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IRAN IN THE MIDDLE EAST

BUILDING BRIDGES OR EXPANDING INFLUENCE?

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INTRODUCTION

Shahram Akbarzadeh & Hamidreza Azizi

Iran's role in the Middle East is both historical and evolving, marked by a strategic interplay of religion, ideology, politics, and regional dynamics. As a country situated at the core of vital geopolitical junctures, Iran's actions have far-reaching implications, resonating across the region and beyond. This dossier is dedicated to deciphering the complexities of Iran's regional policy, shaped by a fusion of historical legacies, ideological orientations, strategic interests, and political aspirations.

The significance of Iran's relationships with its neighbors—stretching from Türkiye in the northwest to the Arab states to its south—is a central aspect of its regional policy. A complex interplay of cooperation and competition characterizes these interactions, with significant implications for the region's stability and security. Iran's neighborly engagement has been volatile, mixing antagonistic rhetoric with dialogue and strategic positioning.

The signing of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) promised to settle the nuclear issue and bring Iran back into the fold. However, the unilateral withdrawal of the United States (U.S.) in 2018 and its reinstatement of sanctions through a policy of "maximum pressure" effectively crippled the deal, leading Iran to respond by gradually curtailing its compliance with the agreement in subsequent years. Moreover, the ascendancy of a hardline faction under President Ebrahim Raisi and the parties' inability to come to agreement that would discourage future unilateral actions (such as the U.S. withdrawal) have seriously limited the scope for nuclear talks, against a background of heightened regional tension.

In terms of geographical scope, Iran's influence extends to key countries, such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. In Syria, Tehran's involvement has been a critical factor in saving President Bashar al-Assad's regime and marking a venue for closer Iran-Russia cooperation, which later began to manifest in the war in Ukraine. In Iraq, Iran has expanded its influence both directly and through its allies within the Shiite factions. Iraq has also turned into a proxy battlefield between Iran and the United States. Similarly, in Yemen, Iran's support for Ansar Allah (the Houthi movement) underscores its strategic intent to extend its influence in the Arabian Peninsula and to counterbalance Saudi Arabia's involvement in Bahrain and Syria.

The "Axis of Resistance," a network of Iran-backed actors, is a significant element of Iran's regional strategy. This network includes groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza and represents a key tool in Iran's foreign policy. Crucially, the "Axis of Resistance" allows Iran to project power and influence beyond its borders while reducing the risk of direct confrontation with key adversaries like the United States and Israel. The recent involvement of Iran-backed groups, namely Hezbollah and the Houthis, in the ongoing war between Hamas and Israel in Gaza further illustrates Tehran's strategic positioning within the broader regional context.

These developments occur against the backdrop of shifting domestic politics in Iran, marked by a trend toward increased securitization and authoritarianism. As Iran becomes more authoritarian domestically and faces increased pressure internationally from the West, there has been a noticeable pivot toward cooperation with Eastern powers like Russia and China. This shift is part of Iran's "Look East" strategy, reflecting a strategic realignment in response

to global and internal dynamics. These shifts impact how Iran engages regionally, influencing its interactions, policies, and alignments.

This dossier provides a comprehensive overview of pertinent themes in Iranian foreign policy, offering a nuanced understanding of Iran's role in the Middle East and the responses it elicits from regional and external actors.

In the first chapter, Mehran Kamrava discusses Iran's evolving "neighborhood policy" under President Ebrahim Raisi, emphasizing a shift toward improved relations with the country's Arab neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia. Kamrava examines how this approach differs from past efforts due to its formal adoption as a key foreign policy doctrine. The chapter analyzes various factors contributing to the policy's effectiveness, including Saudi Arabia's receptivity and broader structural changes in the region. Additionally, it considers the historical context of relations between Iran and Arab states since the 1979 revolution and recent diplomatic initiatives, such as the Hormuz Peace Initiative and rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, highlighting the impact of international and regional dynamics on Iran's foreign policy.

The second chapter, written by Hamidreza Azizi, then assesses the deep-rooted alliance between Iran and Syria, particularly since the 2011 Syrian conflict, in the context of recent regional shifts. Azizi discusses how new dynamics have started to influence this alliance, crucial for Iran's strategic regional interests, such as Syria's reentry into the Arab League, improving Iran-Saudi Arabia relations, and Arab-Israeli normalization. The chapter explores the potential impact of these regional changes on the Iran-Syria relationship, suggesting that while Syria's diplomatic realignments provide new opportunities, they do not necessarily reduce Iran's influence, especially in military and security matters.

Subsequently, Fatima Alsmadi's contribution deals with the evolving dynamics of the Iran-Saudi relationship. It focuses on the historical context of their interactions, marked by periods of intense conflict, competition, and occasional diplomatic engagements. The chapter discusses the nature of disputes between the two sides, which encompass a wide range of issues including regional competition, energy, foreign relations, and differing ideological perspectives in foreign policy. Alsmadi delves into the potential success and limitations of the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, considering the factors influencing the trajectory of their relationship.

In the fourth chapter, Faozi Al-Goidi focuses on Iran's role in the Yemen war, its actual influence, and its regional gains. Al-Goidi discusses differing perspectives on Iran's involvement—whether the Houthi movement is a proxy or an independent entity with shared goals with Iran. The chapter examines Iran's foreign policy motivations in Yemen, emphasizing its support for dissident groups opposing Western influence. It traces the historical relationship between Iran and the Houthis, contrasting their religious, political, and doctrinal factors.

Closing the first section, Muhanad Seloom's chapter, the fifth, explores the dynamic relationship between Iran and Iraq, tracing their historical journey from adversaries to allies. The chapter delves into Iran's expanding influence in Iraq post-2003, particularly in the political, security, and economic spheres. Seloom situates the two countries' ties within historical context, reflecting on the significant shift from the Iran-Iraq war to a surprising collaboration in

the new millennium. The chapter also examines Iran's strategic imperatives in Iraq, such as using the country as a buffer zone, a conduit for regional alliances, and an economic partner. Additionally, it discusses Iran's sophisticated use of proxy dynamics in Iraq, which has cemented its influence within the Iraqi political landscape.

Opening the second section, Shahram Akbarzadeh's chapter examines the complexities surrounding the attempted revival of the JCPOA amid changing global and regional dynamics. The chapter reflects on the impacts of the U.S. withdrawal from the deal under President Donald Trump, the escalation of tensions in the Middle East, and the rise of a hardline administration in Iran. Akbarzadeh analyzes the ideological underpinnings of Iran's foreign policy, its strategic pivot toward Russia and China under the "Look East" policy, and the challenges these pose for reviving the nuclear deal. The chapter also explores Iran's asymmetrical military capabilities and regional ambitions. It argues that these developments—along with the state's growing integration into organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the bloc composed of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS)—have reduced the urgency for Iran to revive the JCPOA and complicated the situation for the United States.

Subsequently, in the seventh chapter, Luciano Zaccara analyzes Raisi's handling of international relations, which have defied expectations of increased isolation. Zaccara points out that Raisi's success has largely relied on building upon the strategic foundations laid by his predecessors. The chapter highlights the continuation of policies, such as asymmetric deterrence, regionalism, and the "Look East" policy, tracing their roots back to the presidencies of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani. It also underscores the revival of Tehran's "good neighbor" policy toward Gulf countries and its re-engagement with Latin America. In sum, Zaccara argues that Raisi's tenure marks a continuation of established foreign policies in the Islamic Republic.

The eighth and final chapter by Azadeh Zamirirad, examines Iran's evolving foreign policy under Raisi, particularly focusing on its "neighborhood" and "Look East" policies. Zamirirad explores how these policies are increasingly intertwined due to developments like Russia's war against Ukraine and China's involvement in the Gulf. The chapter assesses Iran's growing assertiveness and its pursuit of a revisionist goal in shaping a post-Western order. It also discusses the Raisi administration's success in diplomatic relations with Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, and the strategic alignment with Eastern powers in response to Western sanctions and regional developments.

Please note that this dossier was compiled prior to Iran's drone and missile attack on Israel on April 13, 2024. The strike marked Tehran's first direct attack on Israel, framed as a retaliation for the Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, 2024. This dossier provides insights into Iran and its policy thinking. The analysis does not reflect recent developments.



SECTION ONE

IRAN'S REGIONAL POLICY



Image caption: This handout picture provided by the Iranian Presidency on November 11, 2023, shows Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (R) meeting with Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi during an emergency meeting of the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), in Riyadh. (Photo by Iranian Presidency / AFP)





IRAN'S NEIGHBORHOOD POLICY: AN ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Soon after his election to the Iranian presidency in 2021, Ebrahim Raisi declared that one of his key foreign policy objectives would be to improve Iran's relations with neighboring countries. Within months, the new administration in Tehran articulated a "neighborly policy" (*siyasat-e hamsayegi*) that has at its core improved relations with Iran's Arab neighbors and especially with Saudi Arabia.¹ Efforts at improving post-revolutionary Iran's relations with its neighbors are not new, having featured prominently in the administrations of former presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, and Hassan Rouhani. However, this is the first time that the Iranian government has formally adopted the good neighbor policy as a formal doctrine.

This chapter examines the hitherto unexplored parameters and objectives of Raisi's new foreign policy doctrine. It argues that Tehran's deliberate pursuit of good relations with neighboring states has combined with a number of factors outside of Iran's control—not least of which is Saudi Arabia's recent receptivity to Iranian overtures—to bear significant results. Raisi, with an earned reputation as a conservative, has largely succeeded in an area where Iranian reformists and moderates have tried but failed. This partial but important success is not all Raisi's doing, having been greatly aided by a number of larger structural factors unfolding in the Gulf region, in the broader Middle East, and beyond. Nevertheless, the Iranian president deserves credit for having greatly reduced tensions between Iran and most of its neighbors.

Despite occasional efforts by the Islamic Republic's leaders to improve Iran's relations with its Arab neighbors—notably by presidents Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Rouhani—Iran-Arab relations have remained consistently tense since the 1979 Iranian revolution.² An Iran-Arab cold war of sorts was set off, in fact, when in January 2016 mobs in Tehran and Mashhad attacked the Saudi embassy and consulate, respectively, and set the buildings on fire.³ These attacks occurred against a backdrop of civil wars in Syria and Yemen, where Iran and many of its Arab neighbors found themselves supporting opposing sides. In fact, Syria and Yemen became primary battlegrounds where proxy groups supported by Iran fought with those financed by Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies. Tehran, meanwhile, frequently accused Riyadh and Manama of interfering in its internal affairs and fomenting unrest in the country.⁴ Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, for their part, maintained that Iran continued to harbor ambitions of exporting its revolution, destabilizing the region, and disrupting the free flow of energy out of the Gulf.⁵ Not known for holding back his opinion, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman at one point even likened Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to Hitler.⁶

In pursuing its good neighborly relations, Tehran has decided that Saudi Arabia is key to improving its relations with the rest of the Arab world. As far as Tehran is concerned, Saudi Arabia engages in "dollar diplomacy," using its financial prowess to ensure that less-wealthy Muslim-majority countries keep Iran at arm's length.⁷ The Iranian government has decided that as long as the Saudis entice or threaten other Arab capitals to remain cold toward Tehran, broader Arab-Iranian relations will not improve.⁸ Significantly, therefore, when it comes to Saudi Arabia, Iran's notoriously fractious state has, since 2021, been remarkably unified in its consistent advocacy of improved relations with the kingdom. Despite Iranian persistence, however, until the March 2023 deal, Riyadh saw little to no strategic gains in engaging

in substantive dialogue and tension-reduction measures with Iran. Instead, relations between the two sides were characterized by mutual mistrust.⁹

While Iran's stated adoption of the good neighborly policy may be recent, neither the overall approach nor its manifold benefits are new. The chapter therefore starts with a brief examination of the concept of neighborhood, the necessary preconditions making it possible, and the likely motivation for adopting it. It then examines attempts by Iran to pursue good neighborly relations, albeit often half-heartedly. Apart from specific political and strategic considerations that may surface from time to time, three sets of structural factors—at the domestic, regional, and international levels—undermine Tehran's effective implementation of the good neighborly policy with most of the regional Arab states. Until and unless these domestic, regional, and international obstacles are resolved, Iranian efforts at improving relations with neighbors, especially its Arab neighbors, will remain at best only partially effective.

