

The interference of Iran in the domestic affairs of other states

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We also have important capabilities outside of the country. We have supporters, we have strategic depth, both across the region and in this country. Some support us because of Islam, others because of the language, and others because of Shia Islam. They all constitute the country's strategic depth. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 2014

Introduction

Iran interferes in the domestic affairs of other states in four distinct ways, sometimes a combination of these. I sum them up as Ideological affinity, Strategic convergence, Political expediency, and Transactional value. There are common elements as each has ideological, strategic, political, and logistical dimensions. Some are organic and structured, others opportunistic.

These ways allow for a more nuanced understanding of each partner's relationship with Iran. Significantly, Tehran has made no attempt to formalise the status of any of these relationships. These criteria also enable analysis to make weighted comparisons and judgements about the likely durability and future course of relationships with Iran. These criteria can also be used to assess the actor's classification with Iran: partner, strategic ally, ideological ally, proxy, or state organ.

Iran is not typified as a country that leads military invasions of other countries but is rather an actor that takes advantage of the conditions of invaded countries and those that have domestic strife and/or weak or failed governance. Taking these four ways sees the relationships between Iran and several non-state actors and states vary widely in the interference in each of the cases of Israel, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Bahrain. Iran's interference is manifest in economies, religion, and culture in addition to the security and intelligence apparatuses.

There is also evidence that Iran has been involved in offensive cyber-attacks globally, and missile and UAV attacks on Saudi Arabia and American forces in the region.

The characteristics of Iranian interference

Like other major revolutions—such as the French and the Russian—the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran did not remain a domestic affair. Its authors and Iran’s new ruling elite were determined to export their revolution. Progressively since 1979 there has been concern for Iranian foreign policy that is not limited to its nuclear ambitions. This concern is both regional and global as Iran’s foreign policy actively utilises proxy forces and violent groups across the Middle East to interfere in the domestic affairs of other states.

Iran has actively developed unconventional forms of asymmetric warfare - such as swarm tactics, drone, and cyber-attacks to add to its conventional forces for its own military use and that of its proxy forces and allies in combat in the civil wars in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. In these battles have been won against adversaries due to Iranian involvement. This phenomenon has led the capitals of these countries to be ironically portrayed in the regional media as “Tehran’s four Arab capitals.”

This interference is spreading globally. In doing so Iran is winning the strategic struggle for influence against its rival, Saudi Arabia for a fraction of the cost. That rivalry is about the age-old sectarian Sunni-Shia Islamic differences. Such rivalry is not confined to increasing the number of worshippers preferring Shia Islam.

Such aggressive and bellicose activities escalate tensions in the region leading to arms races and has spread globally. Iran to become a global weapons supplier including to Russia in its war with the Ukraine. Hezbollah can be seen in Africa and South/Latin America.

The Iranian military machine and combatting it has seen the allocation of resources within Iran and its adversaries devoting at the expense of sustainable development. The ramifications have also led to high volumes of refugees and internally displaced people. Iranian foreign policy is not geared towards conflict reduction and resolution. Iranian foreign policy is goaled towards fermenting strife.

Rationalising Iranian foreign policy of interference

The drivers and history behind this interference in the domestic affairs of other states is since the first days after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Iran’s lack of state allies, a plethora of well-resourced regional and international adversaries, and antiquated and sanctions-constrained armed forces compelled Tehran to develop a military doctrine that avoided direct or extended conflict with superior conventional powers.

One way of achieving this was to aim have offence as the means to defence through actively seeking to embed its influence in the domestic affair of other countries. This was seen as an element of power that was confirmed most recently by Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei when he said in March 2022 that matters of “national strength”—such as the country’s wider military capabilities and links to armed groups abroad—were not a matter for negotiation.

Iranian interference in the domestic affairs of other states is on different levels in each case. Regional instability and weak states in Lebanon (from the 1980s), Iraq (from 2003) and Yemen (from 2014) have allowed Iran to develop alliances with Hezbollah in Lebanon, militia groups in Iraq and the Houthi group in Yemen. Iran has also supported President Assad in Syria, with the two countries being long-standing allies. Iran has provided significant military and economic support to his regime.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is at the fore of military assistance that adversely impact the economics and human security of civilians in other countries. In addition to personnel in Iran, it exerts wider influence in the region by providing money, technology, and training through its Quds force.

Examples of the IRGC's activities include threatening international energy and shipping arteries in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, and to some extent the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb. For example, attacks on tankers and other shipping such as the MV Mercer Street in 2021. A Ukraine International Airlines flight PS752 was also downed near Tehran in January 2020. The IRGC's Quds Force operations have sparked hundreds of Israeli airstrikes against Iranian and Iranian-backed-group sites in Syria.

Iran uses other means as well as military. Iran's means of extending its influence are not restricted to partnerships with other entities. It also makes extensive use of soft power, cultural diplomacy, and terrorist operations overseas against hostile states and domestic opponents. The details of Iran's financing of its partners are in many cases opaque.

The diversity of interference in the affairs of other states is most evident in Iranian support of groups against Israel. This has been characterized by a combination of hard and soft power strategies. Iran supports groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah with money and propaganda through actors such as al-Mustafa International University, media outlets such as Al-Alam, foundations such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, and cultural diplomacy efforts by the Owj Arts and Media Organisation.

