

JIS



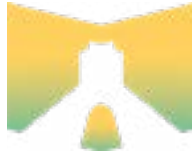
Journal for Iranian Studies

Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual periodical Journal



- The Impact of the Saudi Development Model on the Iranian Home Front
- Green Saudi Arabia: The Rise of a Renewable Energy Superpower
- Iran and the Role of Factional Groups in Operation Al-Aqsa Flood: Tools and Policy Outcomes
- Latin America: A New Market for Iranian Drones
- Politics and Philosophy in Contemporary Iran
- Landlocked Ethiopia and the Strategic Implications of Attempting to Reach Open Water



JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual Periodical Journal

Year 8, Issue 19, April 2024

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, (Rasanah)

Al-Takhassusi St. Sahafah, Riyadh

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

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

ISSN: 1658-757X

©2024 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

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 suggestions 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

Dr. 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

■ The Impact of the Saudi Development Model on the Iranian Home Front Dr. Mohammed Alsulami	7
■ Green Saudi Arabia: The Rise of a Renewable Energy Superpower Dimitri Zabelin.....	31
■ Iran and the Role of Factional Groups in Operation Al-Aqsa Flood: Tools and Policy Outcomes Ali Bakr	45
■ Latin America: A New Market for Iranian Drones Amal Mokhtar	63
■ Politics and Philosophy in Contemporary Iran Mohammed al-Sayyed al-Sayyad	81
■ Landlocked Ethiopia and the Strategic Implications of Attempting to Reach Open Water Dr. Mohammed al-Amin bin Awdah	103

THE IMPACT OF THE SAUDI DEVELOPMENT MODEL ON THE IRANIAN HOME FRONT

Dr. Mohammed Alsulami

Associate Professor of Iranian Studies, Umm Al-Qura University

Abstract

This research article explores the perspectives of Iran's social and intellectual elites regarding significant developmental, social, economic, political and diplomatic shifts within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It examines how these elites engage with and comment on such transformations via online platforms, including websites and social media platforms. It also investigates both the implicit and explicit comparisons drawn by Iranians between their country's internal circumstances and Saudi domestic developments. The primary objective is to assess evolving perceptions of Saudi Arabia among Iranians and their implications. Special attention is given to material published after the Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal in March 2023. The article encompasses a diverse range of content, including public commentary derived from Persian texts and video footage originating from Iran, as well as the views of the Iranian intelligentsia through opinion pieces in domestic publications and websites.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Saudi Vision 2030, poverty, unemployment, social media platforms, economy, Iranian public opinion

Introduction

In the last decade, regional rivalry has significantly impacted relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, notably shaping perceptions of Saudi Arabia within Iran. Iranian official discourse has often portrayed Saudi Arabia in a negative light. However, there has been a recent shift, with the Saudi development model attracting regional and global attention. This newfound recognition holds significance domestically and internationally, as evidenced by various indicators and statistics placing Saudi Arabia in a prominent position on the regional and international stage. Iran has been one of the countries where the influence of the Saudi model has become apparent, particularly among the elite and a broad segment of the Iranian public. This development may have provoked discontent among certain elements within the Iranian establishment and its institutions. This is especially true given that the establishment perceives Saudi Arabia as a regional rival, and any positive view of the Saudi model torpedoes its narrative about the country, causing embarrassment and undermining its legitimacy.

Within this evolving landscape, the inquiry extends to assessing the extent of the influence of the Saudi development model on Iran. This inquiry gives rise to several subsidiary inquiries, among which the following stand out: How have Iranian elites and public opinion interacted with the political, economic and cultural changes unfolding in Saudi Arabia? What implications can be discerned from this interaction for Iran's domestic front?

This research article addresses these questions by scrutinizing the viewpoints of Iranian elites and the general populace following the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023. It focuses on reactions to social and economic advancements in Saudi Arabia and the impact of the kingdom's development strategies, plans and projects for fostering cultural transformation and enhancing citizens' quality of life. Saudi achievements across various fields have drawn comparisons with emerging economies worldwide, provoking widespread discontent among Iranian elites and the general public toward their political system. Despite possessing capabilities comparable to Saudi Arabia, Iran grapples with isolation, sanctions and economic pressures, resulting in dire socio-economic conditions. This paper sheds light on how the Saudi model has impacted the Iranian establishment, especially the continuity of its domestic and foreign policies.

This research article is grounded in data collected by the researcher, focusing on the most popular or prominent articles and analyses that followed the restoration of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The collected material covers various aspects, including:

- Reactions to Saudi Arabia's statement concerning the Durra field.
- Articles, opinions and analyses regarding Saudi Arabia's heightened diplomatic role in resolving the Russia-Ukraine war.

■ Commentary from Iranian experts, elites and social media influencers regarding developments in Saudi Arabia and the Saudi model.

■ Responses to a video featuring Saudi sports journalist Khalid al-Shenaif critiquing Azadi Stadium, the venue for a match between Al-Nassr Football Club and its Iranian rival Persepolis in the AFC Champions League 2023.

The content examined spans the period from June 2023 to September 2023. Through the analysis of the data collected, a nuanced understanding of Iranian perspectives toward ongoing developments in Saudi Arabia is conducted, alongside an exploration of the impact of these viewpoints on bilateral relations.

Responses and Opinions of the Iranian Elite to the Saudi Development Model

Saudi Political Performance at Home and Abroad

The paper's sample data revealed a noteworthy internal admiration among elites and the general public for Saudi Arabia's political prowess on both domestic and international fronts. It became evident that public sentiment was significantly swayed by various facets of Saudi Arabia's political performance, with key aspects including:

Saudi Arabia's Diplomatic Role in Resolving International Disputes

A discernible trend has emerged within Iran, suggesting a belief that Saudi Arabia has effectively leveraged various international relationships to advance its national interests. This achievement is attributed to the visionary leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, alongside an academically proficient elite, as affirmed by opinions on the expertise of the Saudi elite and their adeptness in representing the state on the global stage. Such accolades are closely intertwined with commendations regarding Saudi Arabia's educational standards, particularly when juxtaposed with Iran's. Strikingly, discussions among Iranian elites underscore the pragmatic approach of Saudi Arabia's ruling establishment, which has played a pivotal role in the country's ongoing transformation. An example of such praise from Iranian elites can be observed in their commendation of Saudi diplomacy and its significant role in mediating international conflicts. Notably, Iranians positively acknowledged the peace meeting convened in the Saudi city of Jeddah, attended by representatives from approximately 40 countries, including Brazil, the UK, India, China, the United States, Turkey, South Africa and various European Union nations, aimed at resolving the Russia-Ukraine war. According to university professor Mohammad Mehdi Mazaheri, the decision to hold the meeting in Jeddah holds multifaceted importance. Mazaheri highlights that this gathering, hosted by an Arab nation, stands out as one of the few instances where an Arab country has taken the lead in mediating to resolve an international crisis. Historically, Arab states' mediation efforts have primarily focused on regional

conflicts such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Yemeni civil war, the Syrian crisis, as well as political upheavals in Iraq and Lebanon.

Mazaheri emphasized that hosting an international meeting aimed at resolving the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which is perceived as a confrontation between Western powers and Russia, serves as a notable example of this Arab nation's endeavor to underscore its role on the global stage.⁽¹⁾ Meanwhile, Mohammad Hosseini, former Iranian ambassador to Saudi Arabia, viewed the Jeddah meeting as a significant triumph for Saudi Arabia. Despite not achieving success in halting the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the meeting succeeded in swaying major global actors such as China and emerging powers like India, Brazil and South Africa from a stance of passive neutrality. Hosseini noted that this strengthened Saudi Arabia's standing as a proactive and neutral actor in global affairs. Particularly noteworthy was Saudi Arabia's ability to secure China's participation, as Beijing had abstained from attending a peace meeting in Denmark to end the war in Ukraine.⁽²⁾

A Model Centered on Modernization and Development

Iranian elites drew a stark comparison between Iran's development model, reliant on five-year plans that failed to achieve significant progress, and Saudi Arabia's forward-looking vision, which propelled it far ahead in terms of modernization and development despite both nations' abundant resources. According to the Iranian perspective, Saudi Arabia effectively leveraged its oil revenues for development and modernization, contrasting sharply with Iran's perceived failure to capitalize on its vast oil wealth, representing a significant missed opportunity. Former Iranian Parliament member and assistant to the Minister of Agricultural Jihad Ali Qambari emphasized this gap, stating, "We are 15 years behind neighboring countries, at best 10 years behind, and in more realistic scenarios, 15 years behind." Qambari highlighted that recent developments in Saudi Arabia compelled Iran's elites to critique "conservative" factions that sought to undermine Saudi Arabia by misrepresenting its vast strides in development or portraying it as regressive.

Pursuing a Balanced Foreign Policy Between East and West

Iranian elites have taken a keen interest in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy endeavors, lauding its well-calibrated approach, inclusive diplomatic relations and adept management of alliances across the global spectrum. Saudi Arabia's ability to foster positive ties with diverse international actors, including cooperative and adversarial parties like China, Russia, Japan, India, the United States and European Union, has garnered praise. Observers have also noted Saudi Arabia's adept utilization of prevailing international dynamics to advance its interests and bolster its autonomy on the global stage. Mahmood Sariolghalam, advisor to former President Hassan Rouhani and professor of political science and international relations at Shahid Beheshti University, emphasized this point, stating, "Six countries have achieved an important position among the midlevel

powers; they are Brazil, Saudi Arabia, India, South Africa, Turkey, and Indonesia." These six countries engage with both East and West, maintaining positive relations with Russia as a cornerstone of their foreign policy. Their approach aims to leverage the strengths of major powers, enabling them to play diverse roles, negotiate effectively, and foster a strategy of "hedging." This contrasts with Iran's foreign policy, which has increasingly pivoted toward the East while distancing itself from the West. However, this shift has not effectively resolved Iran's challenges and crises. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has been expanding its diplomatic engagement and international presence, actively participating in the existing global system. In contrast to Iran's oppositional stance, Saudi Arabia emerges as a mediator in key conflicts, a participant in the G20, and a regional player sought after by Russia and China for inclusion in their respective spheres of influence. Meanwhile, Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi embarked on visits to select Latin American and African nations, possibly as a response to isolation, pressure, and sanctions.⁽³⁾

Effectiveness of the Saudi Regional Role

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a pivotal regional actor, contrasting sharply with Iran's approach. Through a strategy focused on problem resolution, stability and collaboration, Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as a key player in the Middle East. Ali Bigdali, an expert in international relations, suggests that Saudi Arabia aims to foster diversity and pluralism in the region.⁽⁴⁾ Former Iranian diplomat Kourosh Ahmadi argues that Saudi Arabia possesses the requisite conditions to serve as a gateway to the Arab world, presenting an unparalleled opportunity to exert direct and indirect influence across the Middle East. Given its significant domestic and foreign policies, Saudi Arabia's actions inevitably reverberate throughout the region.

Iranian Elites' Critique of Iran's Regional Role

These elites have questioned the allocation of resources to regional endeavors instead of focusing on economic development. This strategy has propelled Saudi Arabia to become a formidable regional power. Political activist and University of Tehran Professor of Political Science Sadegh Zibakalam highlights the repercussions of Saudi Arabia's prolonged involvement in the Yemeni conflict. Despite seven years of war, substantial expenses and the human toll on Yemeni citizens, Saudi Arabia has paradoxically emerged stronger. Zibakalam raises pertinent questions about the Iranian government's responsibility in prioritizing regional ventures over the country's national interests, which is particularly evident in the Yemeni context.⁽⁵⁾

The Enhancement of Saudi Arabia's Image and Influence

Iranian elites admire Saudi Arabia's adept utilization of soft power and its comprehensive approach to improving its image and advancing its influence,

contrasting this with Iran’s image on the global stage. Particularly noteworthy are Saudi sports and entertainment diplomacy efforts, characterized by initiatives to attract international stars and host major sporting events. Ali Faraidouni, writing in Setareh Sobh newspaper, observes, “Saudi Arabia is actively vying with neighboring nations to cement its status as a premier entertainment and sports hub in the Arabian Gulf region.” He adds, “The Saudis are strategically leveraging sports, especially football, as a means of diplomatic engagement with nations worldwide.”

In a notable example of such comparisons, Saudi journalist Khaled Al-Shanif’s remarks drew significant attention on social media platforms, garnering support from Iranians. Shanif’s commentary contrasted the conditions of Azadi Stadium with those of the stadiums in Saudi Arabia three decades prior. This comparison arose following a match between the Iranian team Persepolis and the Saudi team Al-Nassr in the AFC Champions League, during which concerns were raised about the field quality at Azadi Stadium, leading to injuries among some players. Table 1 illustrates various Iranian reactions to Shanif’s observations.

Table 1: Iranians’ Comments Supportive of the Saudi Anchor and Mocking the Iranian Establishment

Comments Supporting Shanif’s Observations	Comments Mocking and Criticizing the Iranian Government
Indeed, the truth is deeply bitter.	The Iranian government should be ashamed.
We should weep blood rather than tears.	I reject his comments. We have lagged a hundred years.
His comments were right.	We exclaim, how did they accept to play on this stadium? I think the matter is political. They did not want the relations between the two nations to deteriorate.
He points to part of our plight. We don’t possess anything distinguished.	Since Al-Nassr and Ronaldo have arrived in Iran, many of our faults have been exposed. We have become certain that we are the most backward people in the region at all levels.

<p>If we are lagging just three decades, it would be fine. But I think we are lagging far behind that.</p>	<p>In situations where a high-value player sustains an injury, the expenses incurred by their team and country for their treatment often amount to the cost of constructing an entire stadium.</p>
<p>What would our response be in the face of correct comments?</p>	<p>It is indeed puzzling how the Asian Football Confederation permitted matches to be held at the Azadi Stadium considering its subpar conditions.</p>
<p>Come and look at every place in Iran. This will rend your heart.</p>	<p>Thankfully, a thousand times over, [O media anchor], for sparing yourself from residing in this desolate land even for a single day.</p>
<p>Exactly. And things may be even worse. We did not have any alternatives to this stadium.</p>	<p>Just two weeks ago, I confided in my friend, expressing my regret for not being born in a country like Saudi Arabia, where the king's priority is the welfare of his people. Here, it seems that the government's sole aim is to harm its own citizens. It is truly shameful and deeply regrettable.</p>
<p>No one should be sad because he was right about all that he said.</p>	<p>The media anchor's remark about us being merely 30 years behind was delivered with remarkable politeness. He showed great respect for us.</p>
<p>He told the truth. And we should not hurl insults at him.⁽⁶⁾</p>	

Source: Prepared by the researcher

The political shifts occurring in Saudi Arabia, both domestically and internationally, have drawn admiration from the Iranian elite. The kingdom has notably asserted itself in global forums and taken the lead in proposing international and regional initiatives aligned with global aspirations. Particularly noteworthy are its climate policies and the Green Middle East project. Moreover,

Saudi Arabia has emerged as a regional diplomacy hub, actively mediating conflict resolution efforts.

Economic Performance

Interest from Iranians has been observed across various economic sectors concerning the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, encompassing a wide array of economic and developmental aspects within the kingdom. This interest often prompts comparisons with the Iranian economy, leading to feelings of regret and despair at times. Some of the aspects that have gained attention from Iranians include:

Economic Growth and Human Capital Investment

Advisor to the former president and esteemed university professor Mahmood Sariolghalam highlighted several positive economic insights gleaned from the Saudi delegation at the Davos World Economic Forum 2023. These observations include:⁽⁷⁾

- Saudi Arabia exhibited a buoyant attitude and a steadfast, positive perspective regarding its economic trajectory.
- The participating delegation demonstrated enhanced linguistic and analytical proficiency, indicative of robust human capital development, particularly in education within the kingdom.
- Noteworthy strides have been made in achieving an impressive economic growth rate, standing at 8.7%, alongside ambitious investment initiatives aimed at bolstering wealth and cash reserves to a projected \$2 trillion by 2030.
- Saudi Arabia solidifies its stature as a significant player among the global middle powers, alongside Brazil, India, South Africa, Turkey and Indonesia, while fostering amicable relations with both Eastern and Western counterparts.

In a similar vein, Ali Ghambari, a former parliamentarian and university professor, painted a stark picture of his country's developmental status in comparison to Saudi Arabia. He remarked, "We lag behind neighboring nations by approximately 15 years. At best, our deficit is 10 years, but in more realistic assessments, we find ourselves trailing by 15 years behind neighboring countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others."

Economist Vahid Shaqaqi emphasized the urgency of achieving substantial economic growth within the current decade (2020-2030) to bridge the gap with the Saudi economy. He highlighted Saudi Arabia's transition into the third wave of knowledge, characterized by significant shifts toward a knowledge-based economy and the integration of wealth-generating elements like virtual technologies, smart systems, green initiatives, and renewable energies. In contrast, Shaqaqi lamented that Iran remains stuck in the second wave.

Journalist Ihsan Badaghi highlighted significant disparities in education and healthcare between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Citing the PIRLS test results, Badaghi pointed out that Iran ranked poorly among 57 participating countries, only outpacing Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, and South Africa. In contrast, Saudi Arabia

demonstrated better performance. While Saudi Arabia aims to boost its population by 50% by 2030, Iran faces criticism for its restrictions on tests for fetal disabilities and limited access to contraceptives. Despite these challenges, some Iranian politicians continue to label Saudi Arabia's leadership as reactionary and uninformed.

These perspectives underscore the entrenched discontent among Iranian elites regarding their country's economic and social conditions. Conversely, there is not only admiration but also a stark realization of the significant gap between Iran and Saudi Arabia's economic development. Given the prevailing circumstances, this sentiment is coupled with a sense of despair regarding the possibility of bridging this gap in the short term. In alignment with elite opinions, societal sentiments also lean toward acknowledging Saudi Arabia's advancements, as evidenced by the substantial support for various development and pioneering projects in the kingdom, with some garnering nearly half a million likes (refer to Table 1).

Table 2 highlights key development projects and topics concerning Saudi Arabia that have garnered likes from Iranians across various websites and social media platforms.

Table 2: Iran's Social Media Responses to Key Development Projects in Saudi Arabia

Topic	Number of Likes
Development projects in the kingdom — the Mukaab: Golden cube-shaped project in Riyadh.	476,000
The Line: The world's most sophisticated city in Saudi Arabia.	112,125
The assets of the Saudi Investment Fund have reached a substantial value of \$600 billion.	17,560
Saudi Arabia asserts its exclusive rights alongside Kuwait in the Durra field.	14,482
An article by Dr. Mohammed Alsulami, head of the Rasanah Institute, was featured on the Asr Iran website under the title "Competing Models in the Middle East."	1,450
The Jeddah meeting on Ukraine: the DW account on Instagram. ⁽⁸⁾	4,773

Source: Prepared by the researcher

Policies and Economic Planning for the Future

Quoting a comparison with the effectiveness of Saudi economic policies, Hujjat Mirzaei, a faculty member of the Economics Department at Allameh Tabataba'i University, remarked, "Making the right decisions in managing the economy could enable us to achieve Saudi Arabia's current level in 15 years. However, if we make mistakes, our conditions could deteriorate to a level worse than Pakistan's within a year and a half."

Mirzaei aligns with the economic expert Siamak Ghasemi, asserting, "Even if everything in Iran changes today, prioritizing development and lifting all sanctions, according to World Bank data, it will take 15 years to reach the current economic level of Saudi Arabia and 13 years to reach Turkey's level. To be frank, bridging this gap seems increasingly improbable."⁽⁹⁾

In addition to economic policies and future strategies, the Iranian Saham News website applauded Saudi Arabia's minister of tourism for his efforts to bolster the tourism and investment sectors with a hefty investment of \$800 billion over 10 years. Conversely, the Iranian Ministry of Tourism's initiatives primarily focus on ensuring tourists have unrestricted access to the internet without website blockages, alongside attempts to dissuade the Intelligence Organization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from leveraging tourists as bargaining chips. The following table showcases comments from Iranians expressing admiration for Saudi leaders and their policies on Iranian websites, reflecting significant engagement from Iranian audiences.

Table 3: Comments by Iranians Expressing Admiration for Saudi Policies on Iranian Websites

Comment	Number of likes
He (the crown prince) is transforming Saudi Arabia into a global power while we continue to support proxies.	3,781
Salute to their patriotic ruler who thinks well of the consequences and final outcomes of all matters.	359
Mohammed bin Salman is one of the best living diplomats of our age.	143
Salute to the Saudi ruler who is adept at planning and thinking of his country's interests.	16
O God. We have a lot of love and respect for Mohammed bin Salman. ⁽¹⁰⁾	30

Source: Prepared by the researcher

Professor Mehdi Bazuki of Allameh Tabataba'i University criticized Iran's failure to realize its long-term economic objectives as outlined in the 20-year vision document. He emphasized that Iran aimed to become the leading power in Southwest Asia but had not achieved this goal. Instead, the gap between Iran and countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey and Azerbaijan had widened. Bazuki also highlighted the shortcomings of investments made by the National Development Fund, suggesting that its members should study the management of similar funds in countries like Norway, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.⁽¹¹⁾

Indeed, these funds are among the world's most successful and sizable sovereign wealth funds. Saudi Arabia's ambitious plan to elevate the fund's wealth to \$2 trillion by 2030 underscores its strategic vision. In contrast, Iran's National Development Fund is depleted annually to support government expenditures, leaving only a few billion dollars in reserves. This stark contrast highlights a clear paradox in the economic management and policies pursued by the two nations, particularly considering Iran's status as a major oil producer.

Trade With Advanced Industrialized Nations

Several Iranian economists and researchers have lamented the limited volume of their trade with major industrial nations renowned for exporting technology, such as Japan and China, compared to Saudi Arabia. This lament is amplified by the absence of trade with Western European countries and the United States since the reimposition of US sanctions in 2018.

Abolfazl Karimi, an Iranian researcher specializing in Arab world affairs, highlights a stark reality: while the economic exchange between Saudi Arabia and Japan surged to over \$33 billion in 2021 and soared to approximately \$47 billion in 2022 — a notable 42% increase — Japan's total exports to Iran in 2022 amounted to less than \$50 million. This paltry sum is even less than trade between two major firms, let alone countries.⁽¹²⁾

Another economist, Ehsan Soltani, a researcher and economic advisor, underscores this trend, stating that Iran has experienced a significant setback in global trade compared to its regional counterparts. This decline, which began four decades ago, is reflected in Iran's foreign trade volume, projected to be less than a quarter of that of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE in 2022.

Regarding trade with the world's second-largest economy, China, the Iranian newspaper Payam Eghtesadi notes, "The trade volume between Iran and China has risen from \$14.8 billion at the time of concluding the 25-year agreement to \$16 billion." Meanwhile, during the same period, Saudi Arabia's trade volume with China surged from \$87 billion to \$114 billion. This significant contrast speaks for itself. No more clarification is needed.

In the same context, Mahmoud Sadri, a journalist at Arman-e-Emrooz newspaper, noted, "The total trade between Saudi Arabia and Iran could potentially reach 300 billion dollars, with a target figure of \$500 billion in the future. This significant trade volume encompasses energy purchases, exports of services and

technology and aligns with fulfilling China's considerable interests in energy procurement and exportation of goods.⁽¹³⁾

Currency Stability and the Social Happiness Index

Surprised by the substantial decline in the value of the Iranian currency and its adverse effects on the quality of life of Iranians in recent years, one social media user expressed astonishment in a post on Twitter, giving an illustrative example, "With 100,000 Saudi riyals, one can buy a BMW car, whereas with 100,000 Iranian riyals, it's only enough to inflate the car's tires."

In a comparison highlighting the contrasting fortunes of their respective nations, Mahmoud Sadri, a journalist with the Iranian newspaper *Arman-e-Emrooz*, expressed astonishment at the vast disparity in stability and happiness levels between Iran and Saudi Arabia. He remarked, "According to the latest reports of the World Happiness Index, Iran ranked 101st, while Saudi Arabia ranked 30th."

Political and Economic Independence

According to university professor Majid Muradi, there is a stark realization that challenges the long-held Iranian slogans of hostility toward the United States and ridicule toward Saudi Arabia for its perceived subservience to the United States. Muradi reflects, "For many years, we have been shouting the slogan of death to America and mocking Saudi Arabia by saying that it is subservient to America, but when we look carefully, we see that we have practically become subservient to America." He further explains that Iran finds itself in a position where it seeks to appease the United States to access its frozen assets in South Korea for civil purposes, contrasting with Saudi Arabia's stance, which has cultivated political independence through a strong economy. Muradi emphasizes the practical impact of economic strength on political independence, suggesting that Iran's weak economy has compromised its autonomy despite its slogans of defiance against global powers.⁽¹⁴⁾

Investment Climate and the Disparity in Exploiting Resources

In the view of Davood Souri, a prominent economist and former professor at Isfahan University,

"Foreign investment isn't just about money, which is abundant in Saudi Arabia. It's about science, expertise, management, and integration into the global production chain of goods, services, and international luxury!; the attractive business environment. That's what Saudi Arabia desires, but we lack it in Iran and seem uninterested. May God protect our country from ignorance and falsehoods."

