

Iran and Shi'ite Terrorism

- The Decision-Making System in Iran and the Balance of Power Between Centers of Power

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Historical Background

The Islamic Republic of Iran is the “head of the axis” of political Shi’a in the Middle East. What is “political Shi’a”? I am referring to an understanding of Shi’ite identity and culture, as well as Shi’ite community and social resources, as a platform for the creation of a political force with a broad worldview. Shia’s transformation into a political force was not an obvious move. Traditionally, as early as the ninth century, the sixth Shia imam held that the leaders of the Shi’ite community would not seek executive political authority for themselves. Up until the revolution of 1979 in Iran, Shi’ites in the Middle East were a religious community that fought for sectoral interests against other communities. The political circumstances that developed in Iran since the 1960’s caused a clash between the authoritarian and Western Shah, and a small group of clerics led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini, who spent 16 years in exile, formulated a governmental theory during this period according to which clerics are entitled and even obliged to seek active rule in their country. The revolution, which took place in Iran in 1979, was not originally conceived as an Islamic revolution. Similar to other popular revolutions that took place in Iran in the 20th century, this was also a revolution of a coalition aimed at ousting the incumbent Shah. Its leaders, which included both conservative and liberal elements, assumed that they could use the unifying force of religious discourse to mobilize various segments of the public. They were surprised to discover that the religious opposition considered itself capable of taking power and they were even more surprised when the establishment of the Islamic Republic, according to the model of "guardianship of the Islamic jurist", was approved by referendum.

The new Islamic Republic spent the first ten years of its existence in a difficult and destructive war. For several years, Iran’s leaders tried to promote the “export of the Islamic revolution”. The Shi’ite political gospel combined anti-imperialist rhetoric with the protection of Shi’ites in distress (for example, in Lebanon), yet the potential for creating a large Shi’ite political

movement was never realized. Iranian efforts to export the revolution died out several years after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The Shi'ite community in the Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent did not hurry to adopt the model of "guardianship of the Islamic jurist" (*Wilayat-Faqih*) as a blueprint for political development. The specific political distress of those Shi'ite communities - from the aggressive policies of Saddam Hussein in Iraq to the discrimination against Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain - were not addressed under the possible rule of an Islamic jurist. Furthermore, they objected in principle to the concept and perceived it as a blatant deviation from the Shi'ite tradition.

The Nature of the Political Struggle in Iran

Since the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Khomeini, Iran has been in a state of internal struggle for the continuation of the Islamic Republic. The first stage of the struggle was waged between the "conservatives" and the "reformists". The former sought to deepen Iran's isolation from the world, and to adhere to the revolutionary and religious doctrine in a decisive and uncompromising manner. The latter promoted a discourse of "moderation" and "dialogue", and called for rapprochement with the West. In the eyes of the world, this struggle was very similar to the end of the Cold War. The assumption was that ultimately the advocates of democracy (or the closest version of it) would prevail, but Iran challenged the global consensus and the conservatives were the one who took over most of the centers of power in the country.

The second stage of the struggle, which is being waged today, is defined in Iran as a struggle between the "revolutionaries" and the "republicans". The West and Iran's attitude towards it are not the focus of the current struggle. Both sides set competing visions for the future of the Islamic Republic.

The revolutionaries, the prominent force among their ranks being the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), believe that the survival and vitality of Iran depend on its ability to

challenge the existing regional and global order. According to their approach, Iran must maintain a pro-active foreign policy that strengthens its presence and influence in the countries of the region, in the world in general, and essentially wherever Iranian interests may lie. The Iranian toolbox is broad and deep, and includes assistance and training of terrorist organizations, political subversion and, above all, an attempt to strive for the creation of a cross-border Shi'ite political force.

The Republicans, who are led today by the President of Iran (Hassan Rouhani), are convinced that Iran must integrate into the existing world order in order to continue to flourish as an Islamic Republic. They are not “reformists”, like Mikhail Gorbachev, who strive to change (and certainly not to cancel) the dominant system. The republican foreign policy is aimed at integrating Iran into the world. Rouhani was not eager for confrontation and snubbed the possibility of "Shi'ite" unity at the expense of Iranian national interests.

Supreme Leader Khomeini seemingly has revolutionary inclinations. However, his conduct over the past year demonstrates that he is aware that the majority of the Iranian public does not support the revolutionary agenda. Khomeini, who suffers from terminal prostate cancer, wants to leave behind a stable Islamic Republic. Thus, it seems that despite his political views he cautiously backs Rouhani and the Republicans.

The Nuclear Agreement and the Withdrawal by the United States

The approval of the nuclear agreement (JCPOA) was a great victory for the Republicans. Iran's path seemed paved for integration into the international community and potential regional arrangements. The Supreme Leader, who sought to balance the internal struggle, allowed members of the IRGC to operate relatively freely in the framework of the Syrian civil war and the Yemen arena. Rouhani also did not object, thinking that it would be better to focus on the IRGC in Syria rather than on the IRGC in Iran itself. Qasem Soleimani and his men exploited

the political situation in Iran in order to significantly increase their presence in various arena of conflict throughout the Middle East. The Iranian presence in Syria, and in Yemen, has been upgraded in terms of technology and infrastructure. Shi'ite militiamen from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq arrived to fight in Syria, and their joint presence on the battlefield greatly helped to create a "human" Shi'ite axis. Nevertheless, it is difficult to identify a strategic agenda led by the IRGC. The Shi'ite land corridor has not yet taken shape.

IRGC members are primarily concerned with maintaining their presence and influence in their arenas of activity (in the Israeli context - Lebanon, Syria, Gaza). The IRGC also has significant economic interests and its members seek to secure positions of influence in the emerging Syrian state. Despite Israeli protests, it is difficult to identify an organized global effort to distance Iran from Syria.

Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement shook the very balance between strategic leadership from Tehran, and operative and tactical operations throughout the Middle East. Rouhani's republican integration policy is in serious trouble as many international companies are leaving Iran in the wake of fears of secondary American sanctions.

However, Sunni-led efforts to create a "Shi'ite axis" are also faltering. There are forces that oppose an Iranian-led Shi'ite front, from Muqtada al-Sadr in Iraq to voices within Hezbollah that emphasize its commitment to the Lebanese state. Meanwhile, the Supreme Leader continues to back Rouhani and his republican policy, and Rouhani has no intention of granting political points to his revolutionary rivals.

In addition, the Iranian nation continues to support the republicans and shows no signs of renewed support for the revolutionaries. In fact, the opposite is true. An aggressive revolutionary policy within Iran could damage the political status of members of the camp's leadership. The revolutionary camp has no clear political leader (Soleimani, apparently, does

not aspire to be such a leader) and an aggressive initiative by his people to take power will not be welcomed by the public.

Conclusions

In summary, it is hard to imagine a situation in which the IRGC leadership will choose to intensify and escalate "revolutionary" strategies. The greatest gain for the IRGC will come from its continued presence and strengthening in Syria and Yemen, and from its attempts to "stir up" the Gaza Strip with the help of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. An "explosion" in the form of increased terrorist activity is contrary to the agenda of the Supreme Leader and the Iranian public. Over the years, the IRGC has become a body whose main strength is in implementation and less in the formulation of a strategic agenda. Local initiatives may evolve, and local opportunities may take shape and even lead to concrete actions. However, it is difficult to detect a commitment on the part of the IRGC leadership to lead a multinational Shi'ite force. The goals of such a force are not defined (for instance, it will be difficult to enforce Afghan militias to fight against Israel) and the connections that build it are fragile. It seems that the options available to the IRGC to create a paradigmatic shift are sparse and limited.

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