



# **JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES**

## Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual Periodical Journal

---

Year 7, Issue 17, June 2023

---

ISSUED BY



# JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

*Journal for Iranian Studies (JIS) is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal offers a biannual survey in Iranian affairs, spanning a wide range of subject areas. It offers in-depth analysis and empirically grounded studies exploring key issues in Iranian culture arts, literature, linguistics, economics, politics, as well as in social, cyber and military sciences. JIS is published in three languages; English, Arabic, and Persian. JIS is committed to maintaining high standards through carrying out stringent peer review; therefore, it seeks submissions from researchers experienced in the field of the proposed study.*

## **Rasanah: International Institute for Iranian Studies,**

Al-Takhassusi St. Sahafah, Riyadh

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

P.O. Box: 12275 | Zip code: 11473

### **For annual subscription:**

Contact: [JIS@rasanahiis.com](mailto:JIS@rasanahiis.com)

Individuals inside Saudi Arabia: \$32

Individuals outside Saudi Arabia: \$80

Institutes inside Saudi Arabia and abroad: \$160

ISSN: 1658-757X

©2019 Rasanah: International Institute for Iranian Studies.

*All rights reserved.*

The materials contained in the JIS should not be quoted without indicating their sources, and should not be republished without Rasanah's permission.

---

*Opinions in the journal reflect the writer's point of view,  
not necessarily the view of Rasanah.*



[www.Rasanah-iiis.org](http://www.Rasanah-iiis.org)

## PUBLISHING TERMS AND CONDITIONS

---

- All submitted manuscripts are subject to peer review and expected to meet the rigorous standards of academic excellence.
- The manuscript submitted must adhere to the journal's quality standards: originality, novelty, preciseness, and free of any language errors or ambiguity.
- The manuscript submitted shall focus on subject areas related to Iranian domestic affairs or Iran's regional international and interactions.
- The introductory literature review shall propose an overview of the topic, exploring relevant historical information and key works within the chosen areas of focus.
- The submitted manuscript will be scrutinized for plagiarized content (sent to for an originality report) and revised by the JIS Editorial Committee on publication ethics.
- The manuscript is published after compliance with the reviewers' recommendations. The author shall submit the reviewers' changes and suggestion on the deadline date.
- The author must follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*; otherwise, the manuscript is rejected.
- The opinions expressed in the article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the view of the JIS.

### ADVISORY BOARD

Prof. Abdulhameed Alansari  
Prof. Ahmad Alshatheli  
Prof. Mohammed Alsaheed  
Prof. Mohammad Almobaideen  
Prof. Radwan Assayed  
Prof. Saleh Alkhatlan  
Prof. Yahia Ibn Junaid  
Dr. Abdulkarim Jaradat  
Dr. Sultan Alnu'aimi

**Editor in Chief**

Dr. Mohammed Alsulami

**Editorial Director**

Mahmoud Abu Alqasim

**Editorial Board**

Retired Major General Ahmed Almaimouni

Dr. Mutasim Abdullah

Dr. Abdulrauf Alghoniemy

Dr. Yahia Bouzidi

Dr. Mohammad Sayyad

Ahmed Leila

Hashr Mujahed Albdrani

**Editorial Secretary**

Dr. Mohammed Zahed

Ruba Abu Mualish

**Art Director**

Hani Yassin

# CONTENTS

■ <b>Social Media and the Youth Activism: The Case of Generation Z in Iran</b> Shadi Abou Karam .....	7
■ <b>The Iranian Revolution and the Reality of Jews in Iran After 1979</b> Dr. Husam Kassai Hussein - Dr. Wedad Abdolrahman al-Karni.....	19
■ <b>The Iranian Drone Program: Role and Scope of Its Influence in Iran’s Foreign Policy</b> Dr. Hamdi Bashir .....	31
■ <b>Geopolitical Factors and Impact of BRI on Iran-China Relations</b> Dr. Mohamad Zreik .....	45
■ <b>A German Feminist Response to the Mahsa Amini Protests in Iran: Balancing Normative and Realist Foreign Policy</b> Nicolas Verbeek .....	57
■ <b>Book Review: Secular Thought Within Islamic Iran</b> Reviewer: Dr. Mohammed al-Sayyad - Author: Emad el-Hilali .....	69

# **SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE YOUTH ACTIVISM: THE CASE OF GENERATION Z IN IRAN**

**Shadi Abou Karam**

---

Political researcher

## **Introduction**

The recent protests in Iran were characterized by the participation of a significant number of so-called Generation Z or Zoomers born between the mid-1990s and early 2000s. This demographic utilized Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok and WhatsApp to coordinate their activities and communicate their messages and opinions. Generation Z utilized social media tools to disseminate information as well as to organize protests. They also shared videos of police brutality, which helped to bring international attention to the situation in Iran and increase awareness. Their ability to harness technology to put pressure on the Iranian government is indicative of the important role they will play in shaping Iran's future. This study analyzes the impact of social media platforms on Generation Z participation with regard to the Iranian protests that erupted against the backdrop of the death of Mahsa Amini.

## **Iranian Protests: Background and Motivations**

The roots of the recent protests can be traced back to the death of Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman who was arrested by the government's morality police in Tehran for not adhering to the country's strict hijab laws. The subsequent release of police footage showing her collapse in a police station sparked widespread outrage among the general Iranian population, leading to widespread protests. People of all ages, including women and schoolgirls, participated in the protests, which quickly spread across multiple cities and towns in Iran.<sup>(1)</sup>

The motivations behind the recent protests were multifaceted, and they encompassed a sense of nationalism and a desire for greater freedom. Gender issues, in particular, emerged as a driving force in the protests, with women and girls serving as symbols of change and key catalysts of the protest movement. At least 520 individuals have been killed to date,<sup>(2)</sup> though the actual number remains unknown. The Iranian government adopted a security approach in dealing with the protests, authorizing security agencies to crack down on protestors.

Since the 1990s, digital activism, or the use of digital mobile technologies and internet-based devices for political and social change, has been on the rise, with the internet demonstrating its effectiveness in mobilizing, organizing, informing and communicating on a global scale to bring about positive change.

Despite the Iranian government's censorship and crackdowns, Iranian Zoomers born between 1997 and 2010 played a crucial role in both the physical and online protests, using social media to express themselves and spread their messages. Protesters refer to the older leaders as "dinosaurs,"<sup>(3)</sup> highlighting the significant generational divide between them and the clerical establishment.

International support for a cause is a crucial goal of any social media campaign, but determining its impact can be difficult. The so called Arab Spring, also referred to as the Arab uprising, as well as the ongoing civil war in Syria, has demonstrated that social media can play a critical role in bringing international attention to a cause and conveying a sense of urgency.<sup>(4)</sup> This quest for seeking international attention is likely to be a key basis of future campaign plans for Iran's Zoomers, but the difficulty will remain in translating support into effective change on the ground.

## **Social Media Influence on Iranian Zoomers**

In recent years, Generation Z's use of social media and the internet has increased significantly, particularly in Iran. They are now able to organize and communicate with one another in ways that were previously impossible as well as reach a much larger audience and garner more attention for their cause.

By blocking WhatsApp and Instagram and other social media platforms, the Iranian government has attempted to control the spread of information, but it is not a total blackout.<sup>(5)</sup> Social media has enabled young Iranians to see their country's misfortunes in real time, including nationwide or local protests, violent crackdowns, and the disparity in wealth between themselves and government elites.<sup>(6)</sup> This is

probably what provoked the Iranian Parliament to pass a bill declaring full state control over the internet and cyberspace just a few months prior to the recent protests, with the intention of restricting Generation Z's use of social media applications.<sup>(7)</sup> The Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran has utilized Instagram, Facebook and Twitter to spread its message and mobilize young women against the mandatory hijab laws.<sup>(8)</sup> Generation Z employed Telegram, an encrypted messaging app, as one of the main platforms to disseminate information and coordinate logistics. This enabled them to bypass traditional channels of information dissemination, which are often subject to censorship or control by the Iranian government.

The use of social media also helped Generation Z in reaching a broader audience and amplified their message. It also helped in establishing connections with sympathetic individuals from around the world who are supportive of their cause, hence creating a sense of solidarity among protestors.

Hashtags (such as #MahsaAmini, #IranProtests and #OpIran) were instrumental in the success of the recent protests. They have served as a rallying cry for protesters and a way for people to express their support for the protest movement. These hashtags have enabled the creation of decentralized and organic forms of political activism, in which individuals can share their own experiences and perspectives while also enhancing the messages of the protest movement.

However, it is important to note that assessing the impact of social media as a tool for social mobilization is difficult. Key issues to examine include the following: the specific social media strategy and tactics used by opposition groups; the evolving use of different social media tools as mobilization happens; and the possibility of social media tapping into the emotions of people, hence having a persuasive impact. Even the most open governments in the world can be surprised by "micro-mobilizations" in opposition to policies and programs.<sup>(9)</sup>

## **Role of Social Media in Iran's Social and Political Movement**

### **Student Activism in Iran**

Student activism has a rich history in Iran, with universities serving as critical hotspots for political activism and opposition movements. During Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule, the growth of the Iranian higher education sector provided students who were against the shah with opportunities to organize both domestically and abroad, leading to universities becoming hotbeds of activism during the period leading up to the 1979 Iranian revolution. After the revolution, the university system came under intense pressure from the clerical establishment, which saw it as a challenge to its rule. Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat (DTV) emerged as the main umbrella organization coordinating Islamic student groups, playing a significant role in establishing the cultural and political hegemony of the Islamic left in universities.<sup>(10)</sup>

The reform movement in Iran was sparked by Mohammad Khatami's presidential campaign in 1997, which resonated with the rising demands of the middle class,



youth and women, who turned out to vote in record numbers.<sup>(11)</sup> The international community supported the reform movement by condemning Iran's human rights violations and advocating for a wider range of issues, including civil rights.<sup>(12)</sup>

Recent years have seen a steady growth in student activism in Iran, with young people leveraging the power of social media to organize and communicate their demands for reform such as improved access to education, an end to the compulsory hijab and discrimination against women.

Student activism is a catalyst for transformation in Iran. Despite confronting various obstacles, such as repression and censorship, students have persisted in utilizing social media and innovative forms of protest to express their demands and advocate for democracy and social justice.

An analysis of student organizations in Iran from 1996 to 2006 identifies the salient political discourses that they have championed: social justice, freedom, pluralism and Islamic democracy. These discourses have contributed to reshaping the Iranian polity, affecting both the student movement and the wider political landscape of Iran. The future of student activism in Iran is uncertain, but the country's young people are committed to pursuing change in their society.<sup>(13)</sup>

### **Role of Social Media and the Internet in Driving Social and Political Movements**

The 2009 Iranian presidential election was won by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in a landslide, but thousands of Iranians took to the streets in protest, chanting "Where is my vote?"<sup>(14)</sup> Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi emerged as the protest movement's leaders in response to opposition to Ahmadinejad's reelection. Twitter, Facebook and text messaging played a critical role in organizing and coordinating opposition efforts and public demonstrations.

By utilizing social media, the Green Movement was able to circumvent censorship and garner widespread support from diverse and frequently conflicting segments of the Iranian population. Particularly, Twitter protected Iranian users by making it more difficult for state agents to locate and detain them. Facebook also launched a beta version of its website in Persian to accommodate the volume of Persian-language news and information shared on the platform. YouTube also played a role by relaxing its restrictions on graphically violent videos, allowing videos of the Iranian revolution to be widely distributed on the platform.

After the contested election, which President Ahmadinejad won with 63% of the vote, citizens took to social media platforms to document their struggle and reach a wider audience. Social media allowed information to flow, including the viral video of Neda Agha-Soltan's murder, despite the state crackdown on domestic and foreign media outlets. The video received global attention, prompting the then US President Barack Obama to respond to it.

However, some scholars are skeptical of the "Twitter Revolution,"<sup>(15)</sup> because traditional media still wields considerable influence over the dissemination of information, and governments have the ability to monitor and censor social media sites.

Critics believe that social media only helps in raising awareness of issues, and it is the protestors, not the technology, that makes the real difference on the ground.

The internet, particularly social media, has provided a new platform for Iranian students to challenge the policies of the Iranian government and has also helped in propelling them to the forefront of political and social movements in Iran.<sup>(16)</sup> Students and the youth use social media to promote cultural values and norms and to challenge the government's official norms despite political repression. The Iranian government has attempted to exert control over social media by increasing its own presence on these platforms, instilling fear among internet users and restricting access to online networks. By the end of 2009, the Iranian government had amassed substantial control over the information environment, while the Green Movement had lost steam.

### **Impact of Social Media on the Advocacy of Social and Political Movements**

The use of social media by opposition groups has enabled the decentralization of power and has also helped in the ability to evade retaliation, but the Iranian government has co-opted social media tools for its own purposes and has expanded its efforts to monitor and restrict online activity. The government has adopted a more aggressive stance toward online activity and launched a campaign against the perceived threat of a "soft war."<sup>(17)</sup>

The recent Iranian protests have depended heavily on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to share information and coordinate activities. These platforms have enabled protesters to circumvent government-controlled traditional news outlets and reach a larger audience. Hashtags and other online organizing strategies have played a crucial role in the dissemination of information about the protest movement.

Despite the government's attempts to shut down the internet and heavily filter it, Iranian activists have been able to use a variety of tools to spread their message and connect with supporters around the world. Social media has helped make the protests a global phenomenon and allowed activists to share information and ideas. However, the government's crackdown on cyberactivity and dissent has been severe, resulting in the arrest, torture and imprisonment of numerous activists.

Digitally networked activism (DNA) movements have supplanted traditional hierarchical social and political institutions as the centers of power in society.<sup>(18)</sup> Coordinated by digital media technologies, DNA has led to large-scale collective action centered on broader political agendas such as economic justice and environmental protection.

## **Social Media and the Role of Generation Z in the Protests Over Mahsa Amini's Death**

### **Methodology**

This research explores the impact of social media and the internet on Generation Z's participation in the recent Iranian protests. To achieve this end, a combination

of open-source intelligence (OSINT) and social media monitoring technologies were used to collect information on protesters' use of social media. Using sentiment analysis, network analysis and content analysis, the collected data was then analyzed.

Identifying relevant social media platforms was the initial step in the research. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok and Telegram were among these platforms. Then, keywords and hashtags associated with the recent protests in Iran, Generation Z and social media use were identified and used to search for relevant data on the mentioned platforms.

To track keywords and hashtags and collect data on social media activity in real-time, social media monitoring tools were developed. The collected data included posts, comments, likes, shares and other forms of engagement associated with the recent protests in Iran and the participation of Generation Z. The data was stored in a secure and organized manner, and it was pre-processed to eliminate any unnecessary or duplicate information.

The pre-processed data was then analyzed using sentiment analysis, network analysis and content analysis. The overall sentiment of the posts and comments related to the protests and Generation Z's participation was determined using sentiment analysis. Utilizing network analysis, the relationships between social media actors were examined and the most influential actors were identified. The content of the posts and comments were analyzed using content analysis to determine the topics and messages being communicated.

### **The Digital Landscape of Iran in 2023**

Iran's digital landscape has been constantly evolving over the years, and the most recent data paints a vivid picture of the country's digital adoption and use. As of the beginning of 2023, 78.6 percent of Iran's population, or 69.83 million people, were internet users. This demonstrates the remarkable growth of the internet in Iran, where it continues to play an increasingly vital role in the lives of the Iranian people.

Social media usage has also increased in Iran, where 54% of the population, or 48 million people, are now active on social media. In Iran, social media has become an indispensable tool for communication, information sharing and entertainment. As more and more people incorporate social media into their daily lives, it is likely that its usage will increase further.

In addition to the increase in internet and social media usage, the number of active mobile cellular connections in Iran has also increased significantly. At the beginning of 2023, there were 126.9 million active mobile phone connections in the country, or 142.8% of the population. This demonstrates the widespread adoption of mobile technology in Iran, where individuals continue to depend on mobile devices for communication, entertainment and information access.

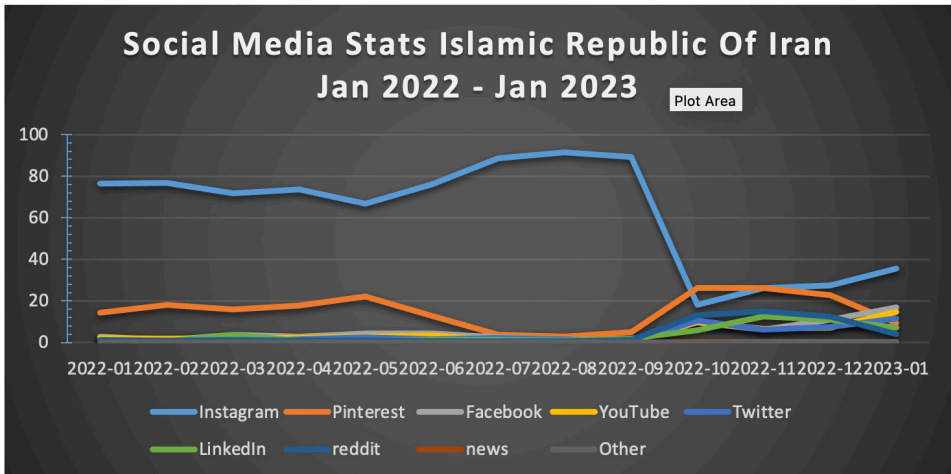
Iran's population stood at 88.84 million as of January 2023, which is an important fact to keep in mind when analyzing the country's digital landscape. The popu-

lation increased by 588,000 (+0.7%) between 2022 and 2023, with females comprising 49.5% and males 50.5%. In addition, as of the beginning of 2023, 77% of Iran’s population resided in urban areas, while 23% resided in rural areas.

Figure 1, which is based on the data provided by Statcounter, provides a summary of the market share of different social media platforms in Iran from January 2022 to January 2023. The data shows the percentage of users who used each platform in each month.

Instagram appears to be the most popular social media platform in Iran, with a share ranging from 66.68% to 91.42% during the period. Pinterest, Facebook and YouTube also had a significant number of users, with market shares ranging from 9.46% to 26.31%. Twitter, LinkedIn and Reddit also had a small but notable user base, with market shares ranging from 0.46% to 6.09%. The other platforms listed had relatively low market shares during the period.

**Figure 1: Social Media Stats in Iran**



Source: Statcounter.<sup>(19)</sup>

### Hashtag War

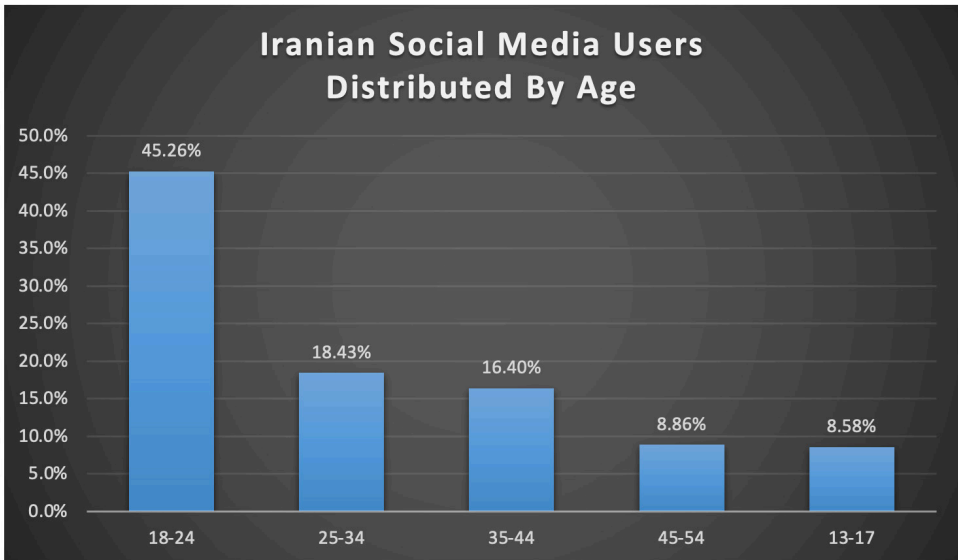
The #MahsaAmini movement is a rapidly evolving and multifaceted phenomenon, with an uncertain outcome and impact. Amini’s hashtag broke the world record of 100+ million tweets.<sup>(20)</sup> This research has focused on the protest movement’s hybrid nature and how it has leveraged Twitter to challenge the Iranian government. It also highlights how the movement reflects the technological proficiency of Iranian users.

