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Iran: Regional Threats and Shiite-Sunni Challenges

The Islamic State, Saudi Arabia & the Arab States, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel and Australia

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Map of the Middle East. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Creative Commons

Introduction

Any assessment of the multitude of dynamics that contribute to the ongoing regional stability in the Middle East requires an understanding of the factors that motivate the perceptions and actions of each state and other non-state actors. Iran and its neighbours, the Islamic State (IS) and the Sunni and Shiite sects of Islam are all stakeholders in this mix, and in shaping any solution that contributes to regional peace and stability.

Iran currently views the Islamic State (IS) as the major threat to Iran and the Middle East with the potential threat of Israeli air and missile strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities as the most likely direct military threat to Iran. Iran did not assess any other regional country as a direct military threat.

While anticipating a growth of Iranian regional power and influence following the signing of the nuclear accord, and noting initiatives by Iranian President Rouhani to become a constructive part of a peaceful solution to the Middle East crisis, the Arab and especially Gulf states still feared Iranian aggression. A proxy contest between Shiite and Sunni had developed as both sides sought to protect and project their respective interests and influence but this contest had been exploited by the IS and other religious extremists.

Any peaceful solution required religious participation, the domination of both the Shiite and Sunni sects by moderates and the development of understanding and trust between those sects. There is a role for Australia to contribute to regional peace and stability.

Threats to Iran

According to senior officials of the Iranian government and government-affiliated think tanks, the Islamic State (IS) was the major threat to both Iran and the Middle East generally. The primary objective of the IS, described as an anti-Shiite extremist organisation and derivative of Saudi Arabia's Sunni Wahhabist sect, was to fully take over or become the major politico-religious force in all Muslim states. The ultimate goal of IS was the creation of a greater caliphate. It sought to dominate states or regions within states that were predominantly Sunni and to weaken, isolate and eventually overthrow governments or capture regions that were predominantly Shiite. Iran's Shiite and Sunni populations and Iran as a nation-state generally, were all IS targets.

Israel was rated as the next highest threat. Specifically, it posed the highest direct military threat to Iran, with Israeli principal targets being the destruction Iran's nuclear facilities by air or missile strikes. However, the immediacy of this threat had receded following Iran signing the nuclear accord (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action - JCPOA) with the P5/EU+1 countries¹ in July 2015. Despite this, the threat remained. The Israelis had clearly indicated that if they assessed Iran had breached its commitment to the conditions of that accord they reserved the right to respond militarily.

Iran did not assess any other regional country, or potential coalition of regional countries, as posing any direct military threat, at least in the foreseeable future. While Saudi Arabia and others had substantial armed forces, Iran's "self-sufficient" military capability was at least on par with that of its neighbours and near neighbours. Iran was confident it could protect its borders, its skies, maintain

¹ The US, UK, France, Russia, China plus EU and Germany.

its sea lanes of communication through the Gulf and proximate areas of the Indian Ocean, and in general, deter or repel any military invasion or incursion. This assessment excluded the US. Iran saw no reason for any conflict with the US armed forces.

Contrary to the views of some in the US, Iran had no plans to militarily annex the Shiite populated area of neighbouring Iraq, or any other foreign territories². However, Iran did actively cooperate politically, militarily and through its intelligence and law enforcement agencies with its neighbours and near neighbours against mutual threats, including those by the IS and other political and religious extremist organisations and their related militia³. Cooperation also extended to countering the smuggling of illegal narcotics. The Iranians spoke of positive cooperative relations with India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Central Asian Republics, Russia, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Oman but varying relations with the other states⁴.

The IS threat

Elaborating on this threat, Iran readily acknowledged IS strengths: the commitment of its leadership to their militant extremist ideology and that generally it was well led, well organised, well financed and well armed. It had also proven its transnational capability to effectively exploit opportunities to expand its control and influence, particularly where local governments were highly unpopular, weak, or had collapsed.