Peyman Molavi, an economist and university professor, emphasizes, "Saudi oil sales reach \$326 billion annually, translating to \$27 billion monthly or \$876 million daily, while we struggle to retrieve our funds from the International Monetary Fund."⁽¹⁵⁾ He contrasts this with Iran's loss of \$4.5 trillion from oil sales due to sanctions. Regarding the mining sector, Molavi notes, "Saudi Arabia has invested \$50

billion in mining over the past two years. Riyadh aims to boost mining revenues from the current \$17 billion to over \$60 billion by 2030.”

In the same context, Siamak Ghassemi, an economic expert, remarks, “While a group stands in line in Iran to spread the news of the release of \$7 billion of Iran’s funds frozen in South Korea, last year, the UAE and Saudi Arabia began launching direct investments in South Korea worth \$40 billion. Last year, Saudi Arabia’s oil revenues were approximately \$1 billion dollars per day, meaning that these \$7 billion are Saudi Arabia’s revenues in one week. Oh, Iran! How poor you have become so that \$7 billion is an achievement for you.”⁽¹⁶⁾

It is evident from the above that Iranian elites are keenly interested in the economic conditions of their neighbors, particularly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They acknowledge, albeit with some regret at their own circumstances, the stark disparities between their own economic reality as an oil-rich state and the significant economic and developmental progress made by their western neighbor, Saudi Arabia. This comparison highlights differences in long-term economic planning, as well as disparities in societal prosperity and happiness. Furthermore, this comparison underscores the extent of Iran’s dependence on the West despite its promotion of resistance policies and aspirations for political and economic independence. In contrast, it emphasizes the kingdom’s remarkable ability to wield influence on the international stage and achieve a level of independence that eludes Iran.

Opinions and Responses to Religious and Cultural Issues

These include the following:

Orientations of the Clerics

Before the Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal, Iran’s clerics used to take a hostile position toward Saudi orientations, linking these to US and Zionist schemes. However, this deal has brought about a palpable shift in the positions of the clerics, with Iranian Friday prayer leaders describing the Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal as a means of unifying the Islamic world and putting aside differences.

The Friday sermon in Iran serves as a prime example of this shift, given its wide circulation among concerned preachers across the country, with it reflective of the government’s policies and orientations.⁽¹⁷⁾ In a recent Friday sermon delivered by Hojatoleslam Hassan Zumi, he warmly welcomed the agreement with Saudi Arabia, emphasizing that the enmity between Iran and Saudi Arabia only served to benefit the United States and Israel. He accused the previous government, led by Rouhani, of damaging Iran’s relations with its neighboring countries while praising the current revolutionary government under Raisi for pursuing a policy of good neighborliness. Furthermore, the Friday prayer leader of Golestan highlighted that the Saudi-Iran agreement symbolizes the regional strength of Islamic Iran and represents a defeat for foreign-backed opposition forces. He underscored that the agreement serves the interests not only of Iran and Saudi Arabia but also

of the entire region and the broader Islamic world. In his Friday sermon, Hojatoleslam Hassan Turabi emphasized that the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia represents a significant setback for both the United States and Israel. This sentiment was echoed by Hojatoleslam Ismail Kazemi, who further highlighted the defeat of internal and external saboteurs.⁽¹⁸⁾ Meanwhile, other preachers underscored that if implemented effectively, this agreement could mark the inception of the “union of the Islamic world.”⁽¹⁹⁾

At the Islamic Unity Conference this year, Hojatoleslam Shahriari highlighted the significance of Iranian-Saudi cooperation. He described the resumption of political relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran as a crucial development that has sparked hope among Islamic reformers. Shahriari emphasized that both political-ideological schools have set aside conflict in favor of cooperation, leading to influential actions in this regard. He also commended the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for its new approaches and religious discourse leaning toward openness.⁽²⁰⁾ Hojatoleslam Mohsen Haidari, a member of the Assembly of Experts, attributed the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to the marginalization of what he referred to as the “Wahhabi” movement in its stronghold.⁽²¹⁾

Thus, hardline clerics are on the same page in the context of the Iranian government’s course of action. They consider the agreement to be one of the accomplishments of the revolutionary government and that the deterioration in relations with neighboring countries was caused by previous governments. Therefore, it is probable that the clerics will maintain their support for the agreement as long as the ruling elite perceives it as a solution to many of Iran’s political, economic, and social challenges. However, if the Iranian government opts not to proceed with it, there is a likelihood that hardline clerics will retract their support. Each stage of this process comes with its justifications from within, reflecting a system of conjectural and expedient Islamic legal corpus aimed at bolstering legitimacy and reinforcing the incubators of emulation (taqlid).

Expressing Admiration for Reforms Related to Women and the Youth

In the same vein, Iranians have acknowledged the influence of the Saudi model on their society, particularly after witnessing the significant advancements and progressive reforms implemented by the Saudi government. These reforms, particularly those pertaining to the youth and women, such as granting women the right to drive, access to stadiums and employment in various sectors without strict dress codes, have resonated with Iranian women. This comparison between the Saudi and Iranian contexts has placed pressure on the Iranian ruling elite. As a response to internal discontent, particularly in the wake of events like the killing of Mahsa Amini and subsequent protests by youths and women against the government’s policies, Iran sought a truce with Saudi Arabia. This truce aimed to appease internal dissent and maintain a similar religious and jurisprudential framework, albeit with adjustments in literature and discourse. The following table illustrates some of the dynamics involved in this context.

Table 4: Comments of Iranians Expressing Rage at Their Economic and Social Conditions Compared With Saudi Arabia

Comment	Number of likes
O, my sister, put on your hijab (in a mocking tone).	1,170
We are preoccupied with the hijab and with which foot we should enter the bathroom.	886
I wish I were a Saudi citizen.	74
We are now fighting for a lock of hair.	8
We will reach the day whereon Iranians will mount on camels (for transportation) due to those officials. ⁽²²⁾	23

Source: Prepared by the researcher.

Standing Up to Extremism and Radicalism

Similarly, on the Saudi front, there was a noticeable crackdown on all forms of intellectual and religious extremism. This crackdown effectively curtailed hate speech, declarations of takfir and the marginalization of minorities, religions and sects to a significant extent. This strategic approach exerted pressure on the Iranian side, serving as an inspiration for its populace. Therefore, in response to certain clerics' actions within the seminary, such as issuing excommunications and excluding dissenters, Iranians found themselves compelled to adjust or refine their rhetoric to align with the rationality of Saudi religious discourse in its updated form.

The Impact of the Saudi Development Model on Iran's Home Front — Key Points

The rivalry between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran, as two regional powers in the Middle East, has intensified the reciprocal scrutiny of domestic developments in both countries. This rivalry has impacted internal public opinion, leading to various comparisons drawn between the two nations based on the issues highlighted in the competing countries through international and local media outlets. There are several points of convergence between Iran and Saudi Arabia, including their economic capabilities, geographical expanse, religious significance, and the conservative nature of their societies. These intersections fuel societal discussions, as living conditions in both countries are presumed to be similar. Consequently, the greater the disparities, the more fervent the debate becomes. Iranians often gravitate toward comparing conditions in their own

country to those in neighboring Gulf states, particularly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The competitive backdrop between Iran and Saudi Arabia accentuates the unique impact of news originating from or pertaining to Riyadh. This is because the internal dynamics within the kingdom are relatively settled, with society enjoying safety and stability for decades, coupled with significant advancements under the Vision 2030 initiative in recent years. Conversely, the internal battle in Iran remains distinct, as Iranian society has grappled with worsening conditions over the decades. At the grassroots level, there is prevailing dissatisfaction and resentment among Iranians regarding declining living standards and the political choices that have led to confrontation and hostility with numerous countries worldwide.

The Decline of Iran's Official Narrative Regarding Saudi Arabia

In the official Iranian narrative, its internal agenda and external relations are framed within the context of the ongoing confrontation with foreign powers, chiefly the United States, which seeks to dismantle Iran by toppling the current theocracy and installing a subservient government akin to the Pahlavi era. Despite facing sanctions, Iran has asserted itself significantly in the international and regional arenas. Within this narrative, Saudi Arabia is depicted as a key player aligned with the Western plan to undermine Iran. The country is portrayed as a hub of terrorism which plots against Iran. According to the official Iranian narrative, Saudi Arabia acts as an agent of the United States, backing extremist groups and Iranian opposition factions abroad and participating in alliances aimed at destabilizing Iran.

The Iranian ruling establishment had long propagated a false and inaccurate narrative about Saudi Arabia. However, recent developments within the kingdom have significantly eroded this narrative. The changing discourse among Iranians, both in comments and writings within Iran, signifies a shift away from the state-controlled narrative. This shift marks an end to the ruling establishment's grip over public opinion regarding Saudi Arabia and its ability to shape policies that are hostile to the kingdom.

In the recent period, particularly after the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia undertook several significant actions that underscored a clear shift in its relationship with the US administration. A prominent example was its refusal to comply with President Joe Biden's request to increase oil production, followed by its agreement to reach a deal with Iran itself, a deal brokered by China, a primary competitor of the United States. These decisive moves affirmed that Saudi Arabia's priorities in advancing its national interests are genuine and not merely rhetoric. This development unsettled the official Iranian narrative, which had long portrayed Saudi Arabia as closely aligned with the United States, attempting to conceal its own failures while downplaying the significance of Saudi accomplishments by attributing them solely to

Western support. Furthermore, the cessation of media hostilities, a direct outcome of the Saudi agreement, compelled Tehran to refrain from framing its internal challenges as part of foreign schemes, particularly those involving Saudi Arabia. In contrast, Saudi achievements across various sectors highlighted the root cause of Iran's predicament: flawed internal and external policies. This reality starkly contrasts with the official Iranian narrative, which consistently attributes all of its problems to external actors.

Indirect Leverage Over the Iranian Political System

In societies facing challenges, discontent typically arises, but when individuals compare their circumstances to those of similar societies with favorable conditions, their dissatisfaction deepens. This leads to heightened resentment toward their political leadership, whom they hold accountable for their plight. In this context, the ongoing successes in Saudi Arabia will likely exacerbate societal tensions in Iran. The Iranian political system will struggle to find flaws, especially with the extensive coverage of Saudi achievements in the global spotlight, facilitated by technological advancements and diverse media sources. Furthermore, some of these achievements directly impact Iranians, particularly during their visits to the kingdom for Hajj and Umrah, where they witness significant developments in the organization and provision of services. Sporting events involving teams from both countries, such as the match between Saudi Arabia's Al-Nassr football club and Iran's Persepolis, also provide opportunities for Iranians to witness the manifestations of Saudi accomplishments firsthand, alongside interactions with international footballers such as Cristiano Ronaldo.

Social media will remain the largest medium for the expression of Iranian public opinion in response to ongoing Saudi developments, with most Iranians holding their leadership responsible for the country's problems. The challenge facing the Iranian establishment in this context is that it is still a prisoner of the first stage after the success of the 1979 revolution when it was at the height of its revolutionary enthusiasm. It presented a model drawing on moral and religious values that fight injustice and corruption and spread justice. It also promised the Iranians a better future than the situation they were living in under the rule of the shah. However, after four decades, the Iranian establishment has failed in all its promises, and the new generations have only witnessed the calamities of the current establishment. Even those who lived through the period of the monarchy yearn for its return with great sorrow. This does not mean that there are no critics of the kingdom in Iran. Still, their size at the popular level seems small compared to those who admire the Saudi development model. The following table illustrates some of these criticisms and the negligible levels of support received compared to the positive interaction in the previously presented tables.

Table 5: Comments of Iranians Angry at Saudi Arabia

Negative Comments	Number of Likes
Pilgrims head to Saudi Arabia and provide it with the budget it needs.	168
Saudi Arabia managed to devour the money of Muslims through its ancient cube-shaped Kaaba. And now it plans to devour the money of non-Muslims.	83
We will head to the embassy to close it.	22
Again, Saudi Arabia behaves rudely.	3
Whatever advancements it achieves, Saudi Arabia will remain the cradle of terrorism and ISIS.	1
We have reached a point where we moan about what is happening in a tiny state on the map.	14
They don't build eternal paradise; they just build a good cage.	360
We don't look enviously to Saudi Arabia because they house the Kaaba and the Prophet's grave. Let them go to hell. We will build 2,000-3,000 shrines. ⁽²³⁾	17

Source: Prepared by the researcher.

In light of this, the Saudi model is poised to become an indirect external factor in potential future protests in Iran if the ruling elite continues pursuing its failed political approach and fails to enact meaningful changes to address the country's longstanding economic challenges. This situation mirrors the dynamics of the Cold War era and the clash of systems between the Soviet Union and the United States. While Vision 2030 embodies the Saudi dream of progress and prosperity, Iranians are grappling with the realities of daily life and remain apprehensive about an uncertain future.

A Card to Force Political Reform and Change the State's Orientations

The current developments raise the stakes for reform within Iran, not limited to the "reformist" movement but encompassing all factions advocating for

change. The worsening situation and escalating problems prompt the emergence of voices calling for a balanced foreign policy to normalize relations with the West to alleviate sanctions and integrate Iran into the global economy, enabling the implementation of stalled economic programs and development plans. It is plausible that the “reformist” movement could capitalize on Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy shifts, particularly toward the United States, as leverage against “hardliner” factions. The “hardliners” may react by either co-opting these options or adopting more uncompromising stances to maintain control and perpetuate their narrative of blaming foreign powers for Iran’s predicament. However, such reactions could lead to long-term repercussions. In this context, the Saudi model indirectly influences the Iranian political landscape.

Emulating the Saudi Model and Achieving Potential Benefits

While Iran grapples with a multifaceted internal crisis, including deteriorating living conditions and strained relations with global and regional powers, the ruling establishment may be influenced by the pragmatic Saudi model. There is a growing recognition of the need to rationalize policies, governance and economic planning, driven by internal aspirations and the desire not to fall behind Saudi Arabia, which has surged ahead in all indicators. This shift could be facilitated by a reformist orientation at home, emphasizing precise scientific planning and development as a means to address Iran’s current predicament. However, implementing an economic simulation of the kingdom’s model would come at a significant cost for the Iranian government. Iran’s hostile policies limit its ability to diversify partnerships, and sanctions impede access to knowledge and modern technologies crucial for development. Furthermore, the government remains captive to an ideology that hampers progress and development.

Possible Impact on the “Hardliner” Discourse

The inspiring Saudi model, coupled with recent religious experiences and comprehensive social reforms in Saudi Arabia, will exert continued pressure on both the Iranian government and its people. This pressure underscores the need for Iran’s religious elites and seminary to rationalize religious discourse and consider embracing radical and profound reforms akin to those witnessed in Saudi Arabia. Such reforms prioritize development, societal renaissance, the well-being of citizens and women’s rights over religious radicalism and divisive confessionalism.

Conclusion

In the Iranian sphere, perceptions of Saudi Arabia tend to be largely positive among both elites and the general populace, despite the presence of a minority holding more extremist views rooted in ideology or sectarianism. The most prominent aspects of this perception can be summarized as follows:

- **Attractive, influential model:** In recent years, Saudi Arabia has garnered significant regional attention, including from Iran, owing to its notable strides in

internal development and its affirmed regional and global stature. Moving forward, it is anticipated that Saudi influence within Iran, both among its elite and the general population, will persist. This is attributed not merely to rhetoric but to tangible developments, positioning the kingdom as an indispensable regional power and a focal point for global interests. A potential catalyst for further shifts in Iranian attitudes toward Saudi Arabia could come from initiatives such as facilitating tourist visits for Iranian youths or inviting Iranian influencers to attend cultural events like Riyadh Season or exploring historical sites such as Al-Ulla. Observers anticipate that the positive image of the kingdom could gradually seep into Iranian literary and cultural expressions, including short stories, films and series, provided there is a degree of receptiveness from the Iranian government toward such voices.

■ **The stereotype of Saudi Arabia among Iranians has changed:** The perception of Saudi Arabia among Iranian elites appears to be undergoing a significant shift, with many expressing admiration for the kingdom's modern approach to governance and strategic planning. This newfound admiration is characterized by a neutral perspective, free from the influence of the Iranian government. The recent restoration of relations between the two countries has provided Iranians with a platform to voice their opinions more openly, liberated from the authoritarian constraints and propaganda that previously shaped their views of Saudi Arabia. This shift in perception reflects Iranians' aspirations for modernity and a desire to break free from ideological constraints imposed on society and individuals.

■ **A bigger role for alternative media outlets:** Undoubtedly, social media platforms and unofficial media channels have played a pivotal role in spreading news about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and comparing its policies with those of the Iranian government. These platforms have become instrumental in shaping perceptions of the kingdom, particularly since they operate outside the realm of the state's control. Furthermore, these channels facilitate interaction between individuals both within and outside Iran, including exchanges between Iranian and Saudi elites. This digital interaction is anticipated to continue to grow, driven by the kingdom's continued progress and widespread impact. Simultaneously, Iranians have a keen interest in closely monitoring Saudi Arabia's progress and current affairs, viewing it as a means to exert pressure on the government through various media platforms.

■ **Credibility and reach:** Opinions and viewpoints regarding developments in Saudi Arabia are voiced by various individuals, including experts, specialists, former government officials and activists on social media platforms, alongside ordinary citizens. This collective expression underscores the widespread awareness and engagement with Saudi Arabia among a significant segment of Iranian society. The resonance of these perspectives from within a competing state holds substantial significance, particularly given their alignment with the notable advancements witnessed by the kingdom over the past decade. Saudi Arabia's strides in

national development and the consolidation of its regional and global stature are underscored by credible data and media coverage, enhancing the credibility and reach of these viewpoints.

■ **Exposing the development gap between Saudi Arabia and Iran:** Experts and elites have articulated their perspectives on Saudi Arabia's developments, often juxtaposed with the situation within Iran, revealing a significant developmental contrast between the two regional states despite their shared regional prominence and resources. While the kingdom has surged toward a future marked by prosperity, meeting the aspirations of its populace and playing a constructive role in advancing regional stability and progress, the Iranian government has adhered to an unrealistic approach, resulting in harsh living conditions for its people. Moreover, Saudi policies have bolstered its regional standing and global image, positioning it as a hub for international conferences. In contrast, Iran's policies have led to isolation, increased sanctions and internal unrest, exacerbating political instability and straining the country's budget with burdensome foreign policies.

In conclusion, restoring relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran has provided Iranians with a more realistic perspective on Saudi Arabia. The newfound openness has allowed for a candid assessment of the kingdom's developments, contrasting these with Iran's complex living conditions. As internal admiration for the Saudi model grows in Iran, Saudi Arabia's influence on the Iranian arena, albeit indirect, becomes increasingly significant. The kingdom's policies and achievements have become a source of embarrassment for the Iranian government. In a few years, Saudi Arabia has ascended to become the largest regional player, a pivotal actor, and a desirable regional partner for major powers. Externally, it has demonstrated independence and diversified partnerships, in contrast to Iran's alignment with Russia and China. This admired policy may incentivize Iran to reconsider its own behavior and emulate Saudi Arabia's approach to resolving issues and pursuing economic goals. Consequently, the Saudi model could serve as a potent pressure point on the Iranian government, prompting potential shifts in its domestic and foreign policies. Failure to adapt may lead to significant internal crises and a diminished standing on the regional and international stage.

Endnotes

- (1) "Margins More Important Than Main Text: Message of Peace Meeting in Iran," *Sad Online*, July 23, 2023, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://2u.pw/hJqt5Cy>, [Persian].
- (2) "A Great Victory for Saudi Arabia: Productive Discourse; The Achievement of the Jeddah Meeting for the War in Ukraine," *Iranian Diplomacy*, August 8, 2023, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://2u.pw/NxlLUm1>, [Persian].
- (3) "What Happened in China Deal 2023?" *Sariolghalam*, July 3, 2023, accessed January 24, 2024, <https://2u.pw/SIKigMR>
- (4) "Bin Salman Wants to End the War in Ukraine," *Aftab*, August 10, 1402 HS, accessed January 23, 2024, <https://2u.pw/AO9ITl>
- (5) Sadegh Zibakalam (@sadeghZibakalam), X post, June 19, 2023, 8:20 a.m., accessed, January 23, 2023, <https://2u.pw/YUVbNrv>, [Persian].
- (6) Hatricknews (@Hatricknews), "The Saudi Arabia TV expert compared the quality of the grass field and the pictures of the Persepolis-Al-Nasr game at Azadi Stadium with 30 years ago in Saudi Arabia," *Instagram*, September 20, 2023, accessed October 1, 2023, <https://2u.pw/CSfYYtQ>, [Arabic], [Persian].
- (7) "What Happened in China Deal 2023?" *Sariolghalam*, July 3, 2023, accessed January 24, 2024, <https://2u.pw/SIKigMR>
- (8) Picopry (@picopry), "Bringing Cristiano Ronaldo and Karim Benzema to Saudi Arabia is part of this Saudi project without the need for oil!" *Instagram*, June 13, 2023, accessed October 1, 2023, <https://2u.pw/GxUW4Mr>, [Persian].
- Mohamad Baztab (@mohamad.baztab), "Saudi Arabia shocked the world!!! What do you think?" *Instagram*, June 21, 2021, accessed October 1, 2023, <https://2u.pw/dvQ2uYn>, [Persian].
- Akharinkhabar (@akharinkhabar), "Arabistan" statement: 'Arash Square' is related to it and Kuwait East," August 3, 2023, accessed October 1, 2023, <https://2u.pw/Ru0XlFC>, [Persian].
- gunesh.news, "Head of a Saudi Think Tank: Iranians Lack the Development of Saudi Arabia," *Instagram*, August 2, 2023, accessed May 18, 2024, <https://2u.pw/g3uaPFC>, [Persian].
- DW (@dw_persian), "The leaders of Kyiv have high expectations from the meeting in Jeddah," *Instagram*, August 5, 2023, accessed October 1, 2023, <https://2u.pw/cs00rp2>, [Persian].
- (9) "A Sad Fact/ Ghasemi: Iran's Economy Will Take 15 Years to Reach Today's Economy of Saudi Arabia," *Khabaronline* June 22, 2023, accessed January 23, 2023, [Persian].
- (10) Picopry (@picopry), "Bringing Cristiano Ronaldo and Karim Benzema to Saudi Arabia."
- (11) "Pazuki, Economist: From April 2022 Until Now, the Value of the National Currency has Halved," *Darya Kanar*, June 23, 2023, accessed January 24, 2024, <https://2u.pw/RWPvuqM>, [Persian].
- (12) "Japan - Saudi Arabia and Our Empty Hands!" *Insaf*, July 23, 2023, accessed January 24, 2024, <https://2u.pw/0lrcAmO>, [Persian].
- (13) "Limited diplomacy," *Arman-e Emrooz*, October 2023, accessed January 23, 2024, <https://2u.pw/Nes0mxI>
- (14) "The Disparity Between the Value of our Riyal and the Saudi Riyal Is Glaringly Vast," *Sedaye-Joya*, July 23, 2023, accessed January 24, 2024, <https://2u.pw/gSOXDv9>, [Persian].
- (15) "This Short Text Shows the Difference Between Iran and Saudi Arabia," *Bahar News*, November 3, 2023, accessed January 23, 2024, <https://2u.pw/9potXhi>, [Persian].
- (16) Siamak Ghassemi (X platform, @SiamakGhassemi), X post, May 30, 2023, (last modified date: 10:48 AM a.m., May 30, 2023), accessed January 24, 2024, <https://2u.pw/emlwuLO>, [Persian].
- (17) Moatasem Sediq Abdullah and Mohammed Alsayed Alsayyad, "Friday Prayers in Iran Religionizing Politics and Politicizing Religion," *Rasanah IIIS*, March 11, 2020 accessed October

29, 2023, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/?p=7713>.

(18) "The Reaction of the Friday Imams of the Cities of Tehran Province to the Agreement Between Iran and Saudi Arabia," *Qatra*, March 15, 2023, accessed October 26, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3ZmuZYK>, [Persian].

(19) "Imam Juma Gorgan: The Agreement Between Iran and Saudi Arabia Will Lead to the Formation of the Union of Islamic Countries," *Mehr News*, March 14, 2023 accessed October 25, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3JNcORg>, [Persian].

(20) "Hojjatul Islam Shahriari at the 37th International Islamic Unity Conference: The Beginning of Relations Between Iran and Saudi Arabia Promises Stability, Peace and Lasting Cooperation in the Region," *ISNA*, October 1, 2023 accessed October 31, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3FAH3hL>, [Persian].

(21) "Member of the Assembly of Experts: Wahhabism and Salafism Have Been Abandoned Even in Saudi Arabia," *Hawza News*, October 1, 2023, accessed October 31, 2023, <https://bit.ly/40IAIAo>.

(22) Picopry (@picopry), "Bringing Cristiano Ronaldo and Karim Benzema to Saudi Arabia. Baztab, Saudi Arabia shocked the world."

(23) Ibid.

