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UK

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Our Vision:

In the beginning all people were one nation (Holy Qur'an, 2:213)
Throughout human history, peace has always been the 'primary state' and war the 'accidental state'. Peace is beautiful, compassionate and constructive, while war is fearsome, merciless and destructive. Unfortunately, despite this, war has been one of 20th century's most major problems, and has proved to be the symbol of the beginning of the 21st century. As portrayed by the contemporary history of international relations, particularly in the Middle East and Central Asia, war is not the solution, nor is it constructive or helpful in solving problems; rather, it causes problems and is the root of the continuation of violence, instability and insecurity.

War is not the solution to the differences between governments and nations. Only with peace which is based on justice, i.e. '*Just Peace*', can we reach a stable and permanent solution to our differences. Diplomacy and constructive dialogue which take into consideration the rights of both parties, is the only path to establishing '*Just Peace*', stability and world security. Our aim is to change international relations with the active participation of nations on the basis of '*Just Peace*'.

Let there be a group among you who will invite others to good.
(Holy Qur'an, 3:104)

We, as part of the international network of intellectuals, are able to play an important and constructive role in the establishment of mutual understanding, of dialogue and in the reduction and amelioration of global problems. Our intention is to provide solutions and means for the positive and just cooperation of nations with each other, and to reach this end independent of governments, through a realistic understanding of nations and governments from each other, and through clear, truthful and constructive dialogue.

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1. Establishing justice between the countries of the South and the North.
2. Mutual respect between different nations and different governments.
3. Respecting and considering the valid interests of all parties which have a vested interest in any given conflict.
4. Thinking globally and acting against extreme nationalism.
5. Realistic understanding of the realities of the world.
6. Upholding and respecting human rights and the principles of democracy.
7. Accepting and moving towards the destruction of weapons of mass destruction throughout the world/on a global scale

Our priorities in the current situation are to analyse the issues and problems of conflict-zones such as those of the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

Our tools for aiding in the establishment of world peace are:

1. Inviting and facilitating for intellectuals from different parts of the world to engage in dialogue with each other.
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4. Organising international scientific conferences dealing with regional and global issues.
5. Publishing scientific research work on peace studies in the form of books and journals.
6. Providing education internationally on the culture of dialogue, understanding, compromise, justice, freedom and spirituality.

We are a private, non-governmental organisation. Our offices are based in Europe and the Middle East.

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The Active Role of the Iranian Geo-strategy The Persian Gulf as a ground for Hot Debate

Mahmoud Haidar

The Delta Centre for In-Depth Research – Beirut

Abstract

Any talk on and about Iran, 30 years after the Iranian Revolution, assumes raising the level of discussion to the status that this country occupies a heavy and influential place in international strategies.

This assumption will lead us to work on the Iranian geography considering that it is a vital field in and around which realities and turning points are made in the world of ideas as in that of politics, culture, economy and the strategies of war and peace.

Talk about Iran's presence inside the regional and international realms is not dependent on how its current image appears to be, rather it goes back to the moment of transformation when the world witnessed the fall of the monarchy and the rise of the Islamic Republic led by Imam Khomeini in 1979.

Keyword: Iran, Persian Gulf, Geo- strategy, Geo-security, world order.

Introduction

In the fall of 1978, late French philosopher Michel Foucault travelled to Tehran to document his impressions in the *Courier de la Sierra* on the rising popular demonstration against the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Foucault, famous for his philosophical analyses on the history of prisons and insanity, knew little about the Persian history and about Islam. He also never worked as a journalist or a reporter before. However, after he was asked about the reason for his travel to Iran he answered with the following meaningful phrase: “We have to be there at the birth of ideas”...

At that moment, the French philosopher’s statement summarised a great amount of questions that the western intelligentsia did not know about political Islam after the collapse of the Ottoman caliphate. And we find how the research institutes and decision-making bases in the West started to deeply study what the “political religious geology” could result in, in terms of transformations that exceeded the Iranian plateau with their repercussions and effects.

In the first part of this study, we will try to shed light on Iran’s geo-strategic position. This position was established, crystallised and expanded in an accumulative and gradual manner but in a way that is laden with complications and that is inseparable from a large group of internal and external sources of threat. Domestically, the international game, opposed to the regime in Iran, did not stop betting on the internal geopolitical movement since the presidential elections in the summer of 2009 launched it to its maximum limits. Abroad, eyes did not, for a moment, stop looking suspiciously at the Iranian escalation or finding the means that can contain the Islamic regime, weaken it and destabilise it.