THE GOOD NEIGHBORLY POLICY

Iran's first serious attempt in a decade at deepening relations with its neighbors started in 2017 in relation to Qatar in the aftermath of what came to be known as "the Gulf crisis."¹⁰ The two states, which found themselves on opposite sides in 2011 after the beginning of the Arab uprisings, took steps to improve relations after the imposition of sanctions against Doha by Saudi Arabia and its allies.¹¹ The development of these relations gradually led Iran to hope for an improvement in its relations with other Arab states. In this regard, Iran's most significant good neighborhood policy measure was taken in 2019 under the auspices of the Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE), introduced by President Hassan Rouhani's administration.¹² The proposal, first presented at the 74th United Nations (UN) General Assembly, was designed to find solutions to secure the Gulf and to ensure "energy security, freedom of navigation, information exchange, arms control, conflict prevention, and non-aggression."¹³ Despite containing a series of measures aimed at building trust and fostering multilateral cooperation, the proposal failed to elicit positive responses from Iran's Arab neighbors.¹⁴ At the time, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were especially hopeful that the United States' (U.S.) policy of "maximum pressure" on Iran would bear fruit and lead to regime change, or at least a change in the behavior of Iranian leaders. But President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" policy proved less than effective. A new U.S. presidential administration took office in 2021, and the Saudis and Emiratis began to feel the heat of their missteps in the war they had launched in Yemen in 2015. Slowly, the kingdom began to realize that détente with Iran might be to its advantage.¹⁵

For Saudi Arabia, several factors appear to have been at work. These considerations included an unpopular and unwinnable war in Yemen; the apparent failures of highly confrontational policies toward both Iran and Qatar; the compound effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; and the need to rehabilitate its global image in the aftermath of the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Focusing on internal economic development—especially on the ambitions of Vision 2030 and on massive infrastructural projects—also appears to have influenced Saudi receptivity to tension-reduction measures with Iran.

All of this has been happening within the context of an apparent reduction in U.S. diplomatic engagement in the Middle East, at least as perceived through regional capitals.¹⁶ For the Saudis, the seeming U.S. withdrawal from the region has made rapprochement with Iran not just desirable, but in many ways a necessity. The simmering down of the Syrian civil war and the country's steady reintegration back into the Arab fold, especially the thaw in its relations with Riyadh, also appear to be crucial to Saudi's receptivity to improved relations with Iran.¹⁷ In his 2021 speech to the UN General Assembly, Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud softened his previously harsh tone toward Iran: "Iran is a neighboring state," he said. "We hope that initial talks with Iran will lead to concrete confidence-building measures, measures that will achieve the aspiration of two peoples for collaborative relations based on the commitment to the principles and resolutions of international legitimacy, respect for sovereignty, and non-interference in internal affairs."¹⁸

For its part, Iran sees reducing tensions with Saudi Arabia as the most important hallmark of its neighborhood policy. From Iran's perspective, détente with Saudi Arabia can be a starting point for improving relations with other Arab states and establishing peace and stability in the region. For this reason, the Raisi administration has considered the neighborhood policy as a main priority of Iran's international relations. Finally, in March 2023, as a result of secret negotiations conducted in Beijing, which had been going on for some time through mediation efforts by Iraq and Oman, Iran and Saudi Arabia announced the resumption of diplomatic relations and the start of a new era in their policies toward each other.¹⁹

Significantly, shortly after the start of Iran-Saudi rapprochement, Iran and Bahrain announced the start of a series of confidence-building and tension-reduction measures as well, among them a resumption of passenger flights, visits by parliamentary delegations, and, eventually, restoration of diplomatic ties that were severed in 2016.²⁰ Meanwhile, Iran and the UAE had started a number of high-level security engagements that dated back to the Rouhani administration. Such exchanges became more frequent and more substantive once Raisi took office, culminating in the formal establishment of full diplomatic relations between the two sides in April 2023.²¹

A potential flashpoint for Iran has been its porous eastern borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan. In recent years, in fact, a number of Iranian border guards and soldiers have been killed in attacks the Iranian government had attributed to smugglers and "terrorists."²² Nevertheless, Iranian authorities have consistently taken great care to downplay the gravity of the situation and instead emphasize the degree to which Iran's relations with both Islamabad and Kabul remain cordial. When, in May 2023, as many as six Iranian soldiers were shot and killed from inside Afghanistan by Taliban forces, Iranian officials were quick to dismiss the event as nothing more than a "minor incident," akin to a "family dispute."²³ Dialogue, Iran's interior minister insisted, is the only way for the two sides to resolve their differences.²⁴

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian has indicated that de-escalation with Saudi Arabia is key to reconciliation with other Arab states: "We need more dialogue. We and Saudi Arabia [have] reached agreements on certain issues, and we welcome this dialogue. Our dialogue with Saudi Arabia is useful and constructive to the region. Iran and Saudi Arabia are two important countries and play very important roles in stabilizing regional

security.”²⁵ Another ranking administration official, Mohammad Jamshidi,ⁱ echoed the foreign minister’s statement: “One of the main foundations of the government’s foreign policy is the neighborhood policy, maximal interaction, and economic multilateralism.”²⁶ In January 2022, Iran’s Foreign Ministry held a high profile conference titled “Neighborhood,” during which the interior minister, Ahmad Vahidi, went so far as to propose the establishment of a “Ministry of Neighboring Affairs” tasked with advancing the government’s neighborhood policy.²⁷ “The problem with the neighbors is not caused by the lack of an organization or the lack of the Ministry of Neighboring Affairs,” another speaker responded. “Rather, the problem is related to perceptions, policies, historical and political events, and actions and reactions that change the direction of events in the region.”²⁸

CONCLUSION

At the broadest level, Iran’s neighborhood policy is motivated by the overarching objective of creating a new regional order. In accomplishing this aim, the Islamic Republic is pursuing a number of goals that may be broadly categorized as political, security, cultural, and economic. The policy represents the first time since the revolution that the Iranian government has actually articulated and labeled a proactive foreign policy approach. In the past, factional infighting often made Iranian foreign policy at best reactive.²⁹ Under Raisi, good neighborly relations, and its complementary “Look East” policy, so far appear to have achieved a number of their stated objectives. All Iranian presidents since 1981 have had a track record of serving a second term. Barring unforeseen developments, Raisi’s foreign policy approaches are likely to continue at least until 2029. If this indeed does happen, Iran is likely to see the continued deepening of political and economic relations, and perhaps even security cooperation, with its neighbors.

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IRAN-SYRIA RELATIONS AMID REGIONAL RESET DYNAMICS

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INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the relationship between Iran and Syria has been notably strong. This alliance was further solidified during the tumultuous period of the Syrian civil war, which commenced in 2011. Throughout this conflict, Iran emerged as a steadfast supporter of Syrian President Bashar Assad, offering his regime substantial military and financial backing.¹ This unwavering support was not merely a testament to the two regimes' alliance, but also an indication of Iran's strategic interests in the region.²

More recently, the Middle East has experienced notable diplomatic and geopolitical transformations. Three pivotal regional reset trends have emerged, each bearing the potential to reshape the dynamics of Iran-Syria relations. Firstly, Syria's reintegration into the Arab League in May 2023 marked a milestone in normalization between the country and Arab states.³ Secondly, the thawing of relations in March 2023 between regional rivals, Iran and Saudi Arabia, signaled a new era of potential diplomatic engagements.⁴ Indeed, these two dynamics are closely intertwined; Iranian and Saudi leaders' decision to enhance relations facilitated Syria's reintegration into the Arab League. Lastly, the growing trend of Arab states normalizing ties with Israel⁵ has introduced a new dimension to the regional calculus.

The core objective of this chapter is to explore the ramifications of these regional reset trends on Iran-Syria relations. Its central argument maintains that, while Assad's burgeoning ties with Arab states afford Syria more autonomy from Iran, they do not necessarily equate to diminished Iranian influence in Syria, particularly in the military and security realms.

In this evolving scenario, Iran is likely to capitalize on the renewed engagements with its Arab counterparts—particularly those with Syria—to bolster and legitimize its regional stature. Yet, the shared animosity of Tehran and Damascus toward Israel stands in stark contrast to Arab-Israeli normalization, potentially muddying the waters of Arab states' involvement in Syria.

SYRIA-ARAB NORMALIZATION

In May 2023, after nearly a twelve-year suspension, Syria made its much-anticipated return to the Arab League.⁶ This significant development—following a decade marked by the Assad regime's widespread atrocities against its citizens⁷—symbolized most Arab states' reluctant acceptance of the Assad government as the official representative of Syria.

The Arab League's decision to reincorporate Syria was not so much an endorsement of Assad's regime but rather a recognition of the unavoidable geopolitical realities shaped by his persistent grip on power. This move also underscored the divergence in perspectives between the Arab world and the West on how to address the ongoing Syrian crisis.⁸ Moreover, there was intra-regional disagreement, as Qatar (and to a lesser extent Kuwait⁹) remained critical of re-establishing ties with the Assad regime.¹⁰

From Iran's vantage point, this development raised intriguing questions. While some analysts believe that the Arab states' acceptance of Assad was primarily motivated by a desire to counterbalance Iran's influence in Damascus, others offer a contrasting view.¹¹ In fact,

Tehran viewed Syria's return to the Arab League as a reaffirmation of Syria's legitimacy and a "restoration of its power."¹² The Islamic Republic's state media also highlighted Tehran's influential role in facilitating Syria's re-entry into the Arab League.¹³

The timing of the Arab League's decision was particularly noteworthy, coming on the heels of a landmark deal between Iran and its primary regional adversary, Saudi Arabia, ending seven years of overt hostility. This rapprochement was likely key to Syria's readmission to the Arab League.

Overall, Tehran's official stance on Syria's reintegration was positive. Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Nasser Kanaani lauded the move as supportive of "overall stability and peace" in the region.¹⁴ Similarly, Ali-Asghar Khaji, a senior advisor to Iran's foreign minister highlighted the benefits reintegration would bring to regional security.¹⁵

However, the evolving landscape presents both opportunities and challenges for Iran. While Syria's re-entry into the Arab League could bolster its economic recovery, potentially offering Iran avenues for economic collaboration with certain Arab states, there are underlying concerns. Crucially, enhanced Arab engagement in Syria might overshadow Iran's economic interests.¹⁶ Additionally, the potential for Arab states to influence the Syrian government toward limiting Iran's military activities in the territory, or toward normalization with Israel,¹⁷ has raised concerns in Tehran, even if the latter outcome seems distant amid the war in Gaza. In essence, while Syria's reintegration into the Arab League might not drastically alter Iran's plans in Syria, it does necessitate a recalibration of Tehran's strategies in the face of new challenges.

IRAN-SAUDI RECONCILIATION

The thawing of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023 was a significant event in the region's diplomatic landscape. Historically, the two powers' rivalry has caused tension, with their differing positions shaping many conflicts and shifts in power throughout the Middle East.

For Syria, this reconciliation carries a multitude of implications. The renewed diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia could contribute to easing tensions between Syria and its Arab neighbors. With Iran on board, Syria may have more opportunities to engage with other Arab nations. The Syrian regime has openly expressed its support for the Iran-Saudi rapprochement, viewing it as a harbinger of regional stability.¹⁸ Furthermore, Iran's willingness to facilitate cooperation between Damascus and Riyadh underscores Tehran's commitment to fostering stronger ties between its close ally, Syria, and the broader Arab world.¹⁹

However, with Iran no longer encountering the same degree of rivalry from its Arab neighbors, it may be more inclined to amplify its influence in Syria and throughout the region more assertively. Nevertheless, Tehran will likely strive not to directly challenge the interests of the Gulf states. The United States and Israel could perceive an empowered Iran in Syria as a threat to their security interests.

Moreover, while the reconciliation might bolster economic cooperation in Syria between Iran and Arab states, it does not necessarily guarantee a reduction in Iran's military presence in Syria. Arab states of the Gulf have long expressed concerns about Iran's military footprint in Syria and its support for various militias. These concerns are unlikely to dissipate overnight, even with improved diplomatic relations.

As such, while promising on the surface, the Saudi-Iran rapprochement presents a complex web of opportunities and challenges for Syria. While it opens doors for economic and political cooperation, it also brings to the fore the delicate balance of power that exists in the region. The coming years will determine whether this reconciliation will usher in a new era of stability or surface fresh challenges in Syria and the region.

ARAB-ISRAELI NORMALIZATION

The ongoing normalization of relations between several Arab states and Israel also holds implications for Iran's interests and role in Syria. The Abraham Accords inaugurated this process in 2020, with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain taking the lead.²⁰ Subsequently, other Arab states have solidified their ties with Israel or are in the process of doing so. However, not all Arab countries are on board with this trend. Notably, Qatar²¹ and Kuwait²² have refrained from normalizing relations with Israel and show no immediate signs of doing so.

Nevertheless, the Arab-Israeli normalization process undeniably carries implications for Iran-Syria relations. As more Arab states attempt to align with Israel and Syria simultaneously, Arab states might find it increasingly challenging to support the Syrian government in its current configuration, given its close political and military alliance with Iran, which staunchly opposes Israel.

Conversely, Iran might view Syria as an even more vital, strategic asset amidst the trend of regional states normalizing with Israel, leading to a deeper entrenchment of Iranian influence in Syria. This could escalate Iran-Israel tensions, potentially drawing Syria into the fray. Similarly, the recent war in Gaza adds another layer of complexity. The war temporarily paused the discussions on normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, although it did not entirely halt them. But in any case, the Gaza war serves as a stark reminder of the longstanding issues in the region and could make Arab states more cautious in their approach toward Israel.