GREEN SAUDI ARABIA: THE RISE OF A RENEWABLE ENERGY SUPERPOWER

Dimitri Zabelin

Geopolitical Strategist, Pantheon Insights

Abstract

This research article explores Saudi Arabia's ambitions and efforts to secure its position in the new global energy paradigm. It analyzes key features of its post-oil strategy including hydrogen, minerals extraction and processing as well as solar as mechanisms to fortify and enhance its geopolitical influence. The global landscape is changing rapidly, with geopolitical forces influencing economic decision-making. Supply chains are being reorganized for security rather than purely for efficiency. While economic optimization remains a goal, political security is taking precedence. This shift has significant financial, political, and economic consequences. The global move towards renewable energy will require significant resources, particularly metals like lithium, cobalt, and nickel. Studies predict dramatic demand increases, ranging from sevenfold to 51-fold by 2040 compared to 2020. Saudi Arabia is actively positioning itself as a leader in the global renewable energy supply chain. Saudi energy endeavors coincide with a critical juncture for the global economy, marked by geopolitical tensions, energy transitions, and technological advancements. Vision 2030 serves as the blueprint for Saudi Arabia's clean energy initiatives, setting ambitious targets and fostering a supportive environment for investment and innovation. Success in this transition is crucial for achieving the economic and geopolitical goals outlined in Vision 2030, propelling Saudi Arabia into a new era as a leader in clean energy and a more influential player on the world stage.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, renewable energy, green hydrogen, diversification of energy, transition minerals, the Middle East, the post-oil era

Introduction

Saudi Arabia has been exerting relentless efforts through its ambitious initiative for sustainable energy to bolster its global and regional position by securing a foothold in the global supply chain for renewable energy. This is coming at a time when the global economy is at an inflection point in geopolitics, energy, and technology. States concerned about being left out or falling behind are increasingly deploying government-backed capital to ensure they are at the very least at par neck-with global developments. This is referred to as industrial policy: a strategic effort by a government to encourage the development and growth of specific sectors or industries within its economy.

As security takes precedence, governments are playing a bigger role in industries with geostrategic importance by providing accommodative financing conditions. Whether in the form of interest-free loans or tax incentives, global leaders are looking to wield a number of policy levers to accelerate their position in this multi-dimensional race. In industries with high costs and long-term horizons for returns in an environment of high interest rates, the private sector will need a push — or a pull. Legislative measures like the US Inflation Reduction Act and European Chips Act are just two of many examples of targeted industrial policies. Sovereign wealth funds have also proved to be a popular conduit through which the state can inject capital to advance their industrial policies. Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) is one such example of a state leveraging its capital to advance geostrategic objectives. It states that its international strategic investments are meant to “solidify Saudi Arabia's position on the global scene as an impetus for the advancement of ventures for things to come. Therefore, this pool comprises a combination of long-term investments, which aim at establishing strategic partnerships through direct and indirect investments. This contributes to expanding the kingdom's global reach and impact, with a focus on industries of the future.”⁽¹⁾

Vision 2030 has been instrumental in directing capital and magnetizing foreign investment by providing a clear direction for the kingdom's geopolitical and energy-related aspirations. The PIF has a target to develop 70% of the kingdom's renewable energy capacity by the end of the decade. The National Renewable Energy Program (NREP) is part of Vision 2030 and is the action plan that translates the country's renewable energy ambitions into concrete steps and projects. As I will demonstrate below, these objectives are instrumental in driving the kingdom's energy diversification efforts. In the current environment, articulating a clear objective with strategic value becomes an imperative. The tectonic plates of geopolitics are shifting, and with it, new economic fault lines are being created. Supply chains are being re-organized not for economic maximization, but geopolitical optimization. That is not to say that economies are deliberately being inefficient for the sake of it, but rather they are prioritizing political secu-

rity now in a much more pronounced way than before, and this shift has major implications financially, politically, and economically.

Resources necessary for the energy transition are characterized as “transition metals,” and these are primarily lithium, cobalt, nickel, and copper. These are all expected to sharply increase in demand with the shift toward energy transition-focused policies. A sharp rise in demand for these resources, combined with an inelastic response amid shifting supply chains creates notable upside risks to inflation. Or specifically, “greenflation,” and that leaves markets, economies and states vulnerable to the disruptions caused by a rapid energy shift transition. In anticipation of these risks, Saudi Arabia is deploying proactive measures to shield itself against policy-related volatility. If executed properly, Riyadh’s transition policies would not only reinforce its regional standing but make it a central node in the emerging global energy paradigm. Doing so will pay geopolitical dividends and ensure that the kingdom will remain a global powerbroker long after oil ceases to be its main source of economic dynamism.

Riyadh’s Renewable Revolution: A New Era of Geopolitical Strategy

Minerals, Metals and Mining

While there is significant uncertainty about the outlook for the energy transition, one fact remains certain: it will be a resource-demanding transition. The IMF estimates that copper, nickel, cobalt and lithium will be most impacted by the global energy transition. Whereas minor supply shortfalls (around 10%-20%) are anticipated for metals like nickel, critical components like dysprosium, a chemical element atomic and an earth element used to improve magnets used in electric motors, could face significant shortages exceeding 70% of projected demand.⁽²⁾ Forecasting expected demand and subsequent impact on price is predicated on the time horizon and type of scenario. Specifically, achieving net-zero by 2040 or 2050 will have radically different implications for the price of key transition metals. The range of estimates varies. The World Bank expects a sevenfold increase in lithium demand by 2040 compared to 2020.⁽³⁾ In a net-zero emissions scenario, the IMF projects a 25-fold increase in lithium consumption by 2050 compared to 2020.⁽⁴⁾ And finally, the IEA presents a range of possible future trajectories. In its Sustainable Development Scenario (SDS), demand significantly exceeds supply, with lithium demand being 51 times higher than today’s levels by 2040. Applying the IEA’s SDS to the rest of the transition metals of cobalt, nickel and copper, we see a radical increase in demand:

- 21x increase in cobalt demand by 2040 compared to current levels
- 9.7x rise in nickel demand by 2040 compared to current levels
- 6.2x rise in copper demand by 2040 compared to current levels

Most of the minerals and metals necessary for the energy transition are concentrated in regions and countries with elevated political risks. With lithium,

in 2022, Australia produced approximately 61,000 metric tons, accounting for 49.91% of global production, with Chile at

39,000 metric tons or 31.81% of the global total. Nickel is primarily dominated by Indonesia, which produces 1.6 million metric tons a year, accounting for 61.07% of global mine production, with the Philippines far behind at 330,000 metric tons, representing 12.60% of the global total. Cobalt, the most concentrated — and one of the most critical — transition metals is located in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The central African country produces approximately 175,000 metric tons, accounting for 78.83% of global production. In second place is the Philippines at 30,000 metric tons, or 13.51% of the global total. And finally copper, with Chile having produced 5.9 million metric tons in 2022, accounting for 27.45% of the global production, with Peru at 2.7 million metric tons or 12.59% of global production.⁽⁵⁾

To avoid getting the short and expensive end of the supply chain, Saudi Arabia is strategically tapping into its rich reserves of minerals and precious metals to pave the way for a future that is less dependent on oil. The kingdom has recently reassessed the value of its mineral wealth, elevating it from \$1.3 trillion to an impressive \$2.5 trillion.⁽⁶⁾ The kingdom is investing heavily in its future, committing \$200 million to a comprehensive geological mapping project and the creation of a resource database, building on a previous \$500 million survey investment.⁽⁷⁾ This updated valuation brings to light substantial deposits of gold, copper and zinc, which are expected to play a crucial role in the challenging energy transition ahead, where the demand for such resources is likely to exceed supply.

The landscape for mining — both figuratively and literally — is harsher than expected. As *The Economist* correctly pointed out: “Unfortunately, miners are also investing a lot less than they once did, as their latest set of earnings, released this week, confirm. The world’s biggest miner, BHP, last year spent less than half of what it did a decade ago. In part that is for sensible reasons: miners are rightly conscious that theirs is a boom-and-bust industry. The last time they splashed out, during the China-led bonanza of 20 years ago, a spectacular crash followed.⁽⁸⁾” This lack of flexibility in the supply chain, coupled with pressure on publicly traded mining companies to adhere to ESG metrics, is likely to result in higher metal prices as demand outpaces slow-moving supply. The green push is creating a multifaceted supply problem that will likely translate into higher commodity prices for mining companies. And the geography and geopolitical topography will complicate the process and potentially push commodity prices — and shares of companies specializing in their extraction — higher. According to *The Economist*, “Governments are not helping” mining industries exposed to the energy transition. But this is not entirely true.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is steering the country to become a major resource hub, mirroring its pivotal role in the global oil market. Saudi Arabia is actively encouraging investment in its mining sector with sev-

eral key measures. This is on top of the kingdom's deal to become a minority shareholder in Brazilian mining giant Vale's \$26 billion-valued copper and nickel unit. According to the Financial Times: "A joint venture between Saudi Arabian Mining Company and the country's Public Investment Fund will own 10% of the division, which supplies materials required for the transition to cleaner energy."⁽⁹⁾ Saudi Arabia is looking to position itself as a key node in the battery supply chain through the creation of lithium processing facilities. By 2030, it is anticipated that the worldwide need for lithium will surge to over four times the levels seen in 2022, growing from 720,000 metric tons to an estimated 3.1 million metric tons.⁽¹⁰⁾ However, the projected lithium supply globally in 2030 is unlikely to satisfy this burgeoning demand. Saudi Arabia's aggressive industrial policy, channeled primarily through generous allocations from the PIF, outpaces even the substantial expenditures of the United States' Inflation Reduction Act. The kingdom has established a dedicated Ministry for Industry and Mineral Resources, reduced license fees and royalties, and overhauled its mining laws to mirror the investor-friendly frameworks of countries like Australia, Botswana, and Canada. These reforms have significantly cut down the time to obtain mining licenses to just two months, contributing to a 20% increase in active licenses since 2022, now totaling 2,300.⁽¹¹⁾

Hydrogen

Saudi Arabia's forays into stimulating fossil-fuel alternatives is also yielding results. Analysis suggests that venturing into hydrogen production could further reduce Saudi Arabia's reliance on oil revenues. Since it uses natural gas as a source, blue hydrogen can leverage the kingdom's existing natural gas infrastructure and supply networks for scaling production and transportation. The kingdom's National Hydrogen Strategy, which aims to produce and export 4 million tons of clean hydrogen annually, positions Saudi Arabia as a potential global leader in the hydrogen sector. The PIF is actively supporting this vision, with notable investments including a \$5 billion partnership with Air Products to establish a green hydrogen production facility in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, in October 2022, the PIF led a groundbreaking initiative by auctioning 1.4 million tons of carbon credits, establishing the first voluntary carbon market in the region and marking a significant step toward environmental sustainability. Saudi Arabia's hydrogen strategy also aligns with global environmental goals, notably the Paris Agreement targets that complement multilateral efforts to shift away from fossil fuels.

Fundamentally, there are two types of hydrogen. The first is blue hydrogen. This is produced from natural gas with Carbon Capture, Utilization and Storage (CCUS) technology. CCUS captures the carbon emissions produced during hydrogen creation, making it a cleaner option than traditional natural gas. Compared to traditional hydrogen production from natural gas (which vents the CO₂), blue hydrogen captures a significant portion of the emissions, making it a cleaner option. The majority of hydrogen production (over 90%) is derived from fossil fu-

els, resulting in 10 kilograms of carbon dioxide for every 1 kilogram of hydrogen produced.⁽¹²⁾ The second is green hydrogen. This is produced by splitting water using electrolysis, and is powered by renewable sources like solar or wind.

At this moment, the technology for blue and green hydrogen is still in its nascent stages. China sits at the top of the global hydrogen game, holding the title of both the world's largest producer and consumer. China's hydrogen production has been steadily climbing, with an impressive annual growth rate of 6.8% since 2010.⁽¹³⁾ By 2020, this resulted in a staggering 33 million tons produced. However, a closer look reveals a reliance on traditional methods. Currently, over 60% of China's hydrogen comes from coal gasification, a process with a significant carbon footprint. Steam methane reforming (SMR) contributes another 20%, while industrial by-products make up 18%. Green hydrogen, the cleanest production method, accounts for less than 1% of China's total output. However, the small output means there is ample room for a country to position itself as the vanguard of it.

Saudi Arabia's entry into the hydrogen market is not just an economic diversification effort but a strategic geopolitical maneuver. As the world pivots toward cleaner energy sources, hydrogen is pegged as a critical player in the global energy transition. The market for blue hydrogen in 2024 is approximately \$24.29 billion and is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11.82% to \$47.74 billion in 2030.⁽¹⁴⁾ But this is not happening in a vacuum. Other gas-rich countries like the United States and Canada are tapping into their abundant resources to start hydrogen production to meet their own emissions goals. Industrial policy is driving the market so to speak — with commercialization projects already underway. Honda will introduce a hydrogen fuel cell vehicle that can also be recharged, making it the first Japanese automaker to bring the technology to market.⁽¹⁵⁾

The kingdom's ambitious hydrogen projects, such as the one in NEOM — a \$500 billion mega-city project — exemplify its commitment. The NEOM project aims to power the entire city with renewable energy, primarily solar and wind, making it a beacon for green hydrogen production. This project is not just about producing hydrogen but also about demonstrating the feasibility and scalability of green hydrogen as a cornerstone of a sustainable economy. The green hydrogen facility in NEOM is expected to produce 650 tons daily, fueling various sectors from transport to heavy industries. This in turn will showcase the versatile application of hydrogen in decarbonizing a broad spectrum of economic activities.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia's strategic geographical location, bridging the East and the West, offers an unparalleled advantage in the global hydrogen market. It can potentially become a central hub in the hydrogen supply chain, exporting to both Asian and European markets. Europe's aggressive shift toward clean energy and Asia's massive energy demand present Saudi Arabia with a significant export market for its green hydrogen. In addition to green hydrogen, Saudi Ara-

bia's approach to blue hydrogen is equally strategic. The kingdom plans to capitalize on its vast reserves of natural gas and existing infrastructure to scale up blue hydrogen production. By integrating CCUS technology, Saudi Arabia aims to make its blue hydrogen among the cleanest and most competitively priced on the market. This dual approach of pursuing both blue and green hydrogen allows the kingdom to cater to diverse market needs and transition phases toward a hydrogen economy. Existing supply chains will likely be key to facilitating a more seamless energy transition.

Currently, most crude oil is transported via large tanker ships or pipelines. Pipelines designed for liquid hydrocarbons (crude oil) are not directly suitable for hydrogen gas because its small molecule size and high diffusivity raise issues such as embrittlement of metal and potential leaks. However, some existing natural gas pipelines could be more easily adapted or retrofitted for hydrogen transport, especially for blue hydrogen, which could be blended with natural gas in existing pipelines to a certain extent without significant modifications. For tanker ships with green hydrogen, it is more likely to be transported as a liquid or bound to a carrier medium (like ammonia or Liquid Organic Hydrogen Carriers (LOHCs)). This would almost certainly necessitate repurposing oil tankers with additional modifications. For instance, transporting hydrogen as liquid ammonia (a method gaining traction due to easier liquefaction compared to hydrogen) would require tanker ships with refrigerated storage tanks designed for ammonia. In other words, changes to new energy markets and the supply chains that support them will require not just altering the type of cross-border flows but the vehicles that facilitate them.

Solar

Saudi Arabia is aggressively expanding its solar energy capabilities as part of its broader strategy to diversify its energy sources and reduce carbon emissions. The country's National Renewable Energy Program (NREP) aims to generate 50% of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030. As recently as November 2023, ACWA Power, a local utilities company, signed an agreement with Water and Electricity Holding Company (Badeel) to build the world's largest single-site solar-power plant in Al Shuaibah area, Makkah Province.⁽¹⁶⁾ The solar-power facility is expected to start operations by the end of 2025, with a generation capacity of 2,060 megawatts. The Gulf region as a whole and Saudi Arabia particularly already boasts among the world's lowest solar-power tariffs. The key reasons why the Gulf region has lower tariffs than countries like India include lower cost of dollar denominated long-dated financing, lower expected return on equity (ROE), higher solar resources leading to higher capacity utilization factor (CUFs), no corporate taxes or duties on equipment and power sales and negligible land cost for solar projects.⁽¹⁷⁾ Government support in this regard is instrumental in creating accommodative finance conditions for domestic production and scaling through magnetizing foreign investments.

ACWA has 44% of its equity value owned by PIF, and received non-interest-bearing loans while it raises more equity capital. As a result, this state-backed effort through sovereign wealth funds is helping to lower the cost for customers and simultaneously expand capacity. This has helped make the levelized cost of Saudi solar energy, which takes into account both construction and operation of a power plant, among the lowest in the world.⁽¹⁸⁾ The kingdom's solar energy investments in this regard also complement its green hydrogen initiative. By using renewable energy for electrolysis, it would result in a significantly reduced carbon footprint and complement cross-initiative transition projects. The lower cost of solar energy has helped to make industrial-scale deployment more feasible. Looking at a broader timeframe, the cost of solar panels has seen a significant drop. Between 2010 and 2020, the price plunged by about 85%.⁽¹⁹⁾ Fourteen years ago, the average cost of solar PV panels was approximately \$2 to \$3 per watt. Then around 2020, the price fell to around \$0.20 to \$0.60 per watt.* Saudi Arabia's total solar installed capacity grew from 14 megawatts in 2012 to 439 megawatts at the end of 2021, representing a 3,064% increase in solar capacity in under a decade.⁽²⁰⁾ The kingdom is aiming for 40 gigawatts of solar photovoltaic (PV) capacity by 2030.

Countries and companies are recognizing the long-term economic benefits and energy security enhancements that solar power offers. As a result, solar energy is rapidly becoming a central pillar in national energy strategies, spurring further innovation, driving down costs, and catalyzing the transition to a more sustainable and resilient global energy system. The relentless expansion of the solar market signals a paradigm shift in energy production, where solar power stands at the forefront of meeting the world's growing energy needs sustainably. The kingdom's push toward a sustainable and diversified energy mix necessitates a reliable energy storage system to ensure grid stability and continuous power supply, especially during periods when solar irradiance is low. One of the pivotal steps taken by the kingdom toward this direction is the inclusion of battery storage in its solar projects. Although specific regulatory frameworks focusing on energy storage are still evolving, the Saudi Electricity Company (SEC) and the Electricity and Cogeneration Regulatory Authority (ECRA) have started to lay the groundwork for incorporating energy storage within the national grid. The Al-Jouf PV project, for instance, includes plans for battery storage, showcasing the country's commitment to stabilizing its renewable energy output. This project reflects a broader strategy to adopt energy storage systems that can mitigate the challenges posed by the variable nature of solar energy, thereby ensuring a more stable and efficient electricity supply. Against this backdrop, strategic partnerships and government policies are also playing a crucial role in accelerating solar adoption, with initiatives aimed at reducing carbon footprints and achieving net-zero emissions targets gaining momentum. This holistic approach reinforces the solar market's growth trajectory, ensuring its central role in the global transition to renewable energy.

Moreover, the government has introduced several incentives to attract investment in the renewable energy sector. These include long-term Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) with favorable terms for renewable energy producers, which provide financial stability and encourage investment. Additionally, the government has streamlined the process for obtaining permits and licenses for renewable energy projects, significantly reducing the bureaucratic hurdles that developers might face. Key regulations facilitating the solar energy transition include the introduction of net metering policies, which allow residential and commercial solar energy producers to feed excess electricity back into the grid, receiving credits in return. This policy encourages the adoption of solar energy by making it more economically viable for individual consumers and businesses. Another significant regulation is the establishment of the Saudi Arabian Standards, Metrology and Quality Organization (SASO) guidelines for solar equipment. These guidelines ensure that all solar panels and related equipment meet high standards of quality and efficiency, safeguarding the long-term sustainability of solar energy investments in the country.

Reshaping Regional Relations

Saudi Arabia's investments into this frontier technology will likely yield economic and geopolitical dividends. Many of its regional neighbors are major gas and oil producing states such as Iraq, Kuwait and Iran — and the kingdom's energy transformation may inspire/put pressure on other countries in the region to follow in Riyadh's footsteps. Fostering a technological ecosystem has shown to stimulate innovation, attract international tech firms, and encourage the growth of domestic startups. In parallel, foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows from global firms looking to tap into a regional market would likely also grow. To complement these modernization efforts, Saudi Arabia has begun to gather data directly from company and investors financial statements to calculate FDI. While the majority of inflows came into the country's eastern oil-producing region in 2022, non-oil investment has also been growing in recent years.⁽²¹⁾ Energy reform, diversification and adherence to standardized regulatory protocols and accounting will make the Saudi market more transparent and magnetize additional FDI. Furthermore, the publicity and image of a major, oil producing nation leading the charge in hydrogen production in a region characterized by fossil-fuel powered economies would enhance Saudi Arabia's international standing. By leading in the adoption and development of frontier technologies and updating its data systems and regulatory regime, Saudi Arabia can enhance its soft power.

From a strategic geopolitical perspective, the concentration of hydrogen production, investment and innovation alone would give Riyadh significant geo-energetic leverage. Access to the kingdom's technological hub in sustainability, funding environment and strategic partnerships is a tool Riyadh could use to selectively extract concessions from regional states. In the case of more complex relations like Iran, diversification is as much a defense strategy against domes-

tic obsolescence as is also a proactive policy against a regime that depends on oil. While the transition itself will likely be marred by delays and technical difficulties, the geopolitical dividends of a first-mover advantage are far too valuable to be left for others to take.

As Saudi Arabia diversifies its energy portfolio, its role within the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its influence over global oil markets are likely to evolve. While the kingdom may reduce its reliance on oil revenues, its position as one of the world's largest oil producers will allow it to continue to play a pivotal role in shaping global oil supply and pricing strategies. However, its investment in renewable energy could lead to a shift in OPEC's long-term strategy, potentially incorporating a broader focus on energy stability and sustainability. Saudi Arabia's transition could alter the geo-energy calculus in the region. Historically, Saudi-Iranian relations have been partly defined by their roles as major oil producers. As Riyadh moves toward becoming a leader in renewable energy and potentially green hydrogen, it may shift the parameters of regional power. This does not necessarily mean a reduction in tensions but could lead to a reconfiguration of how energy resources influence regional politics. For instance, competition might increasingly focus on technological advancement in renewable energy and sustainability measures rather than solely on oil production and prices.

Strategically, Saudi Arabia's investment in renewable energy and the resulting economic diversification could enhance its security posture. By reducing its vulnerability to oil market volatility and potential sabotage of oil infrastructure — a concern given past attacks attributed to Iran — Saudi Arabia lessens potential leverage Iran might have. Furthermore, as Saudi Arabia develops its renewable energy infrastructure, it might also invest in fortifying these assets, creating a new security dynamic in the region.

Global Influence

As a major oil producer, Saudi Arabia's investment in renewable energy and related technologies could position it as a leader in the global energy transition. The strategic shift could enable Saudi Arabia to shape international norms and standards for renewable energy, much like it has with oil pricing and policies. It could leverage its investments in renewable energy to advocate for global energy policies that favor its economic and strategic interests, positively influencing international trade regulations, environmental standards, and even security alliances. This would not only ensure its long-term energy security but also give it a key role in shaping the future of global energy markets, much in the way it has with oil for over half a century.

In emerging and developing economies, Saudi Arabia will be able to leverage its renewable energy capabilities to partner with emerging and developing countries, especially those in Africa and Southeast Asia. By offering access to affordable and clean energy technologies, the kingdom could play a critical

role in their economic development, in turn securing favorable trade terms and diplomatic support on international platforms. Countries like the DRC, which boasts 70% of the world's cobalt, could strengthen their ties with Saudi Arabia through trade agreements.. This would complement Riyadh's increasing interest in playing a more prominent role on the African continent, which, coupled with its strategic pivot toward renewable energy, suggests a potential for positive bilateral relations with African nations rich in critical minerals and renewable energy potential.

Within the Asia-Pacific, Japan and South Korea are spearheading the drive toward clean energy solutions utilizing blue hydrogen technology. This momentum is fueled by a confluence of private sector investments and proactive government initiatives in the region. Saudi Arabia's \$362 billion worth of exports — of which close to 80% come from mineral oils and fuels and products of their distillation — roughly 10% goes to Japan and South Korea, respectively.⁽²²⁾ Leveraging existing trade networks with Saudi Arabia's economic and financial opening of its country will further catalyze intra-regional adoption of alternative forms of energy while solidifying geopolitical ties in a new energy paradigm. Regional uncertainty vis-a-vis China and tensions in the South China Sea will continue to be a global risk and could dampen trade.