Strategically, and importantly, the IS had escalated its extremist ideology and actions to an assault on moderate Islam, especially Sunni moderates, and to waging a bitter and ruthless “religious war” against the Shiite. IS tactics included the uninhibited use of terrorism and more conventional military force wherever practical to achieve its goals. Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan were cited as amongst the regional counties where this was evident. IS outreach was also evident in Asia, Africa and Europe.

Iran fully recognised that not every extremist or fundamentalist, Sunni or other, is IS. However, an Iranian frustration was the difficulty of determining which organisations were and were not members of the IS or constituted a like threat. There were many separate organisations in the mix that had a similar profile, often operated in ways akin to elements of the IS, or coordinated some of their activities with those of the IS. In many cases the ranks of these were swollen by out-of-region jihadists, including some from Australia, most of whom had no past affiliation with the IS or like organisations but who had been radicalised and were committed to their vision of the jihadist cause. This was a problem, particularly in Syria and Iraq.

Iran saw itself as a high priority target of the IS: it was host to the largest Shiite population of any state (some 90 percent of Iran's 80 million population were Shiite) and was the centre of Shiite theology.

² The UAE disagrees and is in a continuing dispute with Iran, the origins of which go back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, over the sovereignty of three islands, Abu Musa, Tunb as Sughra and Tunb al Kubra off the coast of the UAE. These islands are currently occupied by Iran.

³ Iran has common borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, and Iraq, and proximate sea borders with Kazakhstan and Russia on the Caspian Sea, and Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE and Oman in the Gulf.

⁴ The Iranians also spoke positively of their defence relationship with China, including particularly their common interest in protecting sea lanes of communications.

According to the Iranians, the IS targeted Iran in two ways. Firstly, it sought to weaken the state from within by penetrating and radicalising its minority Sunni population (about 9 percent of Iran's population were Sunni, most of whom lived in Eastern Iran. Iran was also host to some one million Afghan refugees, mostly Sunni, and most of whom were living amongst the local population in the towns and villages in eastern Iran, not in refugee camps). Secondly, the IS was using its power in neighbouring states to squeeze Iran and weaken its influence amongst its neighbours.

On the first method of targeting, the Iranians said that the IS had not succeeded in securing any firm ideological foothold amongst its Sunni population. However, the threat remained very real and was subject to close and constant monitoring.

On the second, many Iranians believed that politically influential nationals in Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf states (Qatar, the UAE and Bahrain were variously mentioned) were indirectly, and in some cases directly, supporting or influencing the actions of the IS and similar groups to target Iranian interests. While most supporters were assessed as acting independently, there was speculation about some acting as proxies on behalf of elements of their governments (see below).

The Iranians also cited the US and Turkey as supporting or having supported the IS but in the case of the US, indirectly and presumably unintentionally. Both countries had provided weapons and other material support to opponents of President Assad but the US had done so without checking the credentials of all recipients. Many recipients were reportedly IS or like extremists. Turkish support went further. Turkey had opened its border and enabled unrestricted access into Syria by any opponents of President Assad. The IS were quick to exploit this situation and passage through Turkey became the major IS infiltration and supply route to both Syria and Iraq. The Turks were well aware of this.

On countering the IS, the Iranians believe that militarily targeting their strongholds and logistic supply lines was important but that ultimately the solution was political. Religion was an integrated part of this solution and cooperation between major stakeholders would only be possible where the religious environment was dominated by moderates, whatever their religion or sect. The Iranians also believe that it was essential that stakeholders knew who they were negotiating with. In Syria and Iraq especially, it was essential to differentiate between local "opposition" groups motivated by domestic issues from those exploiting the local situation to further the broader goals of the IS and other extremists.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States

Iran's relationship with Saudi Arabia was described as tense. The cause was attributed principally to Saudi Arabia's actions to protect its own regional power and influence and contain that of Iran. The Saudis were working with all regional and out-of-region supporters both state and non-state actors across the political, religious and ethnic spectrum. That included funding and other support to religious and cultural organisations that were, or the Saudis sought to influence to become, hostile to Iran or the Shiite. It also included arming the Sunni "opposition" militia in countries such as Syria and Iraq, to counter Iranian support to Shiite militia.