On both sides of the confrontation, the Iranian leadership saw that the clash with the United States and its allies was inevitable. And if the frequencies of this clash had reached their climax after the events of September 11, 2001, the Iranians showed how their country entered an unstoppable geo-strategic track. After the occupation of Afghanistan

and Iraq and after the soil and waters of the Persian Gulf was filled with armies and fleets, the Iranian national security entered the great circle of danger, placing the leadership before the merit of seeking to dig a counter track of the confrontation. It had to make use of all national capacities and new conditions that resulted from the failures of the American-western project.

I. The strategy of the place

We wouldn't have used the term geo-strategy while talking about the case of Iran had it not been an evident and essential definition of the situation it reached today.

Iran is a state for a nation in the classical meaning agreed on for the concept of state/nation. Today, it exceeds being a geo-political entity limited to events of power inside its closed citadel. This is because—due to the major changes that took place at the level of the central-Asian sub continent – it became an essential matter of world affairs. As such it genuinely acquires the term geo-strategy which imposes itself among the cases that are concerned with conflicts among states or among political powers that consider themselves as hostile to each other. Therefore the invasion of Kuwait, for example, Saddam Hussein's war on Iran and the war – one time cold another hot – that the Americans and their allies are operating against Iran from the Persian Gulf and Middle East stretches only enter the range of the geostrategic movement.

In return, the term geo-strategy, in some conflicts, indicates the significance of geographic facts that are then considered major bets. Famous examples to that are what happened and is happening in the Mediterranean area, the Persian Gulf, the Oman Sea, the Middle East, the great oil reserve in the Persian Gulf geography, the Gibraltar Strait, the Suez Canal, the Aden-Djibouti crossway and the Hormuz Strait. For decades and centuries, these examples have been the subject of geostrategic rivalries.¹

If Iran is behaving on the basis that it has really achieved a geostrategic location, this is based on a political-religious culture that has a preventive and defensive trait. And this is what the Iranian leaders underline in any occasion related to the ongoing debate over the roles of their country. This is why Iran's pursuit for power does not mean – according to this assertion – weakening other regional countries or threatening any country. Iran's acquisition of power – in its leaders' opinion – is linked to the Iranians' natural talent in a completely new manner. It is an Islamic way of life and in Iran's geopolitical and geo-economic logic. According to this different logic, it is possible that the vocabulary of the Iranian political language today differs from that of the United States. "But our goals and aims are to service the Iranians and to adhere to their ambitions and their national sovereignty."²

And because the geo-strategic rhetoric is often used in the heat of debates and sentencing, the parallel view does not find in using the geo-strategic power on the part of Iran a defensive act, rather an expansion of influence and a subjugation of the hostile part. This is what the two researchers at the Royal Academy of International Affairs in London, Robert Louis and Claire Spencer, concluded. They found in their joint research entitled "Factors of Iran's Geostrategic Power" that the Iranian foreign policy interests are focused on the following causes:

- Regional hegemony, especially the economic and cultural, within its circle of influence.
- Expanding the circle of its regional influence.
- Preserving regional stability.
- Seeing a united Iraq without it being able to pose a military threat on Iran.
- Understanding the United States, despite the vagueness over how to deal with it.

In all of the above mentioned areas, the Iranian influence – according to Louis and Spencer – poses a strategic threat to the neighbouring Persian Gulf countries. As the nuclear issue and Israel's conflict with its neighbours escalate, an existential threat to the influence and hegemony of the United States on this vital region is growing and expanding.³

In any case, friction in the geostrategic space is often focused on facilitating the execution of taken strategic decisions. Iran is not far from this understanding when it comes to the fields of cold wars in Afghanistan, Iran and the Arab-Israeli conflict or when it involves the open rush over the nuclear program.

Here we are faced with the following obvious question:
How do the Iranians behave according to their geostrategic position?

If the geographical nature of any country pushes it to adopt a special political behaviour that conforms to this geography, there is in the experience of the Iranian Islamic Republic what represents a unique example to this rule. Iran's presence – with and after the Islamic Revolution -became a geostrategic phenomenon with an actual impact on the near, medium and long ranges. Over three decades, there will be political, cultural and security impacts that will make the regional and international surroundings saturated with the predispositions of interaction, response and vulnerability with the developments of the internal environment.

A necessary reminder is that the foreign policies of any state originate from what is stored in its internal establishment. For example, the weaker a country's national power is, according to international standards, the greater its vulnerability to international movement. On the other hand, the greater its size, area and national strength, the more complicated are its vulnerability and influence.