In the case of #MahsaAmini, the hashtag became a symbol of protest against the Iranian government and gender discrimination in Iran. The use of the hashtag helped to amplify the message of protesters, making it visible to a larger audience, both within and outside Iran.



The data provided shows that the largest group of social media users are within the 18-24 age bracket, with a proportion of 45.26%. The second largest group is aged 25-34, with a proportion of 18.43%. The third largest group is aged 35-44, with a proportion of 16.40%. The proportion of users aged 45-54 and 13-17 are 8.86% and 8.58%, respectively (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Iranian Social Media Users Distributed by Age**



It is important to note that Figure 4 only shows the distribution of social media users by age and the difference versus the baseline. Further research and analysis may be necessary to understand the trends and patterns in social media usage by age and how it relates to other factors, such as gender, education level and location.

## Results and Examination

### Findings

The purpose of the research was to determine how social media and the internet impacted Generation Z's participation in the recent Iranian protests. Using a combination of OSINT and social media monitoring technologies, data on protesters' use of social media was collected. The collected data was then examined using sentiment analysis, network analysis and content analysis.

As of 2023, 78.6% of Iran's population, or 69.83 million people, are internet users, while 54.0% of the population, or 48 million people, are social media users, according to the latest data. Additionally, the number of active mobile cellular connections in Iran rose to 126.9 million, or 142.8 percent of the population. Instagram was the

most prominent social media platform in Iran, followed by Pinterest, Facebook and YouTube. Most social media users who utilized the hashtag #MahsaAmini opposed the Iranian government and supported the demonstrations.

45.26% of all social media users in Iran were between the ages of 18 and 24, followed by 25-34 with 18.44%. The research also revealed that hashtags, such as #MahsaAmini, served as a tool for amplifying messages and monitoring events and movements.

Social media and the internet played a crucial role in Generation Z's participation in the recent Iranian protests, allowing people to communicate, share information and coordinate their efforts. The impact of social media and the internet on these protests reflects the significance of social media technologies in influencing public opinion and facilitating political activism.

### **Implications**

These research findings have significant implications for gaining a deeper understanding of the dynamics of student activism in Iran. The importance of social media and the internet in driving social and political movements is one of the most significant implications. As the statistics illustrate, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok and Telegram played a crucial role in organizing and coordinating the recent protests in Iran, as well as amplifying protesters' messages.

The influence of social media and the internet on the advocacy of social and political movements is another important finding. Protesters' use of social media allowed them to avoid state retaliation and reach a larger audience within and outside of Iran. The research also revealed that the Iranian government has attempted to exert control over social media by increasing its own presence on platforms, instilling fear among internet users and limiting access to online networks.

The research also emphasizes the participation of Generation Z in the recent Iranian protests. The findings revealed that most social media users who participated in the protests were between the ages of 18 and 24 (45.26% of users). This demonstrates the essential role that Generation Z has played in the recent protests, utilizing their digital expertise and social media usage to challenge the Iranian political system's policies and orientations.

### **Conclusion**

These research findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of social media in driving social and political movements.

Firstly, the research emphasizes the significance of social media in facilitating the decentralization of power and the ability to avoid state reprisal. Thanks to social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs, Iranian protestors were able to circumvent censorship and garner support from all segments of the Iranian population.

Secondly, the research demonstrates the efficacy of social media as a platform for Iranian students to challenge the policies of the Iranian government and advocate for democracy and social justice. Despite political repression and censorship, students continue to express their demands through social media.

Thirdly, the research demonstrates the limitations of social media in driving social and political movements as the government has been able to co-opt social media tools and expand its efforts to monitor and restrict online activity. Despite protesters' widespread use of social media, the government has been able to control the flow of information as it did during the Green Revolution in 2009. The momentum of the protests, despite the manifold restrictions, affirms the significance of digital literacy and technological competence in influencing the dynamics of social and political movements. The #MahsaAmini movement exemplifies the technological prowess of Iranian users who have overcome digital handicaps and successfully utilized Twitter protests to challenge the Iranian government.



## Endnotes

- (1) "Threshold of Revolution: Why Iran's Protests Are Different This Time," *Euronews*, December 20, 2022, accessed March 1, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3MroUnz>.
- (2) "They Shot Me, Sister," *The Women Victims Of Iran Protest Crackdown*, *IranWire*, February 24, 2023, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://bit.ly/42AjNdC>.
- (3) "How Iran's Gen Z Is Leading Protests in the Streets and Online," *PBS NewsHour*, October 1, 2022, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3pEYY1V>.
- (4) John Kringen, "Worldwide: The Role of Social Media in Social Mobilization." *Institute for Defense Analyses*, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27004>.
- (5) "Iran's Gen Z movement and the hashtag Wars," in *The Talk* (Podcast), *Al Jazeera*, October 19, 2022, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3pJYpDW>.
- (6) Holly Dagres, "Meet Iran's Gen Z: The Driving Force Behind the Protests" *Foreign Policy*, November 1, 2022, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3W32PSy>.
- (7) Arghawan Farsi, "Iran's Gen Z: From Digital Freedom down to the Streets," *Reset DOC*, December 21, 2022, accessed, March 15, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3BookDY>.
- (8) Farinaz Basmechi, "How Gen Z Is Using Social Media in Iran's Women, Life, Freedom Movement," *The Conversation*, December 19, 2022, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3W8wVUW>.
- (9) Kringen "Worldwide."
- (10) Paola Rivetti and Francesco Cavatorta, "Iranian Student Activism Between Authoritarianism and Democratization: Patterns Of Conflict and Cooperation Between the Office for the Strengthening of Unity and the Regime," *Democratization* 21, no. 2 (2014): 289-310, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2012.732067.
- (11) Mohammad Kadivar, "Alliances and Perception Profiles in the Iranian Reform Movement, 1997 to 2005." *American Sociological Review* 78, no. 86-1063 :(2013) 6. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43188371>.
- (12) Shirin Mohammadi, "Iran's Internal Quest for Reform: A Closer Look at the Student Movement," *United for Iran* November 21, 2009, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3IgsQbw>.
- (13) Majid Mohammadi, "Student Politics and the Discourses of Democracy in Iran: Between Social Justice, Tradition, Totalitarianism, Pluralism, and Islamic Democracy," *Journal of Language and Politics* 14, no. 3 (2015): 473-494. [www.jstor.org/stable/25597419](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25597419).
- (14) Sara Elson, Douglas Yeung, Parisa Roshan, S. R. Bohandy, and Alireza Nader, "Background on Social Media Use in Iran and Events Surrounding the 2009 Election," in *Using Social Media to Gauge Iranian Public Opinion and Mood After the 2009 Election*, (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2012), 11-22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/tr1161rc.10>.
- (15) Shahira Fahmy and Sadaf Ali, "The Icon of the Egyptian Revolution: Using Social Media in the Toppling of a Mideast Government," In: Ralph Berenger eds., *Social Media Go to War: Civil Unrest, Rebellion and Revolution in the Age of Twitter* (Washington, DC: Marquette Books).
- (16) Saeid Golkar, "Student Activism, Social Media, and Authoritarian Rule in Iran," in Irvin Epstein, eds., *The Whole World is Texting. Pittsburgh Studies in Comparative and International Education* (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2015), e-book, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-055-0\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-055-0_4)
- (17) Niki Akhavan, "Social Media and the Message," in *Electronic Iran: The Cultural Politics of an Online Evolution*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 83-106, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5hjz9.8>.
- (18) Lance Bennett, "The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644 (2012): 20-39, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23316140>.
- (19) "Social Media Stats Islamic Republic Of Iran | Statcounter Global Stats," *StatCounter Global Stats*, January 1, 2022, accessed January 1, 2023, <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/iran/>.
- (20) Mondoair, Twitter post, September 26, 2022, 12:07 pm, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://twitter.com/mondoair/status/1574324715069521921>.

# **THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION AND THE REALITY OF JEWS IN IRAN AFTER 1979**

**Dr. Husam Kassai Hussein**

---

Head of Department of Political Thought,  
College of Political Science, Tikrit University

**Dr. Wedad Abdolrahman al-Karni**

---

Assistant Professor of Political Sociology, College of  
Humanities and Social Sciences, King Saud University

## **Introduction**

Following the outbreak of the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Jewish minority in Iran found itself in a highly complex situation. When the clerics took over power, anti-Zionist opinion, which had evolved in Iran since the 1940s, coinciding with the announcement of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, was further embedded in Iranian minds as it was part of the revolutionary rhetoric. The country's rule shifted from a pro-Western and Israel-friendly government to a clerical one that harbored anti-Western, anti-imperial and anti-Zionist sentiments. The new Iranian political system was exclusionary, at odds with the country's minorities.

However, under the new Iranian political setup, the Jewish minority's conditions were slightly better when compared to other ethnic and sectarian groupings. Unfortunately, the Jews were confronted with a situation that changed one of their oldest bastions into a hostile one and unsuitable for living — the bulk of the minority had lived in Persia for more than 2,700 years. The majority of them left Iran, and the others that remained faced limitations and exploitation for political ends and for the sake of preserving the revolutionary government's religious and cultural imperatives.

This study argues that the Jews in Iran have been affected since the rise of Wilayat al-Faqih after the 1979 revolution. Despite various stipulated rights, Jews have faced limitations. The Iranian establishment aims to improve its image and neutralize accusations connected to its human rights violations at home and abroad through projecting a relatively soft policy toward its Jewish minority. In addition, it has employed the problem of the Jewish minority to deflect Western and Israeli pressures. The study will address the following questions: what is the historical context of the Jewish presence in Iran before and after the revolution? How was this minority impacted by the clerics' rise to power in 1979 and the subsequent disputes between Iran and Israel? How far has the Iranian government succeeded in employing the Jewish minority in its dispute against the West and Israel?

### **Historical Roots of the Jewish Presence in Iran**

The first Jewish migration to Persia began in 741 BC, when the Assyrian ruler Tiglath-Pileser seized Jerusalem. He razed the city, captured and deported its inhabitants to Assyria, and then to Persia. The second migration occurred in 733 BC, under the reign of Assyrian King Shalam Nasr V (722-228 BC). He devastated Jerusalem, slaughtered its inhabitants and enslaved the rest. He marched with these captives toward the Khabour River in northern Iraq. They were successful in establishing a Jewish empire on the Caspian Sea coast.<sup>(1)</sup> The third migration transpired in 597 B.C., during the rule of the Chaldeans, led by King Nebuchadnezzar. He captured Jerusalem and destroyed the Kingdom of David. They kidnapped thousands of Jews and took them to Mesopotamia (Babylon), from where they moved to Persia.

Throughout time, the Jews were able to penetrate Babylonian society, occupying important positions in the court and state. They also performed religious rituals and wrote in Babylon (the Babylonian Talmud). Many prophets emerged from among the Jews throughout the Babylonian period, including the Prophet Dhu al-Kifl, whose shrine is located in the Iraqi Province of Babylon. The Jews of Babylon aided King Cyrus the Great, the first ruler of Persia (560–529 BC) and the founder of the Achaemenid state, in occupying Babylon after providing the Persians with vital intelligence about the Babylonian army and the city's fortifications, which fell in 539 BC. In exchange for this Jewish assistance, King Cyrus the Great granted them the right to return to Palestine. Yet, many Jews preferred to remain in Persia,<sup>(2)</sup> and the Jews sprang up in Babylonian centers and then appeared in Persian regions and cities such as Hamadan and Susa (an Ahwazi city located in the Arab region situated

in south and southwestern Iran). The Jews there are Ahwazi Arabs, and this city is home to many Jewish landmarks and it is also the home of Prophet Daniel and others.<sup>(3)</sup>

The Children of Israel were 42,360 strong. They were allowed to build a temple in Jerusalem, and King Cyrus the Great favored the Jews to the point that most of Persia's kings followed in his footsteps when dealing with them. The Jews' position in Persia was elevated, and they held high posts. During the reign of King Shapur II (310-379 BC), their ties with the Persians grew stronger. The Jews began to send presents to the Persian monarchs, and their relationship with them grew stronger. As a result, they took part in Persian battles throughout Khosrau I's rule.<sup>(4)</sup>

The Jewish population in Iran expanded and dispersed throughout the Sasanian dynasty (226-642 AD). They did, however, face persecution on a regular basis. The invasion of Arab Muslims in 642 AD terminated the Persian Empire's rule and established Islam as the state religion. Because of economic and societal circumstances, some Jews converted to Islam as a result of this turn of events. Yet, they enjoyed extensive rights throughout this time.

The Jewish minority experienced fundamental transformations throughout the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722 A.D.). They were persecuted, as were other religious minorities in Persia. Except during the reign of Shah Abbas II, they were forced to convert to Shiism as part of the Safavid's campaign to spread Shiism. Under his rule, the persecution of Jews was briefly halted.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jews largely endured persecution and discrimination. At the end of the Qajari dynasty, however, they enjoyed some rights such as the right to have representation in the 1907 Parliament. When Britain occupied Iran in 1917, protection was given to the Jewish minority. And against the backdrop of the rise of Zionism, the role of Jews in Iran grew. The organization Preserving the Languages of the Past was established which carried out purely Zionist activities. In 1918, the Zionist Union of Iran's Jews was created, opening offshoots in other Iranian cities. In 1919, the first Zionist conference of the Jews of Iran was convened in Tehran, which was chaired by Azizullah Naim, with the participation of all Zionist organizations in Iran. The Zionist movement in Iran actively promoted the formation of influential Zionist associations among the youth of Iran's Jewish minority for the sake of collecting donations, aiding Zionist institutions to purchase Palestinian land, spreading the Hebrew language and literature, and publishing educational periodicals and magazines. In Tehran, the Persian magazine "Hajeulah" (Salvation) was published. Furthermore, the first and most important books for teaching Hebrew were printed in Tehran in 1918.<sup>(5)</sup> Yet another Jewish magazine was published in Tehran under the name Sina, which was the mouthpiece of the Zionist movement in Tehran.<sup>(6)</sup> This is in addition to creating the first Zionist league in Tehran. In addition, in 1914, the Society for Teaching the Hebrew Language was founded in the city of Hamedan. The first Zionist association in Iran was founded in the same year. *Shalom*, a Zionist newspaper, was published in Persian and Hebrew.<sup>(7)</sup> There is no doubt that the state's directives contributed to the expansion of Jewish-Zionist activities.

From the time Reza Shah came to power in 1925 until the end of the Pahlavi family's control in 1979, the country was secular and Western-oriented. This greatly benefited Jews, who acted freely and played an important role in economic and cultural life. When World War II broke out, Iran provided a safe haven for thousands of refugees from Europe, Soviet Central Asia, Iraq and the Caucasus and was also the dreamland for Polish Jews and Christians in Central Asia. It was also a welcome respite from the Soviet Union's famine years. "For them... it's heaven," said Warsaw-born Rabbi Haim Ze'ev Hirschberg. All in all, it could be said that the Persian Jews have long played an active role in the social life of Iran. The Jewish community partakes in Jewish and Persian celebrations alike, which points to the fact that they are proud of their history and role in Iranian culture. The reign of Reza Shah, the king deposed by the Khomeini-led revolution, is regarded as the golden age of Persian Jewry. While the shah's oppressive domestic policies and violent response to opposition enraged many Iranians, his partial economic reforms allowed Persian Jews to thrive.<sup>(8)</sup>

### **The Jewish Minority in Iran and Shifts in the Relationship With Israel**

Following the establishment of the State of Israel, a strong alliance grew between Tehran and Tel Aviv since Iran was quite significant in the "Periphery Doctrine" developed by Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in the 1950s. This doctrine stated that Israel should cultivate deep ties with the region's non-Arab countries to protect itself from hostile Arab neighbors. Non-Arab countries such as Israel, Iran, Turkey and Ethiopia all faced active Arab states, which facilitated the formation of the periphery alliance.<sup>(9)</sup>

In this setting, Iran and Israel saw Iraq as a shared threat, providing another reason for collaboration. By the 1960s, Israel was assisting the Iraqi Kurds in their war against the Iraqi government. Iran likewise saw the Iraqi Kurds as the Iraqi government's Achilles' heel. As a result, Mossad and SAVAK joined together to assist the Iraqi Kurds in their fight against the Iraqi government, and collaboration between the two countries intensified on several security and intelligence fronts. It is important to note that the collaboration between Israel and Iran was not founded solely on shared fears. The shah also had an exaggerated idea about Israel's clout in Washington. He believed that Israel could help him gain the support of the Kennedy administration which was critical of his rule. Notwithstanding the intensification of Iranian public condemnation of Israel following the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War in 1967, the shah continued to strengthen ties with the Jewish state after Israel's triumph over Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian armies. He also expressed his belief that Israel's growing standing would lead to enhancing Iran's position as the chief regional power.<sup>(10)</sup>

Economic cooperation between the two countries also improved, particularly in the energy sector. Cooperation progressed to the point where advanced missile systems were being developed and secret deals were struck. Consequently, the Pahlavi administration's remarkable relationship with Israel, as well as the secular character of the Pahlavi government, created an appropriate and inspiring atmosphere for

Jews to remain in Iran. Moreover, many Iranian Jews considered Persia to be their second-most important country after the State of Israel.

However, the 1979 revolution led to an important shift in Tehran's relations with Tel Aviv. Immediately after the revolution, Iranian foreign policy was saturated with anti-Israel sentiment and ideological zeal. The revolutionaries in Iran did not consider toppling the shah as their ultimate goal per se. But it was just the first step down the path of liberating the wider Middle East from US and Zionist hegemony. The anti-Israel rhetoric escalated, thus putting the Jewish minority under unprecedented pressures.

As a result of the chaotic situation and mounting concerns about the growing clout of clerics and anti-Israel rhetoric, some Jews fled Iran in the months following the shah's overthrow. Because the majority of them were traders and businessmen who had forged connections with Israel under the shah, they feared retaliation from the new revolutionary government.<sup>(11)</sup>

It could be said that until 1979, Jews were never forced to flee Iran, including those who had settled in Israel between 1948 and 1979. However, with the outbreak of the revolution, the arrest and arbitrary trial and subsequent execution of the Jewish businessman Habib Elghanian, one of the richest and most powerful personalities in the Jewish community in Iran and the honorary president of the community in May 1979 by a firing squad on charges of communicating with Zionists and Israel, was the spark that prompted many Iranian Jews to leave the country. Before the 1979 revolution, there were 100,000 Jews, but after the clerics assumed power, the vast majority of them fled Iran. Today, the number of Persian Jews in Iran varies between 9,000 and 20,000.<sup>(12)</sup>

Yet, and despite the proclaimed hostility, mutual interests — Iran's priority in sustaining the theocratic republic and Israel's ambition to weaken Iraq — led to continued collaboration between Iran and Israel in the 1980s. This cooperation resulted in Israel providing Iran with Phantom fighter jets and other military equipment. In return, Khomeini allowed large numbers of Jews to leave the country to settle in Israel and the United States. This cooperation, which was based on deals and fleeting pragmatic interests, does not paint a full picture of the nature of the relations between Tehran and Tel Aviv in 1979 nor does it provide a complete picture of the Iranian regime's attitude toward the Jewish minority in light of the escalating hostility toward Israel at the official and popular levels.