The Iranians described the Saudi funding of organisations hostile to Iran in regional countries as a state-on-state contest by proxy. To this, some added their speculation (above) about the exploitation of the IS as a proxy also.

The Iranians viewed some senior leaders within the Sunni Wahhabist sect in particular as at the core of religious extremism in the Middle East. Examples cited of that extremism were the preachings by some senior Wahhabist clerics in Saudi Arabia, which were in turn repeated in many Wahhabist controlled or funded regional mosques and religious schools. These preachings decreed the Shiites were infidels and that killing them was condoned⁵. These messages simply promoted hatred and violence between the Sunni and Shiites in some regional areas. Despite this, Iran viewed Wahhabism, officially the “state religion” of Saudi Arabia, as basically fundamentalist and did not believe the majority of its clerics and members condoned these decrees or supported the IS objectives and actions. But if the Saudis were serious about promoting regional stability and peace, they had to reign in and disassociate themselves with Wahhabist extremism.

Iran also believed Saudi Arabia had to check this extremism for its own internal security reasons. Iran anticipated the extremists would eventually turn on the Saudi establishment and believed there were already signs of this happening, as was happening in Pakistan. The Iranians also claimed many of Saudi Arabia's Gulf state allies were very wary of allowing Wahhabism to become established locally for that reason.

Syria, Turkey Iraq Afghanistan and Israel

Syria and Turkey

Syria was seen by Iranian interlocutors as a highly complex situation because, in addition to the IS, it involved broader bilateral issues between Russia and the US and Turkey and the Kurds.

The Iranians made five points to explain their support of Syria's Assad government and the way ahead if there was to be a potentially workable political solution. Firstly, the Syrian government (headed initially by President Hafez al-Assad and since 2000 by his son Bashar al-Assad) had been supportive of Iran since the 1979 revolution and a regional friend when friendships were few.

Secondly, Assad's government was Alawite, essentially a Shiite sect (Syria's population was some 23 million people. Ethnically, 90 percent were Arab and 9 percent Kurd. Their religious affiliation was 90 percent Muslim and 10 percent Christian and others. Some 75 percent of Muslims were Sunni and 11 percent Alawite i.e. the Assad government comprised a religious minority).

Thirdly, the Assad government was the legitimate government of Syria and Iran was providing support at the formal request of the government.

Fourthly, the US and Turkey were supporting the overthrow of Assad by arming largely unknown “opposition” elements, who were not united politically and whose relationship and any common agenda with the IS or other extremists was often unclear or unknown. The one certain outcome if Assad was overthrown by opposition militia, was political chaos, – the tragic lesson of Iraq.

⁵ Senior clerics including Mecca's Chief Mufti, Sheikh Adil al-Kalbani, Internet references cited as evidence were <http://www.nairland.com/1275143/saudi-salafi-wahhabi-cleric-calls>, and <http://en.abna24.com/index.php/service/bahrain/archive/0000/00/00/161257/story.htmls>

Compounding that was the broader ethnic implications involving Syria's Kurds, elements of which were being militarily targeted separately by Turkey because of their support to Kurdish dissidents in Turkey.

Fifthly, the Syrian crisis could only be resolved politically. Assad and his government had to be part of that process, if only initially, to ensure the state infrastructure remained intact. Any solution also had to protect religious and ethnic minorities (notably Alawites, Christians and Kurds).

On the fourth point, Iran feared the potential impact of disaffected Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey on its own Kurdish population. (Some 7 percent of Iran's population was Kurdish and most lived in the northwest of Iran, adjacent to Turkey, Syria and Armenia). Iran was anxious to quarantine its Kurds to the maximum extent possible from that disaffection and to prevent any potential moves by them for autonomous status in Iran.

Regarding the fifth point, Iran was well aware of Assad's adverse reputation, especially on human rights, and appreciated that he was unlikely to be part of the end solution⁶.

