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Iran's Influence in the Middle East

By Jadranka Polović

Introduction

The Middle East as one of the most heterogeneous and politically conflicting regions in the world and has long been at the center of international interest. Faced with sectarian wars and comprehensive social crises for decades the Middle East, due to its geostrategic importance and especially the imperative of controlling the region's vast energy resources, has once again become a battle ground for major powers whose interests affect the concentration of participants in the

region. The competition between global powers and growing influence of Russia and China, who undermine the US power and European Union's influence and also undermine established alliances in the Middle East, undoubtedly require a rethinking of Western strategies for the region. A series of geopolitical challenges, especially after September 11 attacks against the United States, as a result of military interventions and civil wars (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria) and uprisings (Arab

Spring) and thus the collapsed regional order, confronted the international community with the changing nature of security threats, as well as with the new balance of power of regional and international actors in the Middle East. Among the many aspects of the Middle East conflicts, the fundamental issue of regional security today is the Sunni-Shiite conflict, which has since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 directly defined the approaches and policies of great powers and significantly changed regional dynamics. In this context, Iran's role is particularly significant. Namely, over the last two decades, Iran has consolidated its goals in the Persian Gulf and strategically expanded its influence to other countries in the Middle East, primarily Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. The growing influence of Shiite Iran, and its close relations with Shiite communities in the region with which it forms a strategic coalition, have become a key geopolitical challenge for the international community.

1. Iran: The roots of regional influence

The Islamic Republic of Iran is located in the Middle East, in the region connecting the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, Central and South Asia and the Caucasus, and is undoubtedly a regional power that, thanks to the advantages, but also the risks of its geographical position throughout history, has strongly influenced the destiny of the Middle East. Slightly more than

81 million people live in Iran most of whom are young but also well educated, and the country has huge reserves of oil and natural gas, as well as significant military potential. The Persian Gulf is a buffer zone separating the Iranian mainland from Sunni Arab countries. Furthermore, the Strait of Hormuz is one of the most important sea routes and is a strategic "artery" that connects Middle Eastern oil producers with markets in the Asia-Pacific region, Europe and North America. This waterway serves Iran as a political tool to bargain with major powers, especially the United States. Furthermore, the Strait of Hormuz has been an indicator of the level of tensions between Iran and the US and its regional allies for decades. Incidents and clashes of varying intensity around Hormuz have been going on since the time of the Islamic Revolution, and during the Iraq-Iran war, both sides tried to prevent its foe's oil exports by air and naval strikes.

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Throughout its history, Iran has been strongly marked by its affiliation with Shiite Islam, which is why the traditions, beliefs and laws that derive from it have always had a decisive impact on Iranian society. Although during the 20th century Iran accepted secularization, the resistance of

the Iranian population to the imposed ideas as well as to great powers resulted in the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, which represents one of the turning points in the world politics of the past century. Iran is the first Islamic state in modern history whose social structure is organized on the principles of Islam, which is why Iranian religious leaders believe that the Islamic revolution in their country should be the starting point of the global struggle for liberation and unification of all Muslims. The establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, as a unique mix of theocracy, Islamic law and a limited degree of political pluralism, brought about a complete transformation in culture, system of values and spiritual life of the country.

The political system in Iran is characterized by numerous formal and informal competing centers of power. Some of them are based on the constitution and act as state institutions, such as the institution of the President and the Parliament (*Majles*). But the real authority, provided for in the constitution, lies in the hands of the Supreme Leader (now Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) who is responsible for Iran's domestic and foreign policies. As commander-in-chief of the armed forces, the Supreme Leader controls Iran's intelligence and security operations and has the authority to declare war. The Supreme Leader has the power to appoint and dismiss leaders of the judiciary, directors of state radio and television networks, and the supreme commander of the

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The duality of power is not restricted only to the President and the Supreme Leader as it is often the subject of dispute between the Parliament and the Council of Guardians and the armed forces (regular military versus the Revolutionary Guard). In a country with a predominantly Shiite population (91%), in which Sunnis have less than 8%, Islam as a religion has become the basic criterion of social life.

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In geopolitical terms, the Iranian Islamic Revolution has produced almost seismic shifts in the region, as the new theocratic regime has become a direct threat to the regular supply of oil in the Persian Gulf, which the United States considers its priority and of vital interest. After the revolution, Iran turned from a regional ally into an open enemy of the United States, a self-proclaimed anti-imperialist state that seeks to export its ideology to the countries of the region. Iran assesses its security threats through the prism of hostile actions not only by the United States, or the „Great Satan,“ a metaphorical expression introduced into the discourse of Iranian politics by Ayatollah Khomeini, but also by Saudi Arabia and Israel.