Hostility and rivalry began to deepen between the two sides when remarkable shifts in Iranian foreign policy took place. Iran, given its transboundary project, created the Lebanese Hezbollah, which emerged in response to the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in 1982 and afterwards became Iran's longest arm perched on Israel's borders. Iran's development of ballistic missiles raised the concern of Israel's security establishment. This is in addition to Iran's nuclear ambitions, which have been the main cause of hostility over the past two decades. Moreover, Israel now holds the view that the manifold challenges facing the region are primarily created by the Iranian establishment and its regional proxies. Furthermore, the signing of peace

treaties by Egypt and several Arab nations beginning with the Camp David Accord in 1979 and subsequent agreements generated significant shifts in regional relations patterns. These developments turned the cordial pre-revolution relations between Iran and Israel into ones beset with hostility and wide-scale confrontation.<sup>(13)</sup>

The situation of Jews completely changed after the 1979 revolution. Before the revolution, the number of Jews exceeded 100,000. Against the backdrop of the 1979 revolution, a considerable number of Jews resorted to migration to Israel while the rest preferred to stay in Iran. Overall, it can be said that the Iranian revolution caused a substantial change in the situation of Jews in Iran for two main reasons: the first is the ideological nature of the ruling establishment which favors the Shiite majority at the expense of others. The second reason is the Iranian government's ideological position that is hostile to Israel. The Jews, accordingly, have experienced difficult challenges since 1979 revolution.<sup>(14)</sup>

### **The Dilemma of Jews Under Wilayat al-Faqih**

Despite the hostility between Iran and Israel, which reached the extent of confrontation, the Iranian government was keen not to antagonize its Jewish minority and make it a party to the dispute (with Israel). In his religious edict, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini stated that the Jewish minority in Iran was a minority that enjoyed full protection and warned against any attacks against its members. Khomeini attempted to portray Zionism as a savage enemy for both Iran and Jews, whose historical existence in Iran dates back to 2,500 years BC and who were a core component of Iranian society.<sup>(15)</sup>

At the same time, the Jewish community members who did not leave Iran were keen not to put themselves in a position that could make them subject to suspicion and persecution, hence affecting their survival and interests. Moreover, leaders of the Jewish minority developed a symbiotic relationship with the Iranian government to enhance the community's interests. Iran attempted to employ the Jewish minority to polish its image and achieve its interests in the face of the United States and Israel.

The Iranian Constitution ensured the rights of the Jewish minority by recognizing three official religions in addition to Islam — Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism.<sup>(16)</sup> Hence, the Jewish minority, along with Christians and Zoroastrians,<sup>(17)</sup> was granted the right to representation in the Iranian Parliament. In the successive Iranian governments, the quota system ensured the Jews a single seat in Parliament through elections that were determined by the Iranian Constitution.<sup>(18)</sup>

In comparison to other minorities, we find that the Jewish minority which remained in Iran enjoyed freedom in performing religious rituals and building synagogues. Furthermore, the Iranian government granted permits to establish charities and associations in the cities where Jews resided, particularly in the capital Tehran, Hamadan and Isfahan.<sup>(19)</sup> In Tehran alone, there are 13 active synagogues, five Jewish schools, two kindergartens and a 100-bed Jewish hospital. There are active local Jewish communities in several other Iranian cities, including Shiraz, Isfahan and

Kermanshah and they have their own respective associations. However, living as protected second-class citizens under a Shiite-clerical power structure is very complicated. There is no injustice, but there definitely are restrictions.<sup>(20)</sup>

Iran has struggled to fulfill its constitutional guarantees toward its minorities. Arabs, Balochis and Iranian Kurds face discrimination and repression. The Iranian government also does not recognize the Baha'i faith, thus Bahai's face more persecution and repression than any other minority. Even Sunni Muslims, who constitute the majority throughout the Middle East but are a minority in Iran, lack the rights that their Shiite fellow countrymen have. The government does not allow Sunnis to be engaged in political and administrative activities and deprives them of assuming state positions.<sup>(21)</sup> This is in addition to the restrictions which have impacted their freedom to worship and perform religious rituals.<sup>(22)</sup> Moreover, Sunni scholars are subjected to insults and arbitrary arrests, with some were assassinated in the past.<sup>(23)</sup>

In contrast, the Iranian government has permitted Jews to construct places of worship. Furthermore, the IRGC assisted in the recovery of an ancient Torah stolen from the Jewish minority, one of the world's oldest manuscripts. It was returned to them in Shiraz, Iran's southern city.<sup>(24)</sup> Meanwhile, Sunnis are still deprived of having their own mosque in the capital Tehran. Rabbi Yehuda Jeremy stated, "Sharia law governs everything, and all houses of worship are open. We have the right to worship freely."<sup>(25)</sup>

At the social level, Jews in Iran stated that their situation improved after President Hassan Rouhani took office. He allowed Jewish schools to close on Saturdays and allocated nearly \$400 to a Jewish hospital in Tehran. The Jewish minority secured the right to full "blood money," ending the significant financial discrimination between Muslims and followers of other faiths in this respect.<sup>(26)</sup>

Additionally, Jewish religious leaders who spoke up against Zionism and the State of Israel have enjoyed state protection. Jews have also achieved several successes at the societal level recently such as the closure of Jewish schools on Saturdays rather than the Muslim off-day Friday.<sup>(27)</sup>

Nonetheless, given the views of the more fanatical Iranian hardliners, the aforesaid does not mean that the Jewish minority does not face marginalization, exclusion or challenges. For example, during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who questioned the Holocaust, Jewish relations with the Iranian government deteriorated. Jews and others around the world condemned his remarks.

According to Haroun Yashayaei, the leader of the Jewish Committee in Tehran, and Maurice Motamed, who represented the Jewish minority in the Iranian Parliament, denying the Holocaust — the gruesome historic tragedy — is an affront to all Jewish communities worldwide. It is noticed that Iranian Jews speak up about the different forms of discrimination experienced by their community. But they do not question the legitimacy of the Iranian government or the Islamic Sharia and system which governs them. Notwithstanding the relaxation of immigration restrictions, Jews living in Iran are hesitant to leave, even though Israel offers cash prizes ranging from \$10,000 for individuals to \$61,000 for families. However, this does not mean



that the Iranian government is tolerant toward Jews leaving for Israel. Ruhollah Kadhodazadeh was executed in 1998 for assisting Jews to illegally immigrate. Iran has also tightened measures against some of those who visit Israel to curb the number of these visits. They face jail, fines and questioning. Two Jews were sentenced to 91 days in prison. The sentence was later reduced to 20 days.<sup>(28)</sup>

As Iranian Jews are intrinsically linked to Iran's relationship with Israel, the Iranian government has attempted to employ them in its struggle against the West and Israel by controlling them. In this regard, we can highlight the ruling establishment's desire to employ Jewish elites in Iran to improve its image abroad. We can mention Hassan Rouhani escorting the lone Jewish representative in the Iranian Parliament to the United Nations summit in New York in 2013. This is an indication of employing and exploiting the Jewish minority to improve Iran's image at an international forum. This is in addition to the dispatchment of Iranian Jewish rabbis to the United States and the West where they speak positively about their circumstances.<sup>(29)</sup>

The Iranian government has also employed the Jewish minority in the context of its battles at the international level. Iran has depended on rabbis to intervene and mediate to resolve crises and bridge the gap with the West.<sup>(30)</sup> A large group of Jewish rabbis — 340 rabbis — sent a letter to US congressmen in which they urged them to support the Iranian nuclear deal as it would achieve the United States' and Israel's security. This position was in opposition to that of the Israel lobby that opposed the nuclear deal.<sup>(31)</sup> Through their ties with Jewish communities overseas, Iran's rabbis have played a key role in improving Iran's image. Iran also contacted Jews who are against the establishment of the Israeli state — part of its efforts to refute accusations of enmity against Judaism as a religion and affirming that it is against the Zionist project. For example, Ahmadinejad met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly with 12 rabbis from Neturei Karta who oppose the establishment of the State of Israel. The rabbis lauded the Iranian president. Rabbi Yisroel Dovid Weiss, spokesman for the Jewish group, said that Ahmadinejad was not an enemy of the Jewish people and several thousand Jews live in Iran without persecution.<sup>(32)</sup> Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper revealed that Israeli journalist Orly Azoulay traveled to Iran and remained there for several days with the aim of preparing reports about the conditions of Jews there. The reports concluded that the Iranian people love Jews, given the historical ties between the two peoples.<sup>(33)</sup>

## Conclusion

Persia occupies an important place in ancient Jewish history. Jews are indebted to Persians and their King Cyrus the Great for allowing them to return to Jerusalem and settle there in the past. Iran is home to the biggest Jewish minority in the world despite the decline of its numbers after the establishment of Israel. The clerical establishment that took power in 1979 pushed many Jews to depart for Israel and the United States, which reduced the number of Jews in Iran by 90% over the past four decades — as previously mentioned.

It is clear that the Jews who remained in Iran were keen not to engage outsiders in the context of their relationship with the Iranian establishment. They wanted to address their issues directly with the Iranian political system. Perhaps this played an important role in the successes they have achieved despite their sensitive position in light of the growing tensions between Tehran and Tel Aviv.

However, despite the Jewish minority in Iran enjoying a special status under the Wilayat al-Faqih ruling system, Jews face a number of challenges, primarily in the context of the government's tensions with Israel. They are obliged to prove all the time that they are uninterested (in establishing good ties with Israel) or increasing cooperation. This comes despite the fact that many of them have families in Israel and have visited Israel — maybe via a third country. Perhaps tensions between Iran and Israel will escalate, with Tel Aviv striking at Iran's depth. At this point, the Jewish minority will face more restrictions and scrutiny.

The Iranian government strives to demonstrate that it is adopting a sensible policy toward minorities by addressing the issue of the Jewish minority. This minority, however, does not have full citizenship rights. Members of the Jewish minority are barred from holding positions of power in government ministries. Principals of Jewish schools, on the other hand, must be Muslim. Additionally, some Jewish community members have made complaints about the application of Sharia to non-Muslims in the areas of inheritance, retribution and blood money. Despite the government's discrimination against Jews and its treatment of them as suspicious until the contrary is proven, it has succeeded in employing their leaders to play a diplomatic role to improve its image at home and promote the fact that it is hostile to Zionism rather than Jews in general. Furthermore, the government has engaged with Jews to settle sensitive issues at the global level, particularly those relating to its human rights record, and to polish its highly tainted image in this regard. The ruling establishment also employs Jews to advance its interests in the nuclear file in Western political circles and to put pressure on foreign lobbies to alleviate pressure on Iran. Leaders of Iran's Jewish community perhaps grudgingly accept to play this role to protect the remaining Jewish presence and heritage, which is threatened in Iran from their perspective, or for fear of the state's repression and crackdown on them.

## Endnotes

- (1) Safaa Mahmoud Abd al-Aal, "Jews of Iran in Safavid Era" *Resalat al-Mashreq [The Message of the Orient]* 34, no. 2 (March 2019): 243, DOI: 10.21608/RMSHREQ.2019.88086, [Arabic].
- (2) "The Secrets of the Jewish Community in Iran," TRT Arabic, May 18, 2016, accessed February 16, 2023, <http://bit.ly/3SoHuHy> . [Arabic].
- (3) Mamoun Kiwan, *The Jews in Iran* (Beirut: Bisan Publishing House, 2000), 21. [Arabic].
- (4) Safaa Mahmoud Abdel-Aal, "The Jews of Iran in the Safavid Era," 244.
- (5) Samuel Ettinger, *The Jews in Islamic Countries (1850\_1950)*, trans. Dr. Jamal Ahmed al-Rifai (Kuwait: World of Knowledge Series (197), 1995), 119-120. [Arabic].
- (6) Nazir Fanaseh, *Tehran: The Fate of the West During the Shah's Reign to the Republic of Ayatollahs* (Paris: 1988), 45.
- (7) Ettinger, *Jews in Islamic Countries*, 116.
- (8) Austin Bodetti, "Persian Jews and an Uneasy Peace in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Inside Arabia*, May 15, 2020, accessed February 25, 2023, <https://bit.ly/364NJly>.
- (9) Yossi Alpher, "Periphery: Israel's Search for Allies in the Middle East," *The Guardian*, 30 Apr 2015, accessed April 13, 2023, <http://bit.ly/3KVJUVQ>.
- (10) Larry Cohler-Esses, "How Iran's Jews Survive in Mullahs' World?" *The Forward Association*, August 18, 2015, accessed February 16, 2023, <http://bit.ly/3K6Wth8>.
- (11) *Ibid.*
- (12) Bodetti, "Persian Jews and an Uneasy Peace in the Islamic Republic of Iran."
- (13) Dalia Dassa Kaye, Alireza Nader and Parisa Roshan, "Title: A Brief History of Israeli-Iranian Cooperation and Confrontation," *Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2011), <http://bit.ly/3jZ4pX3>.
- (14) Ahmed Salah, "Jews and Iranians: The Jewish-Persian Minority Since the Revolution in Iran and Israel," *Asharq al-Awsat*, October 10, 2019, accessed February 16, 2023. Link: <https://9h.fit/ZXpLTT>. [Arabic].
- (15) Johanna Afriat, "Jews of Iran: a Community on Borrowed Time," *I24NEWS*, April 13, 2022, accessed 16 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/3k49ywU>.
- (16) *The Iranian Constitution*, Article 12.
- (17) Rania Makram, "The Ambition of Minorities and the Future of the Regime in Iran," *Journal of Iranian Studies* , no. 6 (March 2018), <https://bit.ly/3CdjGZQ>.
- (18) *The Iranian Constitution*, Article 64.
- (19) Abdel-Jalil Maali, "Zoroastrianism in Iran...The Cultural Origin and Political Employment," *Al-Arab*, London, February 17, 2016.
- (20) Cohler-Esses, *How Iran's Jews Survive in Mullahs' World.*"
- (21) "The Sunni Bloc in Iran's Parliament Lodge a Complaint Against the Minister of Interior and 19 Lawmakers Sign a Request to Interrogate Him," *Al Youm Al Sabea (Youm7)*, November 27, 2018, accessed February 26, 2023, <http://bit.ly/3ycZNjL>. [Arabic].
- (22) Idris Lakrini, "Management of Societal Diversity in Iran and the Status of the Sunnis," in *The Sunnah in Iran* (UAE: Al-Mesbar Center for Studies and Research), 70.
- (23) "The Aspiration of Minorities and the Future of the State in Iran."
- (24) "The Secrets of the Jewish Community in Iran."
- (25) "Iran's Chief Rabbi: 'We Enjoy Freedom of Worship,'" *i24 Channel*, June 01, 2022, accessed March 1, 2023, <http://bit.ly/41MsEIT>. [Arabic].
- (26) "The Secrets of the Jewish Minority in Iran."
- (27) Cohler-Esses.
- (28) *Ibid.*
- (29) Iyad Jabr, "The Jews of Iran...and Their Political Role," *Al-Bayan*, July 6, 2015, accessed March 5, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3ETphWL> . [Arabic].
- (30) Rai Taqiyyah, *Hidden Iran*, trans. Ayham Al-Sabbagh (Riyadh: Obeikan Bookshop for Publishing, 2010), 276.

(31) Nazir Majali, "Jewish Rabbis Send a Message to Congress to Support the Iranian Nuclear Agreement," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, August 19, 2015, accessed March 1, 2023 AD, <http://bit.ly/3ETLX9u>

(32) "Ahmadinejad meets Jewish rabbis who oppose the establishment of Israel," *Al Jazeera*, September 26, 2008, accessed March 1, 2023 AD, <http://bit.ly/3YlsLbE>. [Arabic].

(33) "An Israeli Journalist Who Visited Iran: The People of Iran Love the Jews," *Arabi Channel 21*, April 4, 2015, accessed March 2, 2023 <http://bit.ly/3SRmwLB>. [Arabic].

# **THE IRANIAN DRONE PROGRAM: ROLE AND SCOPE OF ITS INFLUENCE IN IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY**

**Dr. Hamdi Bashir**

---

Researcher on regional security issues

## **Introduction**

Iran is giving increasing attention to developing its drone program, employing it to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Iran's political moves have revealed its interest in developing drones. Several reports have proven that Iran supplied Moscow with drones to use in the Ukrainian theater. On November 5, 2022, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian acknowledged that his country had supplied Moscow with a few drones, months before the war had started. Meanwhile, Iran announced on May 17, 2022, the inauguration of a plant for manufacturing drones in Tajikistan. On August 24, 2022, the Iranian army launched drone drills in the Arabian Gulf and the Sea of Oman to the south of Iran. These Iranian moves raised questions about the role and influence of the Iranian drone program on Tehran's foreign policy agenda and objectives. This study examines the progress in the Iranian drone program, the military and political motivations for developing it, to what extent it influences Iran's foreign policy and its implications for regional and global security.

## **Iran's Drone Program: Limits of Development and Impact**

The Iranian drone program has been subject to several assessments by global and regional military and intelligence services. Some assessments assert that the program is advanced, classifying it as a major threat, while others suggest that there is an exaggeration of drone technology capabilities by Iran's propaganda machine. A CIA report in 2019 described the Iranian drone program as the fastest progressing part of Iran's air force.<sup>(1)</sup> Former Commander of the US Central Command General Kenneth McKenzie testified before the US Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2021 that the increasingly aggressive use of small and medium-sized drones by Iran and its proxies pose "a new and complex threat to our forces and the forces of our partners and allies." He added, "We are operating without complete air superiority for the first time since the Korean War. And until we manage to develop and establish a network capability to expose and defeat these drones, the attacker will continue to have an edge."<sup>(2)</sup>

### **The Iranian Drone Program's Evolutionary Stages**

The program has progressed through three stages:

First stage (monitoring and reconnaissance drones): The IRGC has been building unmanned reconnaissance planes since the mid-1980s. It created the first Iranian drone, Mohajer 1, in 1986. It was fitted with cameras to provide intelligence data.<sup>(3)</sup> After the war with Iraq ended, Iran continued developing drones through the Quds Aviation Industry Company, an IRGC affiliate, under the supervision of the Ministry of Defense and the IRGC's Aerospace Force which continues to manage its own comprehensive drone research and development program under the auspices of Shahed Aviation Industries.<sup>(4)</sup> At this stage, Iran largely focused on examining the debris of US-made drones that had crashed in Iran.