On the issue of which countries should be involved in negotiating a political solution in Syria, the Iranians saw themselves as participants because they were a direct stakeholder. They also saw Russia as a participant because of its direct and historical interests in Syria and the region. One of Russia's aims would be a solution that enabled the retention of their naval support base at Tartus in Syria, their only remaining military base in the Mediterranean⁷.

Iraq

Iraq was cited by the Iranians as a prime case of where the decision by the US and its allies to invade and overthrow the unpopular Saddam regime was so badly planned in terms of its implications and outcomes that the Iraqi state effectively collapsed. That situation was subsequently exploited by the IS. While the Iraq coalition government notionally represents all major political, religious and ethnic groups, as a state it is unstable, with a very active and highly threatening IS presence. (About 65 percent of Iraq's 36 million population were Shiite, and 35 percent Sunni).

Iran saw its military support to the Iraqi government as in the direct interests of both Iran itself and Iraq. Iran shares a common border with Iraq and sought to prevent any hostile cross-border operations, especially by the IS. Iran was also assisting the Iraqi government operationally, at Iraq's request, to combat the IS. That included military support to the Iraqi armed forces, to the local militia⁸ and strikes by the Iranian airforce against IS targets. These operations were approved and coordinated by the Iraqi Ministry of Defence (MOD).

The Iranians emphasised that their support to the Iraqi government, including military operations against the IS, were also consistent with the interests, aims and actions locally of the US and its

⁶ It was implicit that Assad himself would **not** be part of the end solution. See also *Syria: Iranian and Russian Support for Assad*, published in the AIIA Australian Outlook on 9 October 2015.

⁷ Some Iranians also suspected a hidden US objective in any political outcome would be to bring about the closure of Russia's naval support base at Tartus.

⁸ The local militia form part of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) established by the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior in 2014. Most PMF are Shiite, but a small percentage are Sunni. Because of sectarian tensions, their operations are mostly confined to areas populated by their respective sects.

allies, including Australia. They also stressed the necessity to ensure there was no accidental conflict between the military (especially air) activities of Iran, the US and its allies when targeting the IS. They were satisfied with deconfliction arrangements managed by Iraq's MOD⁹.

Iran acknowledged the ultimate solution to the crisis in Iraq was also political but did not anticipate any solution in the foreseeable future.

Afghanistan

Iran viewed its border with Afghanistan as safe from any proximate threat by the IS or Taliban. Iran worked closely with Afghanistan on monitoring and action to counter mutual threats. Border monitoring was described as “in depth”. Relations generally with Afghanistan were described as good, including ethnic and cultural relations. The Iranians cited Afghanistan as an example where state-on-state relations were not adversely affected, nor were there major sectarian tensions, because of their Shiite-Sunni differences (an estimated 84 percent of Afghans were Sunni and 15 percent Shiite, the latter mostly Tajiks and Hazaras). This, they said, clearly countered allegations by some Sunni extremists that Iran could not work in harmony with Sunni states.

Israel

Iran believed that the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had no intention of agreeing in the foreseeable future to any peaceful settlement with the Palestinians that involved a return to Israel's 1967 borders (actual or approximate). Iran assessed that Netanyahu's objectives included holding out for a settlement that was much more favourable in terms of territorial retention. In the meantime, Netanyahu was expected to perpetuate the status quo, including the provocation of increasing Israeli settlements in the West Bank. This remained an important destabilising factor in the region.

Commenting on continuing Iranian support to the military wing of Hamas and to Hezbollah, both proscribed terrorist organisations, the Iranians made two points. Firstly, both organisations were established in response to Israeli aggression i.e. Israel's occupation of Palestine and military operations against Syria respectively. Neither was the creation of Iran. Secondly, Iranian support to Hamas was now “almost negligible” and Hezbollah's focus was support to the Assad government to combat the IS. The Iranians did not elaborate on the reasons for their claimed diminished support to Hamas or any possible change of policy by Hezbollah about Israel.