2. Shia Crescent: The role of political factions and groups

After the American President George W. Bush in January 2002 branded Iran, Iraq and North Korea as “axis of evil”, and as rogue states that financed and aided terrorism, the US invasion of Iraq followed in 2003. In 2004 the US launched a new strategy - the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) which as a “forward strategy of freedom” emphasized the priority of expanding human rights and democratizing the Middle East, as well as the fight against growing Islamist extremism. Therefore, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 did not only target Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, but the intervention was also to produce a democratic domino effect throughout the region, and thus a strategy to overthrow the Iranian regime.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 removed the American, but at the same time also the Iranian enemy Saddam Hussein. Iran took advantage of the post-2003 power vacuum to establish a strong presence in Iraq by fostering ties with Shiite-led Iraqi authorities and Iraqi Shiite militia groups on the ground. However, as early as in 2004, Jordan and Egypt warned of a „Shia Crescent” in which Iran had taken the lead. Namely, they warned that Tehran was forming a „land bridge” connecting Iran through Iraq to Syria, Lebanon, and the Israeli border in the Golan. The Shia Crescent poses a challenge to American interests in the region. Iran’s network

became a threat to vital trade routes and to the security and stability of key US allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia. Although Shiite militias, backed by Iran, have played a significant role in the fight against ISIS since 2014, the Iranian presence has encouraged sectarianism, which poses a serious threat to regional stability.

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Iran has invested in allies and proxies across the Middle East – Hezbollah, Palestinian Hamas and Yemeni Houthi movement. Ever since the 1979 revolution, the Shiite theocracy has sought to carry out its own revolution and to empower Shiite groups in the Middle East. Proxies are an important factor in Iran’s foreign policy, crucial in achieving Iran’s dominance over the region. Providing support to militant Shiite groups is an ideological as well as a constitutional obligation, closely linked to geopolitical goals. Namely, although ideology plays an important role in Iranian foreign policy, in recent decades the emphasis has been on geopolitical factors, so the regime’s primary goal is to project power throughout the Middle East to counter American, Israeli and Saudi influence. The development and strengthening of the network of proxy partners are primarily due to the Quds

forces of the Revolutionary Guards Corps that were controlled by General Qasem Soleimani until his death in January 2020.

One of Iran's most important proxy partners, formed in 1982 during the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, is the Shia Lebanese Hezbollah or "The Party of God", which militarily defends Iran's interests in Lebanon, Syria, but also in Iraq and Yemen when needed. Hezbollah has long been a parliamentary party and also gradually became a key part of Lebanon's political system. However, with the war in Syria, it has become a factor that coalition forces, whether for or against the division of Syria, take seriously. Namely, when the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, Iran provided strong support to Bashar al-Assad, however, the main regional actors - Israel, Turkey and several Arab states led by the US and Saudi Arabia - established a consensus on suppressing Iran's influence.

After President Barack Obama planned to withdraw most of the US troops from Iraq in 2011, the creation of the Islamic State forced Washington to cooperate. Since 2014, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a counterintelligence military agency formed to conduct special operations abroad, has a strong presence in Iraq. Together with coalition forces, it participated in the destruction of ISIS. The US and Iran worked closely together during the years-long battle to defeat ISIS between 2014 and 2017. Several Shiite militias, in alliance

with Iran, have been integrated into the national police force, created by the United States.

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The withdrawal of US forces has strengthened Iranian forces in Iraq, but also numerous pro-Iranian groups in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. By providing support to the Yemeni Houthi movement, Tehran is trying to establish control over Yemen, especially its coastal part. This, along with Hormuz would allow Iran to control Bab el Mandeb, which would represent an unprecedented ability to simultaneously threaten the world's two largest straits. In Iraq, Shia mobilization forces trained and equipped with IRGC-QF are trying to take full control of the Iraqi political process by copying Hezbollah's practice in Lebanon. Over two decades, a self-proclaimed anti-imperialist Iran has transformed into a regional hegemon, an imperialist power that bases its regional ambitions on an "axis of resistance" strategy. More than a hundred Shiite militias operating under Iranian leadership are spread across the Middle East, all the way to Israeli border with Syria and Lebanon. The Iranian proxy network has strongly changed the strategic balance of the region, which is why the US President

Donald Trump has significantly changed his approach to the region after 2017.

3. The “maximum pressure” strategy

Rejecting accusations that the United States helped create the Islamic State, Donald Trump provided strong support to Israel and the Gulf Sunni monarchies, and adopted a strategy of “maximum pressure” or hard confrontation with Iran. In 2018, he withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action - JCPOA) promising that his new policy of “maximum pressure” would help eliminate “the threat of Iran’s ballistic missile program; to stop its terrorist activities worldwide; and to block its menacing activity across the Middle East” (Donald Trump, Speech to the nation, May 8, 2018). Economic sanctions, targeting the Iranian sectors of oil production and finance, were introduced in November 2018 (expanded in 2020), not so much because of Iran’s nuclear program, but with the intention of limiting Iran’s sphere of influence.

The assassination of general Qasem Soleimani has triggered an escalation of tensions in relations between the United States and Iran, on a scale never seen before since 1979.