Second stage (attack drones): In the mid-2000s, Iran took a bigger step by unveiling a large group of reconnaissance, attack and kamikaze drones. Iran also developed a newer generation of drones such as the HESA Shahed 136 and the Mohajer 6. According to the mentioned 2019 CIA report, Tehran has produced approximately 15 different drone models, with a focus on short-range (Ababil-S), medium-range (Ababil-2) and long-range (Ababil-T) drones.<sup>(5)</sup> In 2016, Tehran unveiled the first homegrown fighter jet HESA Azarakhsh, which represents in reality the new generation of Simorgh drones. It is a medium-altitude combat aircraft with a range of 2,000 kilometers. It can stay in the air for 24 hours and hit four targets with pinpoint accuracy at the same time. Iran also developed HESA Fotros, a remotely and automatically controlled drone by providing it with prior coordinates capable of capturing photos and transmitting information. It is used for the purposes of protecting maritime and land borders. It is an upgraded version of Shahed-129 (a reconnaissance and attack drone that has a vast flight capacity of up to 24 hours and a maximum payload of up to 400 kilograms), and it can fly for 30 hours at a speed of 300 kilometers per hour.<sup>(6)</sup>

Third stage; exporting drones abroad: At this stage, Tehran expressed increasing interest in transferring drone technology to both its allies and proxies. Thus, the possession of drones was not the exclusive right of governments, but non-state actors now had access, raising fears over drone proliferation. Since 2018, Iran transferred some of its drones to its proxies in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq through the Quds Force. Iran also began exporting to countries outside the Middle East. Meanwhile, Washington, Kyiv and the European countries have accused Iran of selling drones to Russia since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war (in February 2022).<sup>(7)</sup> On May 17, 2022, Tehran confirmed the setting up of drone production lines in Tajikistan.<sup>(8)</sup> As a result, Tehran moved from the stage of manufacturing drones to a new stage of exporting them, hence competing with global and regional powers that also produce them.

### **Iran's Drone Development Program — Scope and Influence**

As for the extent of progress, reports indicate that the Iranian drone program has passed several armament stages. Most Iranian drones can carry guided bombs and Tehran seeks to equip them with missiles capable of hitting targets within a range of 8 kilometers. Iranian companies affiliated with the IRGC have succeeded in developing solar-powered drones, as well as other sophisticated models equipped with navigation guiding devices (gyroscopic navigation). For example, two classes of Iranian drones — Shahed-149 and Fotros — were equipped with satellite antennas, expanding the drones' operational range to 500 kilometers or more. According to reports, the latest generation of Iranian drones has a range of 1,000 kilometers and a flight time of up to 24 hours. According to Iranian officials, the Shahed 129 can fly for 24 hours and carry up to eight air-to-surface missiles.<sup>(9)</sup> Furthermore, the launch of the IRGC's first military satellite is likely to accelerate the development of Iran's drone program, particularly of models that have previously been tested, such as the Mohajer 6 and Shahed 129, as well as the IRGC's largest and most capable Fotros drone.<sup>(10)</sup>

There is no doubt that Iran's drone industry has witnessed progress; at the same time, there has been Iranian media amplification about the extent of the progress that has been made. However, these drones have proven that they have a limited impact on ongoing disputes. They have been used in carrying out cross-border attacks on Saudi military and oil sites. Saudi air defense systems managed to shoot down several of them. The Iranian drones have failed to enable Russia to make any strategic gains or shifts in the war on the Ukrainian battlefield so far. Though the Russian army focuses on targeting Ukrainian infrastructure and civilian targets with drones,<sup>(11)</sup> the Ukrainian army succeeded in downing more than 70% of the Shahed-136 drones using sophisticated air defense systems, particularly the anti-drone systems that the United States and NATO supplied it with.<sup>(12)</sup>

In any case, several experts indicate that the unique advantage that Tehran enjoys when producing its drones is the low production cost compared to the United States, Turkey or Israel. For example, the Shahed-136 drone production cost reach-

es \$20,000. Former CIA officials say that several of the Iranian drone models are originally upgraded versions of US drones. For example, the Iranian drone HESA Karrar is modeled on the US drone Predator and the Iranian drone Simorgh is an Iranian-made variant of the Lockheed Martin RQ-170 Sentinel which Iran downed in 2011.<sup>(13)</sup> According to some reports, despite the Iranian drone industry's progress, it is now facing advanced US defense systems capable of remotely destroying drones. The United States previously installed such systems on its aircraft carriers in the Gulf. Many regional powers, like Israel, have powerful defense systems like the Iron Dome that can take down many of Iran's drones. The Arab Gulf states want to improve their defense capabilities and acquire cutting-edge defense systems from overseas.

### **Iran's Drone Development and Export: Motivations and Points of Deployment**

The IRGC has played a significant and pivotal role in the development of Iran's drone program. Commander of the IRGC Ground Force's Drone Division Colonel Akbar Karimloo stressed the importance of this new weapon in strengthening Iran's military capabilities in a press interview with Tasnim News Agency in 2020. He said, "The drones are expected to be the best weapons and systems in the future for serving the armed forces of our beloved homeland."<sup>(14)</sup> Nonetheless, there are some indications that Iran is employing its drone capabilities to achieve foreign policy objectives. The military and geopolitical motives behind Iran's development of its drone program will be discussed in the following lines:

#### **Military Motives**

Iran seeks, first, to enhance its capabilities through its drone program, which is critical to Tehran's military strategy, particularly in terms of improving information gathering, reconnaissance and attack capabilities, compensating for traditional shortcomings. This is especially related to long-range shooting platforms and increasing Iran's dependence on unconventional weapons as an alternative to unavailable conventional ones.<sup>(15)</sup>

Iran also seeks to expose weaknesses in enemy-state air defense systems. By exporting drones abroad, Iran aims to test their effectiveness and impact in the face of enemy-state air defense systems.<sup>(16)</sup> Iran sought to expose the weaknesses in Saudi air defense systems by providing the Houthi militia with Shahed-136 long-range drones that first appeared in Yemen in September 2020.<sup>(17)</sup> Similarly, Iran exported weapons to Russia, which is waging war on Ukraine, to identify the weaknesses in the West's air defense systems, which the latter had supplied Ukraine with.

In addition, Iran aims to change the regional balance of power equation. This is in the context of regional rivals, particularly Turkey and Israel, embarking on developing their capabilities in drone production. Israel occupies an advanced position among drone producers. Until 2014, Israel continued to stand as the world's main drone exporter, having a 61% share in global drone exports.<sup>(18)</sup> Turkey's swift



emergence as a leading drone manufacturer has been quite remarkable. This was achieved when Baykar Technologies Company launched its drone program in 2015 and achieved a series of breakthroughs in terms of developing Turkey's Bayraktar drone. Turkey has exported drones to nearly 16 nations, including Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Morocco, Tunisia, Qatar and Turkmenistan.<sup>(19)</sup> Other regional powers such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have embarked on developing their own capabilities,<sup>(20)</sup> which in turn has made the Iranians more adamant about further developing their drone program to ensure that the regional balance of power equation remains unchanged.

Finally, Iran aims to increase its military sales to friendly countries. This is to boost Tehran's capabilities in confronting common enemies and to gain revenues to support the national budget, which is affected by sanctions, with hard currency. Since Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi took office in August 2021, Tehran has pushed to export its drones to new buyers other than to its traditional regional partners and proxies. Tehran's establishment of a plant in Tajikistan points to its interest in increasing its military exports to Tajikistan and other countries. Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Mohammad Bagheri stated at the manufacturing plant's opening ceremony in Tajikistan, "We are in a position that, in addition to meeting our domestic needs, enables us to export military equipment to allied and friendly countries to help enhance security and sustainable peace."<sup>(21)</sup>

### **Geopolitical Motives**

One of the objectives of Iran's drone program is propaganda and deterrence. The drone program plays a propaganda role for the Iranian government, assisting it in polishing its image and prestige as well as strengthening its nationalist rhetoric. In this context, we can shed light on the message that Tehran wanted to deliver by conducting drone drills on August 24, 2022, in the Arabian Gulf and the Sea of Oman.<sup>(22)</sup> By conducting the drills at this time, Iran aimed to deflect attention from the growing protests at home. Through these drills, Iran also sent messages to regional rivals that it is capable of displaying its strength throughout the region, using the most sophisticated military technology — even under the international sanctions imposed on it as well as the arms embargo.<sup>(23)</sup>

Iran aims to instrumentalize its drone program geopolitically to boost its clout in the Middle East by providing its aligned proxies with the technical expertise to manufacture drones and training on their use. The same applies to supplying its drones to friendly countries such as Venezuela through which Iran seeks to expand its clout in Latin America.<sup>(24)</sup> According to observers, Iran uses drones as a lever against regional adversaries, particularly Saudi Arabia, by expanding Houthi drone attacks on its oil sites.<sup>(25)</sup> Iran also employs drones to exert pressure and possess bargaining points against the United States and Europe that it can use at the negotiating table in the context of its nuclear program. In addition, crowding out the Turkish, Israeli and Arab presence in strategic hotspots: Iran's building of a drone manufacturing plant in Tajikistan points to an Iranian interest in countering the Turkish and Israeli pres-

ence in Central Asia. Several reports and studies have pointed to the role of Turkish drones in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War which broke out between Azerbaijan and Armenia on September 27, 2020, not to mention Israel's role. According to reports, Israel supplies Azerbaijan with 70% of its drones.<sup>(26)</sup> Furthermore, establishing a drone manufacturing plant in Tajikistan enables Iran to counter Saudi clout since growing relations between Riyadh and Dushanbe caused tensions between Tehran and Dushanbe during Rouhani's tenure. On May 30, 2022, over two weeks after the plant's launch, President Raisi met with his Tajik counterpart in Tehran to discuss strengthening cooperation in several areas.<sup>(27)</sup>

### **Major Hotbeds of Iranian Drone Deployment**

Tehran deploys drones to various hotbeds to achieve its foreign policy objectives, particularly to boost its strategic clout and presence. In this context, we can shed light on the following case studies.

#### **Drones in the Maghreb**

It is one of the most significant regions where Iran seeks to enhance its cultural, religious, political and military clout and presence. However, Iran has faced stiff competition from Israel and the Gulf states, which have succeeded in strengthening ties with Morocco; a country that stands as a stumbling block to Iran's policies in the region. This comes particularly after Morocco severed diplomatic ties with Iran in 2015, signed — along with the UAE, Bahrain and other countries — the Abraham Accords and joined the Negev Forum which comprises the signatories to the accord. As a result, Tehran has taken advantage of the growing tensions between Algeria and Morocco and the Gulf states, boosting its ties with Algeria and the Polisario Front, especially given Algeria's interest in maintaining the balance of power equation in the face of Morocco, which is exponentially building up its military arsenal after strengthening political and military ties with Israel and the United States. The military cooperation between Rabat and Tel Aviv has increased, enabling the former to obtain the most sophisticated weapons from Israel, including drones.<sup>(28)</sup> This could lead to Algerian-Iranian military cooperation that encompasses the manufacturing of drones and their usage.

#### **Drones in the Horn of Africa**

Iran is seeking to boost its footprint and clout in the region due to its location close to the Red Sea's entrance and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Thus, Iran decided to take advantage of the dispute between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray Front before a peace deal was reached last November. This was against the backdrop of tensions between the United States and Ethiopia over the Tigray War, which created a good opportunity for Iran to seek overtures with Addis Ababa, supplying it with drones. By doing so, Iran aimed to support the Ethiopian policy which pushed back against US pressures during the Tigray War and prevent the Tigray Front from winning on the battlefield and securing a political triumph that would have enhanced Washington's political gains, thus advancing its clout in Ethiopia.

Meanwhile, Iranian interests converge with those of China and Russia in Ethiopia. China and Russia have continued their political and military support for Addis Ababa in the face of US pressures, which also provided Iran room for maneuver in the region. However, Iranian policies and moves in the region continue to face the growing clout of the Gulf states and the return of relative calm in US-Ethiopian relations after the conclusion of the peace deal between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray Front.

### **Drones in Central Asia**

It is one of the strategically important regions where Iran wants to expand its presence, especially following the Taliban's ascent to power in Afghanistan and the presence of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel in the region. Ankara helped Azerbaijan by supplying it with drones in its war against Armenia, while Israel also delivered drones to Azerbaijan and other countries in the region. Thus, several observers indicate that Iran's building of the drone manufacturing plant in Tajikistan enables it to achieve several objectives, mostly creating a haven shielding it from Israeli military strikes which could target its drone manufacturing plants in Tehran. Others believe that Iran's establishment of a drone manufacturing plant in Tajikistan was achieved as a result of Iran capitalizing on Russia's preoccupation in Ukraine. Moscow enjoys extensive clout, possesses military bases in several of the region's countries and works to protect its clout in the region against infiltration attempts by the United States and the West. However, it did not mind or object to Tehran building the manufacturing plant, not to mention the understandings between the two countries in relation to Western policies. Russia's acceptance of the Iranian drone manufacturing plant in Tajikistan comes in the context of Russia-West tensions following Moscow's military intervention in Ukraine in February 2022. Tehran, meanwhile, in the context of its shift eastwards, views Russia as one of the main global poles, along with China.<sup>(29)</sup>

On the other side, Iranian infiltration into the region could allow Tehran to engage in a compromise with Moscow as well as lend it space for political maneuvering in the context of its tensions with the United States and the West. The region offers immense political, economic and strategic partnership opportunities that could ease the international isolation imposed by the West on Tehran. Since Russia is an important guardian of clout in the region, Iran could reach a compromise with it whereby it obtains a strong position in the region. At the same time, Iran could make some gains in case it manages to push forward the nuclear talks and boost chances of rapprochement with the EU (through establishing the proposed international transport route, also known as the Black Sea Corridor, which starts from the Arabian Gulf and southern Iran and heads north to the Black Sea). The Turkish presence in the region, meanwhile, pushes Iran and Russia toward further cooperation, particularly if Turkey decides to realign its policies with Western objectives in a way that pushes Russia to support Iran-Tajik cooperation to counter Turkish policies in the region.<sup>(30)</sup>

## **Drones in the Russia-Ukraine War**

Several reports confirmed Tehran's involvement in exporting drones to Russia for its military operations in Ukraine. Though Iran dismisses such reports, it appears there is Iranian interest in boosting ties with Russia, particularly at this time. Both aim to prevent the United States and its allies from achieving a military and political triumph in the war. It is also apparent that Tehran benefits from the continuation of this war since it means Russia's ongoing support at a time when it needs its political support at the UN Security Council in the face of Western pressures. As a result, Tehran's delivery of drones to Moscow during the Russia-Ukraine war aided in strengthening relations with Moscow in the face of Washington while at the same time countering Turkish clout, particularly after Ankara started exporting Bayraktar drones to Ukraine. However, Israel's involvement in the war adds further challenges to Iranian policy. Washington may increase its support to Israel and persuade it to provide the Iron Dome to Ukraine. The extension of Israel's involvement in this war appears to be subject to its calculations, the most important of which is its relationship with Moscow and developments in the Syrian arena. Ukraine is depending on Tel Aviv as the former has accused the latter of inaction or even attempting to support Russia, as Israel relies on Russia in the Syrian arena, which is of priority for Tel Aviv compared to Ukraine. Yet, it is not in the interest of Israel to sacrifice its interests in Ukraine either.<sup>(31)</sup>

## **The Challenges Facing the Iranian Drone Program**

The Iranian drone program is facing several challenges, particularly US sanctions and Israeli military strikes. These challenges will be discussed below:

### **Israeli Military Strikes**

On January 28, 2023, Iran was subjected to a series of bombings that targeted sensitive military installations in Isfahan, 350 kilometers away from the capital Tehran. One of the struck facilities was the Tohid defense industry facility for the manufacture of weapons and ammunition and a laboratory for energy and material at a research center affiliated with the Iranian Ministry of Defense. The second attack targeted a facility for manufacturing and storing Iranian drones. The third is believed to have targeted nuclear sites. The bombings were carried out using drones allegedly launched by Israel. The Iranian Ministry of Defense claimed it intercepted one of the three drones. Observers said Israel wanted to send a message to Iran that its drone industry is now within the range of Israeli fire. The right-wing Netanyahu government wants to curb Iran and its growing drone program.<sup>(32)</sup>

### **US Sanctions**

On February 3, 2023, the US State Department sanctioned eight Iranian citizens who occupy key positions at Paravar Pars, an Iranian facility that manufactures

drones for the IRGC Aerospace Force. This is in addition to individuals and entities linked to Iran's drone industry program on November 15, 2022, December 8, 2022 and January 6, 2022. The Iranian Foreign Ministry considered Iran's supply of drones to Russia as valuable in extending Russia's military operations in Ukraine. In doing so, Iran also violated UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which prevents it from supplying military drones to Russia.<sup>(33)</sup>

However, some experts still question the effectiveness of US sanctions as a tool to thwart Iran from developing its drone capabilities. Despite US sanctions on entities such as the Quds Aviation Industry Company, Iran Aircraft Manufacturing Industries (HESA), Fajr Aviation & Composites Industry and Iran Helicopter and Renewal Industries, the Iranian aviation sector and drone industry continue to expand, with Iran passing drone designs, components and training to its partners and proxies in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen as well as to other countries, particularly after the UN arms embargo imposed on the country expired in October 2020. Thus, it is unlikely that more export controls and pressure on Iranian entities will lead to significantly curbing Iran's access to parts, technology and disrupt its well-established supply chain. However, the United States could punish those companies that sell dual or multi-use technology to Iran. Additionally, Iran takes advantage of Iranians working at foreign universities to spy and pass information about sophisticated technologies.<sup>(34)</sup>

### **Technical and Financial Challenges**

According to certain studies, Iran's capabilities remain limited, preventing it from producing versions that are completely comparable to the original model. So far, no evidence has emerged indicating that Iran has obtained radar evasion technology. The Iranian drone program requires a large expenditure to obtain this technology at a time when the United States and China allocate military budgets that are much more significant than Iran's military budget. So far, there is no indication that Iran is attempting to obtain or replicate radar evasion technology from countries that already possess it.<sup>(35)</sup> Some political analysts believe that Russia's use of Iranian drones in its war on Ukraine has exposed flaws in the Iranian drone program, such as the loud sounds that the drones emit when moving, which makes them easier to track. In addition, sophisticated air defense systems are capable of tracking Iranian drones and downing them. These systems include the Israeli Iron Dome, Barrack 8, and the effective jamming system against Shahed-136 drones which depend on GPS technology, given Israel's expertise in countering the violations of its airspace by Iranian drones.<sup>(36)</sup>

### **The Consequences of the Iranian Drone Program on Regional Security and Stability**

Despite the challenges facing the Iranian drone program, Tehran continues to develop its capabilities. Therefore, it is expected that Iran's drone development strategy will have implications for regional and global security. The implications include the following:

## **Fueling a Drone Race in the Middle East**

Iran's launching of a military satellite is expected to enhance its capabilities, hence impacting drone development programs in the region. Iran will achieve independence via its satellite and a wider geographical range for its drones, addressing the logistical weaknesses it suffers from. This will make Iran a major actor in the drone industry in the region. Other countries, however, will not stand idly by for a long time. Riyadh, for example, is modernizing its drone fleet, including the Saqr drone, which can operate completely out of sight thanks to a satellite-linked system.<sup>(37)</sup> Abu Dhabi, meanwhile, seeks to enhance its drone industry via the Yabhon drone class.<sup>(38)</sup>

## **Fanning Regional Disputes**

This is because Iran, Israel and Turkey are engaged in competition with one another in vital spheres and each back respective regional allies. Three countries out of five in Central Asia — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan — have obtained Turkish drones. Uzbekistan also announced that it has started producing drones. It is expected that Tehran's establishment of a manufacturing plant in Tajikistan will fuel the Tajikistan- Kyrgyzstan dispute. It is likely that the aforementioned factors pushed Tajikistan to welcome Iran's decision to build a drone manufacturing plant in the country since it will allow it to expand its military capabilities and defend its interests in case of any potential attack.<sup>(39)</sup> This is in addition to the Turkish role in fueling the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with the latter acquiring the Turkish Bayraktar drones to deploy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.<sup>(40)</sup>

## **Expanding Proxy Wars**

This is in the context of Tehran embarking on providing its aligned proxy actors with drones such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthis. According to reports, the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Houthis have obtained ISR equipment comparable to that used by other governments in the region. Meanwhile, other reports indicate that Hezbollah has a fleet of over 200 unmanned aerial vehicles, including Iranian-made drones like the Ababil-2 and Mohajer-4, which were used in a number of locations in Syria to support Hezbollah's military operations. The Houthis, for their part, have used the Qasef-2K drone, an upgraded version of Ababil to launch attacks against civilian and economic facilities and targets. Therefore, it is expected that the proxy wars in the region will escalate due to the low cost of these drones and their easy deployment.<sup>(41)</sup>

## **Growing Drone Warfare Between Iran and Israel**

Iran's ongoing development of its drone program has added to the "shadow war" between Tehran and Tel Aviv. Former Mossad Chief Amos Yadlin spoke of the threat posed to Israel by Iran-aligned militias in Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon. He indicated that the "shadow war" between Israel and Iran is evident on all fronts: at sea, in the air, in virtual space and sometimes on the ground. This war, however,

remains limited to a specific scope. Though both parties deal blows to each other, they do not claim responsibility.<sup>(42)</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Iran instrumentalizes its drone program to further its military objectives, particularly enhancing its capabilities in the field of monitoring and reconnaissance and achieving strategic deterrence with rivals in the region. More importantly, Iran has employed the program to achieve foreign policy objectives, particularly disseminating political propaganda for the Iranian government and reasserting its political prestige in the external arena. Iran also uses the program to end the isolation imposed on it, gain new friends and allies, entrench its political clout in strategic spheres and compete head-to-head with rivals like Israel, Turkey and the Gulf states.