In order to understand, in a more credible manner, the concept of the impact of the internal systems of the foreign policy, three variables are underlined:

1. The enshrined political culture.
2. The social, intellectual and class nature of the main elements (powerful and rich individuals).
3. Wide targets and strategies

According to strategic analysts of complicated and highly sensitive international affairs such as Iran, variable (c) – i.e. the targets and

strategies – is considered an inevitable outcome of variables (a) and (b). In other words, if we extract the wide targets of some country, we would have understood the truth, the enshrined political culture and the intellectual and class structure of its elite. Therefore, the behaviour and reactions and the system of incentives for a people are present elements in its political culture. This means that the intellectual nature of the elite is what drives the society and determines its destination while society leaders represent the juice of its social and political behaviour. This is why it is only obvious that the Iranian Islamic Republic cannot be excluded from this rule.⁴

As an example based on the aforementioned rule, we will notice the manners by which the constituent factors of Iran's geostrategic position were formed. The wide targets of the Iranian Islamic Republic are deeply rooted spreading in the Islamic Revolution's political and cultural heritage: They are the roots that led to the victory of the revolution and turned into principles and structures from which the goals of the foreign policy can be derived. According to the Constitution and the Iranians' performance the wide targets can be divided into three parts:

- 1- Growth, economic expansion and preservation of the land's unity and national sovereignty.
- 2- Defending Muslims and liberation revolutions and opposing Israel and the West especially the United States.
- 3- Establishing an Islamic society based on Shiite principles.⁵

Despite the visible contrast in combining the three targets, since each has its context, mechanisms and special formats, and this is what normally happens in traditional countries, the Iranian leadership was able to place them in one pot. The behaviours of the ruling political and ideological elite showed its ability to absorb these targets and manage the complications that faced their implementation. This combination, with the consequent expensive political, security and developmental prices, could be one of the most significant paradoxes that will strengthen the Iranian presence, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic to date. Perhaps, one of the good reasons in the

abovementioned paradoxes, is that the concept of political independence and the ideology of economic and social liberality have deep national and ideological* roots, and that this concept will last for many years to come, at the time when the Iranians are exerting obvious efforts to balance the interaction with the world and to try and enrich confidence building inside the country with the passage of time. ⁶

Geo-strategy as Foreign Policy

During the decades that followed the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran, strong ties were built between the geographic location and the political one. It is this relation that would produce what the geopolitics experts call “scope sensitivity”. The sensitivity and awareness of the elites about state and society policies are as much important and vital as the place where they are active.

Based on the geopolitics goals, the most essential dimension in the geostrategic process is that the geostrategic state turns into a living being. In fact, the state that acts within a geostrategic range succeeds in making its geographic scope effective in international and regional politics, and of impact on its orientations. But this primarily depends on the awareness of active elites in that state about the importance of the scope and further, their recognition of the importance of the location of land that they manage within the conflicts surrounding it.

The German geographer Frederick Ratzel (1844-1904) shows in his referential study entitled Anthropogeography that the soil (land) is the founding and strong fact around which peoples’ interests are concentrated. He goes beyond that to suggest that history’s movement is already identified by soil and land. This is followed by another conclusion drew by Ratzel on the basis of the evolution theory, that the state is a living being, yet a being deep-rooted in soil. For him, the state is composed of the earth’s surface, the area dimension and the popular awareness about both. Thus the objective geographic fact, and the general national personal awareness of this fact which is expressed in politics, are reflected in the state. Ratzel sees that the “natural” state is

the one that organically combines the changeable quantities of the nation: the geography, the demographics and the ethno-culture.⁷

The Iranians base their foreign policies on their recognition of the intimate link between the land where they live and the politics they practice. That's why the geographic location of Iran is described as "the golden middle" that lies between Asia and Europe. Bordering the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, Iran serves as the intersection between all transport lines, including water ones, whether from north to south or from west to east with respect to Eurasia.

The geographic location of Iran in the middle of Eurasia, and being in contact with two sources rich in energy, the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, make it also well positioned in its relation with great powers. Iran has always been an international country influenced by any change in the world order that also affects its fate. During the rise of the bipolar system in the twentieth century, the Middle East was the pillar of this system and Iran was the axis of balance there. The past decades of changes showed that Iran had become a geostrategic path for the region and the world for its geopolitical status. This shows how much this position is effective in international calculations and power relations, that cannot be neglected neither in economic security affairs nor in war and peace ones. The Iranian leadership realises very well the importance of its national geography and that there is no replacement to this status and that thus it cannot be marginalised in any world order.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the absence of one of the bipolar system's major powers, a new world order of competition, challenges and regional and local wars could be seen to the north of Iran. These new geopolitical circumstances required that Iran be part of both systems, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia and the Caucasus. Perhaps an examination of Iran's location between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf and as a crossroad between 15 countries that have a population of almost 500million shows the geo-economic significance of Iran as a centre of the world energy reserves. More importantly, it connects the Central Asia and the Persian Gulf market, as a third market is being set up beyond the Atlantic and the Pacific. The membership of Iran in those systems, particularly the Persian Gulf

system, and being a meeting point with the world order provide it with many opportunities, while creating lots of obstacles.