Therefore, while the Arab-Israeli normalization process promises a new era of cooperation, it also introduces fresh challenges. The reluctance of countries like Qatar and Kuwait to normalize, combined with the ramifications of the Gaza war, ensures that the regional dynamics remain fluid and complex, with Iran-Syria relations at the heart of many unfolding events.

CONCLUSION

The Middle East stands at the cusp of transformative shifts. Central to these changes are three regional reset trends: Syria's reintegration into the Arab League, the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the Arab-Israeli normalization process. Each of these developments carries profound implications for the dynamics of Iran-Syria relations.

Firstly, Tehran interprets Syria's reintegration into the Arab League as a broader recognition of Bashar Assad's regime and, more importantly, an endorsement of the Iran-backed "Axis of Resistance." From this perspective, Syria's reintegration not only bolsters Iran's position in Syria but also legitimizes its broader regional strategy.

Simultaneously, Iran expects its reconciliation with Saudi Arabia to enhance its influence in Syria. Particularly, it could pave the way for cooperation with Arab states in rebuilding Syria's war-torn economy. Iran, leveraging its longstanding support for Assad, could position itself as a key player in Syria's reconstruction, eyeing strategic sectors such as infrastructure and energy.

However, the growing trend of Arab-Israeli normalization presents a challenge for Iran, especially given the war in Gaza. For Tehran, the war proves the importance of keeping Syria aligned with its anti-Israeli stance. This alignment serves a dual purpose: It counters Arab-Israeli normalization and maintains Syria as a critical ally in Iran's broader regional strategy. However, at the same time, intensifying Arab-Israeli relations might eventually draw Syria into direct conflicts, further complicating regional dynamics.

So far, Damascus has maintained a restrained stance in the Gaza conflict, steering clear of direct military engagement. However, the escalation of activities by Iran-backed militias against Washington's interests, which prompted a U.S. response against these militias in eastern Syria and in Iraq, demonstrated that the conflict could readily extend into Syrian territory.²³ Assad likely hoped that by avoiding direct engagement in the war, Syria could prevent further destabilization and avoid becoming entangled in regional conflicts. This strategy would allow it to uphold its alignment with Iran's anti-Israeli position without worsening its already precarious internal situation or risking a direct confrontation. But even this approach might change in the future, especially if Assad consolidates control over the rest of Syria's territory and becomes emboldened by his regime's increasing diplomatic legitimacy.

Overall, these developments compel Iran to adopt a more assertive stance in Syria. Tehran is keen on not just maintaining but expanding its influence in the country. For Arab states, these trends pose a significant strategic dilemma. Balancing their growing ties with Damascus and improving relations with Tehran against their relationships with Israel is becoming increasingly challenging. Their individual national interests and the broader geopolitical currents shaping the region further complicate this balancing act.

Moreover, the potential for increased tensions between Iran and its adversaries, primarily the United States and Israel, casts a shadow over Syria's future. The country risks remaining a battleground for regional power struggles, undermining its prospects for stability and recovery. In essence, the evolving Iran-Syria relationship—set against the backdrop of shifting regional alliances and geopolitical strategies—is indicative of the complex interests shaping the Middle East. As these trends unfold, they will undoubtedly have far-reaching implications not only for Iran and Syria but for the entire region.

Please note that this dossier was compiled prior to Iran's drone and missile attack on Israel on April 13, 2024. The strike marked Tehran's first direct attack on Israel, framed as a retaliation for the Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, 2024. This dossier provides insights into Iran and its policy thinking. The analysis does not reflect recent developments.

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OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES ALONG THE PATH OF SAUDI-IRANIAN RELATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to resume diplomatic ties.¹ Yet other recent events indicate a long road ahead for Iranian-Saudi relations. Notably, in June 2023, Saudi Arabia requested to switch the venue of a joint press conference, as the room featured a picture of the late commander of Iran's Quds Force, General Qassim Soleimani.² Another similar incident occurred when the Saudi football team Al-Ittihad withdrew from a match against Iran's Sepahan in Isfahan, which houses a statue of Soleimani. The situation required a comment from the Iranian foreign minister, resulting in a decision to reschedule the match.³

The escalation of an athletic dispute to a diplomatic one, and the continued friction following the March 2023 deal, signals that enhancing the Saudi-Iran relationship requires more than good intentions. The nature of the two countries' relationship remains competitive and conflictual. Their disputes include regional competition for status and influence at the level of the Islamic world. This chapter explores the successes and failures of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, its determinants, and its potential impacts on regional issues.

HISTORY OF SAUDI-IRAN RELATIONS: CONSTANTS AND VARIABLES

Since the Islamic Revolution, certain factors have driven Iranian foreign policy regardless of political trends. While each of the country's presidents has adopted a distinct approach, the country's relationship with Saudi Arabia remained a priority. The Iran-Iraq war marked an initial period of overt conflict between Tehran and Riyadh. Following the war, under President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran-Saudi relations entered a new phase, transitioning from conflict to competition for influence within a complex regional order. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and subsequent defeat, fundamentally changed the balance of power. The presidencies of Rafsanjani and his successor Mohammad Khatami allowed Iran to gain advantages in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

However, Saudi-Iran relations remained governed by two important variables. First, an unprecedented increase in the United States' (U.S.) military presence in Gulf countries led to tension with Tehran. Second, Washington adopted a "dual containment" policyⁱ towards Iran and Iraq, which suited Saudi Arabia.⁴ As such, Tehran became convinced that Riyadh was fostering international hostility towards its nuclear activities, damaging its standing in the global oil market.⁵

Mutual threat perceptions were another reason for strained bilateral relations. Iran perceived Saudi Arabia as facilitating the United States' political and security presence in the region, implementing economic sanctions against Iran, and generally collaborating to undermine Iran's regional role. Conversely, Riyadh viewed Tehran's active involvement in regional issues—with the Palestinian cause at the forefront—as an ideological and security threat.

i. U.S. President Bill Clinton crafted this policy towards Iran and Iraq, which kept both countries simultaneously weak. It allowed the United States to impose a trade and investment ban on Iran, particularly in the energy sector, in response to Iranian support for Palestinian groups opposed to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

FAILED INITIATIVES

Despite several initiatives, former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's foreign policy approach failed to reduce tensions. This was primarily due to sectarian escalation in Iraq and the intensification of competition in Lebanon and Afghanistan. In December 2007, Ahmadinejad attended the 28th Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit held in Doha, marking the first time an Iranian president was invited.⁶ That same year, Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz invited the Iranian president to perform the Hajj pilgrimage—another first in their bilateral relations.⁷

However, the relationship was still strained. Leaked documents disclosed that the Saudi monarch called on the United States to strike Iran and “cut off the head of the snake” to prevent it from continuing its nuclear program.⁸ The tone of these documents—caution, fear, and suspicion—is inseparable from the narratives and perceptions held by both Arabs and Iranians.⁹

When Rouhani came to power, he prioritized mending relations with the West. Moderates within the reformist movement argued for improving relations with Washington, some even asserting that Iran's economic issues could not be resolved without addressing this dilemma.¹⁰ However, this direction suffered a severe setback under U.S. President Donald Trump who withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and reimposed sanctions.¹¹ Moreover, despite proposing the Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE) with Gulf countries, Rouhani did not prioritize regional relations.¹² This could be considered as one of the fundamental differences between Rouhani's foreign policy and that of Raisi and his “neighborhood” policy.

ONGOING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

To date, Tehran and Riyadh have taken significant diplomatic steps by exchanging high-level visits and diplomatic missions. However, caution remains characteristic of the rapprochement, and many crucial issues are unresolved that cannot be separated from the two countries' relations.

Regional Competition

Regional competition, particularly Iran's regional influence, may be one of the primary obstacles hindering good relations. It has driven tension for decades, with significant consequences evident in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and the Gulf. Raisi, for instance, has committed to continuing to enhance Iran's regional influence. This issue was a prominent theme in his electoral debates and post-election statements, and was included in his 2017 electoral program. Additionally, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's ideology inspired Raisi's focus on strengthening Iranian national security, among other key policies. Khamenei asserts that Iran's deterrent power, including its missiles, is non-negotiable, as it has brought the United States and the West to the negotiating table.¹³

Therefore, this matter continues to be a source of fundamental disagreement between Iran and Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia. What Iran perceives as a stabilizing factor,

its neighbors view as a provocation. Specifically, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman aims to create a collective deterrent against Iran, geopolitically encircling it. Despite Saudi Arabia's internal divisions and hesitation, Israel also plays a role concerning Riyadh's relationship with Iran.¹⁴

The Rouhani administration believed that a nuclear agreement with the West would reduce tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Instead, Riyadh threatened to target the country directly for supporting the Houthis in Yemen. In 2018, Mohammed bin Salman called for increased pressure and sanctions on Iran in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, justifying it as an option to avoid war: "If we don't succeed in what we are trying to do, we will likely have war with Iran in 10–15 years."¹⁵

Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen to achieve a set of objectives—the most prominent being eliminating Iranian influence. However, none of the objectives of "Operation Decisive Storm" were achieved, especially those related to Iran and the Houthi group. These actions merely escalated Iran-Saudi friction, and Riyadh found itself trapped in the costly Yemeni quagmire, facing the growing Houthi threat. These dynamics, and Riyadh's desire for an exit from the war, could have been one factor driving the deal with Tehran after seven years of severed ties.

Crises

Multiple crises in the region are linked to the two powers' competition for position and influence, and resolving them will undoubtedly be challenging. The ongoing crises in Yemen and Syria are prime examples. Lebanon still faces political instability, though a continued Iranian-Saudi rapprochement could have a positive impact, especially economically. Despite the roles played by both parties in escalating these crises, there are significant doubts about their ability to resolve them, due to their complexity, the level of destruction in crisis-ridden countries, and the involvement of multiple players with conflicting interests.¹⁶

The Iranian Nuclear File

The nuclear agreement in 2015 did not lead to an improvement in Saudi-Iran relations. Moreover, the failure to revive the nuclear deal may result in an escalation, leading to the region entering a nuclear race. Several key issues constrain the revival of the nuclear agreement. October 2025 will be a crucial date for the Iranian nuclear file, as the United Nations (UN) framework resolution for the nuclear agreement is set to expire.¹⁷

Moreover, Iran's commitment to the fatwa against nuclear weapons is linked to an escalating threat. If a military strike against Iran becomes imminent, it might choose to withdraw from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and reconsider its previous stance, potentially opting to produce nuclear weapons. Ultimately, the consequences of withdrawing from the nuclear agreement would be serious and could have negative implications for the region. Therefore, there is a need to enhance diplomatic efforts to address the challenges of the Iranian nuclear file—a crucial aspect of any roadmap for relations between Tehran and Riyadh.

RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES

Following his election as president of Iran, Raisi spoke over the phone with the Amir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. In this conversation, the Iranian leader highlighted the need for “collective security,” describing it as a fundamental part of his administration’s “regional foreign policy doctrine.”¹⁸ He believes that collective security can bring “peace and stability” to the region.¹⁹

Achieving collective security, from Iran’s perspective, requires eliminating foreign powers’ intervention in Iran’s relations with its neighbors.²⁰ This stance is not exclusive to Raisi but is a constant in Iranian foreign policy. For instance, Rouhani previously called for Gulf countries to ensure their security without “foreign intervention.”²¹ This is fundamentally tied to Tehran’s declared goal of removing U.S. forces from the region following the assassination of Qasem Soleimani in early 2020. Making this goal a necessary condition for improved relations with Iran’s neighbors further complicates achieving stability and security. It also raises questions about its feasibility in a region that ranks second in terms of U.S. military presence, after the United States itself, and where governments maintain strong ties with Washington while Iran-U.S. relations witness an ongoing crisis.²²

However, Saudi Arabia may formulate a foreign policy independent of the lines drawn by the long alliance with Washington. A leaked document obtained by *The Washington Post* mentioned that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman threatened to impose significant economic costs on the United States if it retaliated against Saudi oil cuts.²³ Despite these indications, it may be premature to characterize this policy as a departure from Riyadh’s obligations as a U.S. ally, and Washington’s influence remains a crucial factor shaping the trajectory of Saudi-Iran relations.

OBSTACLE OF NORMALIZATION AND THE STANCE TOWARDS ISRAEL

The issue of normalization between Israel and several regional states, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), hinders the future of Saudi-Iranian relations. It strengthens the perception in Tehran that certain Gulf countries pose a growing security threat. This amplifies Iran’s existing security approach, which may overshadow the collective security model if Israel’s presence expands in the region.