Across the EMEA region, Europe stands out in its active pursuit of blue hydrogen development as a cornerstone strategy for achieving its stringent low-carbon energy objectives. The European Union's Hydrogen Strategy underscores the critical need to ramp up production of both green and blue hydrogen, aiming to fulfill its decarbonization targets and cultivate a robust hydrogen market. Of the \$45 billion worth of exports Saudi Arabia sends to Europe, approximately 44% goes to France, Italy, and the Netherlands.⁽²³⁾ Europe's hydrogen strategy and Saudi Arabia's efforts can complement each other in several ways. Firstly, Europe's emphasis on blue hydrogen aligns with Saudi Arabia's abundant natural gas resources, which can be used to produce hydrogen through SMR and CCS technology. Saudi Arabia's existing infrastructure in the energy sector can therefore help make it a key supplier of blue hydrogen to Europe.

Geopolitically, this partnership offers the kingdom an opportunity to diversify its economy away from its heavy reliance on oil exports. By tapping into the growing hydrogen market in Europe, Saudi Arabia can reduce its dependence on oil revenues and mitigate the risks associated with fluctuations in oil prices and demand. Moreover, strengthening ties with Europe through hydrogen cooperation can enhance Saudi Arabia's geopolitical influence and stability. By becoming a reliable supplier of low-carbon hydrogen, Riyadh can strengthen its diplomatic relations with European countries, particularly those with which it already has a strong trading relationship and who are major players in regional politics such as France. This could lead to closer political alliances and increased investment opportunities for Saudi Arabia in Europe's clean energy transition initiatives. Additionally, as the global energy landscape shifts towards clean-

er alternatives, Saudi Arabia's participation in the hydrogen market can help bolster its international standing as a proactive player in combating climate change.

Looking Ahead

Saudi Arabia's ambitious foray into the global clean energy landscape presents a compelling case study. By weaving itself into the fabric of renewable energy supply chains, the kingdom seeks to solidify its regional dominance and establish itself as a key player in the post-oil era. This strategic shift, however, presents a complex chessboard with both opportunities and challenges. The successful execution of Vision 2030 and its associated renewable energy targets can significantly diversify the kingdom's economy and mitigate its reliance on a finite resource like oil. Additionally, proactive measures to secure a foothold in the burgeoning clean energy market hold the potential to establish Saudi Arabia as a central node in the new energy paradigm. This, in turn, could translate into significant geopolitical influence and secure the kingdom's position as a global powerbroker well into the future.

However, the path forward is not without hurdles. The success of Saudi Arabia's clean energy gambit hinges on its ability to navigate several key challenges. First, ensuring the efficient and transparent execution of large-scale renewable energy projects remains paramount. Second, fostering a robust domestic clean energy ecosystem, complete with skilled labor and cutting-edge research and development, will be critical for long-term sustainability. Finally, navigating the complexities of a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape and managing the potential disruptions of greenflation require strategic foresight and agility. The world is watching with keen interest to see if this strategic gambit will secure a sustainable future for the kingdom, or whether it will be checkmated by unforeseen complexities in the new energy chessboard.

Endnotes

- (1) "Investment Pools," PIF, accessed April 21, 2024, <https://www.pif.gov.sa/en/our-investments/investment-pools/>.
- (2) Lukas Boer, Andrea Pescatori, Martin Stuermer, Nico Valckx, "Soaring Metal Prices May Delay Energy Transition," IMF, November 10, 2021, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2021/11/10/soaring-metal-prices-may-delay-energy-transition>.
- (3) *The Role of Critical Minerals in Clean Energy Transitions* (Paris: IEA, 2021), <https://www.iea.org/reports/the-role-of-critical-minerals-in-clean-energy-transition>.
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) "Why Geopolitics Will Matter for the Energy Transition," *Pantheon Insights*, February 5, 2024, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/44gkOnR>.
- (6) "Saudi Mineral Wealth Could Top \$1.3 Trillion Amid Kingdom's Aggressive Exploration Plan," *Arab News*, January 31, 2022, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3JxC7vW>.
- (7) "Saudi Arabia Launches \$207m Geological Mapping Project," *Trade Arabia*, May 28, 2023, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3Ud7EYY>.
- (8) "The World Needs More Critical Minerals. Governments Are Not Helping," *The Economist*, February 22, 2024, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4deOevG>.
- (9) Michael Pooler "Saudi Arabia Makes Mining Bet With Stake in Vale's Base Metals Division," *Financial Times*, July 28, 2023, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3xOiqxb>.
- (10) "Demand For Lithium Worldwide in 2020 and 2021 With a Forecast From 2022 to 2035," *Statista*, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3w6rUDI>.
- (11) "The World Needs More Critical Minerals."
- (12) "Cuts Costs for Capturing Carbon Dioxide, Essential for Producing Blue Hydrogen, by Half," *Hydrogen Central*, March 7, 2024, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4aVWX4o>.
- (13) Lina Li, Anastasia Steinlein, Ernst Kuneman, Jakob Eckardt, "Hydrogen Factsheet – China," *Adelphi*, April 2022, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3Wcbohu>.
- (14) "Global Blue Hydrogen Market," *Research and Market*, March 2024, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3WakoCp>.
- (15) "Honda to Sell Plug-in Hydrogen Vehicle in North America, Japan," *Autofinancenews*, February 28, 2024, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3UmD6UW>.
- (16) "Saudi Arabia Launches World's Largest Solar-Power Plant," *EIU*, February 17, 2023, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/44iVbrw>.
- (17) "India Unable to Compete With Record Low Solar Tariffs in Gulf Region," *Jimkresearch*, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3w6qSaM>.
- (18) "Saudi Arabia Has an Unlikely Solar Star," *The Economist*, January 4, 2024, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3UBcscg>.
- (19) "Research: Solar Panel Prices Are Dropping Without Sacrificing Quality," *Yale Climate Connections*, October 18, 2023, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3UvoXMW>.
- (20) Regan Slaymaker, "Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Solar Market Report," *Solar & StorageXtra*, March 6, 2024, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3UhK9Oi>.
- (21) Peshia Magid, "Saudi FDI Data Overhaul To Use Financial Statements Not Estimates," *Reuters*, February 1, 2024, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3JBtX5C>.
- (22) "Saudi Arabia (SAU) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners," *OECD*, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3UduShF>.
- (23) Ibid.

IRAN AND THE ROLE OF FACTIONAL GROUPS IN OPERATION AL-AQSA FLOOD: TOOLS AND POLICY OUTCOMES

Ali Bakr

Researcher on international relations

Abstract

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood was not a spur-of-the-moment action by Hamas; it was meticulously planned with strategic support. This operation marked a significant shift in the conflict between Hamas and Israel. Discussions on the Palestinian issue now revolve around the pre- and post-Al-Aqsa Flood phases. Examining Hamas' prior preparations and connections sheds light on Iran's role. Tehran strategically leveraged the operation, using its influence in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Iran's aim was to assert dominance in the region by orchestrating low-intensity escalations against the United States and Israel. This sent a clear message: Iran wields significant influence through its proxies, which it can activate or deactivate in alignment with its regional goals.

Keywords: Iran, Al-Aqsa Flood, Gaza war, Iranian militias, Hamas, Israel, United States, Hezbollah, Houthis

Introduction

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood marked a significant departure in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, particularly within the Palestinian-Israeli context, with its notable impact on local, regional, and global dynamics. This operation represented a transformative moment unseen since 1973 due to its far-reaching repercussions. Key aspects of the operation revolve around two central themes: Hamas' military capabilities and its remarkable preparedness in orchestrating a surprise attack and making strategic decisions of such magnitude. This naturally leads to an examination of Hamas' relationship with Iran and other regional actors. It is evident that Hamas, along with other Palestinian resistance factions, received substantial financial and military backing from Iran, which contributed significantly to their development and training, either directly or through coordination with Iran-affiliated paramilitaries in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Iran's role in enhancing Hamas' capabilities facilitated the large-scale attack launched on October 7, 2023, without direct consultation with Tehran. However, Iran swiftly sought to leverage the situation to bolster its own influence and position, even as it found itself drawn into a regional confrontation with the United States and Israel. This research article aims to dissect Iran's involvement in this process, exploring how it fits into Iran's broader regional strategy and the subsequent challenges, opportunities, and risks it poses to Iran's regional influence.

Iran's Relationship With Palestinian Factions and Hamas as Part of Its Regional Strategy

The Palestinian cause holds significant prominence within Iran's ideological narrative, with efforts spanning decades to make it a focal point of Iranian foreign policy. Over time, however, Iran has strategically transformed it into a valuable asset, aligning with its practical and pragmatic objectives. This evolution underscores the nuanced dynamics between Iran and the Palestinian cause, including the pivotal role Iran and its affiliated militias play in arming various Palestinian resistance factions.

The Significance of the Palestinian Cause for Iran

Since the initial aftermath of the occupation of Iraq in 2003, Iran recognized that the traditional strategy of regional power balance no longer aligned with its national security ambitions. The collapse of Iraq, a key component of this balance, left a significant strategic void in the region, prompting Iran to pursue a strategy of regional expansion. Iran began implementing this new strategy by establishing proxy entities beyond its borders, overseen by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which shares security, economic and political leadership responsibilities with the Iranian state. Through this approach, Iran effectively extended its military and political influence across the region. Furthermore, Iran capitalized on social and sectarian divisions, leveraging its support for various regional issues, notably the Palestinian cause and the "plight" of Shiite

populations “oppressed” by ruling regimes in countries such as Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Yemen. This rationale justified Iran’s involvement in these nations, seeking to exert greater political influence at a strategic level.⁽¹⁾

After 2003, discussions regarding the Palestinian cause at both regional and international levels inevitably involved navigating the intricate role Iran plays, which is steeped in controversy. Iran has consistently leveraged the Palestinian cause, often capitalizing on Israeli military actions against Palestinians and the substantial strategic support provided to Israel by Western powers, led by the United States. These dynamics have served to enhance Iran’s regional position and its influence across Arab and Islamic spheres. Iran has justified its involvement in the Palestinian cause by positioning itself against Arab political systems it labels as proxies of Israel and the West, criticizing Arab societies for their perceived failure to adequately support the Palestinian cause. Under the guise of resistance, Iran has crafted a comprehensive strategic framework, encapsulated in the Umm al-Qura theory (the Mother of Villages), in which it highlights various issues like the liberation of Palestine, justifies the formation of armed factions, and undertakes extensive media and political maneuvering. This strategy has resonated with certain segments of Arab societies, who increasingly view Iran as a champion of resistance. Furthermore, Iran has utilized the Palestinian cause to garner broad social support, capitalizing on its portrayal as a defender of an oppressed people’s just cause. This strategy has not only enhanced Iran’s legitimacy but has also elevated its special status and achievements within the regional and international arenas.

When discussing Iran’s relationship with Palestinian resistance factions like Hamas, it is essential to consider two distinct criteria:

■ The first criteria: the ideological and doctrinal dimensions that govern Iran’s ties with Shiite factions — adhering to the concept of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) and the supremacy of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. These factions operate within an ideological and sectarian framework aligned with Khamenei’s religious authority rather than primarily defending their own countries or territories. Instead, they serve an ideological agenda that transcends national borders. However, Iran’s primary objective appears to be related to achieving influence in regional countries by leveraging its ideological doctrine rather than genuinely advocating for improvement in the living conditions and rights of Shiites. This is evident in the challenging circumstances faced by Shiite populations in some regional nations, proving that Iran’s support may be more about geopolitical interests than genuine ideological solidarity.

■ The second criterion: the pragmatic and expedient dimension governing Iran’s relationships with certain factions that do not necessarily share its ideology. Despite ideological disparities, Iran has effectively expanded its influence by engaging with non-ideological, pragmatic groups such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and to some extent, the Houthis in Yemen. In countries like Yemen, Iran’s

involvement extends beyond ideological boundaries. Security vacuums resulting from the collapse of official security institutions and the rise of extremist groups have provided Iran with opportunities to exert influence. By collaborating with pragmatic factions, Iran aims to enhance its national security interests and wield broader influence over unfolding events in the region.⁽²⁾

Iran's Direct Support for Hamas

Hamas has been the recipient of direct support from Iran, as well as indirect assistance through affiliated factions in Iranian spheres of influence such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. It is unlikely that Hamas attained its missile and air capabilities solely through independent efforts. Instead of relying solely on their own resources, Hamas has formed strategic partnerships with armed groups and regimes. These partnerships, along with direct contributions from political entities and nations, have played a pivotal role in developing Hamas' capabilities. Hamas members have been provided with training opportunities and even the chance to obtain graduate degrees from countries such as Iran, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, Malaysia, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, Georgia, Russia, Armenia, and the United States.

This support has facilitated training for its personnel and enabled them to obtain advanced education in fields relevant to military technology. The following detailed tables shed light on the types of missiles and drones in Hamas' possession and how they were acquired, both within and outside Gaza, with considerable support from various parties, notably Iran.

Table 1: Hamas' Rocket Capabilities and Its Links to Iran

Name	Range	Original Manufacturer	Development
Fajr-3	kilometers 43	Iran	Undeveloped
Fajr-5	kilometers 75	Iran	Undeveloped
M302	kilometers 180	Syria	Undeveloped
Qassam-12	kilometers 12	Gaza with external support	Developed

Name	Range	Original Manufacturer	Development
Qassam-20	kilometers 20	Gaza with external support	Developed
S 55	kilometers 55	Gaza with external support	Developed
J-80	kilometers 80	Gaza with external support	Developed
M 75	kilometers 75	Gaza with external support	Developed
J-90	kilometers 90	Gaza with external support	Developed
A 120	kilometers 120	Gaza with external support	Developed
SH 85	kilometers 85	Gaza with external support	Developed
Ayyash-250	kilometers 250	Gaza with external support	Developed

Source: Hamas Missiles “Stunned” Israel... What Are Their Types and Military Capabilities?” *Sky News*, October 8, 2023, accessed April 30, 2024, <https://2h.ae/GfCp>. [Arabic].

The relationship between Iran and Hamas has been notably characterized by the development of drone capabilities, prominently showcased through the Ababil drone program. Beginning in the early 2000s, Tunisian engineer Mohamed Zouari underwent extensive training in Iran focused on drone manufacturing. Zouari successfully produced over 30 aircraft by 2008, although they were deployed in warfare against Israel only after 2014 due to technical constraints during their development phase. However, Israel responded aggressively to this advancement by targeting key figures involved in the program. Zouari was assassinated in Tunisia in 2016, followed by the assassination of Fadi al-Batsh in Malaysia in 2018. Israel also conducted operations targeting facilities within Gaza associated with drone development. Over 15 specialized engineers, trained in countries including Iran, Turkey and Iraq, were involved in advancing Hamas’ drone capabilities.⁽³⁾

Table 2: Hamas Drones and Iran's Involvement

Name	Missions	Original manufacturer	Development and construction
Ababil 1 or AIA		Reconnaissance	Main parts manufactured in Iran
Ababil 1 or AIB		Attack	Main parts manufactured in Iran
Ababil 1 or AIC		Suicide	Main parts manufactured in Iran
Shehab		Suicide	Gaza with external support
Zawi		Suicide	Gaza with external support

Source: "Including Al-Zawari... All You Need to Know About the al-Qassam Brigades' Arsenal of Drones," *Al-Arabi*, December 9, 2023, accessed April 30, 2024, <https://bit.ly/44Qdfcs>. [Arabic].

The Role of Proxy Actors in Enhancing Hamas' Military Power

There might be some ambiguity surrounding how Iran provided military support to Palestinian resistance factions. It is possible that many of the technological capabilities utilized by Hamas during Operation Al-Aqsa Flood against Israel, including missiles, drones and small submarines, were transferred across the Iraqi-Syrian border by local agents with allegiance to Iran. This hypothesis is supported by statements made by IRGC Air Force Commander Amirali Hajizadeh in 2021. Hajizadeh highlighted that Gaza and Lebanon were crucial frontlines in this conflict and emphasized Iran's role in enhancing their missile capabilities.⁽⁴⁾

A significant portion of the weaponry employed by Hamas, including missiles, drones and explosives, may have originated from Iranian factories situated within Syria and Iraq, areas where Iran holds considerable influence. Additionally, Iran likely dispatched a substantial quantity of logistical equipment necessary for drone production across the Iraqi-Syrian border. These supplies then would have most probably been transported to Gaza through tunnels or by sea routes.⁽⁵⁾

According to reports, Iran utilized the Iraqi-Syrian border to deliver direct financial assistance to both the Lebanese Hezbollah movement and Hamas. It has been estimated that Iran provided Hamas with over \$30 million per month, aiming to establish an extensive network of tunnels within Gaza. These tunnels were utilized by Hamas during Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and continue to be used in confrontations with Israel.⁽⁶⁾

It is worth noting that Iran played a significant role in facilitating the reconciliation between the Syrian regime and Hamas post-2017. Following this reconciliation, Iran actively worked to enhance the combat capabilities of Hamas fighters by organizing specialized training camps within Syria operated by armed factions. Additionally, Iran utilized land routes passing through Iraq to provide Hamas with advanced combat tactics, including air-to-ground combat maneuvers and military glider techniques. These tactics were reportedly employed during Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.⁽⁷⁾

Iran appears to have pursued a comprehensive strategy aimed at extending its influence across the coastal areas overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, which encompass strategic ports such as Latakia, Baniyas, Hamidiya, Tartus, and Beirut. Khatam-al Anbiya Construction Headquarters, an Iranian contracting firm linked to the IRGC, has been involved in constructing additional docks and enhancing facilities in these ports to facilitate the export of oil, phosphate, and gas. Furthermore, Iran has ventured into gas exploration projects in collaboration with Russian partners.⁽⁸⁾ Beyond mere transportation and energy supply objectives, Iran's control over ports and coastal regions in Syria and Lebanon serves broader purposes. These include achieving regional balance, establishing a deterrence theory vis-à-vis Israel, and notably, developing capabilities for groups like Hamas.⁽⁹⁾

It has been highlighted that Syria and Lebanon have established factories for manufacturing mini submarines, which have played a significant role in transferring technology, missiles and logistical equipment from their coasts to Gaza. Iran has supported numerous students to pursue studies in engineering, communications and related fields in countries like Turkey, Malaysia, and Tehran. Upon completion of their studies, these individuals return to work on military projects for Hamas, often with direct assistance from Iranians.⁽¹⁰⁾

The process of Iranian control has also facilitated the use of commercial ships to transport oil, phosphate, and goods from the Syrian coast to international waters. The IRGC has developed naval bases tasked with conducting landings in international waters, dozens of kilometers off the coast of Gaza. These landings serve to enhance the military and missile capabilities of Hamas. Military parcels have been dropped into the sea by IRGC forces, as well as by Syrian and Hezbollah forces using commercial ships. Corvettes belonging to Hamas' naval force, known as the Elite Force, retrieve such parcels and dismantle them at sea. The components are then transported to unmanned ships, submarines and miniature gliders, which disperse in various directions. Some components are directed toward sea tunnels ending in Gaza's coastal strip, while others are transported near Rafah through tunnels into Gaza.⁽¹¹⁾

Moreover, the ports along the Syrian and Lebanese coasts also play a role in enhancing Hamas' capabilities in various domains. These include providing support for paragliding activities, transporting equipment for tunnel digging, facilitating the passage of cyberwarfare tools, and conducting training in naval

landing operations and boat-based combat. Hamas effectively utilized these tactics during Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. According to many military analyses and intelligence reports, the operations carried out by Hamas, which involved air-to-ground, land-to-sea, and air-to-sea combat, were meticulously planned and executed in a highly professional manner.⁽¹²⁾

Iran's Role in the Attack Orchestrated by Hamas and Its Employment of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood

Undoubtedly, Iran's military assistance played a crucial role in enabling Hamas to execute the operation it conducted on October 7, 2023. During the initial hours of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, Hamas launched over 5,000 missiles that struck various areas of the occupied territories, including the Gaza Envelope and the outskirts of Tel Aviv. These missile attacks were coordinated with land, sea and air raids aimed at targeting camps and facilities within Zderot, Ashkelon, and other regions of the Gaza Envelope. Accompanying the missile barrage was the deployment of a significant number of drones, which served two primary purposes.⁽¹³⁾ Firstly, they were utilized for monitoring and reporting the movements of the Israeli army to the attacking Hamas forces. Secondly, some drones were employed in suicide operations targeting Israeli forces, specifically focusing on watchtowers in the Gaza Envelope area. This tactic aimed to maintain the element of surprise and confusion created by Hamas, further challenging the Israeli army's defenses.

The success of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood by Hamas was heavily reliant on a combination of technological advancements, aerial capabilities, and skilled personnel proficient in managing complex drone and missile systems. These assets have notably become more precise over time. Some of these drones were manufactured within Gaza, while others were transported to Gaza from outside sources via the sea or tunnels. Upon arrival, they were assembled by trained engineers, allowing Hamas to effectively deploy them in operations within Gaza.⁽¹⁴⁾

Cyberattacks played a crucial role in the success of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, disrupting thermal cameras and surveillance systems along the wall separating the Gaza Strip from Israeli settlements. Additionally, these attacks diverted Israeli cyber resources toward numerous government and security websites. Hamas has been actively investing in cyber capabilities since 2014, assembling a team of programmers and hacking specialists based in Gaza, as well as in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and Jordan. Their collective efforts directly contributed to the execution of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.⁽¹⁵⁾

Furthermore, Iranian support has played a significant role in enhancing Hamas' human and logistical capabilities in naval and coastal combat tactics. These capabilities, which include skills in infiltrating Israeli territory, conducting ambushes, and executing swift and decisive operations, were directly utilized during Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. Israeli intelligence reports have indicated that the elite naval force of Hamas was heavily involved in the operation, particularly in the storming of the military base at Zikim coast, known as Bhad 4. This

naval force executed rapid naval landings that caught the Israeli army off guard, contributing significantly to the confusion and disruption of its defenses.⁽¹⁶⁾

It is evident that the executing group involved in Operation Al-Aqsa Flood underwent rigorous training, attaining high proficiency levels in various fields such as paragliding, aerial combat (air-to-ground), cartography, intelligence analysis, and close combat. This training likely took place in nearby countries, possibly Syria, Lebanon, Iraq or Iran, among others. These training programs significantly contributed to the development of the attackers' capabilities and played a crucial role in the precise execution of the infiltration operation deep into Israeli territory.