Iranian drones have proved effective in enhancing Iran's presence and clout in strategic regions, particularly in Central Asia and the Maghreb. However, Iranian drones have failed to achieve any strategic accomplishment when tested on several battlefields and war theaters. Their role remains confined to a subversive one that focuses on disrupting or destroying economic and oil sites.

Several obstacles stand in the way of Iran's ability to develop its drone program, most notably Israeli strikes and US sanctions targeting Iranian individuals and entities linked to the program. However, Iran is expected to continue developing its capabilities in this field, especially given the escalating regional and global drone armament race. This is in addition to the rising proxy wars between Iran and regional rivals, as well as the region's escalating "shadow war" between Israel and Iran.

## Endnotes

- (1) Grant J. Cassingham, "Remotely Effective: Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, The Information Revolution in Military Affairs, and The Rise of the Drone in Southeast Asia," Master's thesis, (Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School, September 2016), 55- 57.
- (2) Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's Game of Drones," *The Washington Institute Near East Policy*, March 2, 2023, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3N1N3Vc>.
- (3) *The Iranian Drone Threat* (USA: United Against Nuclear Iran, April 2021), 4.
- (4) Nadimi, "Iran's Game of Drones."
- (5) Cassingham, "Remotely Effective: Unmanned Aerial Vehicles," 55- 57
- (6) "The Rise of Iran's Drone and Ballistic Missile Industry," *bne IntelliNews*, October 24, 2022, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3WNNMrG4>.
- (7) Majid Rafizadeh, "The Growing Threat of Iran Regime's Drone Industry," *Arab News*, February 16, 2023, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://arab.news/5ms2m>.
- (8) "Iran Watch: Has Iran Become the Master of Its Drone Destiny?" *Iran Watch*, October 12, 2022, accessed April 1, 2023.
- (9) Nadimi, "Iran's Game of Drones."
- (10) Federico Borsari, "The Middle East's Game of Drones: The Race to Lethal UAVs and Its Implications for The Region's Security Landscape," *Ispi Analysis* 15 ,( 2021): 7
- (11) Amer Ababakr, "The Iranian Drones and the Battlefield of West Europe?" *Modern Diplomacy*, October 29, 2022, accessed April 1, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3oC2XvZ>.
- (12) Katherine Zimmerman, "The Dangers of Iran's Drones in Ukraine," October 30, 2022, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3WWxqSt>.
- (13) *bne Intelli News*, op.cit.
- (14) Rafizadeh, , "The Growing Threat of Iran Regime's Drone Industry."
- (15) Borsari, "The Middle East's Game of Drones,"15.
- (16) Fuad Shahbazov, "Iran's "Game of Drones" in the Middle East," *Gulf International Forum*, June 15, 2022, accessed April 1, 2022, <https://bit.ly/42jRcIq>.
- (17) Zimmerman, "The Dangers of Iran's Drones in Ukraine."
- (18) Borsari, 16.
- (19) Ahmed bin Dhaifallah al-Qarni: "Drones in the Ukrainian War: Will They Be an Effective Weapon in Future Wars?" *International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah)*, August 30, 2022, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/?p=10546>.
- (20) Borsari, 16.
- (21) "Iran Inaugurates the 'Ababil 2' Drone Manufacturing Plant in Tajikistan," May 17, 2022, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3C5R1FS>.
- (22) Borsari, 17.
- (23) United Against Nuclear Iran, 4.
- (24) Mohammad Hashemi, "Iran's Drone Diplomacy: Enhancing Tehran's Regional Competitiveness," July 10, 2022, accessed April 1, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3WFC7Q6>.
- (25) Ibid.
- (26) Hulik Kinik and Sinim Celik, "The Role of Turkish Drones in the Military Effectiveness of Azerbaijan," *Turkish Vision*, (Winter 2022): 119-126.
- (27) Eric Lob, "Iran's Drone Factory in Tajikistan," *MEI*, June 3, 2022,
- (28) Borsari, 17.
- (29) Agha Hussain, "Iran's Drone Factory in Tajikistan: A Boon for Russia or a Challenge?" *Manara Magazine*, June 27, 2022, <https://bit.ly/43zrf8U>.
- (30) Ibid.
- (31) Ahmed Aliba, "Ukraine: A New Arena for Competition Between Iran and Israel," *Strategic Assessments*, (Cairo: al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, October 2022), 3.
- (32) "A Strike Into Iran's Depth: Dimensions of the Drone Attacks on Iran," *The International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah)*, January 1, 2023, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/?p=11034>.
- (33) Antony J. Blinken, "US Sanctions Leadership of Iranian UAV Manufacturer," February 3, 2023, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3C3s3XL>.
- (34) Eric Lob and Edward Riehle, "The Difficulty of Disrupting Iranian Drones," *The National Interest*, January 14, 2023, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3N4mQoY>.
- (35) Diaa Kaddour, "Iranian Drones: Capabilities and Weaknesses," *Aramme*, May 1, 2022, , accessed April 1, 2023, <http://bit.ly/40LwtNh>. [Arabic].
- (36) Aliba, 3.



(37) Borsari, 17

(38) Ibid.

(39) Elisabeth Gosselin-Malo, "Drone Race in Central Asia in the Wake of the Taliban Takeover," Trends Research and Advisory, August 14, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3N4rHq7>.

(40) Borsari, 17.

(41) Ibid.

(42) Kirsten Kneipp, "Will the Shadow War Between Israel and Iran Become Overt One?" DW, August 6, 2021, accessed April 1, 2023, <http://bit.ly/3zkSsim>.

# **GEOPOLITICAL FACTORS AND IMPACT OF BRI ON IRAN-CHINA RELATIONS**

**Dr. Mohamad Zreik**

---

Researcher on international relations

## **Introduction**

Despite of the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and its re-imposition of economic sanctions on Iran, Chinese firms have been still able to operate normally since then. The Chinese government has not given up on Iran rather it has sought to improve its relations with Tehran. The study argues that there are several reasons that have triggered economic relations between the two countries, namely: China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); for China the road enables it to connect with Europe and Africa through using Iran as a vital land corridor, as for the latter the road is vital because it grants it a node on the most significant international trade route. The study also forecasts scenarios of BRI's role in shaping the future of international relations, including the possible increase of cooperation or competition between China and Iran.

## **Iran's Pivotal Position in China's BRI**

The BRI relies on Iran's location and its geostrategic status as it enjoys a vital location connecting the continents of the ancient world: Asia, Europe and Africa. Iran has a particular geographical advantage over other countries since it has access to both maritime and land routes. Further, Iran is situated in the Middle East, a region rife with continuous conflicts and complex alliances. Iran's strategic location in the region East has drawn global attention, making it a vital component in regional affairs. Further, Iran is ranked amongst the top oil producers. It relies on oil as a source of basic revenue, contributing to 17 percent of Iranian GDP in 2018 and 30 percent of the Iranian government's fiscal budget for the Iranian year 2019-2020 depended on oil sales, so no doubt international powers, most prominently, China and the United States are interested in this vital resource. Iran is pivotal for the stability of a region where great powers' interests are constantly conflicting ; this region has roughly 63 per cent of the world's oil and 40 per cent of its gas reserves. <sup>(1)</sup>

According to Mackinder's "heartland" theory, Iran's location in the heartland makes it an attractive target for a developing state wanting access to and control over marginal territories. China is considered as a rising power; it is situated on East South of Asia and is both on the periphery and in the heartland. According to Mackinder's theory, landmass has defended the heartland of China and Iran from maritime attacks.

Iran is considered as a "land power" and as part of the heartland that borders marginal lands in Mackinder's geopolitical paradigm. The BRI allows China to achieve authority over marginal areas and the heartland. According to Mackinder's theory, this is critical in the quest for global supremacy and the BRI can connect parts of the heartland or its entirety to the periphery, with China as the focal point. <sup>(2)</sup>

The Middle East is vital to China's BRI; one of the most prominent contributions of Beijing to the region. Iran's strategic location in the region allows it to connect to Europe and other countries in the region by land and sea. The BRI represents a cooperation and partnership framework to establish an economic transcontinental belt that benefit all concerned states, based on the initiative's five principles: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. Security cooperation is just briefly referenced.

In October 2019, China and Iran signed a BRI agricultural cooperation memorandum. Due to the coronavirus outbreak, many BRI efforts were temporarily halted. Despite US sanctions and the health pandemic, China continues to push forward its relationship with Iran. The China National Nuclear Corporation is redesigning the Iranian Arak heavy-water nuclear reactor, while the China Railway Engineering Corporation is building a high-speed railway connecting Tehran, Qom, and Isfahan. <sup>(3)</sup> China is the largest investor in Iranian transportation projects such

as the high-speed railway and the electrification of the Tehran-Mashhad line. These railway projects connect Central Asia to the Middle East via the BRI.

As defined by Mackinder, a single state controlling the gateway between Western Europe and Eurasian heartland poses a great challenge to Western powers, particularly to the United States.<sup>(4)</sup> This corridor (gateway) connects the BRI to Europe via Turkey and Germany via Iran. This is why Iran is essential to the BRI and China's geopolitical ambitions in the region. Iran will have an east-west corridor from Turkmenistan and a north-south corridor up to the Gulf. The third project, signed in 2018, connects Tehran, Hamadan, and Sanandaj via a 470 km of railway. Sanandaj is one of the few Iranian provincial capitals without a train link. Sinomach estimates the project costs \$836.9 million.<sup>(5)</sup> In April 2018, the China Petroleum and Chemical Industry Federation signed an agreement to build a petrochemical park near Chabahar in Iran.

### **Benefits for China and Iran**

BRI benefits both China and Iran in terms of regional geopolitics. BRI can help stabilize Iran's periphery and reduce poverty, opening up new markets in neighbouring countries and lessening conflict risks.<sup>(6)</sup> Iran's Parliament Research Center published a report on how to make Iran an aviation center. China may use this project to increase investment in Iran, develop airports, or sell jets. According to the report, the country's air fleet must be updated to compete. After the state-owned Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China completes the single-lane passenger aircraft C919, China may be able to conquer the Iranian market through BRI.<sup>(7)</sup>

Before his official visit in 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping penned an article in an Iranian newspaper highlighting the ancient and modern cultural ties between China and Iran, citing Saadi, a prominent Iranian poet. It also highlighted the JCPOA's potential to strengthen China-Iran ties and Iran's strategic location for BRI.<sup>(8)</sup> Thus, maintaining the JCPOA is in China's geopolitical interest. China counts on Iran's promise not to build nukes. On December 31, 2019, Chinese diplomat Wang Yi and the former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif discussed the JCPOA and the relationship between the two countries.<sup>(9)</sup> China backed Iran and has condemned the United States' pull-out from the JCPOA and its maximum pressure policy against Iran.

After their second meeting on February 14, 2020 in Munich, Wang Yi said Zarif's "sympathy for China's people amid the recent coronavirus outbreak speaks volumes about the peoples of China and Iran's longstanding friendship."<sup>(10)</sup> Regular meetings between China and Iran illustrate their closeness. China, a signatory to the JCPOA, is an important Iranian ally.

To maintain the BRI and its connectivity to Eastern Europe, energy supplies, and new markets, China's geopolitical goals may require it to play a security role in the Middle East. From December 2019 to January 2020, Russia, China, and Iran conducted joint naval exercises. Saudi Arabia and China also conducted naval

exercises. In 2017, China's Minister of Defense Chang Wanquan indicated that his country was willing to work with Iran and strengthen military ties.<sup>(11)</sup> By integrating the countries through the BRI, China may extend its influence into the hinterlands and heartland of the Gulf, which is vital to its oil security. China has become the world's fastest rising energy consumer in recent decades. Thus, energy security is a key component of the country's foreign policy.

## **Iran's and China's Energy Security in Light of the BRI**

### **The Significance of Energy Sector in China's and Iran's Policies**

Concerns about energy security evolved when China became a net oil importer in 1993.<sup>(12)</sup> Previously, China could provide its local market with enough petroleum. Chinese energy demand has escalated since then. Iran has turned to be a major crude oil supplier to China since 2006.<sup>(13)</sup> In 2017, China accounted for 31% of Iran's exports and 37% of its imports, making Beijing its top trading partner. Iran receives 0.76% of China's exports and constitutes 1.11% of its imports.<sup>(14)</sup> Minerals constitute nearly 77% of Iranian exports to China. In 2020, China purchased 7.5% of its crude oil from Iran, the world's fourth largest exporter. However, China's oil suppliers have shifted. Iran's share of China's crude oil imports declined from 7.5% in 2017 to 3.5% in 2019.<sup>(15)</sup> This drops Iran from the top five crude oil exporters to ninth. China-Iran trade declined by a third in 2019; despite a 31% drop in Iranian exports, China remains Iran's largest trading partner.<sup>(16)</sup> As financial and trade interactions have been able to operate by circumventing sanctions, it is difficult to infer the exact trade volume between the two countries. However, definitely, Iran's oil exports have increased since the beginning of 2023—It reportedly reached its previous export rate before the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal. One need also to take into account that Russia's oil exports to China following the Western sanctions have also impacted Iran's share.

### **Impact of US Sanctions on Cooperation on Energy**

US sanctions on Iran reduced Chinese crude oil imports. The United States employs sanctions as a geo-economic tool to punish Iran. In 2019 and 2020, the risk of war between the United States and Iran increased. A war would wreak havoc on both sides, mainly on Iran, but also throw the entire region into a vortex of instability. As the costs of war are too high, sanctions are adopted as the best option to curtail Iran.

Iran sold almost 75% of its crude oil and condensate to eight countries in 2017. Unlike other countries, China has continued to buy Iranian crude oil.<sup>(17)</sup> In September 2019, multiple Chinese companies were put on the US administration's blacklist for importing Iranian oil. China's oil imports increased after the waivers expired in 2019. After the US ended the waivers, exports fell from over 800,000 bpd to under 300,000 bpd. On average, China's crude oil imports plummeted by 81% during January and February 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.<sup>(18)</sup> As Iran's economy is primarily reliant on oil sales, the United States' goal is to completely

shut down the oil industry. China's quest energy security is an illustration of Iran's willingness to collaborate with a country that is willing to challenge the United States' influence.

The BRI focuses on oil and gas-rich regions in North Africa and the Middle East. As the United States withdraws from the Middle East, China is likely to play a larger role in regional security. Given recent events in the Strait of Hormuz, it is in China's best interest for tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia to ease. China has yet to deploy naval escort or protection in the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>(19)</sup> Iran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz in 2018, and Beijing responded by urging Iran to do more to promote regional peace and stability.

In light of Chinese companies having difficulties in accessing Western markets, Iran becomes a more attractive alternative. However, companies like France's Total left Iran after the United States re-imposed sanctions on the country. The Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Total had previously worked together on the South Pars gas field. Total sold its assets in November 2018 due to the US sanctions. Later, CNPC pulled out of the South Pars gas field transaction.<sup>(20)</sup> According to the then Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Zangeneh, PetroPars would now be exclusively responsible for developing phase 11 of South Pars.<sup>(21)</sup> Due to Iran's increasing isolation, China has a rare chance to access Iranian markets and impose its geo-economic power.

### **Promising Prospects for Energy Cooperation**

According to geo-economic theory, security is a priority for governments. Stabilizing and influencing Iran offers China the chance to ensure energy supply and create a presence in the Middle East. The region will be vital in securing the country's oil supplies for the next two decades. China's net oil trade share will rise from 14% in 2011 to 24% in 2035. However, there is a possibility that the net oil trade share might be larger, estimated at a higher percentage of 54% in 2035, because of rising car ownership. Against the backdrop of US sanctions on Iran and neighbouring conflicts, China's geo-economic policy is to diversify its oil imports.<sup>(22)</sup>

In 2007, the Chinese State Council released "China's Energy Conditions and Policies," which outlined China's intentions to increase local coal, gas, and oil production while lessening dependence on foreign energy sources. However, the council anticipates that the country's energy mix will always include foreign energy sources. As a result, expanding global trade and maintaining market stability are critical to China; it prefers long-term supply contracts with other countries and fostering export partner diversity. This policy encourages Chinese investment in energy infrastructure and worldwide technology and service exchanges.<sup>(23)</sup> China has pursued a geo-economic approach to diversify its oil imports and investments.

Despite reduced Iranian oil exports to China and the halting of projects, Beijing remains intrigued by Iran's geo-economic potential. The comprehensive strategic cooperation between Iran and China was updated in September 2019. China will

spend \$280 billion in Iran's petrochemical, gas, and oil industries.<sup>(24)</sup> China will invest over \$400 billion in Iran's economy over the next quarter of a century as part of a comprehensive strategic agreement. In the context of this extensive strategic engagement, Chinese businesses want to be the first to accept or reject Iranian petrochemical projects and to offer technical assistance. This is part of China's geo-economic plan to expand the presence of its companies abroad.<sup>(25)</sup>

## **China's RMB Penetration Into Iran's Economy**

### **China's Desire to Internationalize RMB**

After entering the World Trade Organization (WTO), China began overhauling its trade and financial systems. Deng Xiaoping's reign was China's first step toward global financial integration under his reform and opening-up policy. Financial institutions helped in the Chinese currency's (RMB) internationalization, and China's foreign direct investment (FDI) rules relaxed. Adding the RMB to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) basket of Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) on October 1st 2016 boosted China's aim to internationalize its currency. Several reasons have aided the RMB's internationalization. Between 2016 and 2017, the number of overseas transactions decreased significantly. The slowing in China's economy and soaring capital outflows were the main culprits. Despite this, trade invoices reached USD 1.1 billion in 2015, a significant increase from zero in 2009. Expats owning RMB peaked in 2014, dropped, and resurfaced in 2017. They have grown fivefold since 2011.<sup>(26)</sup>

In terms of global payments, the RMB was the fifth most used currency in March 2020. Its value as a currency grew from 1.85% in March 2018 to 2.40% in March 2020.<sup>(27)</sup> The RMB is not yet powerful enough to threaten the USD. Despite the RMB's lack of international currency power, China's economic rise has given it political and economic weight.