While some Iranians tend to overlook the UAE’s growing ties with Israel—as the former is Iran’s top economic partner in the Gulf—Iran’s Supreme Leader and his influential supporters hold a different view. Following the announcement of UAE-Israel normalization, Ayatollah Khamenei strongly condemned the decision, calling it a “betrayal” of the Muslim world.²⁴

Moreover, there is not a unanimous consensus among Iranian political circles about the reasons behind the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. Some believe that Saudi Arabia seeks to buy time, suggesting that its strategy towards Iran remains unchanged. Others see Iran as attempting, via the rapprochement, to slow the pace of what is seen as an inevitable Saudi-Israeli normalization. While some believe that normalization between Tel Aviv and Ri-

yadh would lead Iran to escalate regional conflicts, it seems unlikely that Tehran would seek to provoke a significant reaction despite any political posturing.

Qasem Mohebbali, former Director-General of the Middle East Department at the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, believes the Saudi goal in improving relations with Iran is to reduce the cost of normalizing relations with Israel, emphasizing that the relationship with Israel is more critical than with Iran for bin Salman.²⁵

Regarding the Palestinian issue, there is a clear contrast in approaches. While Iran supports Palestinian resistance movements, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and backs the option of armed resistance, Saudi Arabia has labeled Hamas a terrorist organization.²⁶ This is fundamentally linked to the kingdom's stance on political Islam and view of Hamas as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood, which Saudi Arabia has opposed since the Arab Spring. At best, Riyadh seeks political gains in Palestine in exchange for normalization. While the Iranian leadership speaks of a fading Israel, Saudi circles advocate for Tel Aviv as a part of its regional security and economic system.

The recent confrontation between Hamas and Israel clearly indicates the complexity and centrality of this file. It will be a defining factor in its success or failure. While Iran staunchly rejects normalization with Israel, reports suggest that Riyadh may accept settlements and an expanded relationship with Tel Aviv.²⁷ Therefore, the issue of Israeli normalization will likely continue to influence the future of Saudi-Iran relations.

CONCLUSION

The rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran is now crucial for an economically strained Iran and for its Gulf neighbors facing security challenges. The issue of Iran's regional influence will continue to surface intermittently, as the country is not willing to abandon the influence afforded by the "Axis of Resistance," and Saudi Arabia is unwilling to accept it.

A crucial question going forward will be about the possibility of a resolution, which will require more than exchanging ambassadors. A genuine resolution will need a joint plan of action, with a specific time horizon and detailed stages, that effectively addresses and de-escalates regional files to mitigate these crises.

Please note that this dossier was compiled prior to Iran's drone and missile attack on Israel on April 13, 2024. The strike marked Tehran's first direct attack on Israel, framed as a retaliation for the Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, 2024. This dossier provides insights into Iran and its policy thinking. The analysis does not reflect recent developments.

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IRAN'S ROLE IN THE YEMEN WAR: REAL INFLUENCE AND REGIONAL GAINS

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, Iran has emerged as a key regional player in Yemen supporting Ansar Allah (commonly known as the Houthis). In research and policy circles, there are three primary analyses of this relationship. The first exaggerates the extent of Iranian influence in Yemen, considering the Houthis as a regional proxy—a perspective supported by the internationally recognized government and its allies, namely the United States (U.S.) and Saudi Arabia.¹ The second view, representing Iran and its supporters, regards the Houthis as an autonomous entity representing the Yemeni Republic—merely aligned with Iran on certain aims and ideological positions.²

The third view recognizes a complex relationship between Iran and the Houthis. The group has used Iranian missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and other weapons “of Iranian origin.”³ Still, it is not clear whether the relationship is one of subordination or a partnership. Though similar interests do bring them together, other factors clarify the nature of the relationship, which began before the Houthi takeover of Sanaa and escalated after the Saudi-led Arab coalition launched Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015.⁴

Nevertheless, the extent of Iran’s influence over the war in Yemen remains a subject of debate.⁵ Despite the China-brokered Iran-Saudi reconciliation in March 2023, Iran has not made significant concessions on the Yemen file and the Houthi’s negotiating terms have not changed.⁶ While some analysts contend that the agreement could open prospects for peace in Yemen—suggesting the Houthis might make concessions under Iranian pressure—this seems unlikely in the short-term.⁷

To clarify Tehran’s role in Yemen, along with its local and regional impacts, this chapter will first examine Iranian foreign policy and motives in Yemen. The second section will discuss the relationship between Ansar Allah and Iran, questioning whether the Houthis are proxies or allies of Iran. And the third section will delineate the extent of Iran’s regional influence and impact on the Yemeni war.

IRAN’S FOREIGN POLICY AND MOTIVATIONS IN YEMEN

The pillars of Iran’s foreign policy consist of its active regional role,⁸ opposition to Israel and the West, and pursuit of an alternative regional order.⁹ The presence of weak central authorities and dissatisfied local actors has enabled Tehran to intervene regionally, as evident in 1980s Lebanon, Afghanistan, post-invasion Iraq, and post-Arab Spring Yemen.

Iranian support for non-Shia armed groups is motivated by their ideological alignment with the second pillar of Tehran’s foreign policy, namely opposition to Israel and the West. Yemen’s geostrategic location along one of the most important waterways in the world, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, gives it outsize leverage over global shipping as a crucial part of this opposition. To cultivate influence in the country, Iran previously supported the armed Southern Movement (*al-hirak al-janoubi*) as a key component of its regional policy.¹⁰ Later on, Iran’s interests in Yemen aligned more with the Houthis than with the Southern Movement; importantly, the Houthi movement actively opposes the United States, unlike certain

other Yemeni actors.¹¹ Given this alignment, any increase in the Houthis' power reinforces Iran's regional influence. Moreover, cultivating ties with these groups has allowed Tehran to pursue its third foreign policy pillar, aiming to establish an alternative political order via the "Axis of Resistance."

Historically, contrary to common assumptions, the relations between Iran and the Zaidi state in northern Yemen were extremely limited. Iran provided minimal support to Zaidi Imam Muhammad al-Badr during his war with the republicans in the 1960s,¹² which concluded with the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic. Founding figures of the Houthi movement, including Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, studied in the post-revolution Islamic Republic, suggesting that they were influenced by Iranian revolutionary ideology.¹³

Since Hussein al-Houthi founded his movement in the mid-1990s until the start of the Houthis' rebellion in 2004, there was no evidence suggesting that Iran provided any support to the group.¹⁴ The first limited military and financial support reportedly occurred in 2009, increasing gradually from there.¹⁵ Early on, Iran realized that overt support for the Houthis could escalate tensions, potentially culminating in direct confrontation with Saudi Arabia—a scenario Tehran sought to avoid. Nevertheless, the state maintained its marginal connection with the Houthis.

IRAN AND THE HOUTHIS GROUP: PROXIES OR ALLIES?

The debate surrounding the relationship between Iran and the Houthis is a recurring topic. Some view the group as Iran's proxy, while others assert that it is an autonomous actor. This chapter argues that the relationship between Tehran and Ansar Allah is complex; their views and interests differ based on various religious, political, and historical factors. Instead of an Iranian proxy, it is an organized force pursuing its objectives through pragmatic policies. At the same time, Iran has taken advantage of the rise of the Houthis to gain influence in Yemen.

The origin of the Houthi movement differs from other militias aligned with Tehran. It was not established by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) like Lebanon's Hezbollah or certain Iraqi militias. The Houthis emerged in the late 1990s out of *al-Shabab al-Mu'min* ("The Believing Youth")—a Zaidi revivalist movement in northern Yemen.¹⁶ Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, through the Al-Haqq Party, seized control of the group in 1999.¹⁷

Moreover, the Houthis built on the historical legacy of the Zaidi state that governed northern Yemen for centuries until the 1962 September Revolution. The movement was born from Zaidi doctrines and political ideology,¹⁸ including a commitment to revolution against injustice. While rooted in Zaidi ideology, the Houthi movement is also a political one based on revolution against injustice and imperialism.¹⁹ Similarly, the Iranian revolutionary model—based on clerical political authority—influenced the Houthis ideologically. For instance, the founder of the group, Hussein al-Houthi, often praised Imam Khomeini's resistance of imperialism and adopted slogans from the Iranian revolution.²⁰ Ultimately, it is difficult to determine conclusively the degree of doctrinal affiliation between the Houthis and Iran.

As previously mentioned, Iranian support for the Houthis began around 2009, with subsequent years witnessing support in terms of weapons and expertise.²¹ The relationship expanded after the Houthis seized control of Sanaa in September 2014, marked by increased flights between Sanaa and Tehran.²² In March 2015, the-Saudi Arabia-led coalition (SLC), fearing Iran's control over the Bab el-Mandeb Strait,ⁱ announced the start of Operation Decisive Storm, intending to drive the Houthis out of Aden and Dhale.²³ The southern forces that fought against the Houthis in Dhale included units affiliated with the southern leader Ali Salem al-Beidh, who had received training and support from Iran earlier,²⁴ before their relationship soured following the Houthi takeover of Sanaa.²⁵ This leads to the conclusion that Iran sought an ally to secure its interests in Yemen, regardless of its ideology.

The Houthi movement has practiced a similar pragmatism in its political and military ascent. It originated with the intent of preserving the Zaidi minority, engaging in six rounds of conflict to achieve this objective.²⁶ In 2011, it presented itself as an advocate for the people of Saada; then, as a representative of northern tribes; and finally, after Operation Decisive Storm, as an official authority representing the Yemeni people.²⁷

After the launch of Operation Decisive Storm, Iran was the only power to recognize the Houthis by establishing formal diplomatic relations and providing advanced weapons, drones, and missile systems.²⁸ Simultaneously, the Houthis built their own military and economic capacity by the capture of state institutions in northern Yemen. Together, this elevated the Houthi group to a formidable player in the region, allowing it to strike targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, shifting the regional balance of power. However, the Saudi-Iran rapprochement has not meaningfully reduced Tehran's support for the Houthis. Nevertheless, shifting geopolitical developments could alter Tehran's relationship with the Houthis.

IRAN'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE YEMEN WAR AND REGIONAL GAINS

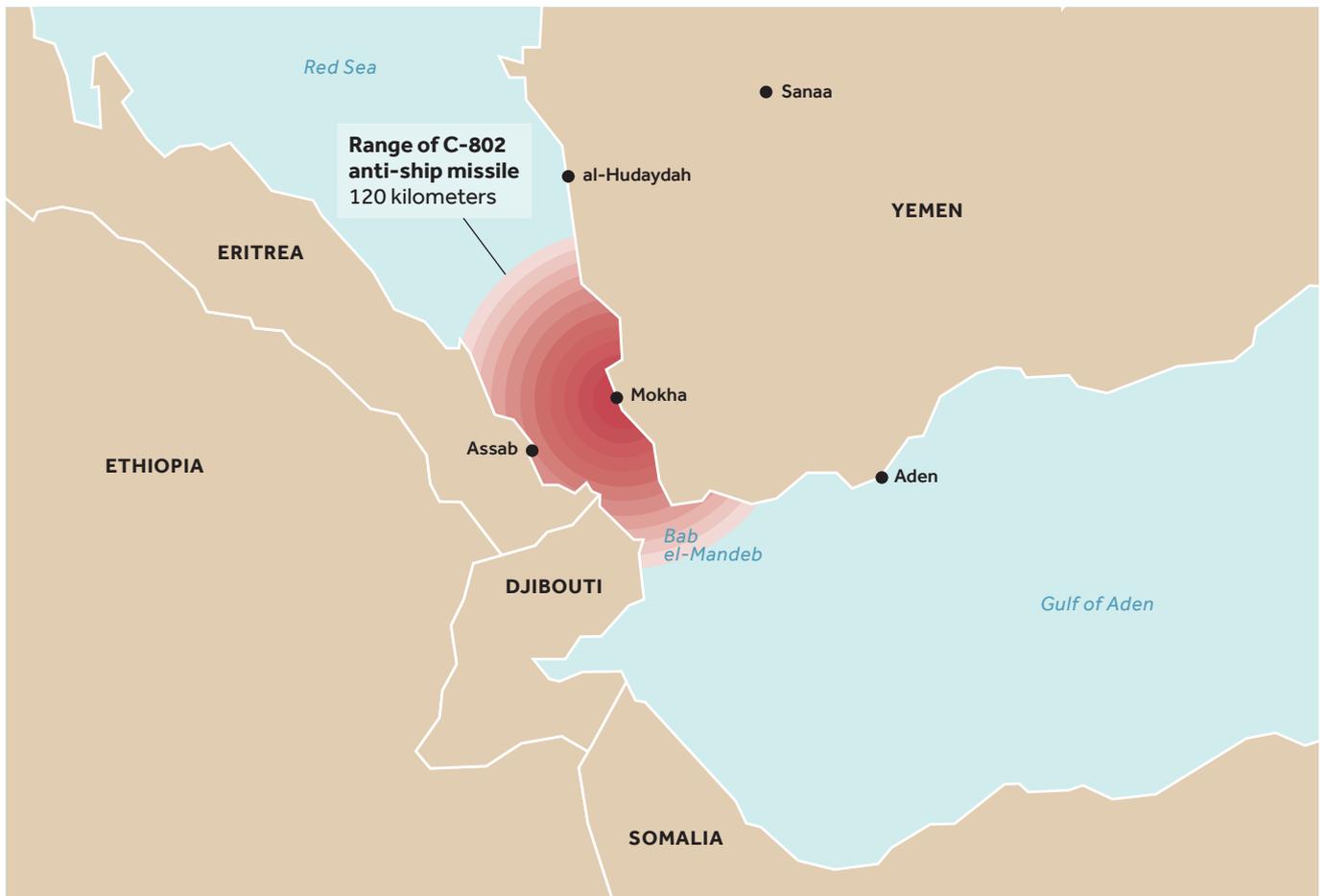
Iran has never officially acknowledged its involvement in the Yemeni war; it denies supporting the Houthis despite international reports confirming such support.²⁹ Operation Decisive Storm altered the dynamics in Yemen. Saudi Arabia sought to reduce Iran's influence and contain the Houthis, but the war escalated, leading to a severe humanitarian crisis and the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians.³⁰ This later led some to blame Saudi Arabia for failing to prevent the Houthis from aligning with Tehran.