Regarding its regional and international position and its geopolitical distinctiveness, however, Iran could defend its sovereignty and the unity of its lands despite the wide American embargo, and the attempt of some great powers to submit it to an economic and political isolation. It also managed to earn the Islamic states' confidence despite the severe psychological war and be one of the most important oil exporters in OPEC, an active cultural player in the world and the promoter of a civil society in a troubled Middle East.⁸

Thus this reflects the apparent flexibility in the thought of the ruling Iranian elites as they managed during the last era to combine the religious and ideological basics of the regime and the volatile international political circumstances.

Regardless of the nature of the moving policies shaped by the authority after each presidential election in Iran, there are four permanent, unchangeable characteristics in the Iranian foreign policy. Therefore, each Iranian government should definitely consider them in shaping and implementing its policy:

- Geopolitical logic of Iran;
- Iran's location within a region that holds 80 per cent of world gas and oil reserves;
- The Iranians' strong sensitivity towards national sovereignty;
- The complicated structure based on Iranians' personal understanding of their cultural identity.⁹

Iranian researchers and historians suggest that one of the challenges that face Iran's foreign policy is a historical fact that all the illuminating, religious, and social anti-colonisation and despotism renaissances have focused during the last two centuries on "the national sovereignty". They were also related to a national mood based on a tendency toward applying the idea of "managing our country ourselves".

The other suggestion by some of the strategic experts in Iran says that every Iranian wants to be Iranian with his self-awareness while being religious and to learn from the positive aspects of the western culture. Normally, Iranians want to be a combination of the three, and the different governments can't impose an artificial cultural identity on their citizens. That's why Pahlavi regime attempts failed to eliminate the religious side of the Iranian personality. The big gain the Iranian society earned during the Islamic Revolution is that the Iranians can decide now for themselves, and that their policies are homemade, even though globalisation implications are well seen in the national programs of state governance¹⁰, mainly in Iran. Moreover, according to some Iranian analysts, the so-called "Islamic rationalism" is behind the pragmatism in Iranian management of their political problems.

This rationalism represents the cornerstone of Iran governments and their foreign policies. The preamble of the Constitution of the Iranian Islamic Republic (articles 152-155) includes the fundamentals of the Iranian foreign policy which are derived from two sets of values: first, "the Islamic values", and second, "internationally recognised civil values". Therefore, the Iranian foreign policy systems are committed to activities based upon "the Islamic rationalism" through available "democratic capacities" and "international relation frameworks".¹¹

Geo-strategy of possible coalitions

Some believe that it is impossible or difficult for the Iranian political regime to build regional and international coalitions. The long time experiences, however, proved otherwise despite the barriers and complications. Thus, relying on the diplomacy of handling problems in international relations, Iran could undertake forging coalitions based on the direct – or distant -interests according to the conditions and circumstances that govern the geostrategic communication rules with any state.

For centuries, the Iranian focus and vision were oriented towards the West. Since they are of Indo-European race, the Persians are proud of their ancestry's distinctiveness in the region. The ruling Persian

families from Safavids to Pahlavi focused their aimed policies on Europe and the United States of America. Their connection to the West was very deep, particularly during the Pahlavi modernisation campaign in the twentieth century. Iranian writer Jalal Al Ahmad penned a book entitled *Gharbzadegi* (Plagued by the West) that deals with cultural dependence and the fact that “Iran is plagued by the West and its technologies”.

But a historical turning point would change this situation with the fall of the royal family regime and the rise of the Islamic Republic. As a breakup from this deep connection with the West, Iran’s oscillating international indicator took a different course at the height of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and Imam Khomeini adopted a policy (neither eastern nor western) where it worked hard to liberate Iran from US policies as well as from the impact of the Soviet Union ideological policies. But the economic consequences of isolation, along with the war with Iraq that lasted eight successive years pushed Iran in early 1990s into a quest for a regional integration. In 1995, Iran asked US oil company Conoco to develop its oil fields, a move that reflected its desire to improve its relations with Washington. Pressure by Congress, however, forced then President Bill Clinton to issue an executive order that banned the development of petroleum products in Iran for reasons related to the US national security. This opened the way to the 1995 sanctions act against Iran that imposed sanctions against every company investing more than \$20 m in the Iranian energy sector. But an exception in 1998 would allow investment in Iran by Gazprom, Total and Petrofac even though Iran found itself obliged to find other trade partners because of the strict procedures.