The Iranians were particularly critical of the failure of the West, and the US especially, to pressure Israel to seek a “just” and timely settlement of the Palestinian issue. While noting the political influence of the Israelis within Western countries, including Australia, they cited Prime Minister Netanyahu's recent direct appeal to the US Congress on the terms of the nuclear accord, as demonstrating not only his willingness to bypass the White House when it suited, but to insult the US president in the process. The Iranians also cited the lack of even-handedness by the West on the nuclear issue: imposing sanctions and JCPOA conditions on Iran but an unwillingness to pressure

⁹ This comment pre-dated the shooting down of a Russian jetfighter by Turkey on the Turkish/Syrian border on 24 November 2015. While the exact circumstances of this incident remain unknown, it has since been cited by Iran and others as a critical reason for coordinated and effective deconfliction arrangements.

Israel to become a signatory to the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) or to declare the Middle East as a nuclear free zone¹⁰.

The Iranians stressed that Iran was not anti-semitic. Iran had the largest domestic practicing Jewish community in the Muslim world and the Iranian constitution specifically designated one seat in parliament for a Jewish representative. Their issue was not with Jews, but with Zionists. Currently, Iran 's policy on Israel was not prescriptive but evolving. The Zionist context was interpreted as recognition of the Israeli state but not of any territorial claims outside the 1967 boundaries. By extension, Iran would recognise a genuine two-state solution and put its weight behind others, including all regional states, to make that happen. But that solution would only happen if the US was committed to make it happen.

Iranian foreign policy generally

The Iranian government under President Hassan Rouhani recognised the need to move on from its negative image of the past, especially that projected by his immediate predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). Iran had moved in that direction before, under President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), with the then cautious approval of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khameni (appointed Supreme Leader in 1989; he was President of Iran during 1981-1989). However, that initiative abruptly ended in January 2002 when US President George W Bush described Iran as part of an “axis of evil”. That reference caught Iran by surprise and significantly elevated their distrust of the US.

Iran was anxious to come in from the cold and be respected as a cooperative partner in seeking a solution for regional peace and stability¹¹. Iran's regional policies were continuously under review and had been and would continue to be reshaped where considered necessary. However, Iran had its core values, political, religious and other, and appreciated other regional countries had the same. It believed that despite the hostility from non-IS sources, cooperation was possible via the moderate middle ground without compromising core values. They believed there was still a way to go to achieve that.

Arab State views

Not unexpectedly, the views expressed in discussions with Arab state officials, including those of the Gulf states, differed on many issues to those of Iran.

The Arab states recognised Iran/Persia as one the three great historic civilisations in the Middle East (along with Egypt and Turkey) and the inevitability, post accord, of Iran regaining a position of regional power and influence. However, Iran has to coexist cooperatively with other regional states, religions and cultures.

¹⁰ Despite the JCPOA, Iran has never admitted to developing a nuclear capability for military purposes. The JCPOA, Preamble and General Provisions, para xi, explicitly states the agreement applies only to Iran and is not a precedent applicable to other states, or state rights or obligations under the NPT.

¹¹ See *Iran: Poised To be Part Of The Solution To The Middle East Crisis*, published in the AIIA Australian Outlook on 16 October 2015.

Iran's legacy, since their 1979 revolution, was that of an aggressor state that had sought to project and impose its revolution on others. Its policies included support to terrorist organisations e.g. Hamas and Hezbollah and to other rebel groups, including the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

The possibility of Iran expanding its territorial ambitions was also raised, based on the accusation of Iran's "unlawful" occupation of three strategically located islands off Dubai, which the UAE claimed were theirs (footnote 2 above). While no other territorial ambitions were cited, some believed other claims or territorial occupation could not be discounted in future.

Iran was also accused of unacceptably interfering in the internal affairs of different states. Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain were cited as countries where Iran had supported dissident groups, most of which were Shiite. Officials of other Arab states, including those in North Africa, accused Iran of support, at least in the past, to the Muslim Brotherhood.