Through more of its trading partners using its currency, China is seeking to reduce exchange rate risks and transactional costs. Despite China's enormous economy and volume of international trade, the RMB's internationalization is still sluggish. The Chinese government can promote the RMB's internationalization through oil trade, as an example. The reduction in oil sales has pushed the Iranian economy into recession. The Institute of International Finance predicts that after two years of sanctions, Iranian reserves will fall to USD 20 billion, and they might grow to USD 143 billion if the sanctions are lifted.<sup>(28)</sup>

### **Iranian Market Conducive for RMB Internationalization**

As China is encouraging the internationalization of the RMB, Iran is a potential venue for increasing its usage. For part of its crude oil supplies to China, Iran has accepted RMB since 2012. Iranian oil is priced in RMB, and other currencies which are collected through China's trade.<sup>(29)</sup> The BRI will also help in the RMB's internationalization. A good credit rating is required to issue Renminbi bonds in China. Investors in China are invited to issue bonds in both local and foreign

currencies, with proceeds going to countries included in the BRI. <sup>(30)</sup> Diffusion of RMB-denominated bonds will foster the internationalization of RMB.

The increasing use of RMB in Iran demonstrates China's growing dominance in Iran. Currency internationalization makes countries more powerful and economically stronger. The RMB is still significantly less extensively utilized than the USD, but China wants to change this.

### **Opportunities and Challenges Before Iran's Use of RMB**

In 2010, Iran's use of RMB increased, probably due to China accepting RMB for crude oil shipments. It took just four years to go from 0.1% to over 0.4% in cross-border transactions. In 2018, Iran even converted its official currency rate platform from USD to RMB. With this in mind, Iran's "look to the East" policy is visible. The USD's dominance in the global financial system hurts Iran, making the RMB an attractive option. Iran needs a currency other than the USD to escape US sanctions and sustain big oil shipments. Aside from increasing RMB usage for oil transactions, China is focusing on increasing RMB internationalization. In 2018, China introduced crude oil futures contracts denominated in RMB, a significant development for Beijing. Using RMB as a settlement currency reduces currency exchange risk for crude oil traders, notably in Asia-Pacific. According to Kamel and Wang, it will be difficult for the RMB to become a global standard for crude oil. Some of the difficulties include a loss of market credibility because of strong global rivalry among existing benchmarks, Chinese government intervention, lack of liquidity despite China's growing market share, and insufficient foreign participation. For benchmarks to work, a sound financial structure must be in place to deal with oil traders. Iran, on the other hand, adopted the RMB due to its "look to the East" policy and US sanctions. Despite this, the RMB remains a minor global currency. Not only does China allow Iran to trade crude oil in RMB but also gives political support for the JCPOA and is against US sanctions on Iran. Iran's decision to replace the USD in the Sanarate (a system that monitors foreign exchange rates, operating under the Central Bank of Iran) with RMB is likely influenced by meetings between the two countries' foreign ministers in 2019. Iran has adopted the RMB for its intrinsic worth and economic utility, indicating it is a negotiable currency. This currency may be phased away whenever Iran regains access to international financial markets. China uses the Bank of Kunlun, which is not subject to US sanctions, to promote trade with Iran. <sup>(31)</sup>

In 2017, the then Central Bank of Iran Governor Valiollah Seif attempted to establish a currency exchange agreement with Vice Chairman Chen Yuan of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in Tehran to further internationalize the RMB. Even if such an agreement exists, it is unrecorded. Iran's banks would need global access to other financial institutions. Before the JCPOA, just 35 banks could do business with Iran. <sup>(32)</sup> The US sanctions may have prevented the two countries from agreeing on a currency swap.



Chinese currency internationalization aims to weaken the USD's global reputation as an investment currency. Most investors do not consider the RMB as a safe-haven currency. Aside from lower transaction costs, seigniorage offers the issuing country the ability to create money cheaply, macroeconomic flexibility, and increased power and reputation. The RMB is still not ready to be a reserve currency. China is striving to lessen its reliance on the USD, as is Iran. International financial institutions continue to destroy the RMB's standing, despite China's growing economic and political prominence.<sup>(33)</sup> It aspires to construct a global order that reflects its growing dominance by internationalizing its currency. As a result, the USD's worldwide trade dominance is at risk. The introduction of the RMB in crude oil trade can generate a new power structure in the Middle East, hence risking US dominance and benefiting China.

## **Conclusion**

Tensions between the United States and Iran have risen since the former withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018. For now, China backs the nuclear deal. Officials from China and Iran meet frequently to discuss the nuclear issue. US sanctions still affect China-Iran relations particularly when it comes to crude oil shipments and Chinese investments in Iran. Despite this, the two countries remain close. The continued relations can be explained by Iran's strategic relevance for the BRI.

The internationalization of the RMB is related to Chinese geopolitical and economic goals. Investment in the BRI is viewed as a key part of China's geo-economic strategy to enhance its economic influence in Iran and the region while facilitating Chinese business access. China is leveraging the RMB and its internationalization to threaten not only the USD but also its regional dominance. Iran is trying to utilize the RMB as an energy currency to bypass US sanctions. The BRI can save the Iranian economy by bringing together various nations in the region through infrastructure development and commerce. A growing Chinese political and economic influence in Iran and support for the JCPOA has also helped Beijing find a partner to counterbalance the United States hegemony.

In addition to its strategic position, Iran's participation in the BRI is vital. The BRI allows China to connect its geopolitical, economic, and monetary globalization goals. Chinese influence in Eastern Europe depends on Iran joining the BRI, and Iran must provide a stable environment for trade and infrastructure development. By connecting the countries along the BRI from China to Europe, Beijing is attempting to increase its influence in the heartland and expand its international power. Hence, the RMB is likely to become more global. The use of the RMB in Iran gives China leverage, allowing it to import crude oil in RMB rather than in the USD. The RMB has also replaced the USD in Iran's official currency rating system. This swap shows the United States that China's influence in Iran is growing and its currency is becoming more valuable.

Based on the study, the following possible scenarios can be concluded; if the United States lifts or eases sanctions on Iran, China could increase its investments

in Iran under the framework of the BRI; this will increase likely trade between the two countries and potentially deepen economic ties. However, if the United States continues to impose economic sanctions on Iran, Chinese companies may remain reluctant to invest in Iran due to the risks involved; this will limit the scope for deepening China-Iran relations under the BRI. As part of its broader push to internationalize the RMB, China may encourage the use of its currency in trade with Iran, this could reduce Iran's reliance on the USD, hence creating space for greater financial independence.

## Endnotes

- (1) Shaher al-Shaher and Mohamad Zreik, "Sino-Iranian Relations: More Cooperation Despite Sanctions," *Res Militaris* 12, no. 2 (Summer-Autumn: 2022), <https://bit.ly/3VOg0Xx>.
- (2) "Iran, China sign 17 documents, MoUs," January 16, 2016, accessed November 24, 2021, *President.ir*, <http://president.ir/en/91427>.
- (3) Mohsen Shariatinia and Hamidreza Azizi, "Iran and the Belt and Road Initiative: Amid hope and fear," *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 994-984 : (2019) 120.
- (4) Torbjorn L Knutsen, "Halford J. Mackinder, Geopolitics, and the Heartland Thesis," *The International History Review* 36, no. 857-835 : (2014) 5.
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) Ibid.
- (7) Stella Qiu and Tim Hepher, "China's Bid to Challenge Boeing and Airbus Falter," *Reuters*, January 10, 2020, accessed January 29, 2023, <https://bit.ly/41qquNZ>.
- (8) Xi Jinping, "Full text of Chinese President's Signed Article on Iranian Newspaper: Work Together for a Bright Future of China-Iran Relations," MFA, January 21, 2016, accessed January 29, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3LQ5NFu>.
- (9) "Wang Yi Holds Talks with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif," MFA, December 31, 2019, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3prX1pA>.
- (10) "State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif," MFA, February 15, 2020, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3puf4vn>.
- (11) Xinhua, "China, Iran to Boost Military Cooperation," December 13, 2017, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://bit.ly/42lAvNy>.
- (12) Nima Norouzi and Maryam Fani, "The impacts of the novel corona virus on the oil and electricity demand in Iran and China," *Journal of Energy Management and Technology* 4, no. 48-36 : (2020) 4.
- (13) Robert A. Harris, Jon B. Alterman, and John W. Garver, "The Vital Triangle: China, the United States and the Middle East," *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 15 : (2010) 2, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol63/iss15/2/>.
- (14) "Where Does China Import Crude Petroleum from?" OEC, March 21, 2020, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://bit.ly/41nYryC>.
- (15) Daniel Workman, "World's Top Exports: Top 15 Crude Oil Suppliers to China," *Worldstopexports*, March 21, 2020, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3LS4ben/>
- (16) Dara Conduit and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Great Power-middle Power Dynamics: The case of China and Iran," *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 481-468 : (2019) 117, DOI:10.1080/10670564.2018.1542225.
- (17) Ibid., 5.
- (18) Dan Katz, "Despite sanctions, China Is Still Doing (Some) Business With Iran," *Atlantic Council*, October 1, 2019, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3Bcabtm>.
- (19) Jonathan Fulton, Degang Sun and Nasser al-Tamimi, "China's Great Game in the Middle East," *European Council on Foreign Relation*, October 21, 2019 accessed November 26, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3BaRRAW>.
- (20) Katz, "Despite sanctions, China Is Still Doing (Some) Business With Iran."
- (21) "Iran's Petropars Developing South Pars Gas Field after Withdrawal of Foreign Companies," *Reuters*, January 25, 2020, accessed November 27, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3VQqfjk>.
- (22) Ole Odgaard and Jørgen Delman, "China's Energy Security and Its Challenges Towards 2035," *Energy Policy* 71, (2014): 107-117.
- (23) "White Paper: China's Energy Conditions and Policies," *National Development and Reform Commission* (105-89 : (2007).
- (24) Simon Watkins, "China and Iran Flesh out Strategic Partnership," *Petroleum Economist*, September 3, 2019, accessed November 25, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3NZ3WAS>.
- (25) Areeja Syed, Adil Khan, and Muhammad Ejaz, "Sino-Iranian Comprehensive Strategic Relations: Implications for the Region," *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* 3, no. 548-537 : (2022) 2, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2022{3-II}50>.
- (26) Daya Kishan Thussu, Hugo De Burgh, and Anbin Shi, eds. *China's Media Go Global* (London: Routledge, 2018).
- (27) "RMB Tracker: Monthly Reporting and Statistics on Renminbi (RMB) Progress Towards Becoming an International Currency," SWIFT, (2020).
- (28) Yuming Cui, Lian Liu and Ke Peng, "International Competitiveness and Currency Internationalization: an Application to RMB Internationalization," *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* (24-1 : (2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13547860.2022.2031521>.

- (29) Saif ur Rehman Malik and Dost Muhammad Barrech, "China-Iran Strategic Partnership: Implications for India," *Chinese Journal of International Review* 3, no. 2021) 02), <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2630531321500086>.
- (30) Tristan Kenderdine and Peiyuan Lan, "China's Middle East investment policy," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 59, no. 584-557 :(2018) 6-5.
- (31) Maha Kamel and Hongying Wang, "Petro-RMB? The Oil Trade and the Internationalization of the Renminbi," *International Affairs* 95, no. 1148-1131 :(2019) 5.
- (32) Przemysław Osiewicz, "The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Implications for Iran-China Relations," *Przegląd Strategiczny* 8, no. 232-221 :(2018) 11.
- (33) *Ibid.*, 831.

# **A GERMAN FEMINIST RESPONSE TO THE MAHSA AMINI PROTESTS IN IRAN: BALANCING NORMATIVE AND REALIST FOREIGN POLICY**

**Nicolas Verbeek**

---

Advisor, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH  
KFIBS-Spokesperson of the IR-Theory and Foreign Policy Research Group

## **Introduction**

The German response to the crackdown on the Mahsa Amini protests by the Iranian government has been perceived by some observers as strong, while other actors have called for more robust responses. The study employs a historical analysis guided by a neoclassical realist view to examine the German response. The study looks at the systemic logic of Germany's foreign policy actions toward Iran following the protests that erupted after the death of Mahsa Amini in September 16, 2022, and at the domestic factors that shape the current German response to the protests, namely the development of a German feminist foreign policy. Furthermore, the study takes stock of the German response following the death of Mahsa Amini and discusses the scope of future German support for the Iranian protesters. The study argues that Germany's new feminist foreign policy has produced excessive expectations regarding the country's response toward Iran in disregard of *realpolitik* interests. For this reason, the German foreign policy response to the Iranian government's crackdown on protesters was widely perceived as ambiguous. The German response will continue to be based primarily on imposing limited sanctions and diplomatic condemnations, particularly if no fundamental German *realpolitik* interests in Iran are affected in the context of further escalation by the Iranian government.

## Theoretical Framework

In September 2022, nationwide protests erupted in Iran against the Iranian government. These were triggered by the death of Amini in Tehran on September 16 at the hands of Iran's morality police. Women have played a central role in the protests, with a key demand being increasing women's rights. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei dismissed the widespread unrest as "riots" and a "hybrid war" launched by foreign states and dissidents abroad. The Iranian government's violent response to the protests has been widely condemned.<sup>(1)</sup>

Some human rights activists and intellectuals in Germany and Iran have accused the German government of an insufficient response to the crackdown on Iranian protestors,<sup>(2)</sup> while overall, a relatively strong response by Germany to Iran's human rights violations compared to the past has been noticed in the international community.<sup>(3)</sup> In the same vein, previous research is at odds, either criticizing Germany's failure to pursue normative values in its interactions with Iran during the protests<sup>(4)</sup> or condemning Germany for acting too normatively and ultimately harming German economic and security interests.<sup>(5)</sup>

To provide clarification, this study uses an historical analysis to examine the factors that have influenced the German response to the Iranian government's crackdown on the Iranian protests through a theoretical lens of neoclassical realism, particularly against the backdrop of a newly developing German feminist foreign policy (FFP) since 2021. The study argues that Germany's new FFP has produced excessive expectations regarding the German response toward Iran in disregard of central realpolitik interests and limited leverage. For this reason, the German response to the Iranian government's crackdown on protestors was widely perceived as ambiguous. The German response will continue to be based primarily on limited sanctions and diplomatic condemnations if no fundamental German realpolitik interests are affected in the context of further escalation by the Iranian government. This is not fundamentally inconsistent with the German FFP.

A neoclassical realist view<sup>(6)</sup> recognizes the relative power distribution in the international system as the primary frame of reference for state foreign policy but views this distribution as influenced by intervening variables at the domestic policy level. Variables such as the perceptions of key decision makers, political interest groups, strategic culture and state institutions can significantly influence foreign policy decisions beyond the geopolitical constraints and opportunities offered by the international system. Such an analytical framework is well suited to evaluate the German response to the Iranian crackdown on the Iranian protests, as in the past it was assumed that German-Iranian relations were strongly shaped by realpolitik variables (security and economic interests), and now a significant change in relations (deterioration) can be observed without a fundamental change in those same variables. The answer for this change in German behavior then lies at the domestic level. The degree of changed behavior indicates the impact of these new variables at the domestic level vis-à-vis longstanding systemic factors (security

and economy in a classical state-centric sense). A crucial domestic variable shaping German foreign policy expectations toward Iran is the development of a German FFP since 2021.

First, the study analyzes the logic of Germany's foreign policy actions toward Iran until recently. Thereafter, the study sheds light on domestic factors that have particularly shaped the current German response to the Iranian protests, namely the development of a German FFP. Against this background, the study outlines the German response to the crackdown on Iranian protestors and discusses the scope of possible further German support for the protests.

### **The Realist Logic of German Foreign Policy Action Toward Iran**

In the past, bilateral relations between Germany and Iran were primarily shaped by economic and security interests. As part of a balancing policy, Germany pursued close economic relations with Iran, while in the context of the increasing security threat posed by Iran (for example, through its nuclear weapons program) Germany attempted to follow Washington's position and exert pressure on Iran to de-escalate. With close economic relations, especially in the technological sector, Germany became the primary European trading partner of Iran, offering opportunities for the former to profit greatly economically and sell this to the outside world as a "change through trade" policy. This policy was deeply anchored until recently in German politics, that an increase in commerce, linked to effective diplomacy, would shift states toward democratization.<sup>(7)</sup> However, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this policy seems to have failed. On the other end of the German balancing policy were attempts to exert pressure on Iran to de-escalate its increasingly aggressive behavior in the region in close cooperation with traditional Western allies like the United States. In view of Germany's relatively moderate position vis-à-vis Iran, Tehran has traditionally viewed Germany as a counterbalance to the United States (a broker between itself and the West).<sup>(8)</sup> The economic and security dimensions of German-Iranian relations until recently will be briefly explored in more detail in the following section.