Following Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip aimed at neutralizing Hamas, armed groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen entered a phase of controlled escalation targeting US and Israeli interests. In response, Israel conducted air-strikes on military sites associated with Iran and its allies in these nations. Notably, the Houthi militia in Yemen pledged full support for these actions and readiness to directly confront Israel. The Houthi group went beyond mere verbal expressions of support for the Palestinian cause and instead employed its military, naval and technological capabilities to launch effective attacks on ships and vessels affiliated with Israel, the United States and their allies in the Arabian Sea region. They also mobilized volunteers through mini-brigades for potential combat, even threatening to blockade the Bab al-Mandab Strait, if necessary, albeit mainly for propaganda purposes. Furthermore, the group utilized media channels to promote and enhance Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. It is now evident that the Houthi group receives substantial military and logistical assistance from Iran, particularly technology that is utilized in drone attacks and maritime operations near Yemen. This support extends to training provided to specialized groups affiliated with the Houthis, aimed at enhancing piracy capabilities and conducting sea landings. The actions of the Houthis have unfolded in tandem with Iran's increasingly assertive stance on this strategically significant conflict. Iran has capitalized on the security instability instigated by the Houthi group in the region, leveraging it to exert pressure not only on Israel but also on Western powers. These Iranian maneuvers are part of a strategy of controlled escalation designed to negotiate and maintain momentum in the ongoing geopolitical dynamics.⁽¹⁷⁾

In the context of Iranian strategic maneuvering regarding the Palestinian cause, Operation Al-Aqsa Flood serves as a significant component. Through this operation, Iran has conveyed several key messages, including:⁽¹⁸⁾

Promoting Iran's Clout From a Security Perspective

For years, Iran has positioned itself as the primary sponsor of the Hamas movement, presenting extensive support through both direct and indirect channels. This backing encompasses financial aid, training programs, rehabilitation efforts and the enhancement of combat and logistical capabilities, particularly in terms

of military equipment and technology. Through its support, Iran strategically leverages Hamas to advance its own overarching objectives, notably exerting pressure on Israel and Western powers. Additionally, Iran signals its dominance over the region's strategic security landscape, including Israel's security, through its alliances with local factions aligned with its interests.⁽¹⁹⁾

Unifying Battlefields and Strengthening Iran's Negotiating Position With the West

The relationship between Hamas and Iran is multifaceted, characterized more by strategic cooperation than a simple dynamic of subordination. While Hamas endeavors to enhance its capabilities, Iran strategically utilizes the group as a regional card to advance its own strategic objectives. Through its support, Iran has portrayed Hamas as part of the broader axis of resistance, spanning Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, capable of striking deep into Israeli territory. This narrative has been enhanced by references to the prophecies of Iran's supreme leader regarding the potential disappearance of Israel from the map. This narrative has been promoted to convince people in the region that Iran supports humanitarian and just causes. However, Iran has leveraged the Hamas card in nuclear negotiations with the aim of securing a truce with Israel to alleviate Western pressure and sanctions while also buying time for the advancement of its nuclear program — making it a *fait accompli*.⁽²⁰⁾

Undermining and Blocking a Two-State Solution

Iran staunchly opposes the concept of a two-state solution, viewing the Palestinian conflict through the lens of absolute right versus absolute wrong. For Iran, any resolution that does not entail the disappearance of Israel and the establishment of a State of Palestine is categorically rejected. The achievement of a two-state solution would effectively diminish Iran's leverage, as it has historically utilized the Palestinian cause as a pressure point at both regional and international levels. Iran strategically supports the idea of confronting and resisting Israel through its local factional allies and endorsed initiatives like Operation Al-Aqsa Flood to maintain strategic relevance and thwart the prospect of a two-state solution, which would impede Iran's ability to exploit the Palestinian issue for its own purposes.⁽²¹⁾

Throwing the Region Into Disarray and Limited Warfare

Through Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, Iran has showcased its capacity to induce regional turmoil and orchestrate limited conflicts through its network of local allies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. While Iran has asserted that it was unaware of the operation's timing and execution, its potential gains from it cannot be dismissed. Iran's role in nurturing armed factions in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon is noteworthy, as these groups have collaborated to enhance Hamas' capabilities and supply it with weapons. The execution of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood by Hamas demonstrated a high level of professionalism, suggesting the involvement and

support of external entities and sponsors, without which Hamas' limited resources would have rendered such an operation implausible.⁽²²⁾

Employing Normalization as a Justification for Interference in the Region

Iran utilized Operation Al-Aqsa Flood as a platform to amplify its criticisms against nations that normalized ties with Israel. The Iranian leadership, including the supreme leader, seized the opportunity after the military operation to condemn countries aligning with Israel, particularly Arab nations that had normalized relations. This stance aimed to highlight perceived complicity in Israeli actions against Palestinians and to undermine any potential peace efforts, including the notion of a two-state solution. By framing itself as a champion of the Palestinian cause and implicating certain Arab states as betraying it, Iran sought to discredit those nations and discourage further normalization with Israel, effectively employing media and social manipulation tactics. This maneuvering has drawn scrutiny from the Arab League, which accuses Iran of exploiting the Palestinian cause to undermine diplomatic efforts and potentially embarrass Arab nations considering normalization with Israel before their populations.⁽²³⁾

The Repercussions of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on Iran and Its Proxy Actors

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood shed light on the intricate conflict dynamics involving Iran and its proxies in the region. The scope of the battle extended beyond the borders of Palestinian territories, encompassing the broader region, particularly areas where Iran holds significant influence. The aftermath of this operation provides insight into the impact on Iran and its affiliated factions, which can be observed through the following factors:

Iranian Gains at the Expense of the Palestinians

■ Blocking the two-state solution and creating challenges to the normalization trajectory: Operation Al-Aqsa Flood along with the subsequent conflict in Gaza not only derailed the path of normalization — posing strategic, geopolitical and economic challenges for Iran — but also hindered the progress of the two-state solution. A coalition of Gulf countries, along with the United States and Turkey, is actively working on crafting a new mechanism to ensure the establishment of an independent Palestinian state and facilitate peace agreements. A two-state solution is perceived as a significant obstacle to Iran's exploitation of the Palestinian cause. As a result of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, prospects for advancing a two-state solution have been hindered, particularly in the short term. This setback is attributed to Hamas' ongoing commitment to combat, as well as the leadership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who represents an extremist faction within Israel. Moreover, the process of normalization between Arab countries and Israel has faced a fresh moral examination. Arab populations and societies have sharply criticized nations engaging in normalization, particularly in the wake of civilian casualties resulting from bombings and attacks in

Gaza. Consequently, countries in the region, especially those considering normalization, face a heightened moral dilemma in the upcoming phase.⁽²⁴⁾

■ **Iran extricated from the confrontation:** In line with its typical policy approach, Iran typically endorses militia attacks and operations while evading direct accountability. Strategically, Iran has extended its influence through similar attacks in Iraq, targeting US bases and interests through affiliated militias and replicating such actions in Syria. However, Iran often refrains from officially claiming responsibility for military operations and, at times, denies direct involvement altogether. While recent exchanges of attacks between Israel and Iran have escalated beyond the traditional shadow warfare, it is improbable that both nations will escalate to direct confrontation. Instead, they are likely to settle for the deterrence messages conveyed through previous attacks and revert to indirect engagement protocols. As Iran reinforces its indirect operations via its militias, Israel is expected to resume its covert activities within Iran's borders or spheres of influence. Additionally, Israel may urge the US administration to intensify economic and military pressures on Iran or to follow through on operations conducted inside Iraq. This could include airstrikes on sites along the Iraqi-Syrian border affiliated with the IRGC.⁽²⁵⁾

■ **A painful blow to Israel:** While Iran may not have been directly involved in the decision-making process behind Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, it undoubtedly played a significant role as a supporter of Palestinian resistance factions both before and after the operation. Strategically, the operation has underscored two fundamental dilemmas for Israel: the constraints posed by its narrow geographical area and the challenge of limited human resources. These dilemmas restrict Israel's ability to employ all warfare tactics and activate all deterrence options. For instance, Israel faces limitations in engaging in long-term conflicts extending beyond eight to 12 weeks. Moreover, Israel faces constraints in conducting ground invasions into Gaza for sustained occupation and clearance operations. Additionally, options for direct confrontation are limited due to spatial constraints and the high value placed on Israeli military and security assets. At the strategic level, the infiltration operation resulted in several significant repercussions, chief among them being the paralysis of the Israeli economy and its shift toward a wartime footing. This led to the halt of key sectors such as agriculture, industry, trade, tourism, education, and construction. Additionally, inflation worsened as the conflict persisted. Socially, there were effects such as reverse migration and widespread shock and terror among Israeli society, leading to a collapse of societal trust in Netanyahu's government and the perceived effectiveness of the military and security services.

The Palestinian armed groups that initiated Operation Al-Aqsa Flood gained an initial advantage over the Israeli military by launching a surprise attack and securing a significant bargaining chip: the prisoner and hostage card. This card constrained Israeli military action and limited its options for engaging with Gaza, particularly considering the presence of Israeli detainees there. A com-

prehensive Israeli ground invasion of Gaza became highly impractical due to the potential for significant casualties in a street-level conflict that the Israeli military was ill-equipped to handle. As a result, the attacking armed groups enforced a constrained level of confrontation, thereby diminishing Israel's available options.

Challenges and Future Prospects

As much as Operation Al-Aqsa Flood presented opportunities for Iran, it also posed significant challenges for Iran and its affiliated factions. These challenges can be outlined as follows:

■ **Restricting Iran's scope of movement:** Despite the heightened tensions during the initial stages of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, the escalation primarily aimed to enhance Israel's campaign against Hamas. Simultaneously, it sought to isolate Israel's adversaries, rendering them bereft of substantial support. The escalation suggests reluctance from the United States and other parties, even those aligned with Hamas, to engage in a full-scale regional conflict. The presence of US and European naval forces, alongside maneuvers conducted in regions like the Arabian Gulf, Mediterranean Sea and Red Sea, including the deployment of naval vessels and aircraft carriers, conveyed a singular and clear message: a robust deterrence against actors like Iran, Hezbollah, the Syrian regime, Iraqi factions, the Houthi militia or any other actor siding with Hamas. Israel's responses also prompted heightened alertness among these actors, reflecting their readiness for potential engagement. Concurrently, the United States aims to confine the conflict to a limited scale.⁽²⁶⁾

■ **Developing a strategy for conducting smart strikes against Iran-aligned militias:** Despite the prevailing state of equilibrium and relatively low-level escalation observed among most parties, whether aligned with Israel or Hamas, there remains the possibility for targeted strikes by Israel. Such strikes could form part of a strategic approach aimed at preempting and containing armed factions in the region. The rationale behind this strategy lies in the belief that leaving these factions unchecked could lead to their increased aggression and capability for future attacks. Consequently, conducting precise strikes to dismantle the infrastructure of these factions, targeting their bases, planning centers, mobilization hubs and leaderships, whether in Iraq, Iran, Syria or Lebanon, emerges as a crucial consideration in the post-conflict period following the events in Gaza.⁽²⁷⁾

■ **The possibility of Iran losing its sway in Palestine:** It is improbable that Israel will cease its efforts to counter Hamas even after the conclusion of the Gaza conflict. This could involve the continuation of a comprehensive strategy or the implementation of subsidiary tactics, including swift operations and targeted assassinations of Hamas leaders globally. Israel may also conduct strikes within and beyond Gaza to preemptively disrupt Hamas' capabilities before it can launch another devastating attack, as seen in Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. Israel

is likely to justify its actions as self-defense to the international community, leveraging support from the United States and Western nations. If Israel succeeds in neutralizing Hamas and other resistance factions, Iran stands to lose a significant ally in the Palestinian arena, potentially diminishing its leverage in its indirect conflict with Israel.⁽²⁸⁾

A two-state solution, despite facing opposition from various quarters including Israel's right-wing, Hamas and Iran, is anticipated to resurface as a key component of international efforts to resolve conflicts in the region. This potential revival could limit Iran's ability to leverage the Palestinian cause for its own strategic interests. While Iran has historically capitalized on the Palestinian cause to incite regional tensions, it is essential to recognize that its motivations may not solely stem from genuine support for the Palestinian cause. Persian nationalist aspirations, coupled with the desire to expand influence through Shiism and issues related to oppression against Shiites and Muslims globally, also factor into Iran's engagement with the Palestinian cause.

■ **New prospects for the Israel-Iran face-off:** It is anticipated that following the conclusion of operations in Gaza, or possibly during these operations, Israel will initiate a response targeting not only Gaza but also the Syrian regime and Hezbollah. This response is likely to involve direct strikes and significant assassinations targeting leaders from Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Iran who are based in Syria and Lebanon. Military, political and training sites, as well as headquarters of various leaderships in these countries, may be among the primary targets. There could be concerted efforts to revitalize discussions about overthrowing the Syrian regime through international mobilization, given the Syrian regime's perceived indirect ties to ongoing conflicts. These efforts may also entail a response targeting Iran, its interests and allies within Iran and Iraq. Israeli intelligence reports have previously suggested the exploitation of the Iraqi-Syrian border by Iran for the transfer of weapons, technology, equipment and missiles to Gaza via land and sea routes. Consequently, Israel might consider a multifaceted response, including airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities and IRGC headquarters, targeted assassinations using drones, cyberattacks, retaliatory strikes and operations along the Iraqi-Syrian border. Additionally, there could be heightened international efforts to isolate Iran and its associates.

Iran perceives its affiliated factions as instruments to advance and escalate certain agendas, utilizing them to exert pressure and assert influence over Gulf states, Israel, and Western nations. Consequently, tactical pathways for these factions may involve supporting political regimes closely aligned with Iran, such as those in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. These factions are likely to resist any attempts to alter the political, security and economic dynamics within these countries, as such changes could undermine their influence. For instance, their involvement in suppressing the October Revolution in 2019 in Iraq serves as a notable example, along with their current efforts to maintain the state's monopoly and protect the Syrian regime and Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon. In

essence, the roles of these factions are expected to remain within the confines of this regional context.

In the context of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, it seems improbable that Iran will directly urge Hezbollah, the Syrian regime or factions near the Israeli border to intervene. However, this stance is likely temporary and signals the initiation of a new phase of post-war escalation. Essentially, Iran is expected to maintain its leverage over ideologically aligned factions like Hezbollah and pragmatically affiliated groups such as Hamas. These actors will likely remain under scrutiny, with the potential for repeated pressure tactics against Israel in subsequent stages.

Iran could leverage these factions to exert pressure on Western nations and their allies in the region. As external pressure on Iran rises, it is anticipated that Iran will reciprocate by exerting pressure on the West's interests and its regional allies, spanning Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This may involve direct escalation tactics orchestrated by these factions, targeting strategic assets such as US and Western military bases, Western embassy compounds, oil facilities, airports, economic hubs in the Gulf region, and any other interests deemed close to Western powers. In the event of escalated Western pressure on Iran, particularly related to the nuclear issue or the imposition of economic sanctions, operations conducted by these factions could intensify. Additionally, with Israeli plans of swift strikes — whether military or cyber — on Iranian or Iran-aligned targets in the region, the Iranian response is anticipated to be direct, utilizing its proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and potentially Gaza. This indicates a complex web of potential retaliatory actions across various fronts should tensions continue to escalate.

Iran is wary of the potential implications of a two-state solution, recognizing it could diminish its leverage derived from exploiting the Palestinian cause, as witnessed in Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. To maintain influence and sow uncertainty in the region, Iran might deploy its proxies and armed factions to incite new turmoil. Notably, Iran has alliances with groups like the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which control significant facilities such as the Al-Hawl camp housing over 53,000 families of ISIS members and the Ghweran prison holding more than 1,500 ISIS fighters. Any disruptions within these places could trigger widespread chaos with far-reaching consequences spanning Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and potentially even extending to the Gulf, Sinai, and nearby regions.

Conclusion

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood presented Iran with a significant opportunity to leverage its international and regional dealings with Western nations and their allies in the Middle East. While the operation was orchestrated by Hamas, Iran, along with other influential powers such as armed factions in Iraq and Syria, as well as the Syrian regime and factions in Lebanon, contributed to enhancing Hamas' capabilities and preparedness for the operation. Iran utilized armed factions

in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to enhance Hamas' strength prior to the operation. Initially, Iran attempted to stoke escalatory conflicts in these countries through its affiliated factions, but it swiftly backed down because of international pressure, including the presence of US naval forces. Subsequently, Hamas faced Israel without sustained support for the post-operation phase, relying instead on media and propaganda efforts in solidarity with Gaza's populace. Additionally, Hamas engaged in covert diplomacy and intelligence negotiations through back channels. The mounting pressures on Iran are likely to intensify in the foreseeable future, particularly considering the evolving landscape of the Israeli military doctrine post-conflict. Israel's response is expected to extend beyond Gaza alone, encompassing various actors and countries affected by the conflict, including Lebanon, Hezbollah, and armed factions in Iraq and Syria. This could lead to a prolonged series of undeclared confrontations and swift operations between Israel and Iran, reflecting the paradigm of protracted shadow wars characterized by assassinations, drone strikes, and cyber confrontations.

Iraq is poised to play a pivotal role in curbing Iran's regional influence, given its connection to the dynamics surrounding Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. The United States and Israel may perceive Iraq as essential in disrupting the network of violent actors and armed factions operating in the region. Effectively halting Iran's expansion hinges on addressing the situation in Iraq, with direct support for Iraqi state efforts crucial in impeding Iran's utilization of armed factions across the Middle East. This underscores the significance of Iraq as the linchpin for initiating change and countering Iran's regional ambitions.

Endnotes

- (1) Crispin Smith and Michael Knights, "Remaking Iraq: How Iranian-Backed Militias Took Over the Country," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 20, 2021, accessed February 22, 2024, <https://n9.cl/r8syq>. Also: Mohammed al-Bazi, "Al-Aqsa Flood: How Do We Understand the Relationship Between Iran And Hamas?," *Al Jazeera*, October 16, 2024, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://n9.cl/lum2p>. [Arabic].
- (2) "Iraqi Factions Loyal to Iran: Shields of the 'Islamic Revolution' in Mesopotamia," *Al Jazeera*, February 22, 2024, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://n9.cl/ytxom3>. Also: Mohammed Alsulami, "Iran and the Militarization of Shiism At Home and Abroad," *JOCU* 12, no. 11, (2021): 6 et seq, <https://bit.ly/4du2b8Y>. [Arabic].
- (3) "Hamas' Advanced Weapons: Rockets, Artillery, Drones, and Cyber," *Jerusalem Israeli Public Affairs*, August 1, 2021, accessed March 2, 2024, <https://n9.cl/uhz68>. [Arabic].
- (4) "The IRGC-Hamas Tango During the Conflict With Israel," *Rasanah IIIS*, May 31, 2021, accessed May 7, 2024, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/?p=9258>.
- (5) "Hamas Requests Ballistic Missiles From Tehran," *Rasanah IIIS*, July 30, 2019, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://n9.cl/moubt>. [Arabic].
- (6) "Qatar-Iran-Turkey: Hamas Allies Network," *The Arab Center for Extremism Studies*, February 22, 2024, accessed February 18, 2024, <https://n9.cl/163r4>. [Arabic].
- (7) Mohammed Sarmini, "The Return of Relations Between Hamas and the Syrian Regime," *Jusoor Center for Studies*, July 22, 2022, accessed February 26, 2024, <https://n9.cl/hzvpz>. [Arabic].
- (8) Rasul al-Hai, "Will America's Strikes on Iranian Targets Expand the Scope of the War in the Region?," *Al Jazeera*, February 3, 2024, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://n9.cl/oyOyx>. [Arabic].
- (9) Dhia Qaddour, "Leaked Documents: The Syrian Regime Gave the Port of Latakia to Iran," *Syria TV*, September 27, 2023, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://n9.cl/gdwp4>. [Arabic].
- (10) "Iran Is Strengthening Its Military and Economic Presence on the Syrian Coast," *Asharq Al Awsat*, March 22, 2019, accessed February 10, 2024, <https://n9.cl/3nwhp>. [Arabic]
- (11) "Dangers of the IRGC's Control Over Ports on the Syrian Coast and the Impact of the US Maximum," *Rasanah IIIS*, October 21, 2019, accessed April 10, 2024, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/?p=7093>.
- (12) Saad al-Wahidi, "Al-Qassam at Sea: From Martyrdom Operations to Frogmen," *Al Jazeera*, October 23, 2023, accessed February 18, 2024, <https://n9.cl/68o2d>. [Arabic].
- (13) "How Did Hamas Possess Missiles, Drones, and Gliders?" *Asharq*, October 13, 2023, accessed February 27, 2024, <https://n9.cl/ql6zxxg>. [Arabic].
- (14) Ibid
- (15) Omar Ojam and George Pajko, "Cyberattacks between Israel and Hamas," *Cloudflare*, October 23, 2023, accessed March 13, 2024, <https://n9.cl/xq2j6r>, for more see: "Cyberspace: Another battlefield between Israel and Hamas" *DW*, October 14, 2023, accessed February 13, 2024, <https://n9.cl/ca9rz>. [Arabic].
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *The Sacred Republic: Power and Institutions in Iran*, August 15, 2023, *Oxford Academy of Studies*, accessed February 3, 2024, <https://n9.cl/yh9y2>.
- (18) "Operation Al-Aqsa Storm (Flood): Reasons, Consequences and Expected Scenarios," *Rasanah IIIS*, October 13, 2023, accessed March 10, 2024, <https://n9.cl/526ls>
- (19) Haleh Esfandiari, "Hamas And Israel: Iran's Role," *Wilson Center*, October 10, 2023, accessed: April 3, 2024, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/?p=11883>.
- (20) Colin P. Clarke, "Iran and the 'Axis of Resistance' Vastly Improved Hamas's Operational Capabilities," *Foreign Policy Research Foundation*, October 27, 2023, accessed May 3, 2024, <https://n9.cl/qzysg>

- (21) Mohsen Muhammad Saleh, "Strategic Implications of the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation," *Al-Zaytouna Center for Studies and Consultations*, October 13, 2023, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://n9.cl/x8wbh>, for more, Al Hadath, "The Attack on Israel Was a Calculated Adventure, and Iran and Hezbollah Supported Us With Weapons and Technology," Youtube, 2:49, October 20, 2023, accessed May 19, 2024, <https://n9.cl/1o3jb>. [Arabic].
- (22) "Al-Aqsa Flood: The Collapse of Israeli Deterrence and Attempts to Restore It," *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, November 8, 2023, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://n9.cl/gn59h> [Arabic]. Also see: Fatima al-Sammadi, "Al-Aqsa Flood: How the Axis of Resistance Manages Confrontation?" *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, February 21, 2024, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://n9.cl/yzc5jt>. [Arabic].
- (23) Hassan al-Barari, "The Geopolitical Repercussions of the War on Gaza," *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, February 21, 2024, accessed February 25, 2024, <https://n9.cl/7fusv>. [Arabic].
- (24) Hisham Jaafar, "The Two-State Solution: Unachievable but Viable," *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, March 3, 2024, accessed October 10, 2024, <https://n9.cl/fwrf9>. [Arabic].
- (25) Muhammad Mohsen Abu al-Nour, "Why Did Iran Not Enter the Confrontation After the Israeli Aggression on the Gaza Strip?" *Arab Forum for Analysis of Iranian Policies*, December 5, 2023, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://n9.cl/gnf7b>. [Arabic].
- (26) "Possible Repercussions and Consequences of the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation," *Palestinian Dialogue Group*, March 20, 2024, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://n9.cl/1j4wj8>. [Arabic].
- (27) Hai, "Will America's Strikes on Iranian Targets Expand the Scope of the War in the Region?"
- (28) Omar al-Tays, "The Fate of Gaza After the War," *France 24*, November 16, 2023, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://n9.cl/fqg89>, for more: "What Are the Solutions Proposed for the Post-war Administration of Gaza if Hamas Is Overthrown?" *France 24*, November 21, 2023, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://n9.cl/d099a>. [Arabic].

LATIN AMERICA: A NEW MARKET FOR IRANIAN DRONES

Amal Mokhtar

Researcher on Latin American affairs

Abstract

Iranian drones have emerged as significant players in various conflicts, including the Russia-Ukraine conflict and indirect confrontations in the Middle East involving Iran, the United States, and Israel. This presents Iran with an opportunity to capitalize on its advancements and expertise in drone technology, potentially boosting sales in a market where it poses a tangible threat, especially following the lifting of restrictions on Iranian arms sales. Latin American countries, particularly those with leftist governments fostering ties with Iran, have increased their demand for these drones, prompting inquiries into the implications of such partnerships. This research article addresses these questions, shedding light on the Iranian presence in the global drone market, heightened interest from Latin American nations in Iranian military technology, and the mutual benefits arising from collaboration in this domain. It also examines the repercussions of such cooperation for Iran and the involved countries, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of international arms trade and regional security.

Keywords: Iran, Latin America, Iranian drones, military alliance, Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Brazil

Introduction

Iran's proactive stance both within and beyond its regional sphere, particularly in areas offering opportunities to bolster alliances against the United States and counter the isolation imposed on the government, has become a central tenet of Iranian foreign policy. Of particular note is Iran's significant and growing presence in Latin America, particularly among leftist governments with adversarial relationships with the United States. What is particularly striking is the progression of Iranian-Latin American cooperation from diplomatic, cultural and commercial ties to the signing of military agreements and the sale of Iranian military technology, notably drones, to nations in the region.

In the past, Iran primarily supplied drones to select allies in the Middle East. However, recent developments indicate a concerted effort to broaden the scope of drone sales to new countries and groups worldwide. This expansion follows extensive testing and development efforts, particularly during the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Iran has transitioned from being solely a regional supplier to emerging as a global exporter of advanced weaponry. From Belarus in Eastern Europe to Venezuela in South America, Iran has introduced drones boasting ranges of up to 1,000 kilometers.

Consequently, the surge in demand for Iranian military equipment raises significant concerns for the United States, particularly amidst the increasing interest in military cooperation and procurement of Iranian weaponry by Latin American countries — which represent a critical region for US national interests and security.

Over the past five years, Iranian-made drones have proliferated across battlefields, fundamentally altering the landscape of modern warfare. This research article delves into the evolution of Iranian drone production and sales, examining the implications of this expansion. Additionally, it explores the burgeoning ties between Iran and Latin America, particularly the recent surge in military cooperation. Understanding the ideological underpinnings of leftist movements in many regional countries is crucial in comprehending this trend, as is identifying the mutual interests driving both parties towards enhanced military collaboration. Lastly, the research article assesses the broader repercussions of this rapid proliferation of drones in armed conflicts, with a specific focus on Iranian drones. Analyzing these developments comprehensively offers insights into the shifting dynamics of contemporary warfare and the geopolitical ramifications of Iran's growing influence in global military affairs.

Signification and Importance of the Evolution of Iran's Drone Industry

According to the CIA's projections for 2022, Iran is poised to possess the largest arsenal of missiles and drones in the Middle East, signaling its potential to wield significant influence in any conflict it engages in. Iran's interest in expanding the market for its drones extends beyond the Middle East and conventional

state actors to include non-state entities. A report from the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War, dated July 20, 2023, noted that a former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander boasted in October 2022 about 22 countries, including Algeria, Armenia, Serbia, Tajikistan and Venezuela, formally requesting Iranian drones. The pace of drone production has accelerated, with the establishment of factories in allied countries further bolstering Iran's capabilities. This trend underscores Iran's strategic efforts to extend its influence globally through the proliferation of advanced military technology.⁽¹⁾

Iran's possession of advanced, domestically produced ballistic missiles and drones with superior capabilities at a low cost can be attributed to the challenging circumstances it faced during the eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s. Throughout this conflict, Iran struggled to acquire advanced weaponry and relied primarily on outdated missiles from the Assad government in Syria and the Gaddafi government in Libya. Faced with limited access to modern armaments, Iran turned to local experts to develop its own weapons, prioritizing cost-effective solutions. Central to this effort were the production lines for unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones. Today, according to NATO assessments, Iran has emerged as a significant arms supplier, surpassing countries like Russia in this regard.⁽²⁾

"The demand for Iranian drones is growing at a record rate," remarked James Rogers from the Cornell Institute for Technology Policy. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has provided a significant marketing opportunity for Iranian drone technology in numerous countries. The effectiveness demonstrated by Iranian drones, notably the Shahed 136 and Shahed 131 models, in assisting Russian military objectives during the war has heightened interest and demand for these products. This newfound recognition of Iranian drone capabilities has contributed to their increased popularity among potential buyers worldwide.