Thus, the war pushed the Houthis further into Iran's embrace, deepening hostilities with Saudi Arabia. In 2018, Russia vetoed a United Nations (UN) resolution to condemn Iran for violating the arms embargo on the Houthis.³¹ Indicating Yemen's growing importance to Tehran, Hassan Irlu,ⁱⁱ who is reportedly an IRGC officer, was appointed as Iranian ambassador to Sanaa in 2020.³²

By securing an active partner in Yemen, Iran has increased its regional influence without incurring significant financial shortfalls, unlike Saudi Arabia's loss of millions of dollars in this conflict.³³ Iran has supplied the Houthis with drones and cruise missiles,³⁴ enabling them to threaten ships passing through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, thereby exerting international pressure and influencing global trade.³⁵ These threats persist despite the naval blockade

- i. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is an international chokepoint where many ships pass from Asia and Africa through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean and Europe.
- ii. Hassan Irlu passed away one year after his appointment, reportedly due to the coronavirus, as announced by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, some doubt this and suggest his death might have occurred during one of the coalition airstrikes or that the Houthis had targeted him due to his increased influence.

Figure 1: A new threat in Yemen



Source: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/new-threat-red-sea-shiping>.³⁶

imposed on the Houthis. In fact, the approximate range of the Houthi anti-ship missiles may have increased compared to what it was in 2017, as indicated in figure 1 above.

The Houthis' maritime capabilities serve Iran's interests in the Red Sea—an area crucial for global trade and regional security. Approximately nine percent of the world's petroleum traded by sea routes passes through the waterway.³⁷ In 2018, a senior officer in the IRGC, Nasser Shabani, admitted that his organization "had instructed the Houthis to attack two Saudi oil tankers in the Red Sea, west of the strategic port of [Hodeida]."³⁸ This led Saudi Arabia to temporarily suspend oil shipments through the passage.³⁹

While Iran may not be able to end the Yemen war, it can contribute to de-escalation. The Yemen conflict, rooted in past civil wars, revolves around local factions vying for control. It is not a proxy or sectarian war, as often portrayed. While the intense regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia fuels the internal conflict, it is not the primary driver. Therefore, the main causes of the Yemen conflict are local, with regional interventions aimed at

maintaining the balance of local power to preserve Saudi influence. Yemen holds primary importance for Saudi Arabia while it is secondary for Iran, as a means to augment its regional dominance.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that Iran has succeeded in gaining influence with Ansar Allah. This leverage has reinforced Tehran's regional standing and demonstrated success in the government's foreign policy. However, it is important to avoid exaggerating the sectarian and proxy dynamics of the conflict, oversimplifying the relationship between Iran and the Houthis, and ignoring local drivers of the war.

Instead, the Houthis have motives distinct from Iran and local relationships that give them an advantage over other Yemeni parties. Iranian support affords them additional strategic capabilities, enabling the group to threaten neighboring countries and maritime navigation. This has served both Iran's regional objectives and the Houthis' local goals.

Please note that this dossier was compiled prior to Iran's drone and missile attack on Israel on April 13, 2024. The strike marked Tehran's first direct attack on Israel, framed as a retaliation for the Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, 2024. This dossier provides insights into Iran and its policy thinking. The analysis does not reflect recent developments.

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FROM RIVALS TO ALLIES: IRAN'S EVOLVING ROLE IN IRAQ'S GEOPOLITICS

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INTRODUCTION

In the complex landscape of Middle Eastern geopolitics, the relationship between Iran and Iraq presents a compelling study of shifts and turns. Historically, the two nations have transitioned from an intense rivalry to a surprising collaboration. The harrowing experiences of the 1980s war are etched deeply in their collective memory.¹ However, the dawn of the new millennium unveiled a surprising turn of events, positioning Iran as an influential actor in Iraq's political, security, and economic realms. This chapter analyzes Iran's expanding influence in Iraq, shedding light on the diverse forces that shape their relationship.

IRAN-IRAQ RELATIONS: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Iran and Iraq's cultural and religious ties date back centuries. The two countries share an almost 1,000 mile-long (1,599 kilometer-long) border, and the adjacent regions, particularly Khuzestan and Basra, have been the subject of territorial disputes.² Notably, how to mark the borders of the Shatt al-Arab river fueled tensions prior to the Iraq-Iran war.³ In an effort to address these issues, Algerian President Houari Boumediene facilitated the signing of the 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iraq and Iran.⁴ This diplomatic effort focused on resolving the border disputes, especially around the Shatt al-Arab waterway, which holds strategic importance for oil exports.⁵ As per the agreement, Iraq and Iran decided to mark their border along the river's thalweg.ⁱ Additionally, Iran agreed to stop supporting Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq.⁶ This agreement briefly reduced tensions. However, it did not fully address deeper issues like territorial and ideological ambitions.

The departure of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi from Iran in January 1979 and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini marked a profound ideological shift in Iran.⁷ This transformation represented not just a change in governance but a radical re-orientation of the country's political, social, and international identity, from a secular, pro-Western monarchy to a theocratic, anti-Western regime.⁸ Saddam Hussein's rise to power as the President of Iraq in 1979 further intensified these dynamics.⁹ In January of 1980, Abolhassan Bani-Sadr was elected as Iran's first president.¹⁰ That same year, a diplomatic rift started on March 8 when Iran withdrew its ambassador from Iraq.¹¹ In April, assassination attempts on Iraq's Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz and Minister of Culture and Information Latif Nusseif al-Jasim—both attributed to Iranian agents—further inflamed the situation.¹² Between May and August, clashes along the Iraq-Iran border intensified, signaling a clear escalation in hostilities.¹³ A critical turning point came on September 17 when Iraq abrogated the 1975 Algiers Agreement by declaring full sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab waterway.¹⁴ This move effectively dismantled the fragile peace established by the agreement.

Finally, on September 22, 1980, Iraqi forces invaded Iran, initiating a prolonged and devastating war that would last for eight years.¹⁵ The war was a struggle for dominance between two rival regimes driven by fundamentally divergent worldviews.¹⁶ The eight-year war was the most significant event in the two countries' modern history. It resulted in significant casualties on both sides and had a profound impact on the region. During this period, Iran focused on defending its territory and its Islamic revolution against what it considered external aggression. The war also had severe economic and social consequences for both countries.

i. A "thalweg" is a line marking the lowest or central part of a river channel or valley.

Iran did not emerge as a clear victor in the war with Iraq; instead, it suffered significant damages and incurred substantial human casualties. However, Iranian elites perceived the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by the United States' (U.S.) forces in 2003—and the subsequent rise of Shia political parties and militias in Iraq—as a form of validation for the sacrifices made during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980–1988.¹⁷ Iranian officials described the war as the “Holy Defense.”¹⁸ This sentiment stemmed from the fact that several key figures in Iraq’s new leadership, including members of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the Badr Brigades, and elements of Dawa, had fought alongside the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) during the war against Saddam Hussein. While Iran did not achieve a clear-cut victory in conventional warfare against Iraq, it arguably achieved one of its significant objectives: the empowerment of the Iraqi Shia community.¹⁹

The 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq initiated a significant transformation in the relationship between Tehran and Baghdad. The downfall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, which had previously stood as a regional adversary to Iran, created fresh avenues for Tehran to extend its influence within the neighboring country. Seizing upon the resulting power vacuum, Iran actively cultivated relationships with various Iraqi political entities, particularly with Shia political and armed groups that now wield substantial influence within Iraq’s political landscape.²⁰ This allowed Iran to assume a prominent position in influencing Iraq’s political environment through both covert and overt means to advance its strategic objectives.

STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES

Since 2003, Iraq has served as a strategic buffer for Iran against various threats, notably from Sunni extremist groups—such as the Islamic State group (ISIS)—which pose a direct threat to Iran’s security and its Shia allies in the region. Additionally, the country buffers against potential military aggression or political pressure from Western powers, particularly the United States, which has had a significant military presence in Iraq. It also acts as a barrier against the influence of regional, Sunni-dominated countries, such as Saudi Arabia, which have historically been rivals of Iran. Through Iraq, Tehran has been able to exert influence and maintain a land corridor to its allies in Syria and Lebanon—the Assad regime and Hezbollah, respectively—thereby solidifying its regional power and creating a contiguous sphere of influence across the Middle East. This geographical placement gained particular significance after the Syrian conflict began in 2011 and following the emergence of ISIS in 2014.²¹ Since then, this uninterrupted land corridor has facilitated the seamless movement of militias aligned with Iran across the three nations, accelerating their coordinated response to perceived threats directed at the Iran-led “Axis of Resistance.”²²

Iraq’s strategic importance in Iran’s geopolitical strategy, especially against the backdrop of Tehran’s shadow conflict with Israel, remains undiminished.²³ However, the regional conflict landscape has evolved, notably with the recent strikes by the United States and United Kingdom (UK) against Houthi positions in Yemen.²⁴ These actions represent a significant development in the ongoing tensions between Iran-backed actors and Western interests. The strikes represent broader engagement by the U.S. and U.K. in countering Iran’s influence in the region, beyond the traditional theatres of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.²⁵ Despite these developments, the pattern of Iran-backed militias launching attacks on U.S. and Israeli targets across

the region underscores the adaptability and widespread nature of Iran's "Axis of Resistance." This network of allied forces, while showing signs of operational de-centralization, continues to operate under the strategic guidance and support of Iran. The recent strikes against the Houthis in Yemen highlight the expanding geographical scope of this conflict. They underscore the complex challenges facing Iran's adversaries in curbing the state's regional ambitions. Tehran, for its part, maintains its role as the central coordinator and supporter of these groups, adapting its strategies to navigate the shifting geopolitical landscape and pursue its broader strategic objectives.²⁶

Furthermore, Iraq serves as an advanced strategic frontier for Iran, positioned to counteract the presence of the U.S. military forces positioned near Iranian borders. This strategic posture aligns with Tehran's overarching regional geopolitical objectives, which include diminishing foreign military influence in its immediate vicinity. It is worth noting that Iran has leveraged the presence of the U.S.-led Coalition Forces to signal its capacity for retaliatory actions, as demonstrated in the aftermath of the assassination of former Quds Commander General Qassim Soleimani.²⁷

Economically, Iraq is a valuable partner, serving as a crucial market for Iranian goods, electricity, and gas exports, which are expected to exceed \$9 billion in 2023, and an enticing destination for Iranian investments.²⁸ Iraq became an economic lifeline for Iran after the U.S. administration under then-President Donald Trump imposed severe financial and economic sanctions on Iran.²⁹ Since then, Iran-aligned political and armed groups have expanded their economic footprint in Iraq as part of their commitment to the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance."³⁰ This economic interdependence contributes significantly to the cooperative framework established between the two countries.

Beyond the realms of security and economics, Iraq serves as a multifaceted platform that facilitates Iran's influence. The shared Shia Muslim heritage between these two nations holds immense importance for Iran. Iraq is home to some of the most revered Shia religious sites globally, making it a central hub for Iranian religious pilgrims and enabling Tehran to exert religious influence in Iraq and the region.³¹ This influence extends beyond the religious domain into matters of political significance. Within the broader Middle East region, Iraq serves as a focal point for Iran to project its political and religious influence, reinforcing its role as a consequential regional actor.

Moreover, the alignment of Iraq's political orientation with that of Iran has the effect of augmenting the latter country's overall regional standing. This alignment not only reinforces Iran's position but also serves as a counterbalance to the influence of regional competitors, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Türkiye. This strategic significance underscores the importance of Iraq in Iran's broader regional aspirations.