The deteriorating situation in the country, but also the weakening of Iranian influence in the region, has prompted the government to consider more decisive action, especially in Iraq. After a series of encounters between US forces in Iraq and Iranian proxies in January 2020, the Americans decided to strike at two major organizations, one Iraqi (*Kata’ib Hezbollah*) and one Iranian (Quds Force), an elite unit of the IRGC, led by general Qasem Soleimani, one of Iran’s most brilliant war tacticians. The assassination of general Qasem Soleimani has triggered an escalation of tensions in relations between the United States and Iran, on a scale never seen before since 1979. The assassination also disrupted the dynamics of anti-regime protests in both Iran and Iraq, which might have led to the Trump administration’s desired goal - regime change. But on the other hand, Iran was powerless to respond proportionately, moreover Mustafa al-Kadhimi who does not have a close relation with the Islamic Republic became the new Iraqi prime minister. Additionally, with the departure of general Soleimani, the corps of the Revolutionary Guard were neutralized. Furthermore, the explosion in Beirut on August 4th that killed 175 people and injured more than 6 thousand is an event that severely damaged Hezbollah’s reputation, as well as Iran’s influence in Lebanon which Iranian officials often call “our southern border.” Public discontent and large-scale protests

may lead to the removal of another influential figure - Hezbollah Secretary-General, Lebanese Hassan Nasrallah.

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Iran is also the epicenter of Covid-19 pandemic in the Middle East, which has led to a serious health situation, with numerous economic challenges that Iran faces while under pressure of sanctions. With the approval of the state's highest religious authority, the Supreme Leader, the government suspended religious rites that are an essential part of the political identity of this theocratic country. Although the number of infected is declining across the country, it is to be expected that Iran will face a whole new set of socio-political challenges.

Conclusion

The facts that are important for understanding the escalating crisis and ways to address it should also be pointed out. The end of the Shia-Sunni conflict is the key to regional stability. In this context, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia produces tensions that destabilize

the region. However, the „axis of resistance“ of Iran and its proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen is aimed at suppressing and deterring American and Israeli threats, less Saudi ones. Therefore, the stability of the Middle East is closely linked to Iran's relationship with the United States and Israel. Although the assassination of General Soleimani was an act of declaring war (*casus belli*), the fact is that Donald Trump did not start a war with Iran. Although this act is a precedent in international relations, the American president reaffirmed his authority in the region by assassinating the main Shiite military leader, and before that assassinating a major Sunni military leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In a way, the assassination of the general balanced Iranian influence in the Levant. The policy of “maximum pressure” within which economic sanctions are most important, with some circumstances such as the coronavirus crisis and the Beirut tragedy that prompted new protests against Hezbollah, destabilized Iran. Therefore, it is hard to believe that Iran will continue to develop the full range of its axis resistance strategy in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The agreement between Israel and the UAE which will possibly be followed by other Arab countries, may represent a crucial turning point in the attitudes of the public of the entire region. A large wave of demonstrations that are shaking Lebanon, but also Iraq because of Iran's involvement in their domestic politics,

poses a serious threat to Iranian interests and regional ambitions. The full impact of the Abraham Accord would become clear only over time, but it is certain that the agreement represents a great success for Donald Trump. Iran cannot fully rely on its new allies - Russia and Turkey, who are aware of the danger of stronger interference in mediation wars in the region. Iran and Turkey are neither enemies nor allies, but both countries have strong regional ambitions that could affect the future of their relations. Russia intervened and then diplomatically protected Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, but it is not certain that it is ready to support Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the region, especially when considered that Russia has good relations with both Israel and Saudi Arabia. Iran and China recently drafted a document on a 25-year strategic partnership in trade and security. This collaboration links China's Belt and Road Initiative with Iran's development strategy. The agreement includes the development of the north-south corridor from St. Petersburg to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas and further towards India. It is important to keep in mind that both China and Iran have global and regional ambitions and confrontational relationships with the United

States. Finally, it is possible to conclude that Trump's strategy of "maximum pressure" on Iran has achieved certain results. Due to the very bad economic situation in the country and the reduced influence of the main proxy partner in the region - Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iran will not risk an escalation in relations with its neighbors and the United States. However, it is to be expected that Iran will continue with secret operations that enabled it to impose itself as a regional power in the past. Therefore, the United States may change its strategy - to balance its pressures on Iran and open space for active diplomacy that can bring about changes in Iranian behavior.

Jadranka Polović PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of International Relations, Libertas International University in Zagreb, Croatia.

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IRMO

Institut za razvoj i međunarodne odnose
Institute for Development and International Relations



Institute for Development and International
Relations - IRMO
Lj. F. Vukotinića 2, Zagreb, Croatia
www.irmo.hr

Hanns Seidel Stiftung
Amruševa 9, Zagreb, Croatia
www.hanns-seidel-stiftung.com.hr