Yet the paradox that emerged all along the efforts aimed at counterbalancing the US international interests is that the administration asked the Congress not to resist tougher sanctions on Iran to maintain the unity between allied countries. Nicholas Burns, then under secretary of state for political affairs, told the Senate banking committee: “We want to turn our attention to the Iranians and not to our allies, because we don’t want to weaken the international coalition we built.”¹²

On the other side of the West-US coalition against Iran, the latter was generous in exclusively creating forms of international coalitions and lines of communication. Perhaps the vertical and horizontal divisions in the world order, notwithstanding the US apparent domination, allowed Iran a wide opportunity to achieve this. The intense permanent debate about Iran's nuclear program shows to what extent the Iranian diplomacy can get through the isolation walls and pursue alliances that may in a certain time gain a strategic aspect.

Some analysts conclude that the "coalition" principle is the way to achieve a lot of these fundamentals in foreign policy. The coalition does not only provide confidence in cooperation, but also limits the threats at the national security and enriches the national wealth.¹³

II. Iran and Persian Gulf geo-security reality

Now the question is how the Iranian geo-strategy dealt with the crises that have been striking the Persian Gulf from 1979 till our days.

Since the fall of the Pahlavi regime, the geography of the Persian Gulf entered a new more controversial phase at the security level. Everything for the governments of countries located within this geography would forecast alarming developments. The political, ideological and religious system set up in Iran never converges with the systems that govern the behaviour of governments or regulate their vision of the regional security.

Yet the Persian Gulf region, notwithstanding all of this, remained a vital scope of weight in the Iranian geostrategic prism. Therefore the Iranian national security can't be seen beyond this scope, and thus beyond the challenges that face the Middle Eastern political and security geographies, primarily those of the Israeli-Arab conflict and the direct American and Western military presence in Iraq, Afghanistan and the warm seas.

“Heavy Water” geopolitics

The Persian Gulf region has a world importance at many levels. Since the nineteenth century, strategic historians and thinkers spoke repeatedly and continually about the vitality of the region. In the theory of Halford Mackinder (1861-1947) published in a 1904 article entitled “The Axis of History’s Geography”, the Persian Gulf was part of a crescent-like region called the Heartland and included Eastern Europe and Central Asia (during the tsardom of Russia). Spykman considered the Persian Gulf as the “Rimland” and that its control was more likely as the rule of the entire world. But in the modern geopolitical theories, the region was called “the axis”, or as Lohazen calls it the “centre of the centre”. In his book “Empires and the Power of Geopolitics” published in 1996, Boris Von says: “The Middle East is the centre of the ancient world. And at the heart of Middle East there is the Persian Gulf with his ancient land that is located at the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates, and is the centre of the centre. Thus every tension there would have its impact on Europe and Africa”.¹⁴

During the cold war, the Persian Gulf region was one of the three strategic fronts along with Europe and Southeast Asia, where at the time, the two poles of conflict were contending. The geopolitical stability in the region was central to the strategic balance between those powers. But in the new world order and under the balance of future powers, the power that controls the geo-economic regions will have the upper hand. Edward Luttwak and John Schreiber, the geo-economy researchers, agree with this point of view and think that the control of Persian Gulf region is a prelude to the control of the world. Therefore by setting up this new order, the US aims at controlling energy sources, especially in the Persian Gulf region.

It is true that the Persian Gulf is of great importance for several reasons; yet the most important reason is that it contains 66% of crude oil reserves and 33% of gas reserves. Out of the 1003 billion oil barrels that represent all the proved oil reserves in the world, there are 663 billions of barrels in the Persian Gulf, which is equivalent to 66%. As for the other proved reserves, there are 158 billion barrels (15.7%) in

the Americas, 62 billion barrels (6.2%) in Africa, 76 billion barrels (7.6%) in Europe and 43 billion barrels (4.3%) in the Middle East and Oceania.

Yet the important thing about the Persian Gulf oil is that it has considerable advantages: the high quality, the large reserves in each well, the possible discovery of new reserves, the low production cost and the low shipping and transport cost. The oil reserves in each of the Persian Gulf wells amount to about 260 million tons while in Venezuela there are 20,000 tons of oil reserves and about 600 tons only in the United States.

According to the forecasts of the International Energy Agency in the 2020 General Future Vision on World Energy, oil production will be up from 62.7 million barrels per day in 1996 to 78.9 million barrels per day in 2010, and it will fall again to 72.2 million barrels per day in 2020. Oil production outside the Persian Gulf will also drop from 45.5 million barrels per day in 1997 to 27 million barrels in 2020. The Persian Gulf oil production will rise by 162.7% (from 17.2 to 45.2 million barrels per day), which means more US and European dependency on Persian Gulf oil. Currently, US oil imports in 2000 accounted for 57%, oil imports to Europe 88% in 2005 and to Japan 100%. According to related studies, the Persian Gulf would provide 60% of the overall oil production in 2020. In the middle of the twentieth century, oil exportation will be limited to the biggest five oil states: Iran, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq. Thus it is clear what prompted Kissinger to lay out plans for seizing Persian Gulf oil in 1975.¹⁵

Iran's vision of the Persian Gulf

To identify the global Iranian vision of Persian Gulf geopolitics, Iranian experts point out three basic elements:

- Exploiting natural resources, i.e. oil and gas, and maritime ones.
- Insuring the security of waterways.
- Living peacefully and calmly with neighbors.