Yet there are also interferences that are slow and subtle. For example, the Arab Gulf States—such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have considered Iran's actions in other states to ferment “sectarian strife.” For example, they have expressed concern for Iranian backing for Bahraini opposition groups.

The breadth and depth of Iranian intervention as a lucky opportunist

An important factor in Iran's consistency of doctrine for the interference in the domestic affairs of other states is the longevity of its revolutionary leadership. No state has been so active, and perhaps as effective, as Iran. The list of Iran's actions is long. Perhaps initially with the establishment of a network of associated militia groups and other non-state actors, starting with Hezbollah in Lebanon in the 1980s. This was enabled by the destabilising of Lebanon by the presence of Yasser Arafat and his Palestinian Liberation Organization.

The unilateral withdrawal of Israeli forces in 2001 from Lebanon created a vacuum that was quickly filled by Hezbollah backed by Iran. Iran has supplied “thousands” of rockets, missiles, and small arms. Hezbollah receives financial support but with Iranian umbrella protection it is also involved in drug smuggling, donations, and “taxation” from the Lebanese diaspora abroad.

There is greater Iranian involvement and more intense in Iraq as it has a common border with Iran and a majority Shia population. Iran's regional drive was facilitated by the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. There is a long and detailed account of this but the most recent has been the arming and training of a paramilitary force called the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), which helped defeat IS but which many Iraqis see as a form of Iranian colonisation.

Iran remains prudent in changing times

Similarly, Iran is also impacted by the conditions of peace processes. Times are changing and factors outside of Iranian control could change the picture of its interference in the domestic affairs of other states. There are many ongoing processes with no clean indicators for outcomes.

One is that Gulf states are now beginning to reconcile with Assad. Reconciliation of Arab Gulf and North African states with Assad have increased further following the February 2023 earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. This may dilute Iran's influence in Syria. However Iranian regional influence may not be diminished as also since 2022 there has been renewed engagement between the Arab Gulf states and Iran.

Further potentially strengthening Iranian regional influence have been the 2023 talks brokered by China saw Iran and Saudi Arabia reestablish diplomatic ties for the first time since 2016. This might be a step towards the chances for a political settlement in Yemen.

Iran has moved quickly to adapt to these changes in what I call "revolutionary pragmatism". This is coupled with the election of the new President, Ebrahim Raisi, who took up office in July 2021. Some examples are: (1) Iran has reconciled to the realities of sanctions not being lifted over the nuclear affair by gaining in the international context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that is favouring the Iranian oil industry; and (2) Iran has pursued temporary détente mechanisms towards other regional neighbours, most notably the expansion of the so-called "resistance economy" in Iraq, the easing of tensions with selected countries on the Arabian Peninsula, and its apparent consolidation in the Mediterranean, not only via countries such as Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinians, but also with the Algerian government.

Iranian "revolutionary pragmatism" is also evident in cases where Iran has chosen not to interfere in the domestic affairs of other states in the region. Turkey is an example. In the same year 2003 that saw Iran gain a foothold in Iraq was also the emergence and consolidation of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Islamist regime in Turkey.

There has been a parallel unfolding of Iran's quest for regional hegemony and Turkey's return to a central position in the Middle East transformed the region's politics. Iran has accepted Turkey's role. Since then, there have been common areas of interest and in the Caucasus for example however Iran and Turkey are neither enemies nor allies.

The analysis of what has transpired since 2003 with Iran and Turkey must be taken in context. Iran's quest for regional hegemony after 1979 and Turkey's shift away from Europe to its neighbourhood (sometimes called Neo-Ottomanism) is continually dominating the region. The existence of these two, large, powerful Muslim states is unique in the history of the last 300 years and indeed must be considered with a third, that being Saudi Arabia. The impact of their new roles is magnified by the atrophy of the Arab system and the diminished influence

of major Arab states such as Egypt and Iraq and indeed the absence of Cold War superpowers and growing influence of China and India in the region.

Conclusions

This paper used primary and secondary sources using a methodology of deduction. The objective was qualitative research to analyse decision-making of different political elites in Iran in a comparative fashion (secular e.g. President and religious e.g. Ayatollah). It concludes by noting that there is no indication that Iran has planned the outcomes rather Iran has taken advantage of events as an “opportunist”. Moreover, Iran focuses on taking advantage of weak or failed governance in other states yet when challenged Iran doesn’t step back but persists.

It may well be human nature to strive to achieve more and so countries will continue to compete for influence with their neighbours and even in their neighbours’ domestic affairs if this is seen as a prudent means to achieve the ends. So, Iran is highly likely to maintain strategies of fermenting strife and unrest in the domestic affairs of other countries and coordinate irregular military efforts in the Arab world to suit its goals.

Delving into the details may well show that Iran now has such an extensive and geographically dispersed network of alliances that it has ample scope to conduct deniable military operations at arms' length, should it choose to. Whilst the West focuses on Iranian nuclear intentions it has shown no efforts to develop a strategy capable of dismantling Tehran’s militias in other states.

Clearly Tehran’s execution of its interference doctrine has won it unprecedented regional influence during periods of equally unprecedented conflict. However, some of those conflicts are now winding down. Iran may well be challenged to produce the resources required to sustain post-conflict reconstruction in Syria. Failure to do so could easily erode Iran’s influence. Moreover, Iran has not had it all its own way given mass demonstrations and violence across Iraq and Iran that show that some of the populations are far from happy with the Iranian interference in the domestic affairs of other states.

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