On the Israel/Palestine issue, several officials emphasised the importance of Iran to not only cease support to Hamas and Hezbollah that enabled them to undertake violent action against Israel, but be seen to pressure both to cease all such action. Ongoing support and attacks against Israel only gave the Israelis an excuse to defer any settlement negotiations by using continuing threats as an excuse.

The claim was also made that Iran was using Shiite religious, cultural and other groups as proxies to promote their own interests in the same way they accused the Arab states of using Sunni counterparts, which they did. The Arab states saw this use of counterparts as a legitimate means of projecting national interests. They also acknowledged the existence of some extremists on both sides, but strongly denied official support to any extremists, and categorically dismissed any allegation of direct or indirect support to the IS. The IS was seen as a common enemy.

On Syria, Saudi Arabia acknowledged the problem of disunity amongst the "opposition" and referred to the recent Saudi initiative to host a conference in mid December to "unify" the opposition. Who would or would not be invited had yet to be determined.

Several Arab state officials claimed that the current tensions between Sunni and Shiite did not exist before Iran's 1979 revolution and attributed them as both a direct and indirect outcome of that revolution. All officials acknowledged the need to return to the moderate middle ground between Sunni and Shiite and to actively promote cooperation between Islam and other religions, as part of a peaceful solution¹². They were hopeful that President Rouhani could bring Iran to the table.

Australian Interests and Activities

Australia's major interests in the Middle East are international security and economic. These interests are supported and executed through a comprehensive range of activities including bilateral initiatives, working closely with the United Nations and other international and regional organisations, and jointly with our alliance partners and others on specific security issues. In promoting activities and initiatives that will constructively contribute to regional peace and stability across the areas of this report, Australia should continue doing what it is doing now, with an

¹² Saudi Arabia cited the establishment of the King Abdullah International Centre for Interreligious and Cultural Dialogue in Vienna in 2011 as a major national initiative to help bring about a better understanding and cooperation between the different sects of Islam, and Islam and the other religions.

emphasis wherever possible on greater effectiveness. In doing so, Australia must remain aware of the limitations of its influence amongst the major players and more broadly within the region. However, there is a positive role for Australia and scope for exercising independent initiatives when opportunities arise in the future..

Some specific Australian initiatives consistent with the above include:

- Positively encourage Iran and the other regional states, bilaterally or in other fora, to identify those unilateral, bilateral and multilateral activities that would deliver cooperative solutions and promote regional peace and stability. Specific current issues include Syria and Iraq and encouraging stakeholders to think outside the box in search of solutions. Any positive action, however small a step, is better than no step at all. Australia should be a willing broker if asked or where appropriate.
- In consultation with appropriate Islamic organisations and leaders in Australia, provide support to domestic and international initiatives to encourage all regional states, including Iran, and Islamic organisations within, to actively promote moderate Islam and publicly disassociate themselves with religious extremism. Positive outcomes would also have an important impact in Australia on the perceptions and attitudes of both its Muslim and non-Muslim communities.
- Australia should promptly lift its UN and autonomous sanctions against Iran, consistent with Iran meeting its JCPOA obligations. This is important in order to demonstrate to Iran Australia's positive recognition of Iran meeting these obligations. It would also facilitate the timely pursuit by Australia of bilateral trade and other economic opportunities created by the lifting of sanctions.
- Actively support through bilateral initiatives, the UN and other fora, the continuation of negotiations to reach a peaceful two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine issue. Australia should think and act flexibly in terms of its possible activities that would support that solution, including ways to encourage Iran to demonstrate its commitment to a genuine settlement of this issue as part of its broader commitment to regional peace and security. For Australian representations to Iran, unilateral or with others, to influence both Hamas and Hezbollah to cease militant activities against Israel as part of its commitment is currently outside the policy box and at best a very long shot. But any well constructed initiative, where all stakeholders could be winners, should not be excluded from the inventory.