Amid stringent US sanctions restricting trade between Russia and Iran, particularly in the realm of weapons purchases, alternative strategies are being explored. Plans are emerging to establish Iranian drone manufacturing facilities within Russia and Belarus, effectively transferring technology, manufacturing capabilities, and training personnel instead of directly selling the final product. This approach has already been initiated in Venezuela, where a drone production factory was established over a decade ago during Hugo Chavez's tenure. Furthermore, Iran has extended its unmanned aircraft systems to Ethiopia since 2021 and later to Sudan following the outbreak of civil conflict between army forces and the Rapid Support Forces. This trend underscores the expanding proliferation of unmanned aircraft systems in Latin American countries.⁽³⁾

While Iran is not alone in the market for unmanned aircraft systems, its proactive approach to marketing its products across diverse geographical regions, extending beyond the Middle East, sets it apart. Additionally, Iran's supply of armed drones to non-state actors introduces a new dimension to military confrontations

worldwide. This raises questions about the threat potency and efficacy of Iranian drones. Key considerations in evaluating this include:

Swarming Tactics

Iranian drones distinguish themselves by their affordability compared to Western counterparts. Additionally, Iran's expansion strategy sets it apart from other drone-producing countries, as it carefully selects regions, countries and actors to which it sells its products. In a nutshell, a significant aspect of Iran's defense policy in its ongoing confrontation with the United States is its utilization of swarming tactics, facilitated by its diverse array of drone products. This underscores the emphasis placed by Iranian diplomacy on promoting the sale of its drone technology. These drones, available at competitive prices, are particularly appealing to countries and actors perceived as direct threats to the United States or Israel.

Multiple Categories of Iranian Drones

Among the notable Iranian drone models are the Ababil-3, Mohajer-6, Saegheh UAV (Thunderbolt), Shahid, H-110, Fotros, Karrar, and Kaman-22 drone. However, it is the Shahed drone series that has garnered the most attention from international media, particularly due to its utilization by Russian forces in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Reports from the Ukrainian Air Force at the close of 2023 suggest that Russia deployed approximately 3,700 Shahed drones over the course of the two-year conflict.

Moreover, both US and Israeli press reports highlight the use of Shahed-136 aircraft by Houthi forces in strikes targeting locations in the Red Sea and Eilat. Additionally, during Israel's war on Gaza, armed Shiite groups in the region launched attacks on US bases in Iraq, Syria and Jordan employing Iranian-made Shahed drones.⁽⁴⁾

The Sale of Iranian Drones: Legal Dimensions

Following the conclusion of the nuclear agreement between Iran and six countries — the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France, and Germany — in 2015, Security Council Resolution No. 2231 was issued. This resolution prohibited Iran from exporting ballistic missiles and drones with a range exceeding 300 kilometers and a payload exceeding 500 kilograms until October 2020. Consequently, all sales conducted between Iran and various countries and armed groups from July 2015 until October 2020 were in violation of the United Nations resolution. However, after October 2020, Iranian transactions in this regard became legally permissible.⁽⁵⁾ Despite the legality of these transactions post-October 2020, challenges exist including the financial restrictions on financial transactions that impede sale payments and the difficulties in shipping and transporting this military equipment. This is primarily attributed to ongoing US economic sanctions on Iran, which complicate financial dealings with a significant number of buyers of Iranian military products, including Russia and Venezuela. These restrictions continue

to impact Iran's ability to fully capitalize on the legal framework established by Security Council Resolution 2231.

Russia-Ukraine War: A Theater for Iranian Drones

Russia has historically been a primary source of arms sales for numerous countries in the Global South. However, the invasion of Ukraine drained significant Russian resources and prompted a wave of sanctions, resulting in a vacuum in the arms and military equipment sales landscape during a period of global instability. Consequently, Iran emerged as a more appealing option for countries that previously depended on Russian military supplies. Moreover, the current scenario could pave the way for a joint venture between Iran and Russia, leveraging their respective high production capabilities to bolster mutual conventional arms sales.⁽⁶⁾

The battlefield itself served as a dynamic testing ground for Iranian technology, providing opportunities for further development and potential promotion of sales to other countries. Following the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Iran agreed to supply Russia with Shahed 136 drones, which made their debut on the battlefield in the fall of 2022. Within a short span, Shahed drones were extensively deployed across Ukraine. Distinguished by their lightweight carbon fiber structure and impressive range of over 1,500 miles, Shahed 136 drones enabled Russia to conduct operations from Belarus in the north to occupied areas in the south, targeting Ukrainian cities. With a payload capacity of 20 kilograms to 40 kilograms of explosives — twice that of the 131 model — these drones were capable of inflicting significant damage to both buildings and military equipment. In November 2022, Russia launched a targeted attack on the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, employing 75 Shahed 136 drones. Despite Ukrainian air defense efforts, which successfully downed approximately 71 of the aircraft, the attack underscored the potency of these drones in modern warfare. Building on insights gleaned from the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Iran further refined its drone technology. In November 2023, Iran unveiled an upgraded version named the Shahed 238, equipped with a faster jet engine. This new model, capable of flying at more than twice the speed of its predecessor, the 136, is believed to have been deployed over Ukraine in January 2024.⁽⁷⁾

Based on the foregoing, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has served not only as a marketing opportunity for Iranian arms to countries worldwide but also as a real-world laboratory for the development of Iran's drone technology. By observing the performance of their drones in combat scenarios and analyzing the outcomes of their deployment, Iran has been able to refine and enhance its products within the aerospace industry.

Leftist Governments: A Key Conduit for Forging Military Alliances With Iran in the Southwestern Hemisphere

For decades, the United States has been vigilant about curbing the military influence of other countries in Latin America. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, a pivotal event during the Cold War, marked the closest the United States

and the Soviet Union came to nuclear conflict. Rooted in US opposition to the Soviet Union's military presence in Latin America, particularly in Cuba, the crisis underscored the region's significance in global power dynamics. In contemporary times, with the rise of leftist parties to power in numerous Latin American countries following democratic transitions, Iran has established a notable commercial, cultural and military presence in the region. This has brought Iran into close proximity with the United States, triggering geopolitical complexities reminiscent of the Cold War era.⁽⁸⁾

The leftist surge in Latin American countries began with the ascent of Hugo Chávez to the presidency of Venezuela in 1999, followed by the rise of two influential leftist governments, led by Lula da Silva in Brazil and Néstor Kirchner in Argentina in 2003. Subsequently, other leftist administrations emerged in Chile, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Ecuador, among others. The first decade of the 21st century came to be known as the "pink tide"⁽⁹⁾ era for Latin American countries. This period coincided with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency in Iran. Given Ahmadinejad's active foreign policy, the clear leftist orientation of Latin American governments to counter US hegemony, and the United States' focus on conflicts in the Middle East, this became a golden period for deepening Iranian cooperation in the region. This collaboration spanned commercial partnerships, cultural exchanges and political coordination to a significant degree. Additionally, signs of military cooperation between Iran and select Latin American countries began to emerge over the two-decade period. This collaboration varied in nature and scope across different countries.

One notable aspect of this cooperation was in the field of Iranian aircraft technology, particularly drones, as detailed below:

Venezuela

In late 2022, during Nicolas Maduro's visit to Tehran, the Venezuelan and Iranian governments affirmed significant cooperation in the defense sector. Maduro conveyed to his Iranian counterpart, Ebrahim Raisi, during this visit, "I believe that between the two of us, an indestructible friendship is going to grow for the future of our peoples."⁽¹⁰⁾

Venezuela's economic and political crisis escalated, reaching its zenith in 2019 with the self-declaration of Juan Guaidó — who was at the time speaker of the National Assembly — as the legitimate president, replacing elected President Maduro. The United States recognized Guaidó and froze Venezuela's assets abroad. Following these developments, Venezuelan-Iranian relations, already robust, transitioned to a new phase. Iran and Venezuela established a mutually beneficial strategic partnership aimed at shoring up the Maduro government amidst internal collapse precipitated by the severe economic crisis and acute shortages of essential goods. Venezuela's state institutions faced significant challenges in fulfilling their responsibilities, exacerbating the plight of the populace and leading to a surge in displacement. Against the backdrop of US support for Guaidó's coup

during the Trump administration, aimed at ousting Maduro and completely dismantling the legacy of Hugo Chávez, Iran and Venezuela deepened their collaboration to withstand external pressures and safeguard their respective interests.

In 2020, Tehran and Caracas witnessed notable trade cooperation, highlighted by the shipment of up to 2.35 million barrels of gasoline to the Maduro government in Venezuela. In exchange, Venezuela provided Iran with at least 9 tons of Venezuelan gold, valued at approximately \$500 million. Many observers at the time speculated that this exchange represented not just commercial cooperation but also potentially had military dimensions.

On November 6, 2020, Maduro announced the establishment of a new military scientific commission within the Venezuelan armed forces, tasked with modernizing the country's weapons systems. Although specific military systems were not mentioned, Maduro noted that the new council would enlist advisors from Russia, China, and Iran. Tehran's recent 25-year strategic agreement with Beijing, alongside a 20-year extension of its arms deal with Moscow, is poised to benefit Venezuela's newly formed defense commission. This development is anticipated to contribute to the creation of a multipolar military force in Venezuela, bolstering the Maduro regime. Iran, in particular, is positioned as a central pillar of this emerging multipolar power structure, evident in its efforts to establish air and sea bridges to Venezuela. This strategic partnership with the Maduro government is increasingly viewed as one of Iran's most successful investments beyond the Middle East.⁽¹¹⁾

In the fiscal year 2022-2023, Venezuela emerged as the primary destination for Iran's exports in Latin America, with goods worth \$118 million sent to the country. In return, Iran imported goods from Venezuela valued at \$816,000. These figures mark a nearly 200% increase compared to the value of bilateral trade in the preceding year.⁽¹²⁾ Additionally, data from Commodity Intelligence, Kepler, reveals that Iran has dispatched 28 million barrels of gas condensate to Venezuela as of January 2023.⁽¹³⁾

These commercial and military agreements help Iran circumvent international sanctions and the 2007 UN arms embargo, providing an avenue for Iranian companies affiliated with the IRGC to establish a presence beyond Iranian borders, notwithstanding the sanctions. For instance, Parchin Chemical Industries, prominently listed in UN Security Council Resolution 1747 for its alleged involvement in Iran's nuclear weapons development program, expanded its operations abroad. Additionally, Iran's Quds Aviation Industry Company is now situated adjacent to the El Libertador Air Base in Maracay, within the Venezuelan state of Aragua. Its purpose is to train the Venezuelan army in drone production techniques, illustrating the extent of military cooperation between Iran and Venezuela.⁽¹⁴⁾

Venezuela stands out as the sole country thus far to possess drones equipped for combat operations. In March 2021, reports surfaced indicating that the Venezuelan armed forces deployed these drones to target dissidents from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the state of Apure, bordering Colombia.

While Venezuelan authorities have not officially acknowledged the use of military drones in this incident, a few months later, during a military parade, the Maduro government publicly showcased drones outfitted with attack capabilities.

During this military parade, the Venezuelan army unveiled the types of drones in its possession, emphasizing that they are domestically designed and manufactured equipment — including:

- Antonio José de Sucre 100 (ANSU 100): Equipped with surveillance, reconnaissance and attack capabilities, this drone features anti-tank and anti-personnel capabilities.

- Antonio José de Sucre 200 (ANSU 200): Boasting high stealth capabilities, this drone is equipped for surveillance, reconnaissance, and attack operations. It also has the capacity to suppress enemy air defense systems.

According to many experts, the Venezuelan ANSU 100 drone bears striking resemblance to the Iranian Mohajer 2 drone, suggesting it is a modern replica. This connection dates back to an agreement between Iran and Venezuela during the Chavez era in 2007, which allowed Venezuela to assemble 12 units of the Mohajer 2 drone. In 2010, US satellite imagery revealed a facility within the headquarters of the Venezuelan arms and ammunition production company (Cavim) where the Mohajer 2 drones were being manufactured. Subsequently, in June 2012, during a televised broadcast, Chavez publicly demonstrated the Mohajer 2 drones for the first time. It was revealed that Venezuelan personnel involved in the project had received training in Iran.

In November 2020, Maduro made a televised announcement revealing Venezuela's plans to produce multi-purpose combat drones. He stated that these drones would be manufactured using Venezuelan aluminum and expressed intentions to export them.⁽¹⁵⁾ Additionally, amidst the border crisis between Venezuela and Guyana in the disputed Escubio region,⁽¹⁶⁾ it was disclosed on December 28, 2023, that Venezuela possesses Iranian-made combat boats known as Zulfighar boats. These fast patrol boats have the capability to reach speeds of up to 52 knots per hour.

Despite the earlier announcement by the presidents of Venezuela and Guyana in mid-December 2023 that they had agreed not to resort to the use of force against each other, tensions escalated on December 28, 2023 when Maduro initiated military maneuvers. These maneuvers involved the deployment of approximately 5,600 soldiers to the Escubio region. Maduro characterized this move as a response to what he termed as a “response to provocation” by the United Kingdom, following the deployment of the British warship HMS Trent to Guyana.⁽¹⁷⁾

Bolivia

The lifting of the arms embargo on Tehran in October 2020 coincided with the return of Evo Morales, the former socialist president of Bolivia, from exile to his home country. Subsequently, Morales, representing the current Bolivian socialist President Luis Arce, engaged in discussions with Iranian officials in Caracas to

finalize the ongoing defense agreement between Tehran and La Paz.⁽¹⁸⁾

Morales, a socialist and vocal critic of the United States, has often described himself as “Washington’s nightmare.” During his initial visit to Tehran in 2008, he hailed Iran and Bolivia as “two friendly and revolutionary countries” who are “staunchly opposed to US hegemony.” Under Morales’ leadership, Bolivia emerged as a steadfast supporter of Iran in the international arena. At the United Nations, La Paz consistently voted against or abstained from annual resolutions condemning Iran, a trend that has persisted since 2009. Moreover, Bolivia has endorsed Iran’s nuclear program since 2010. However, bilateral relations between the two nations experienced a downturn in 2019 and 2020 following Morales’ ousting as president and the ascent of President Jeanine Anez, a right-wing figure with pro-US inclinations who closed Bolivia’s embassy in Iran. Nonetheless, Iranian-Bolivian ties swiftly mended following the election of socialist Luis Arce. In 2023, Tehran and La Paz further solidified their partnership by signing a joint defense agreement.⁽¹⁹⁾

On July 20, 2023, the defense ministers of Iran and Bolivia signed a memorandum of understanding outlining cooperation in various shared areas. Initially, the contents of this memorandum were not made public by either side, leading to speculation and conjecture regarding its details.

The memorandum of understanding between Iran and Bolivia sparked significant concern from the United States, Israel, and regionally from Argentina. At the time of the agreement’s conclusion, Argentina’s right-wing party was the opposition, which vehemently criticized the deal as it was perceived as against Argentina’s interests. They called on the government in Buenos Aires to condemn the agreement and demand its annulment. This stance aligned with the Argentine right’s longstanding opposition to Iran, often accusing various Peronist governments (representing the Argentine left) of forming alliances, and sometimes even colluding with Iran. Consequently, the leftist Argentine government at the time sought clarification from Bolivia regarding the nature and scope of the agreement.⁽²⁰⁾

A week following the signing of the framework agreement between Iran and Bolivia, Bolivian Defense Minister Edmundo Novillo disclosed that the agreement entailed provisions for acquiring drones and boats aimed at monitoring regional borders, combating drug trafficking, and bolstering cyber protection. Additionally, the agreement allowed for the exploration of opportunities in nanotechnology and geomatics, albeit without delving into specific details.

The defense minister clarified that concerns voiced by the United States and Argentina regarding the agreement were largely based on misinformation. He emphasized that Bolivia’s primary objective in acquiring this equipment is not aggressive action against neighbors or combat operations, but rather securing borders and combating drug trafficking, which poses a significant threat. Particularly noteworthy is Iran’s offer of advanced equipment tailored to navigate Bolivia’s challenging mountainous terrain and rugged geography effectively. Defense

Minister Novillo highlighted the demonstration of drone models capable of conducting border surveillance even in high-altitude regions.

Furthermore, Bolivia expressed interest in acquiring advanced Iranian boats and navigation equipment to patrol rivers and combat smuggling and drug trafficking effectively. The minister also underscored Bolivia's need for maintenance services for its aircraft and helicopters, acknowledging the technical expertise offered by Iran in this regard.

Former Bolivian Minister of Government Carlos Sanchez Berzain condemned the agreement, labeling it a "grave betrayal" of the country. He asserted that Bolivia's payment for the military equipment would be in the form of lithium metal, a resource abundant in Bolivia.⁽²¹⁾

In response to internal, regional and international objections and fears, Novillo defended the agreement, stating, "This agreement is part of our efforts to address our scientific and technological lag, and it does not pose any threat to regional peace or security."⁽²²⁾

Two days after Novillo's remarks, John Kirby, spokesperson for the US National Security Council, expressed the Biden administration's apprehension regarding any export of Iranian technology that could potentially contribute to destabilization.⁽²³⁾

Brazil

Following Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's inauguration as Brazil's president, Brazil authorized the docking of two Iranian warships, the IRIS Makran and the Iris Dina, at a port in Rio de Janeiro from January 23 to January 30, 2023. The Makran, originally a crude oil tanker, had been refurbished into an exploratory naval base, making it the largest vessel in the Iranian navy. It had previously embarked on a maiden voyage to the South Atlantic in 2021 before heading north to the Baltic Sea en route to St. Petersburg, Russia. The second ship, Dina, is a Moudge-class frigate equipped with advanced weapons systems including anti-ship missiles, naval guns, and torpedo launchers. Both ships are part of the Iranian navy's 86th Fleet.

Initially, the two Iranian warships were observed traversing near Chilean coastal waters before entering the Drake Passage, which links the southeastern Pacific Ocean to the southwestern Atlantic Ocean near Antarctica. Chile reportedly intervened to prevent the Iranian naval fleet from entering its territorial waters. The Drake Passage, devoid of sovereign territorial waters, serves as the sole interoceanic channel in the Western Hemisphere. Subsequently, the two vessels docked in Rio de Janeiro's port from January 23 to January 30, as previously mentioned. However, the Iranian warships vanished from the South Atlantic Ocean in early February as they approached Argentina's exclusive economic zone and the 201 nautical mile boundary, only to resurface near Uruguay's territorial waters a few days later.

According to some US analysts, there are suspicions of Chinese-Iranian coordination regarding the passage of Iranian warships through the Atlantic Ocean near South American ports and shores. Maritime organizations monitoring illegal, un-

reported and unregulated (IUU) fishing have identified around 433 Chinese vessels near Argentina's 201-nautical-mile boundary, with nearly 700,000 hours of covert activity reported in Argentina's extended exclusive economic zone (EEZ) since January 2018. US analysts suggest that this extensive Chinese fishing presence could provide ideal cover for Iranian warships to conceal any covert activities before entering Brazilian territorial waters.⁽²⁴⁾

The Lula government's inclination toward South-South relations and its emphasis on independence from the United States, coupled with its previous experience in relations with Iran, could drive enhanced cooperation with Iran. As Iranian drones become more prevalent in the countries of the ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas), this will help in raising the Brazilian government's interests, potentially opening avenues for collaboration in the field of drone technology.

Iranian and Latin Interests Gained From Forging Military Alliances

During his visit to Caracas in 2023, Iranian President Raisi outlined his vision and motivations for Iran's engagement with Latin America in an interview with Venezuelan media. He highlighted Latin America as a crucial element among nations seeking independence in the face of US hegemony. Raisi emphasized the potential effectiveness of cooperation between Iran, Latin America and other Global South countries in reshaping the global geopolitical order favorably for nations with independence aspirations. Additionally, he characterized US economic sanctions as tantamount to military aggression against targeted countries, advocating for strengthened relations and cooperation among sanctioned nations to mitigate the impact of such measures.

Given the strained relations with Washington, it is unsurprising that Latin American countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Venezuela, all part of ALBA, are keen to strengthen ties with Iran. These nations not only share a mutual antipathy toward the United States but also face or anticipate economic sanctions from Washington, particularly Bolivia.⁽²⁵⁾

Within this context, the convergence of foreign policy objectives between the Iranian government and leftist Latin American governments, especially those in the Bolivarian Alliance, is evident. This alignment has facilitated increased military coordination between Iran and several Latin American countries, a trend that has accelerated, as outlined in the study.

Through collaboration in sharing Iranian drone technology with allies in Latin America, several mutual interests emerge for both parties:

Iran's Interests

In the realm of Iranian drone production and sales, economic gains constitute a significant driving force. The profitability of this industry for Iran is evident, particularly considering the estimated costs associated with manufacturing popular models like the Shahed 136 aircraft, which range from \$20,000 to \$40,000 per unit. Reports indicate that Iran has conducted substantial sales, with over

2,000 drones sold to Russia alone. These transactions translate into substantial financial returns for Tehran, amounting to millions of dollars in revenue from these lucrative deals.⁽²⁶⁾

Iran's burgeoning expertise in drone manufacturing has positioned it as a formidable competitor to Western nations and Israel in the global market for exporting drone technology. Previously, Israel held a dominant position, exporting an estimated 60% of the world's drones between 1985 and 2014, with a customer base spanning Africa, Asia, Europe, North America and South America, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.⁽²⁷⁾ However, the landscape has shifted significantly in recent years, particularly following Russia's extensive reliance on Iranian drones during its conflict with Ukraine since 2022. This transformation underscores Iran's growing influence and its potential to challenge established players in the drone technology market.

By selling or providing Iranian drones to certain countries and groups aligned with Iran, Tehran is actively advancing its foreign policy objectives and regional influence. For Iran, its domestic drone and weapons industry serve not only as lucrative economic assets but also as strategic tools for fostering what it terms an "Axis of Resistance" against the United States, Western powers, and Israel.⁽²⁸⁾

Furthermore, the sale of Iranian drones to diverse countries globally, as an alternative to Western or Israeli technology, aligns with Iran's efforts to circumvent the isolation imposed by economic sanctions. By offering competitive drone technology, Iran aims to establish itself as a viable player in the international arms market while mitigating the impact of sanctions on its economy and defense industry.

Lastly, the introduction of Iranian military technologies into the vicinity of the United States also serves Iran's strategy in managing its conflict with the United States.

Latin American Interests

The leftist Latin American nations are actively seeking to bolster their trade and military ties with Iran as a means of breaking free from the isolation imposed by the United States and mitigating the economic losses incurred due to sanctions.

Given the challenging economic conditions faced by the Bolivarian Alliance countries, exacerbated by political and economic mismanagement, along with their strained relations with the United States and its repeated attempts to undermine leftist regimes, these nations view countries like Russia, Iran and other great powers outside of US influence, such as China, as vital allies in offsetting the impact of economic decline.

Given the challenging circumstances within the Bolivarian Alliance countries, they have struggled to develop products and technologies with advanced capabilities, whether in the military sector or in manufacturing and mining. Consequently, Iran presents an opportunity for them to acquire advanced technologies and skilled personnel to enhance their performance in various domains, including the operation of local oil companies. For instance, Venezuela, despite boast-

ing the world's largest oil reserves, faces challenges in managing exploration, extraction and refining operations following the nationalization of oil companies and a shortage of qualified personnel. Furthermore, drone technologies offer significant utility in reconnaissance missions, border control and tracking and combating cross-border organized crime, particularly drug cartels, which pose significant challenges for Latin American nations.

Trade between leftist, economically challenged Latin American countries and Iran, whether commercial or military in nature, is often easier compared to dealings with Western nations. Iran may facilitate these transactions through various financial arrangements, such as swaps for essential minerals it requires, thereby bypassing the complications associated with transactions involving the dollar due to US sanctions. This approach aims to streamline the process for both parties involved.

The Proliferation of Iranian Military Technology — Regional and International Implications

For over two decades, Latin America has served as a significant arena for the convergence of interests between leftist governments in the region and nations opposed to US foreign policy, notably Iran and Russia. This convergence has manifested in various forms of cooperation, including trade, investment, political coordination in international forums, voting patterns at the United Nations, as well as cultural, intelligence, and military collaboration. Such cooperation varies from overt to covert, and from strong to tepid, depending on the specific leftist government in power and the prevailing circumstances at different points in time.