PROXY DYNAMICS IN IRAQ

Since 2003, Baghdad has often found itself at the crossroads of regional power plays where major players exert indirect influence through intermediaries. Iran's sway over Iraqi politics was at its pinnacle after the United States announced the withdrawal of its troops from the latter country in 2011.³² Yet, the rise of ISIS in 2014 offered Iran an avenue to reinforce its foothold, with Tehran-backed militias leading the charge against the radical group.³³

The landscape began to evolve in 2018 with the Trump administration's aggressive stance towards Iran.³⁴ The 2020 killing of General Soleimani amplified the discord, leading to apprehensions of Iraq becoming a proxy conflict zone between the United States and Iran.³⁵ Under President Joseph Biden, the contention in Iraq lingers, with the United States, Gulf states, and Türkiye emerging as the main challengers to Tehran. Instead of a complete exit, the U.S. military has been repositioning its troops.³⁶ Moreover, the increasing roles of Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE in Iraq further muddle Iran's regional position.³⁷

Although Iran's dominance in Iraq is waning, Tehran has adeptly broadened its proxy networks within the country to safeguard its strategic interests. Iran has positioned itself as an essential player in Baghdad's political arena, influencing a majority of Sunni politicians and a significant portion of Kurdish leaders, especially those from the city of Sulaymaniyah.³⁸ Several former anti-Iran Sunni figures, including Khamis Al-Khanjar, Rafi Al-Issawi, and Jamal Al-Dhari, found it perilous to engage in Iraq's politics due to the threats posed by Iran's allies, pushing many into exile.³⁹ Their re-entry into Iraqi politics was only feasible after receiving Iran's approval.⁴⁰ Their political views are now largely aligned with Iran.

Moreover, internal Kurdish discord between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) has also played into Iran's hands.⁴¹ It has drawn the PUK closer to Iran's allies in Baghdad and weakened the KDP, which is often viewed as leaning towards the United States and Israel.⁴² In essence, Iran has masterfully orchestrated its influence across the Iraqi political landscape, ensuring its dominance remains intact regardless of resistance from the United States and regional powers.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY OUTLOOK: THE FUTURE OF IRAN'S ROLE IN IRAQ

The prospects and challenges for Iraq, in light of its evolving relationship with Iran, are multilayered and deeply intertwined with broader regional dynamics. For Iraq, a key opportunity lies in leveraging its strategic position and the potential benefits of a close relationship with Iran, particularly in terms of economic and security cooperation. However, this comes with the significant challenge of maintaining national sovereignty and political autonomy. Iraq's domestic political landscape is complex, with various factions often influenced by external powers, including Iran. Balancing these influences while fostering a cohesive national identity and addressing internal issues, such as sectarianism and corruption, remains a daunting task for Iraq's leadership.

Regionally, the Iran-Iraq dynamic significantly impacts the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. Regional actors must find a new equilibrium where cooperation and dialogue mitigate the risk of conflict. This includes addressing the Sunni-Shia divide and finding common ground on issues like economic development and combating extremism. However, deep-rooted historical, religious, and political rivalries pose an obstacle to this. Iran's expanding influence in Iraq and its involvement in other regional conflicts, such as in Syria and Yemen, continue to be sources of concern for neighboring Arab states and Israel, potentially leading to further regional polarization and conflict.

Global actors, particularly Western countries and international organizations, have an opportunity to engage constructively with both nations. These external actors can potentially open avenues for dialogue on nuclear proliferation and regional security. However, this engagement is challenged by the complexities of Middle Eastern geopolitics, where Western policies and interventions have historically been viewed with suspicion. The challenge for these actors is to adopt a nuanced approach that respects national sovereignty, understands the historical context, and addresses the legitimate security concerns of all regional stakeholders.

In conclusion, the dynamics and intricacies of the Iran-Iraq relationship reflect the wider challenges and opportunities confronting Iraq, the broader Middle East region, and the global community. For Iraq, the path forward involves navigating external influences while fostering national unity and development. Regionally, the challenge is to transcend historical rivalries and ethno-sectarian divides in favor of a more cooperative and stable geopolitical landscape. For global actors, the task is to engage with a deep understanding of regional dynamics, balancing strategic interests with a commitment to stability and respect for national sovereignty.

Please note that this dossier was compiled prior to Iran's drone and missile attack on Israel on April 13, 2024. The strike marked Tehran's first direct attack on Israel, framed as a retaliation for the Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, 2024. This dossier provides insights into Iran and its policy thinking. The analysis does not reflect recent developments.

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SECTION TWO

INTERNATIONAL ACTORS AND IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY



Russian President Vladimir Putin, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan pose for a photo before a trilateral meeting on Syria in Tehran on July 19, 2022. (Photo by Sergei Savostyanov / SPUTNIK / AFP)





IRAN AND THE NUCLEAR AGREEMENT: WHAT LIES AHEAD?

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INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Iran, the European Union (EU), and the five permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council plus Germany—a group known as the P5+1—signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).¹ The deal imposed a stringent control and monitoring regime on Iran’s uranium enrichment levels to prevent the weaponization of the state’s nuclear energy program. In return, the UN removed sanctions that had been imposed on Iran in response to its non-compliance with requests from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to access and monitor the country’s nuclear facilities.

While hailed as a breakthrough, the benefits of the easing of sanctions were limited. Due to Iran’s interventionist strategy in the Middle East of support for armed non-state actors, Washington continued to perceive Tehran as a sponsor of terrorism, maintaining a separate set of sanctions aimed at changing Iran’s behavior² and possibly even an attempting to instigate regime change.³ Under President Donald Trump, the United States withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018.⁴ In response, Iran gradually reduced its compliance—through phased increases in uranium enrichment—thereby reversing diplomatic gains from the deal.⁵

Reports of secret talks in 2023 between Washington and Tehran indicated a cautious push by President Joseph Biden’s administration to revive the JCPOA.⁶ However, efforts to negotiate a “JCPOA 2.0” face a number of interrelated barriers, including the recent escalation in the Middle East in the wake of Israel’s war on Gaza and the ascendancy of a hardline faction under President Ebrahim Raisi in Iran. This chapter will examine the interrelated geopolitical and ideological factors constraining efforts to revive the JCPOA and assess the prospects for the future of the agreement.

IDEOLOGY

The idea of “exporting the revolution” has served as a cornerstone of Iranian foreign policy for decades.⁷ Promoted under the banner of supporting *mustaz’afin* (“the oppressed”), the policy was operationalized through links with armed non-state actors, specifically Hezbollah in Lebanon⁸ and the Palestinian group Hamas.⁹ Iran also supported Shia groups in Iraq,¹⁰ Bahrain,¹¹ and Saudi Arabia¹² under the rubric of Islamic solidarity against injustice.

In the wake of the 1979 revolution, Washington and its allies in the region perceived Iranian foreign policy as interventionist and disruptive. This concern explains regional support for Iraq in the protracted 1980–1988 war with Iran, which left a profound impact on Iranian foreign policymakers and their strategic assessments. While some of its leaders, most notably President Mohammad Khatami,¹³ tried to break out of the Iran-versus-the-West mentality, that binary remains firmly at the core of political thinking in the country. President Raisi’s 2021 electoral victory further consolidated this hardline perspective. Raisi has criticized the JCPOA as an unacceptable compromise that undermined Iran’s revolutionary mission,¹⁴ and there is little indication that his views have changed.

ISOLATION

Iran has been a pariah state for more than four decades, despite many opportunities to break the cycle of mutual distrust and animosity with the United States. A significant opportunity followed the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. U.S. operations against the Taliban after September 11 aligned with Iranian interests.¹⁵ The window of opportunity, however, soon closed as neoconservatives in Washington put Iran in their sights as a target in the “Axis of Evil.”¹⁶ At the same time, Khatami’s conservative critics dismissed his efforts to reset relations with the West through a “Dialogue among Civilizations” as wishful thinking.

Another opportunity for a policy reset came in 2014, following the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State group’s (ISIS) factions in Syria.¹⁷ With its decidedly anti-Shia agenda, ISIS posed a significant threat to Tehran. In response, Iran urged mass mobilization against ISIS—a message that was echoed by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq,¹⁸ whose fatwa led to the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).¹⁹ Subsequently, the PMF aided U.S.-backed Kurdish forces and the Iraqi national army in the 2017 liberation of Mosul.²⁰ However, the alignment of U.S. and Iranian interests against ISIS did not ease the entrenched antipathy between the two countries. Instead, Iranian authorities interpreted ISIS as the product of a long-term U.S. strategy to undermine Iran.²¹

U.S. policy on Iran is informed by a combination of historical grievances—particularly the 1979–1981 hostage taking at the country’s embassy in Tehran²²—and an assessment that Iran threatens Washington’s current interests. U.S. sanctions on Iran have been aimed at taming the republic’s revolutionary leadership. Iran has partially mitigated the sanctions’ impact by pivoting trade to Asian markets, notably China, but its economic growth and development remain stunted. The authorities also turned economic difficulties into a badge of honor—extolling the country’s “resistance economy”—coupling the glorification of isolation with an emphasis on self-sufficiency. For the Iranian armed forces, this has meant increased research and development in weaponry, such as drone technology.

“LOOK EAST” POLICY

As relations between Washington and its global rivals Russia and China have deteriorated, Iran has found new opportunities to enhance its ties.²³ The clerical leadership views the recent shifts in geostrategic alignments as advantageous in its dealings with Washington.²⁴ Tehran signed a 25-year strategic agreement with China in March 2021, welcoming investments into the oil industry and railway infrastructure.²⁵ These developments have caused Iranian authorities to hope that some of the severe impacts of sanctions could be mitigated. A similar dynamic is at work in relation to Russia. The alignment of Russian and Iranian interests in Syria proved crucial to the survival of President Bashar Assad’s regime. Tehran further proved itself as a reliable partner for Russia in the war on Ukraine.²⁶

FORWARD DEFENSE

The P5+1 designed the JCPOA to compartmentalize issues of concern, taking a piecemeal approach to the threat that Iran posed to regional security. Addressing Iran’s nuclear ambition was prioritized over deterrence of the country’s interventionism. Iran’s neighbors did not welcome divorcing the nuclear issue from the rest of Tehran’s regional policy, as they bore the brunt of the state’s interventions. Yet, the Obama administration insisted and, for a short period, this approach appeared to make progress. However, the landscape shifted after the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018.

In the intervening years, Iran has doubled down on its asymmetrical advantage. It has consolidated its patronage of proxy allies,²⁷ made significant advances in its ballistic technology,²⁸ put a satellite in orbit,²⁹ and increased the efficacy and deadliness of its drones.³⁰ In sum, Iran has used the last decade to significantly enhance its capacity for regional power projection. Iran’s export of kamikaze drones to Russia points to the growth of this asymmetrical edge, further undermining the logic of compartmentalization.³¹

Iran has also pursued asymmetrical measures under the rubric of “forward defense.”³² Given the depleted state of its conventional military hardware, the regime has invested in ways to pre-empt threats to its borders. Iranian missiles are capable of reaching Israeli territory.³³ Additionally, Hezbollah employs Iranian missile technology and has already demonstrated its willingness to oblige Tehran.³⁴ The JCPOA was not designed to address these factors, and it is next to impossible for Washington to ignore them in any future talks.

REVISIONIST FOREIGN POLICY

Exporting the revolution may have declined in importance in Iranian foreign policy, but the fundamental concept of resistance against an “unjust” U.S.-dominated international order has not faded. While failing to articulate an explicit alternative to the liberal international order, Iran advocates for some key principles: freedom from U.S. “arrogance” and “bullying”; “justice”; and respect for national sovereignty and cultural traditions.³⁵ Tehran’s perspective is informed by a history of power imbalance between Iran and the United States, predating the 1979 revolution. Clerical leadership in that period lamented the steady encroachment of Western culture and values in Iran and rallied against “Westoxication.” This view is now writ large in the Iranian worldview and foreign policy.

Iran tends to partner with nations that share its antipathy toward the United States, such as Syria and Venezuela. But the prospect of mounting a plausible challenge to the United States and the liberal international order gained credibility only after Russia and China hardened their positions. Both see the United States as a hegemon and have sought a counterweight in multilateral agencies, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) bloc. Iran’s admission into the SCO in 2023, and BRICS the following year, has bolstered revisionist thinking in Tehran.

STATE SUPPRESSION OF DISSENT

In September 2022, Mahsa Amini died in custody after being arrested by the religious police for the alleged crime of not observing the compulsory hijab. Her death sparked a nation-wide protest movement, as chants of “Women, Life, Freedom” and “Death to the Dictator” rang through the streets of Iran’s major cities for months. Despite the regime’s violent suppression of protests, demonstrations continued months into 2023.