#### **Economic Relations**

Germany is Iran's most important trading partner in the European Union (EU). German exports to Iran climbed 12.7% from January to November 2022 to around 1.5 billion euros. That exceeded the full-year volume for 2021 of around 1.4 billion euros in times of a rigid US-led sanctions regime against Iran. Following the US withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal (JCPOA) in May 2018, trade between Iran and Europe fell over 78% compared to 2017 in the face of primary and secondary sanctions in the context of the US maximum pressure campaign against Iran. However, in Germany, there was a positive trend in trade with Iran in 2020 (a 6% increase to over 1.8 billion euros, approximately 1 billion euros higher than Iran's average trade volume with the EU — 700 million euros). Overall, the lower trade volume compared to previous times is mainly the outcome of Iranian trade

diversification, especially given the growing role of China during the sanctions on Iran and after the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA in 2018. However, German-Iranian economic relations are relatively resilient toward many international sanctions on Iran, despite the fact that the share of raw materials (especially crude oil and gas condensate) in bilateral trade fell to zero following the Trump administration's sanctions on Iran. It is important to note that raw materials are the commodities which have experienced the strictest international sanctions. Therefore, most commodities which are traded between Germany and Iran have been relatively unaffected by the sanctions, meaning that the Iranian market has suffered comparatively little loss of importance for Germany.<sup>(9)</sup>

### Security Relations

Germany has frequently expressed its interest in making sure that Iran does not possess a nuclear bomb. Bilateral relations are shaped by this issue, affecting economic relations and creating room for regular political interactions. In July 2015, Germany was the only non-UN Security Council (UNSC) nation that signed, along with the five UNSC permanent members, the JCPOA with Iran, an agreement which effectively restricted Iran's weaponization of nuclear power. Germany, France, the UK and the EU continued to stand by the JCPOA, even after the withdrawal of the United States in 2018. Since April 2021, the European troika (Germany, the UK and France) has been engaged in negotiations with Russia, China, Iran and the United States on the latter's return to the JCPOA and a renewed commitment by Iran to fulfil its obligations under the agreement.<sup>(10)</sup>

However, Germany announced in late December 2022 that there were no reasons to resume talks on the JCPOA at this time for the following reasons: Iran's unwillingness to grant IAEA inspectors access to undeclared sites where uranium concentrations were detected; Iran's new maximalist demands in the nuclear talks; and the human rights situation in Iran after the Iranian government's harsh crackdown on Iranian protestors.<sup>(11)</sup>

After the JCPOA in 2015, Germany has inclined toward balancing between Iran and Saudi Arabia, to preserve regional stability. With a renewed focus by Germany and the EU on energy and security policies in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, Iranian support for Russia in the war and increasing Iranian human rights violations, the political potential is building up for closer German and EU cooperation with the Gulf states,<sup>(12)</sup> which has so far been hamstrung mainly by Berlin's lack of interest in Iran's regional destabilizing activities and its consequent recent omission of support for countries such as Saudi Arabia in the arms industry.<sup>(13)</sup>

Economic and security factors shaped Germany's relationship with Iran in the last years, and until recently, relations were relatively unaffected by Iran's human rights record. However, human rights have become increasingly important for Germany, at least since 2021, which is attributable to an emerging domestic demand for a human rights-oriented foreign policy approach, culminating in the recently



published official guidelines for a German FFP. The substance of the new German FFP will be further discussed in the next section.<sup>(14)</sup>

### **The Domestic Logic of Germany's Foreign Policy Approach Toward Iran**

The influence of various actors over domestic decision-making has shaped the German response to the Iranian protests over time, enabling a more powerful German critique of Iran. This can be explained as follows:

#### **A Human Rights-oriented Government**

The SPD party of the current German Chancellor Olaf Scholz sees itself as a party of peace that focuses on diplomacy and dialogue, civil crisis prevention and peacebuilding as well as multilateral action. Scholz has so far tended to appear reactive in terms of foreign policy. The Green Party of Germany, which is part of the German government, is committed to an active and European foreign policy for peace, human rights and climate protection, and advocates for the FFP under the strong guidance of Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock. This commitment resulted in the German government stipulating in the coalition agreement of November 2021, "Together with our partners, we want to strengthen the rights, resources and representation of women and girls worldwide and promote social diversity in the sense of a feminist foreign policy."<sup>(15)</sup> Germany's FFP is a human rights-based approach that focuses on human security and pays particular attention to gender issues. The protection of women, girls and marginalized groups i.e., intersectionality, (a type of feminism which focuses on understanding how a person's various social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination), among others, in armed conflicts, their equal participation in peace processes and consideration in budgeting are important elements of the FFP. The ambitious implementation of UN Resolution 1325 (Women, Peace and Security) is the first guideline Germany has set for itself in its new FFP, which means integrating the perspectives of women and marginalized groups into the global work for peace and security. Germany has been a strong supporter of Resolution 1325 since its adoption in 2000.<sup>(16)</sup> In government circles, there is talk of a "3R+D" approach, the aim of which is to promote the rights, representation and resources of women and marginalized groups as well as to enhance diversity.<sup>(17)</sup> This approach was first introduced in the context of a Swedish FFP and seeks, from an intersectional and postcolonial perspective, to (1) create equal rights and equal participation in social, economic and political processes for women and marginalized groups, (2) adequately resource the FFP and provide women and marginalized groups with equal access to resources ranging from financial, human and natural resources to intangible resources such as education and networks.

Overall, a German FFP encompasses 10 guidelines that focus on vocal and networked action for equal rights, representation and access to resources for women. Furthermore, gender equality, diversity and inclusion in German society

and the foreign service need to be strengthened. This new policy approach with a focus on human security that also incorporates socioeconomic dimensions fits well with Germany's strategic culture of military restraint and focus on civil conflict management that has been anchored in the country's political landscape since the end of World War II.

### **A Vocal Civil Society**

Civil society is pushing the German response toward Iran. On October 22, 2022, a demonstration took place in Berlin with about 80,000 participants from all over Europe. In other German cities such as Hamburg and Stuttgart, larger protests against the Iranian government and expressing solidarity with the Iranian protesters occurred throughout the period of October 2022 to January 2023.<sup>(18)</sup> The Iranian diaspora in Germany (about 100,000 people) and the EU has also acted as an important voice in demanding stricter German measures against the Iranian government. For example, on January 16, 2023, the Iranian diaspora urged the EU to list the IRGC as a terrorist organization at a solidarity rally in Strasbourg.<sup>(19)</sup>

Many have considered Germany's response to the protests and human rights violations in Iran to be insufficient and to not adhere to the high standards of an actual FFP. Civil society actors have demanded a complete political-economic isolation of the Iranian government. Their key demands include the following:

- Designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization
- Declaration of Iran as a terrorist state
- No more negotiations with the Iranian government
- Freezing of diplomatic relations with Iran
- Expulsion of the Iranian ambassador to Germany
- Closure of the Iranian embassy in Berlin
- Extensive and harsher sanctions against all key members of the Iranian government and its pillars.

Given the maximalist demands by many civil society actors, German support for the Iranian protest movement as laid out in the next section has overall fallen short of civil society expectations.

### **Germany's Response to Escalating Violence Against Iranian Protestors**

A combination of different Iranian actions is driving Germany's positioning vis-à-vis Iran: (1) Iran is suppressing the will of Iranian protesters who want freedom; (2) Iran is helping Russia [in its war against Ukraine]; and (3) Iran has refused to cooperate with the IAEA. The main driver currently, however, is the dire human rights record of the Iranian government and its crackdown on the protest movement.

#### *Diplomatic Gestures*

Baerbock and Scholz have continuously condemned the Iranian government for its crackdown on protesters and executions in the media as well as in bilateral meetings with Iranian officials. Particularly well known in Germany is the

chancellor's perspective which was made clear in a government podcast addressed to Iran's leaders in November 2022 in which he said, "What kind of government are you that shoots at its own people?"<sup>(20)</sup> On November 3 2022, Germany issued a travel warning to Iran, saying there was a real risk of German citizens being arbitrarily arrested and sentenced to long prison terms. In late November, on the initiative of Germany and Iceland, it was decided by a simple majority of 25 of the 47 member states of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) that it would investigate the actions of Iranian security apparatuses against protesters. Iran was also excluded from the UN Commission on the Status of Women after a vote.<sup>(21)</sup>

In late December 2022, German Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Christofer Burger told media representatives that Germany sees no reason to revive the stalled nuclear talks given the dire human rights situation in Iran.<sup>(22)</sup> In early January, Germany and other Western countries (France and Norway) summoned their respective Iranian ambassadors to issue a strong objection to the execution of Iranian protestors. In a subsequent interview with reporters, Baerbock emphasized that executions will not remain without consequence and that the EU must remain united and not close its eyes to human rights violations in Iran.<sup>(23)</sup> The invitation of Iranian opposition figures to the Munich Security Conference (MSC) in mid-February 2023 and the exclusion of Iranian government officials sent a strong message to Tehran and reflected Berlin's solidarity with the Iranian protest movement.<sup>(24)</sup> While diplomatic gestures have been accompanied by several German and EU sanctions packages, the German government has still been repeatedly accused of reacting too late to the protests and of failing to find a response to the unprecedented events unfolding in Iran.

### **German and EU Sanctions Against Iran**

The European states until now have not proposed a sanctions response that could embolden Iranian protestors. In mid-October 2022, the EU imposed its first sanctions package on Iran's morality police and more than a dozen other individuals and entities, including members of the Basij because of human rights violations. The following month, the EU reimposed sanctions on 31 individuals and entities in Iran, including members of the IRGC. After Iran executed the second arrested protester in December 2022, the EU imposed a third sanctions package against several individuals in the IRGC.<sup>(25)</sup> On December 23, 2022, Germany's government suspended measures designed to foster business with Iran due to the suppression of nationwide protests in the country. The suspension affects export credits and investment guarantees as well as Germany's management training and trade fair programs in Iran that opened in 2016 after the JCPOA but have remained dormant since 2019.<sup>(26)</sup>

While the German focus is currently on increasing pressure on the Iranian government, the most recent central debate in the EU around elevating the IRGC to the bloc's terrorist list does not seem to move despite continued protests in the EU<sup>(27)</sup> and the European Parliament's majority decision in January 2023 to add the IRGC to the blacklist. The EU, along with the United States and the UK, imposed

further sanctions on 18 people and 19 entities (travel ban and freezing of funds) on January 23 2023.<sup>(28)</sup> On February 20 2023, the EU imposed even more sanctions on an additional 32 individuals and two entities responsible for human rights violations in Iran.<sup>(29)</sup> While voices in the German Parliament continue to call for designating the IRGC as a terrorist organization, Berlin and EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell are hesitant to designate the organization without a court decision in one of the EU member states.<sup>(30)</sup> Yet, a court decision is still pending. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock stressed that the idea of designating the IRGC as a terrorist organization should not be ruled out, emphasizing that a court decision is not strictly necessary from a procedural point of view and that there is sufficient evidence for the organization's blacklisting.<sup>(31)</sup> In the latest round of sanctions, the European troika decided to shut down the INSTEX (Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges) financial mechanism on March 10, 2023. The European troika established INSTEX to reduce the impact of US sanctions, particularly on humanitarian goods. However, the mechanism was systematically blocked by Iran which never agreed to any transactions<sup>(1)</sup> as the Iranian government regarded INSTEX more as a symbolic gesture by the European parties to the JCPOA to make sure Iran remained committed to the deal. Tehran believes that a lack of seriousness from European governments is the main reason for the failure of INSTEX as they are fearful of facing reprisals from the United States.<sup>(32)</sup>

### **Ramifications and Future Prospects**

The Iranian protest movement has pushed Germany's human-rights oriented FFP into the spotlight with Berlin facing intense criticism over being a weak link and not acting firmly against the excesses of the Iranian government. While the German government recently said it had initiated fundamental changes in its Iran policy, the facts are: (1) Germany remains Iran's top trading partner in Europe, (2) a far-reaching diplomatic isolation/freezing of bilateral relations has not taken place, and (3) targeted sanctions against those responsible for human rights violations in the context of the crackdown on Iranian protestors are not comprehensive enough yet to bring about a profound weakening of the Iranian government; the designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization would be important in achieving the latter but the decision has not yet been made.

German foreign policy within the framework of a human-rights and feminist approach has led to extreme expectations regarding the country's responses to the Iranian government's crackdown on protestors and other belligerent activities, regionally and globally. However, it is apparent that the German approach of limited sanctions and diplomatic protests or normative condemnation is rooted in tangible realist German interests: (1) A lingering fear that too much pressure on Iran could risk efforts to revive the JCPOA despite recent statements by the German government that its focus is on the human rights situation in Iran, (2) economic

---

(1) Iran only agreed to a single transaction in early 2020 for the export of medical goods from Europe to Iran.

interests, especially against the backdrop of the economic burden caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, (3) the fear that the designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization would primarily affect the Iranian population and prevent diplomacy, and (4) no deep interest in regime change due to the instability such an event would cause.

The German emphasis on a human rights-oriented foreign policy has nurtured the false expectation that Berlin would go “all in” against the Iranian government. This has led to absurd benchmarks cited by critics of the FFP such as unlimited support for the protesters to the point of supporting them to overthrow the Iranian government.<sup>(33)</sup> These expectations misjudge Germany’s limited ability to influence the events in Iran and overlook the required weighing of economic and security considerations. Germany’s FFP and realist considerations are not exclusive of one another. The FFP is a long-term undertaking meant to challenge the structures of inequality while acknowledging realist considerations.

Iran is a test of German readiness to act progressively and practically over the long term. German diplomacy should be judged on whether it now begins unlocking networks and alliances for change and empowering marginalized groups at home and abroad. The country’s FFP acknowledges that change can happen from the bottom up, driven by people and places that Germany has historically disregarded.<sup>(34)</sup> Progressive change in Iran will not be a product of Germany’s FFP but of an Iranian feminist revolution, meaning that the demands for equal rights by Iranian women and other groups, which play a leading role in the cross-sectional Iranian protests, are realized. Germany can play an important, yet limited, role in this outcome.

Two future scenarios are conceivable in view of the current developments in German-Iran security relations and the human rights situation in Iran. As part of its FFP, Germany will continue to position the issue of human rights and human security in any diplomatic efforts with Iran to address the root causes of conflict and violence.

First, this means including gender-sensitive and intersectional language in the core messages sent in response to human rights violations in Iran, which has not been done consistently so far. Work on eliminating the roots of oppression in Iran, for example, can be furthered by listening even more closely to the needs of Iranian civilians and by looking at gender-disaggregated data collection and analysis to further identify sources of oppression in Iran to highlight their intersectional nature.<sup>(35)</sup>

Germany will work closely in dialogue with trusted diaspora-based civil society organizations and support the documentation and verification of the countless human rights violations, with the aim of holding Iranian officials accountable and making specific and vocal human rights demands backed by targeted restrictive measures against individuals and entities to minimize the harm inflicted on women and vulnerable groups. Through a regional approach, Germany is working with countries like Iraq, Turkey and Pakistan to facilitate refuge for women and human

rights defenders and is strengthening its focus on gender equality in its foreign policy.<sup>(36)</sup>

Second, in the context of rising Iranian escalation in the region as well as against Germany and the EU, a US-European consensus is growing for even tougher action against Iran based on strong security concerns, which in turn will end in a perceived spiral of escalation as the Iranian government's crisis management mostly depends on escalation. This will further isolate Iran, exacerbate its domestic crisis, and lead the Iranian government to depend even more heavily on cooperation with China and Russia.<sup>(37)</sup>

The difference between the scenarios is that a consistent German FFP (scenario one) considers the impact of its actions on the vulnerable Iranian population in all its dealings and does its (limited) part to strengthen civil society. In scenario two, Germany responds ever more aggressively to Iranian escalation, with the Iranian population caught in this struggle and suffering even more than before. Germany's reluctance so far to respond even more aggressively to the Iranian government — targeting all of Iran — may not be a failure of the German FFP, but precisely the deepest expression that Germany has developed its own FFP, despite potential for improvement.

## Endnotes

- (1) "Protests in Iran: Death of Mahsa Amini–House of Lords Library," *UK Parliament*, October 21, 2022, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3lvGvv9>.
- (2) "Navid Kermani: Kanzler Ergreift Mit Seinem Schweigen Partei," *ZDF*, October 30, 2022, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://bit.ly/43mHWEy>.
- (3) "Iran Summons German Ambassador Over Interference," *Deutsche Welle*, October 27, 2022, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3WrdaYA>.
- (4) Barbara Mittelhammer and Cornelius Adebahr, "Women, Life, Freedom: A German Feminist Foreign Policy Towards Iran," *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, January 2, 2023, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3MR2WQg>.
- (5) Roderick Parkes, Dana Schirwon, and Leonie Stamm, "Iran Is No Litmus Test for Germany's Feminist Foreign Policy," *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, January 20, 2023, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3MNIptR>.
- (6) Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro, and Steven Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- (7) "Old Dreams: German-Iran Relations Turn Sour," *Iran International*, October 28, 2022, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202210285407>.
- (8) Faranak Khodnegah, Davoud Kiani, and Mahdi Javdani Moghaddam, "Iran in Germany Balancing Policy," *Studies of International Relations Journal*, 13, no. 3 (November 21, 2020): 47-72.
- (9) "German Exports to Iran Increase 12.7%," *Modern Diplomacy*, January 11, 2023, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3WptDwB>.
- (10) "Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy With Iran," *Arms Control Association*, January 2023, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3Ozk8J5>.
- (11) "Germany Says It Sees No Reason to Resume Iran Nuclear Talks," *Middle East Monitor*, December 28, 2022, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3BNFPOL>.
- (12) This trend is underlined by the new EU strategy paper on strategic partnership with the Gulf (2022).
- (13) Sebastian Sons, "A New Momentum: Recalibrating Germany's Foreign Policy toward the Gulf Monarchies," *Middle East Institute*, January 20, 2023, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3OzpHaI>.
- (14) "Feministische Außenpolitik Gestalten. Leitlinien des Auswärtigen Amts," [Guidelines for Feminist Foreign Policy: Foreign Policy for All] (Berlin: Auswärtiges Amt [Foreign Office], 2023), 1-89. [German].
- (15) "Koalitionsvertrag Zwischen SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen Und FDP," [Coalition agreement 2021–2025 between the SPD, Bündnis 90/die grünen and FDP], *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD)*, November 24, 2021, accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.spd.de/koalitionsvertrag2021/>. [German].
- (16) "Feministische Außenpolitik Gestalten."
- (17) "Inclusion Rather than Exclusion: What Is Feminist Foreign Policy?" *German Federal Foreign Office*, May 3, 2022, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3MPA20G>.
- (18) "Protest Against Iranian Regime Draws Thousands in Berlin," *Associated Press*, October 22, 2022, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://bit.ly/432lrES>.
- (19) "Iranian Rally in Strasbourg Calls on Europe to List IRGC as Terrorists," *Iran International*, January 16, 2023, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202301164189>.
- (20) "Germans 'Disgusted' by Iran Protest Crackdown, Says Chancellor," *The Guardian*, November 12, 2022, accessed April 15, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3Ot94NQ>.
- (21) "Germany Summons Iran's Ambassador over Execution of Ex-Top Iranian Politician," *Anadolu Ajansı*, January 16, 2023, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3MwLZqY>.
- (22) "Germany Says It Sees No Reason to Resume Iran Nuclear Talks."
- (23) "Germany Summons Iran's Ambassador over Execution of Ex-Top Iranian Politician."
- (24) "Germany Increases the Pressure on Iran," *International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah)*, March 6, 2023, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://bit.ly/422eUzu>.
- (25) Sabine Siebold and Ingrid Melander. "EU Imposes New Iran Sanctions, No Deal Yet on New Russia Package," *Reuters*, December 12, 2022, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://bit.ly/431jWqv>.
- (26) "Germany Halts Guarantees for Business With Iran," *Iran International*, December 24, 2022, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212245945>.
- (27) Reuters, "Opposition Groups Rally in Paris Demanding EU List Iran's Guards as Terrorist Group." *VOA*, February 12, 2023, accessed April 15, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3Mx2X8D>.
- (28) "EU Imposes New Sanctions on IRGC Short of Terrorist Designation," *Iran International*, January 23, 2023, accessed April 15, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202301232603>.

- (29) "Timeline-Iran: EU Restrictive Measures- Consilium," *European Council*, 2023, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3BSWos5>.
- (30) "Iran: Lars Klingbeil (SPD) Fordert Aufnahme Iranischer Revolutionsgarde Auf EU-Terrorliste," [Klingbeil Wants to Put Iranian Revolutionary Guards on EU Terror List], *Der Spiegel*, March 12, 2023, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://bit.ly/43hY75O>.
- (31) Friederike Grischek, "Why Declaring the Iranian Revolutionary Guards a Terrorist Group Is a Trickier Business Than One May Think," *Verfassungsblog*, February 2, 2023, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://bit.ly/42ZA2RH>.
- (32) "Europe Dissolves Instex Mechanism for Trade with Iran," *Iran International*, March 10, 2023, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202303104230>.
- (33) "Germany: Bundestag Discusses Motion to Support Iranian Protest Movement," *Ruptly*, October 13, 2022, accessed March 20, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3Mm5ZfO>.
- (34) Parkes, Schirwon, and Stamm, "Iran Is No Litmus Test for Germany's Feminist Foreign Policy."
- (35) Diba Mirzaei and Hamid Talebian, "Iran's Uprisings: A Feminist Foreign Policy Approach," *GIGA Focus Nahost*, no. 6 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.57671/gfme-22062>.
- (36) Mittelhammer and Adebahr, "Women, Life, Freedom: A German Feminist Foreign Policy Towards Iran."
- (37) "Germany Increases the Pressure on Iran."



# BOOK REVIEW: SECULAR THOUGHT WITHIN ISLAMIC IRAN

Reviewer: Dr. Mohammed al-Sayyad

---

Researcher, the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah)

Author: Emad el-Hilali

## Introduction

Perhaps it is not surprising to find deep secularist ideals within the confinements of “Islamic Iran.” Though purely Islamic orientations prevailed after the revolution, there have always been wranglings about the religious interpretations that the state should adopt. These wranglings are the outcome of religious groups adopting enlightenment and secularist orientations. Most of them exist within the Shiite religious community itself.