The strategic geographic (geo-strategic) location of Iran, they think, led to a deep connection between its security and the Persian Gulf's. Thus Iran and the rest of Persian Gulf states become bound to consolidate their cooperation in the social, cultural and economic domains, as well as interconnect their common interests so that to create the right circumstances for a durable security in the region. As they draw a rational picture of the neighbourhood relations with Persian Gulf states, Iranian experts see that the right and useful way to reach that goal is to include the collective security of all states in the international decisions and laws and to stay away from monopolisation and domination policies. When a security system based on "collective cooperation" is adopted throughout the region, the national sources will be set free and the journey of the national evolution begins. Moreover the establishment of a collective security system and a regional cooperation will make the attraction of the foreign investment and technology easy.

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Arms race fever

The most dangerous thing that happened in the Persian Gulf since the 1980s, through the Kuwait invasion to the Iraqi occupation in 2003, is the Persian Gulf States rushing to enter the arms race. Persian Gulf States spent heavily on armament because their concerns over the region's strategic location, its abundant resources and the international conflict over them. For example, Saudi Arabia was ranked second in the world, in 1976, for military spending, while it was ranked 33rd in 1967, where its total military expenditure reached about 167 billion dollars within seven years between 1980 and 1987.¹⁷

It can be said that most of the military spending in the Persian Gulf Arab Countries was linked, directly or indirectly, to the American wars in the region and the real and virtual fears from Iran (to which fighting terrorism was later added).

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait covered the biggest part of losses Iraq has suffered in its war against Iran and which reached 452.6 billion dollars since the Iraqi government was unable to keep financing war

expenditures few years after it was waged. It is important to note that after the end of the war with Iran, Iraq found itself in front of a beleaguered oil sector and the historical war of legal processes that reached its utmost during the Kuwait invasion in 1990.

However, “the military bill” paid by only three countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council; Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and UAE, as a contribution in the American military effort in Desert Storm and Kuwait’s liberation, was, at minimum, 125 billion dollars.¹⁸ As a result, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have spent around 400 billion dollars to support Iraq in its war against Iran as well as the American military effort to liberate Kuwait. The paradox is that these states did not wage any effective war against Iraq or against Iran. Despite the big military spending, they rely on the American protection provided by the military bases spread throughout the majority of the Persian Gulf Arab Countries.

It is possible to notice, through a quick comparison between the military spending and the number of forces and weapons in the Persian Gulf, the illogical difference between its states in this regard, the disproportion of spending and its relation with the protection from the virtual “threats” against these states.

On October 31, 2007, BBC Arabic published on its site that Saudi Arabia was one of the ten states that spend the most on weapons in the world, and it was in the vanguard in the Middle East as well as the most important client for western arms companies. The website added that the Saudi arms spending might exceed 50% of its income, and that the United States lagged behind Saudi Arabia in the matter of arms spending of its national income, as the latter spends around thirty billion dollars per year.

Although weapons are available in large numbers, military analysts consider that the Saudi army cannot be a combatant force; however, armament is still one of Saudi Arabia’s priorities as the Iranian regional power rises¹⁹ The Sunday Telegraph reported, in its issue of February 2007, that Saudi Arabia allocated 50 billion dollars in 2007 for arms’

purchases. (The wider discussion centres on the presence of the Saudi technical cadre that will deal with these sophisticated weapons, the absence of military technical workshops that can contain this amount of arms, and the expiration of these weapons after years of accumulation. On the other hand, some consider that the 2.250.000 km² kingdom needs to be secured with what the state possesses to prevent any strategic vacuum that could be exploited by the enemies).

Along with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates came in the third place among the top five countries importing weapons, following China and India. It has alone contributed with as high as 7% of the world's total arms imports, and thus surpassing each of Greece and North Korea that were ranked fourth and fifth respectively.

The International Institute for Strategic Studies' report in 2007 considered that UAE's military spending is "incredible", reflecting Abu Dhabi's concern about the tensed atmosphere in the Persian Gulf. UAE spent more than 39.6% of the total government expenditures, while the world average of military spending is no more than 10%. On the other hand, Iran expended 6.6 billion dollars; i.e. 4.6% of the GDP (for a country that entered a war with Iraq for eight years and is intimidated with war by the United States and Israel...).