The regime’s heavy-handed response shocked the Iranian diaspora and international observers.³⁶ Many officials in Western capitals spoke publicly about accountability for the perpetrators of the violence.³⁷ As such, a year after the protests, talks on a renewed JCPOA present bad optics for the United States and its Western allies. Many observers in the West have noted that negotiating with Iran on its nuclear program at this juncture would be tantamount to whitewashing the regime’s atrocities.³⁸

CONCLUSION

The Biden administration had hoped to repair the damage that President Trump inflicted on the JCPOA. However, since 2015, Iran realized that even with the sanctions relief offered under the nuclear agreement, other sanctions remaining in place—especially those on the financial sector—seriously diminished the deal’s benefits. Meanwhile, Iran has expanded its ties with China and Russia, eroding the urgency of securing a deal to end Iran’s isolation. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Washington to ignore the security threats Iran’s asymmetrical assets pose for the region and to maintain an approach that compartmentalizes nuclear talks without addressing Tehran’s regional aspirations. As such, efforts to revive JCPOA remain bleak.

Please note that this dossier was compiled prior to Iran’s drone and missile attack on Israel on April 13, 2024. The strike marked Tehran’s first direct attack on Israel, framed as a retaliation for the Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, 2024. This dossier provides insights into Iran and its policy thinking. The analysis does not reflect recent developments.

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RAISI'S FOREIGN POLICY: REVITALIZING IRAN'S INTERNATIONAL POSITION WITH A NON-STRATEGY

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INTRODUCTION

While many expected Ebrahim Raisi's tenure to be marked by seclusion and controversy, the Iranian president has skillfully navigated the complex world of international relations. This chapter argues that Raisi has strengthened Iran's international position, not by developing a new strategy, but by building on the foundational work of his predecessors. He has leveraged diplomatic strategies from previous administrations, including asymmetric deterrence, regionalism, and the "Look East" strategy. Moreover, his administration has revived the "neighborhood policy" and increased engagement with Latin America.

The first section of this chapter will outline the challenges that Raisi inherited, followed by an evaluation of his subsequent responses. It argues that the leader's policies constitute a continuation of established Iranian foreign policy rather than offering a distinct approach. Furthermore, this continuity has proved instrumental in mitigating the country's isolation and re-asserting its influence in both the Gulf region and the broader Middle East. Considering the ongoing war on Gaza and Iran's diplomatic maneuvers following October 7, 2023, this policy continuity positions Iran to benefit irrespective of the war's outcome.

A TROUBLED BEGINNING

Mahsa Amini's death while under morality police custody on September 16, 2022 sparked social and political unrest in Iran. In the face of mass demonstrations, there was widespread speculation about the short-term prospects of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its position in the region. At that time, Ebrahim Raisi was only a year into his presidency and already facing sharp criticism for his human rights record as the head of the judiciary from 2019–2021.¹ After his previous defeat to Hassan Rouhani in 2017, Raisi secured victory in the 2021 election, although turnout was at an all-time low of 48.8%.² This win, with a mere 18 million votes, made him Iran's least popularly supported president since 1997. In 2018, the United States (U.S.) unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) under then-President Donald Trump and reimposed strict sanctions. This, in conjunction with the COVID-19 crisis, exacerbated the country's economic downturn and further complicated the political landscape. Mass protests raged across the country, as the public demanded immediate solutions, doubtful of relief from the newly elected president.

IRAN'S DIPLOMATIC SHIFT UNDER RAISI

By the second year of Raisi's presidency, however, Tehran's global and regional standings began to improve. Historically, Iranian leaders leveraged the state's foreign policy to gain domestic credibility. Raisi continued this trend, using foreign policy successes to enhance his 2025 re-election chances and ambitions to become the next supreme leader of the Islamic Republic. Diverging from his predecessors' more ostentatious diplomacy, the president has made substantial gains on the international stage, reinvigorating Iran's global standing and fortifying regional alliances.

A significant achievement is the expedited reconciliation with regional adversary Saudi Arabia, which materialized in Beijing on March 10, 2023, with the support of Iraq and Oman.³ While the exact advantages and details of the 2023 agreement are still being debated, the prompt reinstatement of embassies in Riyadh⁴ and Tehran represents a significant moment in regional diplomacy.⁵ The two countries' had severed ties after protesters, angered by the execution of a Shia cleric, assaulted Saudi's diplomatic offices in Iran in 2016.⁶ The 2023 deal restoring ties echoed Iran's re-established connections with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) earlier in 2022.⁷ A significant illustration of this new direction was the first-ever phone conversation between President Raisi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman during the war on Gaza, indicating a transformative phase in Iran's diplomatic relations. The Saudi-Iran rapprochement has also opened avenues for dialogue with other regional nations like Bahrain and Egypt. However, this deal merely revives the previous Saudi-Iran Security Cooperation agreement signed between in April 2001 under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami.⁸

Iran's diplomatic achievements have gone beyond improving ties with neighboring countries and establishing a stronger position in the global sphere. These enhancements are highlighted in their elevation to full membership within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2022,⁹ followed by an invitation to join the bloc formerly comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) in 2024.¹⁰ Additionally, Iran has emerged as a key supporter of Syria, advocating for its readmission into the Arab League, thereby promoting regional recognition after a long decade of isolation within Arab communities.¹¹

Although there has been significant progress at the regional level, the nuclear dispute with the United States has reached an impasse, with no significant breakthroughs since President Joseph Biden took office, despite the recent prisoner exchange.¹² However, this deadlock has not hindered other aspects of Raisi's foreign policy agenda. Instead, he has skillfully utilized diplomatic approaches from past governments, encompassing strategies like asymmetric deterrence, a focus on regionalism, and the "Look East" policy. These methods, rooted in the previous administrations including those of presidents Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) and Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021), have been crucial in reducing isolation and reaffirming Iran's central role in the Gulf region and the wider Middle East.

An analysis of Raisi's foreign policy indicates a strategic dependence on the diplomatic infrastructure developed by his forerunners, rather than charting a fresh path in foreign relations. Raisi's period in office has witnessed a resurgence of the "good neighbor" approach toward neighboring Gulf states—a policy first put forth by President Hashemi Rafsanjani in the 1990s—and a reinvigoration of Ahmadinejad's Latin American policy. This reflects a cultivation of traditional policies rather than a shift. Even recent overtures to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are consistent with the path defined by the Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE) launched by Rouhani in December 2019.¹³

The exchange of prisoners between Iran and the United States, announced in August 2023 and implemented in September, along with the release of six billion dollars previously frozen in South Korea due to U.S. sanctions, also denotes a widening of Raisi's diplomatic room for maneuver vis-à-vis Biden.¹⁴ This development not only hinted at a potential defrosting in bilateral ties but also unveiled new possibilities for dialogue and the prospect of establishing a more comprehensive "JCPOA 2.0." This agreement would include considerations regarding Iran's regional role, which Tehran had been unwilling to entertain previously.

The current war on Gaza may derail such possible avenues for rapprochement. In the aftermath of the "Al Aqsa Flood" operation, many states and analysts held Iran responsible as Hamas's primary financial and political backer. *The Wall Street Journal* claimed that Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian had convened meetings in Gaza and Lebanon with representatives from various factions to plan and organize the attack.¹⁵ Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, strongly refuted these claims, asserting that while Iran consistently supports Hamas, it does not exert control over the group's political strategies or decisions.¹⁶ Despite this, Iranian news outlets lauded the attacks, and several Iranian officials commented on Israel's vulnerability and the persistent will of the Palestinians to challenge the Zionist establishment, backed by the "Axis of Resistance," and spearheaded by Iran. They also critiqued Arab nations for seeking normalization with Israel.¹⁷ Further reinforcing Iran's claims of non-involvement, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken remarked a few days after October 7 that no concrete evidence linked Iran directly to the attack.¹⁸ Similarly, a spokesperson for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Daniel Hagari, mentioned that Israel could not conclusively tie Iran to the planning or execution of the attacks,¹⁹ aside from the recognized support they had been providing Hamas over the years.

Iran has unwaveringly rejected any pact with Israel, from the Camp David Accords (1979) to the Madrid-Oslo Accords (1991–1994), and more recently the Abraham Accords (2020). This stance resonates with Arab populations, which often express stronger support for the Palestinian cause than their leaders. Recent geopolitical trends highlight that Iran's sustained backing of groups like Hamas has amplified its influence in the Middle East and Arab World in general.²⁰ This sentiment is not confined to the Muslim or Arab populace but extends to anti-imperialist segments of the Global South. By side-stepping conventional diplomatic norms, Iran's overt endorsement of these attacks seeks to con-

nect with those feeling disenfranchised by their governments' increasing ties with Israel. Importantly, this is not a novel direction spearheaded by Raisi but rather an extension of a longstanding foreign policy doctrine, rooted in the era of the Islamic Republic's founder, Ruhollah Khomeini.

In this context, Amirabdollahian's meetings with Ismail Haniyeh in Doha since October 7 served two objectives.²¹ First, they overtly demonstrated Iran's unwavering support for Hamas and the Palestinian cause to the international community. Second, they were a show of strength to the broader region, Israel, and the United States. Moreover, the U.S.-Iran agreement to exchange prisoners and unfreeze six billion dollars of Iranian assets signalled Washington's openness to ease the strain on Iran, at least prior to October 7. It also suggested that the United States might find it challenging to reverse the Qatar-mediated agreement, without potentially provoking a more forceful response from Iran.²²

Moreover, Iran's response to the Gaza conflict positions it as a regional player advocating for the containment of regional spillover, even amid its repeated warnings to Israel. The unprecedented phone dialogue between Raisi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman,²³ centered on Gaza, was a promising sign of the region's diplomatic efforts on de-escalation. This particular convergence of the various elements of Raisi's foreign policy approach can be characterized as "pragmatic revolutionism."²⁴ However, it is notable that this blend of strategies is not unique to Raisi; it echoes tactics previously employed by predecessors such as Ahmadinejad.

CONCLUSION

In a scenario where many expected the Raisi administration to be marked by isolation, the Iranian president has demonstrated skill in navigating the complex world of international diplomacy. Rather than forging a new path, he has made significant progress by building on the foundation set by his predecessors, thereby repositioning Iran's global standing and proactively engaging at the regional level. Though considerable challenges still loom large, especially in the economic and social sectors, Raisi's strategies present an image of Iran that is not only strengthened within the region but is also intent on expanding its influence internationally.

Raisi's approach might be aptly termed a "non-strategy," given that he has not crafted a distinct regional or global blueprint for his administration. Instead, he treads the courses charted by his predecessors, most notably Rouhani and Ahmadinejad. While these inherited approaches have yielded dividends during Raisi's initial tenure, his endeavors to distinguish his leadership style have yet to manifest clearly.

Please note that this dossier was compiled prior to Iran's drone and missile attack on Israel on April 13, 2024. The strike marked Tehran's first direct attack on Israel, framed as a retaliation for the Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, 2024. This dossier provides insights into Iran and its policy thinking. The analysis does not reflect recent developments.

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IRAN ON THE RISE? CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AND GLOBAL AMBITIONS UNDER RAISI

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INTRODUCTION

President Ebrahim Raisi has placed Iran’s “neighborhood” and “Look East” policies at the center of his foreign relations approach. While these two policy areas have overlapped in the past, they are now much more intertwined after Russia’s war against Ukraine, China’s political engagement in the Gulf region, and Hamas’s attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. These developments have noticeably impacted Iran’s self-perception and foreign policy calculations: Tehran is now fully embracing its eastern outlook, projecting its power more assertively, and actively seeking its revisionist goal of shaping a post-Western order.

THE THREEFOLD SUCCESS OF THE ‘LOOK EAST’ AND ‘NEIGHBORHOOD’ POLICIES

The Raisi government’s “neighborhood” and “Look East” policies align with what Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei defined as policy preferences in February 2018. When Donald Trump’s administration was publicly preparing to withdraw the United States (U.S.) from the nuclear agreement formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Khamenei called on Iranian decision-makers to favor the East over the West and neighboring countries over distant ones.¹

In its neighborhood, the Raisi government has largely focused on de-escalation with Arab states of the Gulf, culminating in a normalization agreement with Saudi Arabia in March 2023. Iranian attempts at de-securitization around the Gulf aim at shifting focus to economic integration while alleviating security concerns over Saudi-Israeli normalization. The latter is no longer an immediate threat to Tehran since Hamas carried out its deadliest attack against Israel to date in October 2023, sabotaging the chances of normalization between Riyadh and Tel Aviv for the time being.

Outside its neighborhood in the Gulf, Tehran has mainly focused on revitalizing its “Look East” policy.² Contrary to past installments, Iran’s current eastern outreach lacks a feasible alternative. As the conflict over Iran’s nuclear program remains unresolved, Tehran continues to be the target not only of a vast regime of U.S. sanctions but also a series of newly imposed sanctions by the European Union (EU) over its brutal crackdown on the nationwide “Women, Life, Freedom” protests in 2022 and 2023. Against this background, balancing an eastern approach with improved relations with the West is no longer a viable option.