Against this backdrop, we are reviewing the book titled *Secular Thought Within Islamic Iran*, by Emad el-Hilali, recently published in Arabic by Muassat Alintishar Alarabi in Beirut. The book’s introduction was written by Lebanese intellectual Haidar Hoballah. The book consists of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter is titled “The Evolution of Religious Knowledge in Soroush’s Thought,” while the second chapter is titled “Shabestari From Hermeneutics to Humanism,” and the last chapter is titled “Modernity and Spiritual Aspects of Religion According to Malekian.” The book’s key points and conclusions will be reviewed in the following sections.

## Soroush's Renouncement of Ideology

Hilali sheds light on the development Abdol-Karim Soroush's thought, which was crystallized after his academic maturity and engagement in intellectual and knowledge-centered battles. Soroush was born in Tehran and studied at Kimiyaye Elementary School in Tehran. At Refah School, he then received his secondary education, which offered a hybrid of modern and religious education. At the University of Tehran, he graduated with a degree in pharmacy. After his compulsory military service, he was appointed as director of a government laboratory in Bushehr in southern Iran. In 1972, he traveled to the UK after he attained a scholarship to study analytical chemistry at the University of London. At the same time, he continued to study history and the philosophy of science. At this point, Soroush familiarized himself with Western schools of philosophy, heralding the start of his intellectual career.

## Religious Reform and the Theory of Correction

Soroush is influenced by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and is particularly inspired by his book "The Revival of the Religious Sciences." He rejects the comparison between Ghazali and Moulawi, arguing that the former's epistemology was superior to the latter's. <sup>(1)</sup> He adds that Moulawi was "dull," while Ghazali was "vivid." At the same time, Soroush is deeply influenced by Mulla Sadra, and his imprint is clearly visible in his writings. Against this backdrop, we can attempt to understand Soroush's thinking and approach to religious reform. Soroush is a key figure in the new school of speculative theology, shouldering the responsibility for reviving speculative theology and other Islamic disciplines. However, in his quest, he has faced vociferous opposition from Iranian traditionalists and conservatives. He provoked controversy through his book "The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religion: The *Theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge* and his book *Straight Paths*, in which he argues there are several straight paths rather than just a single straight path. He subsequently published his book *Expansion of the Prophetic Experience*, which lays the foundations of the history of the prophetic experience itself.

■ Religious pluralism: When examining Soroush's intellectual shift marked by his book *Straight Paths*, we find that he edges closer to John Harwood Hick through embracing religious pluralism. According to Soroush, religious pluralism has two principles. The first is that truth exists in all religions and sects and is not exclusively limited to a certain faith or sect; a position he firmly upholds. The second is that even if we assume that only one religion or sect represents the truth, if man did not arrive at this truth, he will be redeemed if he "sincerely strives in this cause — based on each person's physical and mental capacity."<sup>(2)</sup> However, Soroush argues that those who reject the truth will perish. According to Avicenna, such people are a minority.<sup>(3)</sup> Soroush's position is closely aligned with what some Mu'tazila and orthodox Sunnis upheld such as al-Jahiz, a prominent Mu'tazila imam and al-Anbari, a luminous Sunni traditionalist. In his book *Al-Mahsul Fi 'Ilm 'Usul al-Fiqh*, al-Razi

defended both theologians, suggesting that their argument about sound reason and the basic tenets of religion is restricted to those who reflect, strive and do their best to arrive at the truth, not those who act stubbornly and turn away from religious guidance.<sup>(4)</sup>

■ Drawing a separating line between the subjective and the incidental: In his last book *Expansion of the Prophetic Experience*, which he wrote in Iran, Soroush draws a separating line between the subjective and the incidental in religion. He argues that human and historical factors have played a role in shaping religion. Regarding this point he says, "The case wasn't that the prophet had fabricated a book, asked the people to turn to, ordering them to read it and implement its teachings. The Quran was revealed in a gradual manner and to fit the people's behaviors and acts. It provides answers to real-life incidents and questions aimed essentially to preserve the core essence of the heavenly discourse, in its content. The incidents and real-life issues played a role in shaping Islam."<sup>(5)</sup>

■ Rebelling against reform: In his earlier phases, Soroush attempted to enact reform from within, but he stumbled into *taqlid* (emulation) and the conservatives who rejected any form of religious or social reform. As a result, he declared his theory that the "Quran is the word of Mohammad," which had a great impact on him and his standing among Iran's scholastic and reform community, however, both the reformists and conservatives raged against him. In declaring this theory, Soroush cut ties with the reformist and conservative community in Iran and even with the entire hawza community. In fact, this cutting of ties happened with Soroush embracing the thoughts of theologians such as Ghazali, Moulawi, Mulla Sadra, Fayz Kashani and others; hence he established a purely secular school of thought.

■ Political reform and a democratic system of government: Soroush argues that when we say that Islam is a political religion, it means that Islam faced political issues. Had it not faced political issues, it would have been detached from politics like Christianity. Those seeking pragmatic aims and wanting to exploit the situation emerged on the stage, in response Prophet Mohammad was prompted to counter them; back then he did not withdraw from the scene. At this time, Islam interacted with politics, which played a role in gradually reshaping it.<sup>(6)</sup>

Soroush argues that the government has no divine mandate. It should be questioned, held accountable and monitored by the people and state institutions.<sup>(7)</sup> He is also critical of addressing the state from a jurisprudential perspective since this would make the issues of the state appear as "differences among jurists." Hence, issues would be designated as lawful or unlawful, with no heed paid to overall governance purposes and general ideals.

According to Soroush, the state has no right to compel people to observe religious practices or comply with specific religious or sectarian readings. "If you force people (to adhere to religion) and they become apparently pious, this belief is not a true belief since belief is of a nature that has nothing to do with compulsion. Belief cannot be instilled in people's hearts by force."<sup>(8)</sup> Forcing people to adhere to religion

runs counter to the theory of correction and the “multiplicity of true religions” that Soroush embraces. It also goes against democratic and constitutional principles.

Soroush also attempts to find practical solutions to the process of reforming governance in Iran. He lays out what he calls the theory of “controlling power.” This theory means, according to Soroush, the inner restraints to limit a ruler’s excesses (such as a ruler embodying the traits of justice, reliability, piety and so forth). He also believes in the necessity to create “external restraints” such as regulatory apparatuses and institutions that hold rulers to account, monitor their work and regulate their acts, especially given the fact that they wield extensive influence and have far-reaching capabilities, making them liable to commit grave errors. “The temptations of power and wealth — when combined — are hard to resist. They could cause anybody in power to slide into committing errors — excepting those who are infallible, as God upholds their integrity and restrains their excesses. And this issue could be judged differently,” he argues.<sup>(9)</sup>

### **Shabestari from Hermeneutics to Humanism**

Iranian philosopher and cleric Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari (1936-present) is one of the most important enlightenment philosophers in Iran. He was born in the Iranian city of Shabestar, which is in the Province of Azerbaijan, northwest of Iran. He moved along with his father to Tabriz, the province’s capital, at the age of 14. In 1951, he traveled to Qom to study religious disciplines, both intellectual and textual, at the hawza. He has authored books and translated others.

### **Shabestari and Politics: From a Supporter of the Revolution to a Critic**

Shabestari supported the Iranian revolution and was influenced by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. At the same time, he felt some sort of intellectual proximity to Jalal Al-e-Ahmad (d.1969), Ali Shariati (d. 1977), Mehdi Bazargan (d.1994), Sayyid Mahmoud Taleghani (d.1979) and Mortaza Motahari (d.1979). Though it appears that he was influenced by Khomeini and supported the revolution, he was open to reformist and enlightened thoughts. He did not limit himself to traditionalist scholarship, especially as he had learnt the German language, which opened the door to access Western theology and European philosophy. Though he quit politics at an early stage of his career in the 1980s, dedicating all of his time to university teaching and academia, he was forced to retire in 2005 because of his political positions and enlightened opinions. Abbas-Ali Amid Zanjani, the head of Tehran University, once said that the university is in no need of the likes of Shabestari.<sup>(10)</sup> Despite not leveling explicit criticism against the political system, he has always expressed opinions that are not satisfactory to the ruling establishment and dealt blows to its philosophies and foundational tenets, including his calls for democracy, sovereignty of the people and other liberal principles that are evident in his works.

### **Jurisprudence and Criticism of the State's Official Reading of Religion**

According to Shabestari, there are several reasons behind the crisis related to the official reading of religion. According to his viewpoint, the first reason is the notion that Islam is all-encompassing. The second reason is that the government's function is to implement Islam's ordinances in society. He believes that these two reasons are inconsistent with the true aspects of Islam or the realities that Muslims faced, nor did they take into consideration the changes and developments experienced by Muslims. The latter arose in the Muslim community nearly 150 years ago because of modernity. He also concludes that "modern societies cannot be governed by jurisprudential rulings that determine what is lawful or unlawful since they can only address limited aspects of social life. Jurisprudential rulings cannot analyze social realities, nor can they put forward programs to change such realities and steer them toward achieving specific ends."<sup>(11)</sup>

The concept of an official reading of religion refers to a state-sanctioned reading of religion that gradually arose with the emergence of "jurisprudential Islam;" it expresses the official jurisprudential interpretation of the government. The danger of this reading lies in the fact that it restricts the Constitution, the government's structure, functions and responsibilities as well as the individual's and society's basic rights through religious rulings issued by jurists. This camp — the proponents of jurisprudential Islam — reached the point where they made jurisprudential custodianship a theory that was above criticism. They deemed political legitimacy based on popular consent unnecessary for the sake of governance. Despite the weaknesses and shortcomings of political jurisprudence, this camp made it the chief wellspring for lawmaking and governing society.<sup>(12)</sup> Among the major manifestations and results of this prioritization of political jurisprudence is the negation of legitimacy based on popular consent. Hence, this means nullifying the significant role of popular opinion in legitimizing the state's social, economic and political laws and conferring an aura of sacredness on state officials. In other words, the sanctity of officials and rulers has been equated to and connected with the sanctity of religion. Thus, any criticism of the rulers is a criticism of religion. Moreover, there is the politicization of culture, which means that the government should be the entity charged with determining and overlooking cultural affairs, which results in the employment of violence and repression to enforce specific orientations and outlooks.

In conclusion, it can be said that Shabestari has identified religious criticism as the first step toward reforming religious and political thought. He deems it necessary to criticize religion since it is a free and conscious choice that cannot be believed in through indoctrination or media outlets. Furthermore, it cannot be believed in through the suppression of freedoms and banning criticism of religious thoughts and theories existing on the religious landscape.<sup>(13)</sup>

### **Is There Such a Thing as Islamic Democracy?**

Shabestari criticizes the critics of democracy, arguing that there is no contradiction between it and religion since it is a system that aims to regulate this world rather

than the afterlife. Under the auspices of democracy, adherents of all faiths, religions and philosophies can have the right to life, sound governance and advancement while adhering to their own respective values, doctrines and laws.

He poses an important question frequently raised by those who reject democracy: what if public opinion runs counter to God's commandments? Will you accept public opinion or God's heavenly decree? He answered that a Muslim, from a doctrinal and speculative theological perspective, is obliged to comply with God's definitive ordinances, giving them precedence over his own opinion. Even if we assume that the majority of society consists of Muslims who wanted — when it comes to lawmaking — to seriously abandon the definitive heavenly ordinances, then in this case, “we would unfortunately have to say that they have apostatized. In such a situation, no one could do anything and the talk about (the necessity to enforce) God's heavenly laws becomes meaningless. But I am assured that this day will never come.”<sup>(14)</sup>

He also responds to those who thwart the establishment of a democratic model as they want an “Islamic” one. According to him, there is no such thing as Islamic democracy, but rather there is a democratic system for Muslims. Those who support the concept of Islamic democracy are heedless of an important fact: “democracy is a system for governance that is based on predetermined anthropological and humanistic ideals such as man's ability to freely think and choose, freedom and equality.<sup>(15)</sup> In addition, this restriction [there is only Islamic democracy] aims to prevent opposing ideas from spreading and spilling over into the intellectual arena. Perhaps repressive apparatuses and force could be employed against opponents to prevent them from expressing opinions and bar them from holding government posts.”<sup>(16)</sup>

### **Malekian: Modernity and the Moral Aspect of Religion**

Mostafa Malekian (1955-present) is one of the most prominent renewal philosophers in present-day Iran. He is one of the students of Mortaza Motahari (d. 1979), Amir Hossein Yazd Kurdi (d.1986), Gholam Hossein Sadighi (d.1991) and Mehrdad Bahar (d.199). The striking aspect is that Malekian graduated in mechanical engineering from the university of Tabriz in 1973. Later, he joined the hawza in Qom after he graduated with an engineering degree. From the Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies at the University of Tehran, he obtained a master's degree in philosophy in 1986.

### **Between Religion and Modernity**

Malekian has attempted to reconcile the ensuing dispute between religion and modernity. He divided modernity's elements into two categories: avoidable and unavoidable elements. He argues that this categorization is based on realities rather than criteria. Both, what can be avoided involves good and evil and what cannot be avoided also involves good and evil. The division is not based on what is good and evil according to the intellect or divine law but rather according to reality. Thus, what can be avoided does not conflict with or contradict religion.

However, what cannot be avoided should be accommodated and accepted even if it goes against some aspects of religion since it is a reality that is unavoidable. It could be treated as a necessity.<sup>(17)</sup>

### Reforming Religious Thought

According to Malekian, religion has multiple forms. At times, he means the sacred texts while at others he means explanations, exegesis and hermeneutics of the sacred texts. He could also mean the praxis of religious followers over the ages. The second and third forms undoubtedly manifest as social phenomena.

He poses a fundamental question: does man have the freedom to choose his religion? He responds to this question by arguing that man does not choose his faith, but rather shapes it. Humanity has inherited religion throughout history, and individuals who voluntarily choose their own religion and deviate from its path are rare. Here, he brings up an essential point: most religious matters are of the type whose truth or falsity cannot be determined definitively. How might a definitive statement be reached on these matters? If one religion claims that spirits transmigrate after death and another religion claims the opposite, how can we be confident that one of them conforms to the truth while the other contradicts it as long as we are here in this worldly life?<sup>(18)</sup> Malekian deconstructs the claims of definite truths made by various religions in specific theological areas, allowing for different points of view to arise. Perhaps Malekian did this to advance his notion of “religious multiplicity.”

### Political Reform

Malekian argues that religion and democracy are wholly compatible. He explains this by saying, “Society could be religious and democratic at the same time. It is not impossible neither theoretically nor practically. It is possible to run a genetic society through a democratic political system.”<sup>(19)</sup> However, at the same time, he rejects the establishment of a clerical government within a democratic system of government. He argues this is impossible, stating that if a government in reality wants to be clerical in nature, then it cannot be democratic.<sup>(20)</sup>

According to Malekian, rationality (the logical approach) is the characteristic of “rationalized religion.”<sup>(21)</sup> Its key characteristics can be summed up as follows:

- An elitist characteristic: This means that the elites do not seek to spread rationality among the people but rather limit it among themselves. Spreading rationality among the people is considered to be harmful and counterproductive.
- A skeptical notion that has varying degrees: As much as religiosity has degrees, modernity too has degrees — in terms of strength and weakness. Hence, no one can be stripped of their religiosity. Therefore, rationality is described as a logical approach rather than in reference to a religious sect.
- A necessity rather than a choice: The religious cannot avoid modernity when it comes to necessities as they risk deeming their project unsuccessful. Thus, there is a need for those who are religious to reshape the relationship between religion and modernity.

- Rationality harboring of a degree of secularization: This chiefly means immediacy and worldly aspects. The rational aspect is primarily concerned with this world and immediate results, with scant focus put on the afterlife. All the means of resolving the issues confronting us in this world should be considered in order to ascertain whether they are correct instead of unjustifiably banning or rejecting them.
- Easing human suffering: This means that religion was sent down for humanity, not the other way around. Religion was sent down so that it can serve humanity.

Malekian has attempted to strip religion of its sacred nature, making it subject to rationality and trying to reconcile it with modernity. However, there remains a problem, which is that he did not clarify the slight variation that distinguishes rationality from the other approaches and its implications on the ground, given the fact that the aim is not to disseminate rationality among the laity but to confine it to a specific stratum of intellectuals and followers.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that there are intellectual commonalities among the discussed philosophers. All of them have studied modern and religious sciences, combining both university and hawza studies. They also are well-informed regarding Western philosophy and civilization. They started their careers as supporters of the revolution but shifted their positions and political ideas, criticizing Wilayat al-Faqih and the theory of governance in Iran. As a result, pressures have been exerted against all of them by the system or those close to it. They have led the enlightenment movement in Iran and have become the major theorists of secularism in Iran during the current time. This secularism that is advocated is enlightened, philosophically inspired and opposed to the prevailing system, unlike Iranian secularism or its prevalent strand during the shah's era. These philosophers have not overlooked the importance of reform and renewal of religious thought, given its essential position in the process of comprehensive political, social and seminarian reform. Perhaps their relative seclusion from the political landscape and political criticism (in which they have been involved) has allowed them to pursue religious reform. The religious elite, on the other hand, knows that this path of religious reform will eventually lead to well-established political norms being challenged, because their principles are derived from sectarian readings (of religion) such as Wilayat al-Faqih and other beliefs. Therefore, the religious elite has frequently questioned and, at times, defamed such philosophers. They have influenced their followers against their ideas, while sometimes taking legal measures against them.

*The book is written in Arabic under the title الفكر العلماني في إيران الإسلامية*



## Endnotes

- (1) Emad el-Hilali, *Secularist Thought in Islamic Iran* (Beirut: Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2017), 38
- (2) Abdolkarim Soroush, *Straight Paths* [siratha-yi mustaqim] (Beirut: Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2009), 134. [Arabic]
- (3) Ibid., 136.
- (4) See: Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *al-Mahsul, al-Mahsul fi usul al-fiqh* (Riyadh: Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1981) 6 et seq. (part two-section three) and see also al-Shawkani, *Irshad al-Fuhul* (Cairo: Dar al-Salam, 2006) 2\742. [Arabic].
- (5) Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience* (Beirut, Muassat Alintishar Alarabi) 2009), 39. [Arabic].
- (6) Ibid. 43.
- (7) Soroush, *Vaster than Ideology* (Beirut, Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2014), 91.
- (8) Haidar Hoballah, *Propositions in the Islamic Political Thought* (Beirut, Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2015), 258. [Arabic].
- (9) Ibid., 262
- (10) El-Hilali, *Secularist Thought in Islamic Iran*, 113.
- (11) Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, *A Critique of the Official Reading of Religion* (Beirut: Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2013), 24. [Arabic].
- (12) Ibid., 42.
- (13) Shabestari, *Belief and Freedom* (Beirut: Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2013), 117. [Arabic].
- (14) Shabestari, *A Critique of the Official Reading of Religion*, 144.
- (15) Ibid., 152.
- (16) Shabestari, *A Human Reading of Religion: Belief and Freedom* (Beirut: Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2009), 221. [Arabic].
- (17) El-Hilali, 174.
- (18) Ibid., 176.
- (19) Melikian, *Longing and Desertion*, trans. Ahmad al-Qabanji (Beirut: A Muassat Alintishar Alarabi, 2009), 334. [Arabic].
- (20) Ibid., 334.
- (21) El-Hilali, 206.

**JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES**  
Specialized Studies