A study by the Centre of Strategic and International Studies in Washington, among a series of reports about the military capabilities of the Middle East countries, showed that Qatar spent around 3 billion dollars on defence in 2005. It also depleted 32.5% of its total expenditure between 2000 and 2004 in favour of its military forces. However, the study also mentioned that 70% of the servicemen in the Qatari forces were foreigners and did not hold the Qatari nationality, as the number of 18-year-old men was no more than 7 to 10 thousand persons. Besides, the Qatari military does not have the capacity to confront any great military force in the region, such as Iran or Saudi Arabia.

Most of the military reports from different sources show that Gulf Cooperation Council countries, in general, spend tens of billions of

dollars on armament. Though the number of their naval, air and land forces doesn't match the amount of that continually accumulated military arsenal, especially that the majority of Persian Gulf country population who work regularly are non-citizens and do not hold the nationality of the states where they have worked and lived for many years. Thus, it's impossible that the armament and the large military spending provide a balance in the confrontation with Iran which does not always possess the same sophisticated weapons acquired by the other Persian Gulf States.

On the other hand, Iran has a population of 70 million (which is twice the number of natives in each of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait ...). The number of its reservists is around 600,000 soldiers, in addition to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Basij trained by the Guards and that can have several millions of volunteers. Iran expanded, during and after the war with Iraq, the main structure of its military industry and established modern factories in collaboration with Russia, China and North Korea.

It owns about 240 arm factories and 12 thousand workshops for military production that includes mainly sites, machine guns, munitions and various-range missiles (most important of which is Shahab1, 2 and 3 that can reach deep into the Israeli territories). Moreover, Iran could also provide around 75% of its domestic needs of tanks and troop carriers. This all means that more armament will not achieve any balance between Iran and the other Persian Gulf states; neither will it lead to stability and security (particularly after Iraq was no longer a part of the power balance against Iran). For the same reason, we can conclude that Iran does not need a military nuclear power to impose its control on the Persian Gulf since it seems that it has already that capability even without this nuclear power.²⁰

- Suggestions for a secure Persian Gulf

During the last three decades of the cold war (1971-1981), the United States has been pushing the region's countries to conclude security agreements. Saudi Arabia followed this course by holding two

conferences for foreign ministers in the Persian Gulf States, excluding Iraq and the South of Yemen, in 1974 and 1976, but not for long. On the other hand, Oman called the Persian Gulf States, including Iraq and Iran, to hold a conference at a foreign ministerial level in 1975, and suggested the following:

- Respecting the sovereignty of states and not to interfere in their internal affairs;
- Avoiding using the force of threat and resolving disagreements peacefully;
- Organising ships' traffic and permitting sailing in Persian Gulf water;
- Keeping the region away from international conflicts.

All countries agreed to participate in this conference with the exception of Iraq which considered then that the suggested articles contradict its policies, and consequently, the conference was declared failed. The same thing happened the following year and for the same reason.

The second phase started in 1981 with the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The security issue was put at the top of goals and procedures. Therefore, the following clauses were stated as main laws for a secure Persian Gulf:

- Not to intervene in the internal affairs of the states;
- To find a peaceful solution to end the conflicts, and to accept the principles of peaceful coexistence and the collective security of member states;
- To keep the region away from the foreign influence by following the non-alignment policy.

Thus Iran was influenced by the global positive environment revealed by the Gulf Cooperation Council. The Islamic Republic leadership thinks that its security and that of the Persian Gulf are inseparable and thus adopted the following policies in its Persian Gulf regional behavior:

- Insuring the continual transportation of oil from the Persian Gulf region to the international markets;
- Taking interest in the political independence of the Persian Gulf countries regardless their ruling body;
- Rejecting any foreign control over the countries of the region;
- Rejecting every attempt or endeavour from any state in the region to overcome another state;
- Reducing and eliminating the tension and promoting an ambience of confidence between the region states, especially through dialogue;
- Resolving all the conflicts over land and sea frontiers between the region states peacefully;
- Allowing foreigners to sail in the Persian Gulf continually.²¹

According to Iranian experts, the Islamic Republic, with its 1259 km long coast in the Persian Gulf, i.e. more than 45% of this international waterway, thinks that it is highly responsible for maintaining the security in this region. During the last three decades, it adopted decisions to deal with the member states in the Gulf Cooperation Council based on the Islamic teachings, the radical policies and the long-term principled policies it follows. The decisions are as follows:

- To adopt a tension-renouncing policy as a permanent policy and not a temporary tactic;
- To take confidence-reinforcing measures;
- To hold regular and continuous talks in the various cooperation domains;
- To sign bilateral security agreements with the majority of these states;
- To commonly combat drug smuggling, terrorism and organised crimes;
- To propose the economic cooperation measures;
- To propose signing the non-aggression pact;
- To suggest collective security arrangements between coastal countries.²²

Uses of American pragmatism

The United States succeeded, especially during the neoconservative era, to put the global policies of the Persian Gulf countries in a state of concern about the Iranian neighbor.