However, Raisi has expanded the “Look East” policy even beyond the scope of what was long deemed expedient among policymakers in Iran. This was evident when Tehran decided to deliver combat and reconnaissance drones to Russia in 2022, thus playing a notable part in Moscow’s war against Ukraine—a decision that drew much criticism at home.³ Yet, for the leadership, Iran’s move from an easily sidelined junior partner to a much-needed supplier of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has been worth the indirect participation in a war for which Tehran has officially claimed neutrality.⁴

Iran's decision to supply UAVs to Russia goes hand-in-hand with a new sense of relevance on the international stage after a series of humiliating setbacks and intelligence failures, including the assassination of General Qassim Soleimani, sabotage of its nuclear sites, and Israel obtaining Iran's nuclear archive. The sense of increased global significance has also derived from Iran's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in July 2023—a feat only achieved after an application process that took more than 15 years—and the offer Tehran received and accepted to join the BRICS group formerly comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

While these accomplishments are largely based on the work of preceding presidencies, the Raisi government has been able to claim them as their own, enjoying success on three fronts. First, tensions in the Gulf eased after approaching the brink of war under the previous Iranian government. Second, Iran's middle power status was expanded on the global stage. And third, Raisi leveraged these successes to bolster domestic support, presenting a much-needed political win to his supporters after nationwide protests shook the pillars of the system for months.

TEHRAN'S RISING AMBITIONS FOR A POST-WESTERN ORDER

Iran's foreign policy successes have been achieved during an ongoing critical transitional phase, during which the Islamic Republic is preparing for a post-Khamenei era. Thus, in its own perception, Tehran has displayed significant endurance and near invincibility in the face of external pressure from sanctions and internal unrest. This newfound self-confidence coincides with external political developments that have impacted the Islamic Republic's role in the international order. Most notably, Russia's war against Ukraine, China's shift from an economic actor in the Middle East to a political one, and the brutal attack Israel suffered on October 7 at the hands of the Hamas have contributed to Iran's changing political perceptions.

Against this background, Iran's eastern and regional policies—once distinct foreign policy areas—have now become much more intertwined. The "Look East" policy used to be driven primarily by economic interests and global geopolitics, while Tehran's regional relations lacked a substantial economic dimension, centering around immediate security concerns and regional positioning. Today, the two policy areas overlap and even converge in terms of the Islamic Republic's interest in shaping the international system.

Like other revisionist actors, Iran has rejected a U.S. dominated order and has shared the expectation of a new multipolar global structure with rising regional powers. It has therefore welcomed the relative decline of the United States as a superpower and envisioned the emergence of a post-Western order. For years, Khamenei has claimed that this new order is already in the making, pointing to four main indicators of this transition.⁵ These include the increasing transfer of political, economic, cultural, and scientific power from the West to Asia; a decline of the United States, Israel, and Europe; the rise of regional and new global powers; and the expansion of the "resistance front."⁶ In September 2023, the Supreme Leader reiterated his assessment that the world was "on the verge of a transformation."⁷

Here, Iran has greatly benefitted from the Russian war against Ukraine. The war has widened the global rift between East and West, largely decoupling Russia from the Western sphere for the foreseeable future. Thus, long-held Iranian concerns about Moscow have been alleviated, including the latter's unreliable support at the United Nations (UN) Security Council or being used as a bargaining chip by Moscow vis-à-vis the United States. Additionally, with China entering the Middle East as a political actor after brokering the agreement with Saudi Arabia, Iran's "Look East" policy now no longer relies on a vague, long-term vision of a post-Western order. Tehran is already seeing the contours of a new, multipolar world along the lines of global blocs that come with greater opportunities for much closer partnerships in the Eastern hemisphere than the country could have hoped for only a few years ago. This assessment is strengthened by Tehran's assumptions about the diminishing power of the United States and Europe, as they remain engaged in a costly war in Ukraine, as well as of Israel after the Hamas attacks which were labeled by Khamenei as an "irreparable"⁸ defeat.

The Iranian leadership has also hailed the October 7 operation as a global demonstration of the strength of the "Axis of Resistance," which is now further expanded by the active involvement of Ansar Allah in Yemen. The attacks have cemented the Iranian perception of a geopolitical turning point. With the capacity of the "Axis of Resistance" on full display, Iran's power-projection ability has reached an all-time high. Against this background, all four indicators of global transition—as defined by the supreme leader—appear to have fallen into place.⁹ Per Tehran's assessment, the political developments in Eurasia and the Middle East will allow Iran to move beyond loosely associated alliances to create a much tighter net of structures, common interests, and dependencies in its neighborhood and wider Asia.

STARS ALIGNING FOR A RISING IRAN?

As the Iranian leadership sees the stars aligning for its geopolitical rise and the emergence of a post-Western order, it remains on a slippery slope. Ironically, while the resistance front has never felt more powerful, it has never been more vulnerable. An all-out war of the entire "Axis of Resistance" against Israel and its allies might trigger a devastating blow to at least part of the axis, thus markedly weakening Iran's biggest security asset in the region. Accordingly, Tehran appeared to tread cautiously after October 7, denying any involvement in planning the Hamas operation, but not without warning that another front against Israel remained a real possibility.¹⁰

If Iran were to directly engage in a military conflict with Israel, this would significantly impact its "Look East" approach as well. Neither Russia nor China want to be dragged into a region-wide conflagration; further escalation could deter them from closer relations with Tehran down the line. With Iran becoming a massive security liability for Moscow and Beijing, Tehran's ambitions of playing a shaping role within a rising Asia may diminish rapidly. Iran's tentative normalization with Gulf states may suffer as well. As Arab states of the Gulf have resumed diplomatic ties with Iran—in anticipation of decreased tensions and lower risks of military confrontation—they are not eager to see Tehran further foment regional tension.

Even without a full-scale military conflict, Iranian expectations toward the East will likely be disappointed. Tehran's foreign policy approach comes with numerous shortcomings and limitations, including the possibility of domestic backlash, economic constraints due to U.S. secondary sanctions, and a general misconception of Western decline.¹¹ As Iran has been turning its back on the West, its "Look East" policy has already been suffering, strongly limiting Tehran's opportunities to expand economic and financial relations with its eastern partners.¹² It has become clear that even countries such as China or India cannot fully escape pressure to comply with U.S. sanctions. With the Western sanctions regime firmly in place, Iran's "Look East" policy remains obstructed.

Furthermore, although actors such as Russia or China may share Iran's discontent with the current world order, this does not constitute any consensus on what a new one should look like when it comes to international structures, institutions, or norms. Notwithstanding any differences, Iran has sought closer partnerships with these states in the past based on pragmatic considerations. With the changing political environment in Eurasia, Tehran has shown a willingness to move beyond temporary tactical alliances toward strategic cooperation. At the same time, the Iranian leadership has either ignored or readily dismissed domestic criticism regarding the actual political costs of strategic alliances and their implications for national sovereignty.

Given the numerous challenges and obstacles still in place, Iran's geopolitical rise in a new world order is far from certain. Yet, from Tehran's perspective, all pieces appear to be falling into place, based on a self-perception of unprecedented strength and an ideal geopolitical turning point. Russia's war in Ukraine, China's mediation efforts in the Gulf, and the all-out attack of Hamas on Israel have shifted Tehran's long-standing vision for a future global order to a near-term goal. As Iran is pushing for a revision of the international system, it is going to synchronize its "Look East" and regional policies more closely. As such, Tehran is likely to be much more assertive in its revisionist agenda and less risk-averse with regard to a broader confrontation with Israel or the United States.

Please note that this dossier was compiled prior to Iran's drone and missile attack on Israel on April 13, 2024. The strike marked Tehran's first direct attack on Israel, framed as a retaliation for the Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, 2024. This dossier provides insights into Iran and its policy thinking. The analysis does not reflect recent developments.

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CONCLUSION

Shahram Akbarzadeh & Hamidreza Azizi

The ongoing war on Gaza and Israel's genocidal military campaign have heightened tensions between Iran, the United States, and Israel. Washington and its allies also attribute these tensions to Tehran's continued support for regional actors—members of the so-called "Axis of Resistance." In addition to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the axis includes Yemen's Houthis, Syria's Assad regime, and many Iraqi Shia militias. As the chapters in this dossier have detailed, amid the war on Gaza, Iran's leadership has responded by emphasizing the country's role as the linchpin of this axis. This response reiterates Tehran's long-standing claim of championing the Palestinian cause and, more broadly, the interests of the Muslim world. It distinguishes Iran from its neighbors by reminding observers of its consistent opposition to Israel, having invested blood and treasure in resisting the Israeli domination of Palestinian lands.

The axis, however, serves a dual purpose. In the sixth chapter, Shahram Akbarzadeh noted that Tehran also views the network of pro-Iran actors as a deterrent against hostile actions and a key component of its "forward defense" strategy. It may be ironic, therefore, that Hamas's actions on October 7 of last year brought international attention to Iran and its power projection in the Middle East. This attention is only growing with the Houthis' increasing challenge to international maritime trade and transit in the Red Sea. However, as Faozi Al-Goidi argued in chapter four, the Houthis are neither a mere proxy of nor fully autonomous from Tehran.

Developments at the end of 2023 suggest that President Ebrahim Raisi was not prepared to handle new challenges. Prior to recent escalations between Iran and the United States, Tehran seemed to be making good progress in mending relations with its neighbors and advancing its own interests. For instance, in the fifth chapter, Muhanad Seloom charted Iran's increasing influence in Iraqi politics. Similarly, and within the context of Iran-Syria relations, Hamidreza Azizi emphasized the persistence of Tehran's involvement in Syria despite Bashar Assad's growing ties with Arab states.

Crucially, as multiple authors observed, Iran's renewal of diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia in March 2023, under Chinese auspices, was an important achievement for Raisi's government. This rapprochement was significant on at least three levels. First, as Mehran Kamrava asserted in the first chapter, it confirmed that Iran is prioritizing a policy of neighborly relations to mitigate international isolation. Second, it demonstrated Saudi Arabia's changing calculus in its relations with Iran, as Fatima Alsmadi's chapter outlined. And third, it revealed China's diplomatic clout as a guarantor of a significant agreement between two regional rivals.

Resuming diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia, however, had much broader implications beyond the immediate region, as the dossier's second section explored in detail. It allowed the Iranian leadership to present itself to Beijing as a reliable and rational partner, giving more force to its "Look East" orientation. Iran receiving full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in July 2023, after years of wrangling and negotiation, was a tangible outcome of this orientation.

President Raisi's gains in pushing through Iran's "Look East" policy offer significant advantages to Iranian ambitions for a new world order. Previous administrations saw the policy as an economic opportunity and a panacea for Iran's isolation. The multitude of U.S. and

international sanctions on Iran has devastated the economy and resulted in widespread public discontent and bread riots. The “Look East” policy was expected to alleviate the economic impact of sanctions. However, under Raisi, and amid the war on Gaza, the policy has gained greater political significance.

Many of the authors recognized that Raisi’s successes were built on previous administrations’ policy approaches. Luciano Zaccara termed this a “non-strategy,” contending that it marks “a continuation of established Iranian foreign policy rather than offering a distinct approach.” However, other chapters’ analyses were in tension with this. Kamrava pointed out that, despite building on past approaches, Raisi was the first to formalize the “Look East” policy into doctrine. Similarly, Azadeh Zamirrad, while recognizing certain policy continuities, underscored the increasing integration of the “Look East” and “Neighborhood” policies under Raisi.

Ultimately, while the authors’ analysis diverged on certain topics, their chapters all emphasized Iran’s crucial role in shaping the regional political landscape. 2024 will be a critical year for the region. The ongoing war on Gaza, the U.S. elections, and domestic Iranian politics will all continue to shape the contours of Iranian foreign policy.

Arguably, the Iranian leadership has made a deliberate return to the ideological declarations of early revolutionary days and renewed calls for a new world order. The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has lauded the rise of Asia and the decline of the United States.¹ From his perspective, closer ties with China and Russia do not simply mitigate the impact of sanctions, but herald the dawn of a new era.

Iran’s revisionist foreign policy has gained a new life during Raisi’s presidency and the recent escalation of tensions. It differs from earlier, pragmatic approaches and takes aim at the United States as a hegemonic power that dominates international institutions and unilaterally sets norms for an unjust world order—a view that has been arguably vindicated with U.S. complacency in the ongoing war on Gaza. This worldview presents the framework for Iranian foreign engagement and decision-making; any rapprochement with its neighbors must align with this overarching framework, and this goes to the core of Iran’s approach.

Despite the regional backlash to its proxy relations over the last decade, Iran is unlikely to give up its patronage network. The Iranian leadership, now energized under President Raisi, views rising regional tensions as a vindication of its vision; it rejects past efforts at finding common ground with the West as misguided at best, treacherous at worst. The Raisi-aligned conservatives’ victory in the March 2024 parliamentary election has cemented this political shift. As Raisi’s camp consolidates power and reverses the course of the country’s domestic and foreign policy, the prospect of a compromise over contested issues, such as the nuclear deal, continues to diminish. This changing political landscape—coupled with Iran’s increasingly revisionist foreign policy in search of a post-Western world order—will continue to present serious obstacles to improving relations between Iran and its neighbors.



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ABOUT

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