Yet it can be said that the techniques of the US political propaganda aimed at creating a virtual enemy for the Arabs, Iran, worked. To achieve its goals, it spread first rumors about the conclusion of strategic security deals between Washington and Tehran at the expense of the Arab national security. Secondly, it stirred up sectarian and ethnic conflicts and planted the seeds of fear of a comprehensive Iranian project aiming at creating a Shiite imperial crescent led by Iran, stretching from Iraq, through the Persian Gulf Countries to Palestine, Syria and Lebanon.

Thus, Washington spared no media, political or military effort to propagate the idea of the New Middle East. It also threatened many states in the region after it occupied Iraq in 2003 and made Israel wage a war against Lebanon in 2006 that would be, as the secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, “the birth pangs of a New Middle East...”. In addition, the United States linked between the overthrow of the authoritarian regime in Iraq and the promotion of democracy, so that the “New Iraq” would be an example to emulate by the region’s people with the cooperation of the United States.

With this strategy, it started to exert pressure on the Persian Gulf countries as well as other (friendly and allied) countries to make various reforms and allow everyone to participate in elections. However, after many electoral attempts, the victory was often in favor of the Islamic powers which are hostile to America. Thus, the American administration found itself in a state of double confusion because the allied governments totally refused “the reform imposed” from outside after the victory of their opponents in elections on one hand, and because of the strategy of “change through democracy” on the other hand.²³

The vision of Persian Gulf security is not restricted to only one dimension, the military dimension (the deployment of US military bases in most Arab countries, the Iranian nuclear project and the concerns about its goals and effects on the power balance among the Persian Gulf countries)... Yet some consider “terrorism”, for example, as one of the threats against this security, while others take into account the economic security and the flaws in population structure and their effects on the Persian Gulf countries (the flow of foreign workers). The future of the Iranian role, however, is the main concern of the Persian Gulf Arab countries over their security future.

Nevertheless, Iran is concerned about the American military bases deployed in the Persian Gulf, in the presence of a U.S.-Iran tension and an American threat of waging a war and overthrowing the Islamic regime on the pretext of the Iranian nuclear program, which means that any Saudi-Iranian agreement can ease the tension over the security affairs and other problems in the Persian Gulf. However, this is unlikely to happen if the concerns of Washington and the whole western world over the security of oil, its flow and the free passage of its tankers to them were not taken into consideration, even though all of this implies the intervention of this international power either in promoting the stability between the Persian Gulf countries (as during the Shah regime), or in preventing it (just as happened after the Iranian Revolution and the occupation of Iraq...)

The nuclear power, the end of the tunnel

While the Persian Gulf security geography is the focus of a hot debate on both of its nuclear fronts, there are other parallel fronts that sparked a contentious debate, mainly the Iranian nuclear program.

The general picture of the Iranian conduct and rhetoric shows how the Iranians faced the intense changes that continue since 2001:

First: For Tehran, the open confrontation with the West is not limited anymore to the nuclear project. There are other issues of geostrategic

nature that become the heart of negotiation and the ground of research for common and stable solutions.

Second: Iran addresses now to the founders of the world order, especially the USA, from its crucial and influencing position on the geostrategic level. In fact, these countries cannot disregard the Iranian influence on the series of crises spreading out from Afghanistan to the Iraq, through Palestine and Lebanon to the strategic straits in Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb.

Third: the Iranian rhetoric is based on the basis of a proportioned dialogue with the West, and is the result of two internal and external correlative contexts:

The first context: the regime's ability to end the internal debate that the West extremely betted on after the presidential election in the summer 2009.

The second one: the capability of the Iranian administration to contain the security, political and economic pressures that accompanied the dialogue facts over the nuclear program in more than a decade²⁴...

Some found that Tehran's logic was based on what is considered as postulates, since the West was weak and unable to resume offensive initiatives or preventive occupation wars in the region. Others considered that the West was currently standing on the negative defense line in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon. According to these postulates, it's illogic to speak about a negotiation process and then violate its terms. Therefore, Tehran doesn't see itself obliged to adapt to the rules of a no longer valid game, and even the so called "smart sanctions" are no more important for it because this means of pressure, as the Iranian officials think, doesn't draw an international consensus anymore.

Does this indicate the beginning of a new phase of confrontations between Tehran and the G6 over the nuclear issue?

The next developments are likely to go in this direction. And as the administration of Barack Obama failed to take an initiative that could reverse the rules of the game, Tehran appears to be widening its circles of power on the geo-strategic level. If the Persian Gulf region is to be the most troubled in the coming years, this will be definitely one of the main Iranian concerns about the national security, which makes the principle of dialogue with its Southern neighbours, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf countries, the best and possible solution to maintain the strategic security in the region.

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