Iranian foreign policy is resolutely committed to pursuing an active, continuous and enduring strategy aimed at bolstering and expanding its presence in the Western hemisphere. The key actors in this strategic theater include Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. These nations have long been governed by leftist movements, resulting in a stable and firmly established relationship with Iran. This relationship is primarily characterized by cooperation and solidarity, particularly in confronting US policies directed toward these countries as well as Iran itself.

Iranian relations with countries like Brazil, Argentina and Chile have experienced periods of advancement and decline, largely influenced by the political orientation of the respective governments in power. Under Lula da Silva's presidency in Brazil from 2003 onwards, there was strong support for Iran, particularly concerning its nuclear program. However, with the rise of the far-right Bolsonaro administration from 2019 to 2022, this dynamic shifted significantly. Yet, Argentina's relations with Iran have fluctuated depending on the ideological alignment of its leadership. While left-leaning governments under the Kirchners displayed a more amicable stance toward Iran, the right-wing Macri government adopted a different approach, particularly in the context of the investigation into the 1994

bombing of the AMIA Jewish Society in Buenos Aires, where Iran and members of its government, as well as the IRGC, were implicated.

Some analysts express concerns regarding the Iranian presence and its potential impact on US interests, particularly in light of the growing Chinese port network across South America and Central America. China has undertaken approximately 40 port projects in the region, primarily concentrated in the Pacific Ocean. While these ports are primarily intended to facilitate commercial transport, some analysts fear that they could also provide channels for covert Iranian military movements.

On September 8, 2023, Nicolas Maduro embarked on a significant journey to Beijing, where he engaged in discussions with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Their deliberations culminated in the signing of a pivotal agreement termed a “strategic alliance against all odds.” During the visit, Xi Jinping extended his backing to Caracas, affirming China’s commitment to maintain Venezuela’s sovereignty.⁽²⁹⁾

Revisiting Argentina’s concerns about Bolivia potentially acquiring Iranian drones, and the United States’ apprehensions about this possibility alongside its previous concerns regarding Venezuela’s possession of Iranian drone technology, it is notable that Argentina has pursued its interest in drone technology but has opted for Israeli UAVs instead. On December 27, 2022, Argentina and Israel formalized an agreement to procure the Israeli Hero-120 and Hero-30 UAVs. This deal marks Argentina as the first country in Latin America to acquire this series of UAVs from Israel.⁽³⁰⁾

The aforesaid suggests that Latin America could potentially become a battleground for navigating both the Iran-US conflict and the competition between China and the United States. Moreover, it might evolve into a reflection of the historical conflicts seen in the Middle East, as evidenced by the significant attention Israel is devoting to monitoring the rise of Iranian influence in the region. This dynamic is being observed not only at the governmental level but also in academic and research circles.

The recent surge in the production and sale of Iranian drones reflects a broader Iranian strategy, with Latin America emerging as a significant target region. By 2024, Iranian military factories had manufactured thousands of advanced drones for various purposes, including surveillance, reconnaissance, and combat. These Iranian drones have found their way into numerous conflict zones involving both state and non-state actors. For instance, in January 2024, an attack on Tower 22, a US military base in Jordan near the Iraqi and Syrian borders, resulted in the deaths of three US soldiers and the injury of over 40 others. Additionally, in the same month, Houthi forces in Yemen launched 18 Iranian-made drones at ships in the Red Sea.

In earlier developments, Iran-backed militias initiated the use of drones against US military and diplomatic targets in Iraq and Syria in 2021. Over the course of 2021 and 2022, approximately 20% of attacks by militias associated with Tehran

were executed through drone strikes. Furthermore, Iran began supplying Russia with hundreds of drones starting in 2022.⁽³¹⁾

Conclusion

In the contemporary landscape of armed conflict, drones emerge as a paramount threat due to their affordability, wide accessibility and plausible deniability, given their capacity to obscure their origins through convoluted flight paths. Consequently, the unregulated proliferation of military drones presents a transnational hazard, significantly influencing the nature and trajectory of conflicts worldwide. Iran has made substantial strides in technological research and development within the realms of ballistic missiles and drones. This progress has endowed Iran with a considerable comparative advantage, particularly evident in its ability to field-test numerous drone models in conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war, subsequently refining its production capabilities based on battlefield analysis. Moreover, the degree of coordination between Iran and Russia in this domain merits consideration, exemplified by the operation of factories within Russia and Belarus dedicated to the production of Iranian drones. Additionally, the extent of collaboration between Iran and China serves as a navigational and commercial facade for the dissemination of Iranian military products. Collectively, these factors position Iran as a significant determinant in the dynamics of numerous ongoing and prospective conflicts, extending beyond the confines of the Middle East to encompass diverse regions worldwide, notably the Global South, including Latin America.

Endnotes

- (1) Natasha Turak, "Iran's Drones Could Reach a New South American Market As Bolivia Expresses Interest," CNBC, July 31, 2023, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2u.pw/MQRp8XCL>.
- (2) Mona Hojat Ansari, "Why the West Is Worried About The Growing Use of Iranian Weapons," *Tehran Times*, February 2, 2024, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2u.pw/bP9coCn5>.
- (3) Michael Lipin, "Why Iranian Drones Are Appealing to Belarus, Bolivia," VOA, August 12, 2023, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/OKSg>.
- (4) Ata Şahit, "What Role Would Iranian Drones Play In Any Regional Crisis?" TRT World, February 2024, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/UDPA>.
- (5) Emanuel Fabian, "Gallant Says Iran in Talks With 50 Countries to Sell Missiles And Drones," *Times of Israel*, February 17, 2023, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://2h.ae/nIBJ>.
- (6) Danny Citrinowicz, "Iran Is on Its Way to Replacing Russia As a Leading Arms Exporter. The US Needs A Strategy to Counter This Trend," *Atlantic Council*, February 2, 2024, accessed March 20, 2024, <https://2h.ae/juVvk>.
- (7) Dan Sabbagh, "Deadly, Cheap And Widespread: How Iran-Supplied Drones Are Changing the Nature of Warfare," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2024, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/zDMY>.
- (8) Ardalan Mohammadzadeh, "Iranian Drones; Now in the Western Hemisphere," *Tehran Times*, September 9, 2023, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/STZd>.
- (9) The "pink tide" or turn to the left signifies the rise of leftist movements in Latin America.
- (10) Sabina Nicholls, "Iran's Stealthy Steps in the Region: Latin America Under Threat – PART I," *Diálogo Americas*, February 7, 2024, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/ttHW>.
- (11) Joseph Humire, "Iran and Venezuela: A Strategic Partnership," *Diálogo Americas*, June 10, 2021, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/uheV>.
- (12) Andrew Lumzden, "Media Guide: Iran in Latin America," *American Iranian Council*, January 27, 2023, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/xJPP>.
- (13) Umud Shokri, "Iran Nurtures Ambitions For The Venezuelan Oil Market," *Iran International*, April 16, 2015, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/UhDZ>.
- (14) Humire, "Iran and Venezuela."
- (15) Ángel Bermúdez, "Cómo Venezuela se convirtió con la ayuda de Irán en el único país latinoamericano que cuenta con drones armados" (How Venezuela Became, With Iran's Help, the "Only Latin American Country With Armed Drones"), *BBC News Mundo*, November 11, 2022, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://2h.ae/IGDo>. [Spanish].
- (16) Essequibo, spanning an area of 160,000 square kilometers, constitutes a significant portion of the neighboring country of Guyana. Renowned for its abundance of oil and natural resources, this region encompasses two-thirds of Guyana's total land area. Despite its vast potential, Essequibo remains a contentious territory, exacerbated by Venezuela's provocative actions. The situation escalated following Venezuela's contentious referendum on December 3, 2023, aimed at annexing the region to Venezuela. Subsequently, Maduro issued directives to the state oil company, authorizing the exploitation of resources within the disputed Essequibo region.
- (17) Alijani Ershad, "Venezuela's Zolfaghar Boats Are Just the Latest Military Equipment Provided by Iran," *France24*, January 10, 2024, accessed March 19, 2024, <https://2h.ae/jnOl>.
- (18) Joseph Humire, "Iran's Weapons Now Reach the Western Hemisphere," *The Heritage Foundation*, August 17, 2023, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://2h.ae/LrKy>.
- (19) Andrew Lumzden, "Media Guide: Iran in Latin America," *American Iranian Council*, January 27, 2023, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/xJPP>.
- (20) Eldar Mamedov, "Fresh Hysteria Over Detail-Less Bolivia-Iran Security Deal," *Responsible Statecraft*, August 1, 2023, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/HPTu>.
- (21) Luis Marcelo Tedesqui Vargas, "Novillo dice que acuerdo con Irán incluye drones, lanchas y "protección cibernética" (Novillo Says Iran Deal Includes Drones, Boats and "Cyber Protection") *El Deber*, July 27, 2023, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://2h.ae/yhuF>. [Spanish].
- (22) Edwin Condori, "Ministro boliviano cree que hay 'show político' en Argentina tras polémica por su viaje a Irán" (Bolivian Minister Believes There Is a "Political Show" in Argentina After Controversy Over His Trip To Iran) *El Deber*, July 25, 2023, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://2h.ae/hJXj>. [Spanish].
- (23) Natasha Turak, "Iran's Drones Could Reach a New South American Market as Bolivia Expresses Interest," CNBC, July 31, 2023, accessed March 20, 2024, <https://2h.ae/hmqw>.
- (24) "Vric Monitor No. 29 | Latin America Between War And Peace," *SFS*, March 3, 2023, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/SlIp>.

- (25) Andrew Lumsden, "Media Guide: Iran in Latin America," AIC, January 27, 2024 accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/xJPP>.
- (26) Danny Citrinowicz, "Iran Is On Its Way to Replacing Russia As a Leading Arms Exporter. The US Needs A Strategy to Counter This Trend," *Atlantic Council*, February 2, 2024, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/juVk>.
- (27) Garrett Nada, "Explainer: Iran's Drone Exports Worldwide," *The Iran Primer* June 12, 2023, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/bfbT>.
- (28) Natasha Turak, "Iran's Drones Could Reach a New South American Market as Bolivia Expresses Interest," *CNBC*, July 31, 2023, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/hmqw>.
- (29) Sabina Nicholls, "Iran's Stealthy Steps in the Region: Latin America under Threat - PART II," *Diálogo Americas*, February 23, 2024, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/FhTa>.
- (30) Paul Iddon, "Iran And Israel Are Selling South America Drones. Could Others Soon Follow?," *Forbes*, (28-07-2023, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/FFeN>.
- (31) "Roster of Iran's Drones," *The Iran Primer*, February 2, 2024, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://2h.ae/fYUc>.

POLITICS AND PHILOSOPHY IN CONTEMPORARY IRAN

Mohammed al-Sayyed al-Sayyad

Researcher, the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah)

Abstract

The focus of this study centers on the intersection of philosophy and politics within modern-day Iran. Its aim is to scrutinize how philosophical thought influences political dynamics and explores how the ruling religious authorities have conceptualized the structure of government and state through a philosophical lens. This endeavor is geared toward buttressing their governance by employing such philosophies in political discourse to justify military positions and sanctify institutional frameworks. The primary objective is to provide an accurate portrayal of the current state of affairs in Iran, comprehensively grasping both its strengths and weaknesses in theoretical contexts, engaging in and scrutinizing critical discourse. Consequently, the study aims to address several inquiries regarding the role of philosophical teachings in political theory, the repercussions of such teachings, and the ideological disparities between the “reformist” and “hardliner” factions, particularly those aligned with Wilayat al-Faqih.

Keywords: Philosophy, Iran, Mulla Sadra, Tabatabaei, Khomeini, Shariati, Soroush, Transcendent Theosophy, Ghazali

Introduction

Philosophical discourse in Iran has maintained a close association with political endeavors, influencing the formation of ideological frameworks within religious contexts and strengthening the intellectual foundation of political elites. Since 1979 and continuing to the present day, much of the debate within Iranian religious and political spheres can be traced back to philosophical disparities among various parties. This philosophical discourse is not a recent phenomenon emerging solely after the Iranian revolution; rather, its roots extend deep into Persian history, predating even the Safavid era when Twelver Shiism became the state religion. There exists an ancient Persian philosophical tradition that predates Islam, which some have endeavored to revive and synthesize with other philosophical schools under scrutiny in this study. Notably, Reza Hakimi, credited as a progenitor of modern deconstructionism,⁽¹⁾ drew from elements of Mulla Sadra's philosophy. The philosophical landscape in Persia was diverse, characterized by numerous schools and currents that experienced periods of activity and dormancy throughout history.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the impact of philosophy on politics, specifically how contemporary Iranian philosophical discourse influences the entire political landscape. Philosophy has become intricately linked with the Iranian state, where the religious elite predominantly adheres to the principles of Mulla Sadra. This philosophical foundation has played a significant role in defining the state's identity, ideology, and sectarian justifications. However, the current philosophical discourse in Iran is not confined to the school of transcendent theosophy endorsed by the Velayat-e Faqih⁽²⁾. There are other significant trends that have sparked a philosophical and political movement, utilizing their opposition to transcendent theosophy as a means to challenge the Iranian government. Consequently, philosophy has become a component of the political tension within the country. This phenomenon necessitates a thorough examination to elucidate its diverse and multifaceted aspects.

The Hawza and the Nature of Philosophy

Religious institutions across various sects encompass internal factions, some of which advocate for reformist philosophical approaches, while others denounce philosophy as heretical or objectionable. The term "philosophy" here denotes the entire realm of philosophical inquiry, not solely theological matters. Among those engaged in philosophical discourse, there are critics who specifically target its theological dimension. One notable example is Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, who authored *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers), prompting a response from Ibn Rushd in *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (The Incoherence of the Incoherence). Ghazali's philosophical contentions were only related to theological issues, "When I saw this vein of folly pulsating among these idiots, I decided to write this book in order to refute the ancient philosophers. It will expose the

incoherence of their beliefs and the inconsistency of their metaphysical theories.”⁽³⁾ He argues that there are certain factors differentiating a true philosopher from others which can be broadly classified into three categories:

- “The dispute is centered upon a mere word.”
- “Those things in which the philosophers believe, and which do not come into conflict with any religious principle.”
- “There are philosophical theories which come into violent conflict with the fundamental principles of religion.”

Ghazali advocates for a nuanced approach. He deems the first two categories as non-contentious, emphasizing the need to defend them rather than engage in dispute. Regarding the second category, he emphatically argues that anyone attempting to invalidate a portion of religious doctrine through debate commits a grave offense against religion.⁽⁴⁾ However, when addressing disputes related to fundamental religious principles, Ghazali asserts that criticism should be directed solely at the philosophical doctrines that challenge these principles, not at unrelated matters.⁽⁵⁾ This stance echoes his assertion in *Maqasid al-Falasifah* (The Aims of the Philosophers) where he clarifies his intention to solely address philosophical issues pertaining to theology and metaphysics.⁽⁶⁾ Despite Ghazali’s critique of philosophy and philosophers, Iranian philosophers like Mulla Sadra and later figures like Soroush acknowledged his contributions and were influenced by him, indicating their comprehension of his intent behind criticizing philosophers on specific issues.

The ongoing debate between jurists and philosophers, started by Ghazali and continuing to the present day, remains evident among Iranian philosophers, particularly when faced with allegations of heresy and atheism from their jurist adversaries. Upon closer examination of the majority of these disputes, a common thread emerges: either a political backdrop exists, or the influence of political authority is discernible. However, it is inaccurate to attribute the critique of metaphysical philosophy⁽⁷⁾ solely to Ghazali. Criticism of metaphysical philosophy has historical roots, with both ancient and contemporary philosophers, including Western thinkers, engaging in various forms of critique, albeit with differing methods and objectives. Nonetheless, the underlying principle of criticism against metaphysical philosophy remains consistent across these diverse contexts.⁽⁸⁾

It would be erroneous to attribute the demise of philosophy solely to Ghazali or any single individual, for philosophy, as a dynamic process of inquiry and reflection, cannot be extinguished or eradicated through mere critique or opposition; to do so would contradict the essence of philosophy itself. Similarly, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), despite his criticisms of certain philosophers whom he labeled as atheists (a criticism that could have ironically applied to him),⁽⁹⁾ cannot be considered as having terminated the philosophical enterprise. Instead, such critiques are integral to the ongoing discourse within philosophy. Moreover, while Ghazali is renowned for his confrontations with philosophers, particularly

concerning theological matters, his political philosophy remains a significant but often overlooked aspect of his intellectual legacy. Interestingly, this facet of his work did not garner as much attention as his philosophical disputes, and it did not exert a direct influence on subsequent Sunni and Shiite philosophers.

Shiite philosophers, notably Mulla Sadra, were significantly influenced by Ghazali, evident in Sadra's reverential depiction of him as "the luminous sea, acclaimed by people as the imam and the proof of Islam."⁽¹⁰⁾ This admiration underscores Mulla Sadra's recognition of Ghazali's profound impact on Islamic thought. It appears that Mulla Sadra found in Ghazali's Sufi teachings a congruence with his own mystical inclinations, which he interwove with philosophy and theology, a synthesis reminiscent of Ghazali's multifaceted approach. Although Ghazali embodies the roles of theologian, Sufi and philosopher, a deep sectarian discord persists between him and Mulla Sadra due to the former's affiliation with the Ash'ari school, which criticizes certain philosophical trends. This sectarian divergence engenders complex and ambiguous areas, necessitating thorough examination and reflection.

Each philosopher or philosophical school of thought espouses its own distinct political doctrine, which complements its epistemological framework. Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi, as the pioneering Muslim philosopher in this regard, established a foundation that influenced subsequent thinkers. Notably, his focus was not on governance as a practical art, nor did he engage in contemporary political critique; rather, his concern lay in elucidating humanity's ultimate purpose. Farabi's discourse delved into the conceptualization of ideal cities and the formulation of laws, defining the "virtuous city" as one where collaborative effort leads to the realization of felicity.⁽¹¹⁾ He advocated for a leader, akin to a household head or guardian, to be well-versed in theoretical sciences, emphasizing his role in guiding individuals toward seeking their best interests, whether voluntarily or not. This resonates notably in later instances, such as Khomeini's appointment of religious figures as guardians over the populace. Ibn Sina, meanwhile, condensed the responsibilities of a leader within Sunni legislative theory, blending Islamic principles with Platonic virtues. For Ibn Sina, the leader must embody fundamental Islamic tenets and possess comprehensive knowledge of Sharia, surpassing even a philosopher himself in this context.⁽¹²⁾ The profound philosophical insights of Farabi and Ibn Sina reverberated through subsequent Iranian philosophical developments, notably influencing figures like Tusi and concepts such as *al-hikmat al-muta'aliyah* (the transcendent theosophy) that ensued.

Iranian Heritage: Philosophical and Political Domains

In Persia, the tradition of *'irfān*, denoting gnosis or intuitive mystical understanding, boasts a lengthy lineage deeply intertwined with wisdom. One of the earliest figures in this tradition was Shihab al-Din Umar al-Suhrawardy, whose life met a tragic end in 1191 AD (587 AH). He is credited with the significant contribution

of integrating Sufism into the realm of philosophical discourse.⁽¹³⁾ Suhrawardy engaged deeply with Ibn Sina's philosophy, often referred to as "the Peripatetic philosophy," and is believed to have pursued his studies in Isfahan, although the specifics of his intellectual journey prior to settling in Damascus remain elusive. In addition to his exploration of Ibn Sina's thought, he delved into Platonism, skillfully synthesizing elements from both traditions to form what eventually became known as "Illuminationist philosophy," a distinctive school of thought in its own right. Post-classical Islamic philosophy, as posited by John Walbridge, finds its origins in three foundational streams: Aristotelianism championed by Ibn Sina, Platonism advocated by Suhrawardy, and Monism expounded by Ibn Arabi. Iranian philosophers framed this intellectual landscape as a discourse centered on the dispute between proponents of the primacy of essence, epitomized by Suhrawardy, and advocates of the primacy of existence, exemplified by Ibn Arabi. Alongside these debates, remnants of earlier philosophical traditions persist, including influences from the Peripatetic school.⁽¹⁴⁾ By examining key and significant stages, one can swiftly delineate the central developments in Iranian philosophical inquiry during the Safavid period and preceding eras.

Tusi and Political Confusion

Before the Safavid era, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 1273 AD/672 AH) resided in the Nizariyya Ismaili fortresses in Persia for approximately three decades, sparking debates among researchers regarding his religious affiliation. Some speculate whether he was a Twelver Shiite or an Ismaili. Certain scholars argue that while he may have been a Twelver Shiite, he practiced *taqiyya* (precautionary dissimulation) during his time in Nizari Persia, compiling Ismaili writings to demonstrate allegiance to Ismailism and safeguard his life. Conversely, others contend that although he was initially raised as a Twelver Shiite, his prolonged exposure to Ismaili communities led to his conversion to Ismailism during his significant tenure among the Ismaili fortresses in Persia.⁽¹⁵⁾

During his stay among the Ismailis in Persia, Tusi authored several major philosophical works, including *Akhlaq-i Nasirii*, *Akhlaq-i Muhtashami*, and *Sharh al-Isharat*, a commentary on Ibn Sina's books. However, following the downfall of the Nizari state due to Mongol invasions, Tusi aligned himself with Hulagu's entourage and embraced Twelver Shiism once again. He then focused his scholarly endeavors on Imami theology, producing significant works such as *Kitab Qawa'id al-'aqa'id* and *Tajrid al-I'tiqad*. Farhad Daftari suggests that Tusi stands out as one of the rare figures who seamlessly integrated philosophy and theology, perhaps even being among the first Shiite Twelver scholars to achieve such synthesis.⁽¹⁶⁾

The debate surrounding Tusi's doctrinal allegiance often overlooks the personal and pragmatic dimensions of his actions. It is plausible that he prioritized personal interests and ambitions over doctrinal adherence, or perhaps he strategically maneuvered to carve out spaces for himself to pursue his

projects. In this context, he might have employed *taqiyya*, with various groups. This could explain his apparent alignment with the ideology and doctrine of the Nizaris while residing in their fortresses, fully embracing their beliefs and practices. However, upon the collapse of their state and the conclusion of his association with them, he shifted his allegiance and penned works extolling the doctrine of the Twelvers.

The distinction between Tusi's alignment with Ismaili and Twelver doctrines warrants examination, particularly given the absence of Twelver political power during his time. The Twelvers, characterized as the quietest sect, abstained from political engagement, awaiting the reappearance of the Infallible Imam before actively involving themselves in political affairs. Conversely, the Ismailis held sway over the state, with their ideas permeating society and posing a persistent threat to rival states. Upon the demise of the Ismaili state, Tusi opted to align himself with the quietist Twelver sect, which maintained its stance even in the absence of political authority. By eschewing direct political involvement, even in anticipation of the Infallible Imam's reappearance, Tusi garnered favor with the Mongol rulers, who trusted his loyalty and refrained from monitoring his actions. The transition in Tusi's allegiances — from a purported Twelver Shiite at the outset of his life to a reaffirmed adherence to the Twelver doctrine — raises significant questions, particularly concerning his service to Hulagu and the Mongols. Traditional Shiite jurisprudence typically advocates patience and awaiting the Infallible Imam's reappearance, presenting a dilemma regarding Tusi's cooperation with non-Shiite rulers. However, one could attribute his cooperation to various factors, including Tusi's belief in the permissibility of serving the sultan, his antipathy toward Sunni Abbasids, his desire for prestige and influence, or a combination of these factors.

Mulla Sadra and Shunning Politics

Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi, often referred to as “The Third Teacher,” holds a significant place in the Isfahan School of philosophy, following in the footsteps of his mentor Mir Muhammad Baqir al-Istarabadi, also known as Mir Damad; his title “Damad” stems from his father's relation to the influential Sheikh al-Karaki, who served as a prominent figure in Isfahan, assuming the position of Sheikh al-Islam. He enriched the philosophical landscape by building upon the Peripatetic tradition, synthesizing Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophies with Islamic doctrines, drawing inspiration from the works of Farabi and Ibn Sina. Additionally, Mir Damad incorporated elements from the Illuminationist legacy of Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardy and the Sufi mysticism of Ibn Arabi, blending these diverse influences with Twelver Shiism. A distinctive aspect of Mir Damad's philosophy, and that of the Isfahan School, lies in their endeavor to purify the Neoplatonic elements within the Persian philosophical tradition while emphasizing the Neoplatonic aspects in the works of Farabi and Ibn Sina, thereby refining the philosophical heritage inherited from ancient Persia and delineating it from the

Greek Peripatetic tradition. Among Mir Damad's most notable students is Mulla Sadra,⁽¹⁷⁾ renowned as the most eminent Iranian philosopher and the progenitor of the School of Transcendent Theosophy.

Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi, also known as Akhund (d. 1640 AD/1050 AH), came of age during the reign of Shah Abbas the Great (d. 1629 AD/1038 AH), a period marked by the Safavid ruler's efforts to forge alliances with European Catholics and the West. Shah Abbas's court became a hub for European merchants and diplomats, with the monarch pursuing policies aimed at fostering material prosperity, opulence, and urban development. However, it is reported that Mulla Sadra, as Shirazi was sometimes called, voiced skepticism regarding Shah Abbas's close ties to European Catholics. Consequently, he retreated from Isfahan to a secluded town, dedicating himself to worship and introspection. Hence, Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi vehemently criticized in his writings the practice of scholars who incessantly sought favor at the gates of rulers, enduring humiliation and disgraceful treatment in pursuit of ill-gotten gains funded by illicit money.⁽¹⁸⁾ This stance signifies his opposition to the authoritarian rule of Shah Abbas, renowned for his strict and often ruthless governance. Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi received his education under the tutelage of Mir Damad, whom he regarded as his most influential teacher, and also studied under the guidance of the esteemed Baha'i Sheikh, Baha al-Din al-Amili (d. 1621 AD/1030 AH), a key figure in the Isfahan School. His scholarly lineage includes notable figures such as Abd al-Razzaq Lahiji (1661 AD/1072 AH) and Mohsen Fayz Kashani (d. 1680 AD/1091 AH), from whom he gained valuable insights and knowledge.

In his philosophical endeavors, Mulla Sadra undertook a synthesis of various philosophical, mystical, and theological traditions. He amalgamated the theological, Peripatetic, Illuminationist and mystical schools of thought, notably incorporating elements from the Sufism of Ibn Arabi, into an esoteric Shiite framework which he termed Transcendent Theosophy. His objective was to harmonize reason, revelation and *kashf* (inner inspiration) within a unified philosophical framework.

Some scholars posit that the Isfahan School, within which Mulla Sadra operated, may have been influenced by the philosophical discourse propagated by Ismaili preachers during the era of the Fatimid state.⁽¹⁹⁾ These influences likely permeated Iran and contributed to the intellectual milieu in which Mulla Sadra and his contemporaries mingled.

Shirazi's approach reflects a preference for keeping a distance from authority, opting not to directly challenge it in a manner that would endanger his safety or academic pursuits. Instead, he chose a path of isolation and critique, particularly targeting scholars closely aligned with the ruling authority. This approach, however, may have contributed to the persecution faced by philosophers associated with the Isfahan School later on. In the late 17th century AD, the Isfahan School of philosophy and Sufism encountered persecution, orchestrated by Twelver Shiite jurists who formed an alliance with the Safavid court against

philosophers and rationalists. Despite the adversity faced by the school, it persevered, thanks to the efforts of eminent philosophers who emerged to revive its teachings. Foremost among these figures was Mulla Hadi al-Sabzwari (d. 1873 AD), known as “Al-Hajj” and “Asrar.” Sabzwari maintained amicable relations with jurists and traditionalists, such as Sahib al-Jawahir (Muhammad Hasan al-Najafi) and Murtada al-Ansari, demonstrating an ability to navigate the complexities of his time while upholding the philosophical tradition of the Isfahan School.⁽²⁰⁾

The prevailing philosophical school during the Safavid era was characterized by Transcendent Theosophy, prominently championed by Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi. Despite keeping a distance from governmental affairs during his time, this philosophical tradition remained influential even decades after the downfall of the Safavid state, exerting its impact from within the corridors of power. Regarding the theory of the imamate according to Mulla Sadra, it closely aligns with the traditional Shiite doctrine. He firmly upholds the concept of divine investiture and the infallible status of the imams, a position that distinguishes him from ancient philosophers such as Farabi and Ibn Sina.

Tabatabai and the Legacy of Mulla Sadra: Shura and ‘Irfān

The study of Iranian philosophy experienced a period of decline until the emergence of Muhammad Hussein Tabatabai (d. 1981 AD/1402 AH), renowned for his monumental work *Tafsir al-Mizan*. Tabatabai’s revival of philosophical inquiry reinstated its centrality, particularly within a traditionalist hawza that emphasized the study of jurisprudence and elevated the status of jurists. Throughout Shiite history, jurists have often monopolized the position of supreme marja, regardless of the stature of philosophers or theologians. This dominance of jurisprudence has had a significant impact on other disciplines within the intellectual landscape.

Tabatabai and the Revival of the Philosophical Lesson

Allama Tabatabai is credited as the pioneer in reviving philosophical discourse in contemporary Iran. However, when Tabatabai sought to elucidate philosophical concepts, particularly those found in the works of Mulla Sadra such as *Hikmat al-muta’aliya fi-l-asfar al-‘aqliyya al-arba’a* (The Transcendent Philosophy of the Four Journeys of the Intellect), during his hawza lessons, he encountered significant resistance from within the hawza itself. This opposition, notably from Ayatollah Boroujerdi, the preeminent Shiite authority of the time, stemmed from the traditionalist and conservative orientation of the official hawza, which harbored skepticism and hostility toward philosophical inquiry.

This stance persists in contemporary times, particularly within the Najaf hawza and certain factions within the Qom seminary. In Qom, various groups such as the Shirazi faction, the Hojjatieh, the deconstructionist movement, and proponents of the Akbari school, alongside some Usulis, exhibit disdain for philosophical studies and express antagonism toward them, despite their

nuanced differences. The seminary environment, thus, proved inhospitable to the integration of philosophical study due to several factors, most prominently the predominance of jurisprudence as a discipline necessary for *ijtihad* and jurisprudential mastery and leadership. After mastering *ijtihad*, the *mujtahid* will gain a significant scholarly position. This is in addition to financial benefits derived from *khoms* taxes and the endorsement of *marja-e taqlid* (general emulators), among other considerations.

The predominance of jurisprudence not only hindered the advancement of philosophical studies but also impeded the progress of other disciplines, including Quranic studies. Despite the rich tradition of Quranic studies among Sunnis, contemporary efforts to systematize this field have been relatively recent. One notable example is the comprehensive encyclopedia on Quranic sciences compiled by the scholar Mohammad-Hadi Ma'refat, representing a significant milestone in the development of Quranic studies. This emphasis on jurisprudence also impacted the scholarly pursuits of prominent figures within the Shiite tradition. For instance, Ayatollah al-Khoei did not complete his Quranic exegesis, prioritizing the composition of practical treatises and works on jurisprudence instead. This preference reflects the overarching centrality of jurists within the Shiite world, whether in Iran — often characterized by “jurisprudential Islam” — or in Najaf, renowned as the bastion of Shiite traditionalism. Mortada Motahhari lamented the diminishing emphasis on the Quran within the *hawza*, critiquing the departure from Quranic studies in favor of jurisprudence. “We’ve forsaken the Qur’an, and it’s crucial for the new generation to embrace it. Let me demonstrate how neglected the Qur’an is among us. If someone truly understands it, delving deep into its meaning and interpretation, how many of us would truly value and respect them?”⁽²¹⁾ Hence, Tabatabai did not ascend to the position of *marja* due to his focus on philosophy and exegesis rather than jurisprudence, a prerequisite for holding such a title. This limitation of the *marja* position to jurisprudence prompted Shiite scholars to explore ways to expand its scope, suggesting additional criteria beyond traditional scholarly jurisprudential knowledge, such as comprehension of reality, proficiency in exegesis, and philosophical acumen. Tabatabai himself seemed aware of this predicament and lamented his marginalized status within the Shiite community. He reminded them of the earlier definition of a jurist in Islam, emphasizing mastery of all religious sciences, including *u ʿul* (principles), *furuʿ* (branches), and morality, rather than solely jurisprudence.⁽²²⁾ Despite his challenges, Tabatabai played a pivotal role in reintroducing philosophical discourse to Qom, establishing it as a bastion for mystical philosophical thought. He formed a philosophical circle akin to the Vienna Group or the Frankfurt School, comprising his prominent students such as Morteza Motahhari, Hossein Montazeri, Beheshti, Musa al-Sadr, Ebrahim Amini, Ja’far Sobhani, Mehdi Haeri, and Javad Amoli. In Tehran, weekly gatherings convened with Henry Corbin in attendance, alongside Tabatabai, where Shariati vividly depicted

Tabatabai's presence as reminiscent of Socrates surrounded by his students.⁽²³⁾ Tabatabai and his school primarily focused on teaching and revitalizing the school of Transcendent Theosophy rather than introducing novel philosophical concepts. However, philosophical developments and debates ensued among his students, particularly following the emergence of philosophical groups and political movements grounded in ideologies distinct from Transcendent Theosophy, such as the prevalent deconstructionist movement in present-day Iran. If Tabatabai asserted that Mulla Sadra revived philosophy after its decline, a similar assertion holds true for Tabatabai himself, who revived the Mulla Sadra school following its decline. When Tabatabai sought to teach Sadr al-Shirazi's *The Transcendent Philosophy of the Four Journeys of the Intellect* in Qom, Ayatollah Boroujerdi objected and advised him against it. Boroujerdi suggested Tabatabai either retract this decision or conduct the teachings discreetly if he insisted. He explicitly stated, "The public study of the Asfar in the official hawza is not valid in any way and must be abandoned."⁽²⁴⁾

The Theory of Governance and State Structure

Tabatabai is renowned for his stance on Shura (collective consultation). He asserted that during the era of Occultation (Ghayba), the ruler's governance must be "based on Shura."⁽²⁵⁾ This aligns him with the Constitutional jurists, though he distanced himself from active politics, similar to the founder of his school, Mulla Sadra, and focused on rejecting the concept of absolute guardianship of the jurist (Wilayat al-Faqih) in favor of Shura. However, some of his students, such as Javad Amoli and Mesbah Yazdi, later became leading proponents of Wilayat al-Faqih in Iran, implementing Khomeini's vision of absolute juristic guardianship since 1988. When Tabatabai elaborated on the structure of the state in Islam, he differentiated it from modern democratic systems. He argued that Islam sets itself apart from democracy by distinguishing between two types of rulings or laws: fixed and changing. In democratic societies, there are similarly fixed elements, such as constitutions that are not easily altered, and variable laws that can be amended through legislative bodies like the National Assembly and the Senate, provided these laws align with constitutional principles. The fundamental difference between Islamic governance and democratic systems lies in the source of unchanging principles. In Islam, these principles are divine, as sovereignty belongs exclusively to God (rule belongs only to God), unlike democratic principles which are human made. Changing laws in modern democratic systems is subject to the majority's opinion (half plus one). In contrast, in Islam, changing rulings is based on Shura and real rights and interests, not merely the majority's opinion.⁽²⁶⁾

Tabatabai contends that the well-established, unchanging principles of Islam and what is known by *darurah* (necessity) in religion, leave no room for democracy or Shura. However, he acknowledges that the changing principles and assumptions are areas where Shura and democracy could be applied. Despite this concession, he diverges significantly from Western democratic

principles, particularly in his rejection of the majority rule (half plus one). Tabatabai does not see the Islamic approach to governance as compatible with democracy, especially concerning the principle of majority rule. He remains silent, however, on the matter of the elite group within the Shura who have the authority to override the majority opinion and make final decisions based on their judgment.

In another context, Tabatabai emphasizes that *wilayah* (guardianship) should pertain specifically to the *faqih* (jurist) rather than to other individuals of probity, or the broader Muslim community. He then addresses the issue of guardianship when there are multiple jurists, posing the question of whether each jurist's actions should be effective according to his ability, or if guardianship should be assigned to the most knowledgeable among them. However, he refrains from providing a definitive answer, stating that the resolution of this issue is tied to jurisprudential knowledge. This implies that the matter is grounded in *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and subject to discussion and debate. Tabatabai outlines a general criterion for the individual who should hold guardianship, stating that this person must be "the most pious among others, in addition to being superior in competence, good management, and awareness and knowledge of the circumstances of his age."⁽²⁷⁾ Tabatabai raises another issue regarding the form of government in the context of the contemporary Islamic world, characterized by numerous societies spread over a vast geographical area with diverse languages and ethnicities. He questions whether each society should operate within its own jurisdiction and government, or if there should be local national governments united under a single central government. Tabatabai responds by stating that this is a conjectural issue not definitively addressed by Islam. He explains that Islam, as a "fixed law," does not mandate a specific framework of governance as obligatory. Instead, the law consists of fixed religious principles, while the framework and form of governance are considered variable issues. These aspects are subject to change in future societies in accordance with their civilizational evolution.⁽²⁸⁾

What is peculiar about Tabatabai's approach is that he does not establish a framework for external oversight and political accountability of the government. Instead, he relies solely on internal checks, such as the piety and justice of the rulers, and adherence to the life and Sunnah of the Prophet. He supports this with Quranic verses, such as "There has certainly been for you in the Messenger of Allah an excellent pattern for anyone whose hope is in Allah and the Last Day and [who] remembers Allah often."⁽²⁹⁾ Regarding his stance on Shura, Tabatabai states that any rulings related to the central state and government must be made through Shura, provided that the interests of Islam and Muslims are upheld. However, he does not make Shura binding on the government and jurist, nor does he elaborate on its methods, resources, or the nature of the elite that should be consulted. He also omits the existence of Shura bodies such as the Parliament or elected constitutional institutions. This omission leaves significant

room for manipulating the political process and deviates from traditional concepts of Islamic Shura. By relying solely on internal (personal) checks and not establishing constitutional oversight and advisory bodies, Tabatabai's framework lacks mechanisms for external accountability and counsel.

In the Revolutionary Era: The Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist

Throughout Shiite history, Iranian philosophers largely distanced themselves from politics, engaging only during a few critical periods. For instance, Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi (Mulla Sadra) maintained a separation from political affairs and the ruling court because he adhered to the Shiite tradition of awaiting the reappearance of the Mahdi (quietism) and perceived the Safavid rulers as unjust, thus unable to lend them further legitimacy. Similarly, Sabzwari, also refrained from political involvement. In the modern era, Tabatabai continued this tradition by keeping away from politics, focusing entirely on his philosophical endeavors without delving deeply into political philosophy. This detachment persisted until the significant shift brought by Khomeini, who profoundly incorporated mystical philosophy into his political theorizing. Khomeini justified his political vision and the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih through philosophy and theology, transforming it from a marginal theory within the doctrine to a central tenet. However, despite his philosophical justifications, Khomeini cannot be classified as a philosopher in the same vein as Tabatabai, nor does he compare to the classical sages such as Mir Damad and Mulla Sadra.

Khomeini's Philosophy Between 'Irfān, and Transcendent Theosophy

Khomeini did not favor the Peripatetic school of philosophy; instead, he leaned more toward the Illuminationist school. Mahdi al-Haeri remarks on Khomeini's philosophical preferences: "He did not give much importance to Peripatetic philosophy, but he loved the Illuminationist theosophy of Suhrawardy. He interpreted the Transcendent Theosophy with a mystical taste. The Imam was interested in ancient naturalism and science, modern astronomy, and considered ancient astronomy to be falsehood."⁽³⁰⁾ Although Khomeini did not admire the Peripatetic strand of philosophy, he held great reverence for Ibn Sina. Ashtiani quotes him as saying, "There are many problems with Sheikh [Ibn Sina] regarding divine theosophy, and yet among the masters of research and vindication, there is no one equal to him."⁽³¹⁾ Khomeini denied that the school of Transcendent Theosophy originated from Greek philosophy, describing such belief as pure ignorance. However, he simultaneously acknowledged the significance of Greek philosophy, considering it "of great importance per se."⁽³²⁾ Khomeini's view appears to categorize the Peripatetic school as fundamentally Greek in origin and thought. This perspective has become well-known and is often reiterated among contemporary philosophers. For instance, Taha Abd al-Rahman posits that Islamic philosophy's problems originated from Greek sources, claiming that these issues "were transferred from the Greek language in a mistranslation."⁽³³⁾

However, a contemporary of Khomeini from Al-Azhar, Sheikh Abdel-Halim Mahmoud (1910-1978), vehemently denies and criticizes Khomeini's assertion, arguing that "philosophical problems were raised in the Islamic environment before the era of translation."⁽³⁴⁾ This critique highlights the historical depth of Islamic philosophical inquiry independent of Greek influence. Khomeini's denial of the Greek origins of Transcendent Theosophy, as opposed to the Greek influence on the Peripatetic strand, can be interpreted from another perspective. He might have aimed to establish the authenticity of Shiite philosophical discourse, distinguishing it from other traditions like Peripatetic, Ismaili and Sunni philosophies, which he believed were influenced by or derived from Greek ideas. Regardless of the acceptance of its Greek roots, it is clear that philosophical discussions took place within an Islamic context among Muslim philosophers.

Khomeini and his school transitioned from the conciliatory and coexistent mystical gnosis of Hafez al-Shirazi to a distinct model of *irfān*, which can be termed the Qizilbashi gnosis. This model recalls the Qizilbashi during the Safavid era, characterized by a revolutionary *irfān*, that Khomeini embraced. It has been suggested that this form of *irfān*, rather than his textual theories, was the primary driving force behind the revolution. Farhad Daftari discusses this complex and difficult-to-understand synthesis in the context of the Safavid period. He explores how Ibn Arabi's Sufi thought, which sometimes conflicted with philosophical and theological ideas, was merged with the doctrines of Aristotelians like Ibn Sina, and Illuminists like Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardy. Figures like Mir Damad and Mulla Sadra attempted to reconcile these contradictions and develop a coherent philosophical framework. Although their efforts were successful to some extent, they faced significant opposition from jurists. Khomeini inherited this intricate combination characteristic of the school of Transcendent Theosophy. Notably, even though Khomeini engaged deeply with philosophy, he also remained a traditionalist jurist, firmly rooted in the Shiite jurisprudential tradition, unlike many other philosophers who often rebelled against traditional jurisprudence. This resulted in another synthesis: the integration of jurisprudence, philosophy, and mysticism — elements that are typically seen as contradictory and challenging to reconcile.

Some researchers have attempted to amplify Khomeini's philosophical contributions, with Hamid Parsia asserting that Khomeini was "the first pioneer on the path to reviving the rational disciplines, or what is called the school of Transcendent Theosophy, which is a mixture of philosophy and mysticism." Parsia claims that Khomeini, recognizing the hawza's dire need for these disciplines despite society's longstanding reluctance and neglect, taught philosophical and mystical subjects in the Qom seminary. He was subsequently followed by Tabatabai, who continued the movement initiated by Khomeini.⁽³⁵⁾ We will not engage in a debate with Parsia about the relative statuses of Khomeini and Tabatabai during that period, or which of them had the more established philosophy, as such questions tend to be fraught with ideological

polemics. However, it is clear that all contemporary philosophical efforts in Iran, including related works, students and circles, were primarily under the supervision of Tabatabai, not Khomeini. Even when Khomeini returned to Qom after the revolution, he did not focus on authoring philosophical works to the extent that Tabatabai did. Indeed, Tabatabai is renowned for founding the Qom Philosophical Circle. While cities like Isfahan and Khorasan had historical reputations for philosophical studies, Qom only gained such a reputation through the efforts of Tabatabai.⁽³⁶⁾

In conclusion, it cannot be asserted that Khomeini established a philosophical movement distinct from that of Tabatabai. Both figures are undeniably part of the same intellectual tradition, specifically the school of Transcendent Theosophy. This mystical school reinterpreted and reshaped Shiite knowledge in a complex manner that is challenging to comprehend. The difficulty arises because, while the school is traditionalist in its jurisprudential aspect and adheres to traditional rules in hawza (seminary) studies, it simultaneously embodies a fundamentally mystical character. This leads to the intriguing question of how the historical and heritage-based tensions between jurists and Sufis were resolved. How did jurists transition into mystics? Historically, the relationship between jurists and Sufis was often fraught with tension and scholarly disputes.⁽³⁷⁾ Khomeini was an adherent of Ibn Arabi, which facilitated a synthesis of mystical, philosophical, and jurisprudential elements. This synthesis allowed for significant flexibility in interpreting certain aspects of the jurisprudential tradition, albeit within specific constraints. Such flexibility was confined to the domain of the guardian jurist. Unlike the ordinary jurist, who does not have the authority to rationalize Islam or expand on unrestricted and hypothetical interests, these tasks are the exclusive purview of the guardian jurist. Consequently, the arguments for absolute guardianship are predominantly philosophical and rational.

Wilayat al-Faqih and Political Philosophy

If Tabatabai engaged in philosophical theorization to substantiate *the Wilayat al-Faqih* (the guardian jurist) during the occultation, with the condition of Shura (consultation), Khomeini viewed the guardianship of the jurist as self-evident, requiring no proof for anyone familiar with Islamic rulings and beliefs, and did not include the condition of Shura. Khomeini argued for the necessity of establishing a government even during the Occultation, stating, "It has been proven by the necessity of Sharia and reason that what was necessary in the days of the Messenger (PBUH) and in the era of Imam Ali (PBUH) of the existence of a government, is still necessary to this day."⁽³⁸⁾ He rejected the notion of majority rule, asserting that the Islamic government adheres to the Quran and Sunna (Prophetic traditions), rather than to the opinion of the majority.⁽³⁹⁾ Khomeini stipulated two conditions for the ruler in addition to the general requirements of reason, maturity, and good administration: probity and knowledge of Islamic law. Therefore, if the jurists are the most knowledgeable about Islamic law, then the

real rulers are the jurists, with the sultans merely acting as their subordinates.⁽⁴⁰⁾

During the time of Occultation, guardianship belongs exclusively to the jurist, and the government should be his alone. The desired guardianship encompasses the governance of the people, state administration, implementation of Sharia stipulations, and national policy. Khomeini likened the jurist's guardianship over the people to a guardian's role over children and girls, asserting it as a comprehensive and unlimited guardianship.⁽⁴¹⁾ Khomeini also did not neglect to establish his mystical philosophy, elevating the imams above angels, prophets, and messengers: "One of the pillars of our doctrine is that our Imams have a position that neither a close angel nor a sent prophet can reach." He even asserted that the Messenger and the Infallible Imam existed as lights before this world, gazing upon God's Throne.⁽⁴²⁾

Morteza Motahhari and the Philosophy of Doubt

Morteza Motahhari (d. 1979 AD/1399 AH) is recognized as one of the prominent students of both Tabatabai and Khomeini. Motahhari straddled both the seminary and the university, making him one of the most significant Shiite philosophers and seminary figures of the 20th century, and indeed, one of the most important in Shiite history. He endeavored to establish the philosophy of "doubt" within the religious seminary, a context that traditionally treats religious texts and doctrinal manifestations as sacred and infallible, and thus beyond criticism or attack. According to Motahhari, doubt and skepticism serve to illuminate the truth more effectively. He viewed doubt as the precursor to certainty and skepticism as the ladder of search and exploration in the pursuit of truth. In grounding the issue of doubt, he frequently cited Ghazali's *Mizan al-Amal*: "And even if the only outcome of these words is to instill doubt in your inherited beliefs, this would still be valuable. Such doubt compels you to seek further, as it is through doubt that one is led to the truth."⁽⁴³⁾

There is an underlying nuance in this reasoning, as despite Motahhari's critique of Ash'arism, he shares a commonality with Ghazali and the Ash'ari imams: mysticism and Sufism. Ghazali, like Motahhari, is not among the Akbaris but is considered a significant traditionalist and one of their theorists, whereas Motahhari harbors a negative view of Shiite Akbaris.⁽⁴⁴⁾ However, the differences between them are substantial. Motahhari held a critical stance toward the Ash'aris and Mu'tazilites, in addition to the confessional differences between the two scholars. Thus, Motahhari's reference to Ghazali's theory of doubt was likely an attempt to root his own theory in an Islamic context, avoiding the impression of being influenced by Cartesian doubt. Motahhari, in many instances, seeks to advance the philosophy of doubt but clarifies that he is not troubled by "raising doubts and casting uncertainties regarding Islamic issues." For him, doubt is not merely a path to truth but a means to affirm the truth: "The value of truth lies in the fact that doubt and skepticism illuminate

it further, as doubt is the precursor to certainty, and skepticism is the stepping stone of search and exploration.”⁽⁴⁵⁾

After Motahhari discussed philosophy and the role of doubt, emphasizing that doubt is a right for those inquiring and speculating until they reach certainty, he remained firmly aligned with the established Twelver Shiite doctrine in all its aspects. He was highly critical of Ali Shariati, warning Khomeini about him before the revolution, and labeling Shariati as a deviant from Shiite doctrine and tradition. Motahhari opposed any concept of Islamic unity that compromised any part of Twelver Shiite doctrine. In both politics and religion, he rejected the idea of majority opinion as a criterion for truth. He pointed out that many jurists refrained from expressing their views due to fear of public and popular backlash. This led him to the same conclusion as his mentor Tabatabai: the opinion of the majority is marginal and cannot be considered decisive in political matters. Consequently, Motahhari also endorsed the concept of guardianship of the jurist. Although he did not advocate for the absolute guardianship that was implemented after his death, his philosophy of doubt did not detach him from the Shiite tradition or compel him to reassess traditional philosophical ideas, particularly those concerning the issues of imamate and governance.

The Counter Philosophical Theorization: The Alternative Model and Political Reform

Contemporary Iranian philosophical discourse is not confined to the school of Transcendent Theosophy. It encompasses various other schools, including those aligned with liberal and reformist thought, such as the views of Abdul Karim Soroush, which resonate with contemporary Western philosophical lessons. These reformist philosophers remain active in Iranian universities and seminaries, preferring to focus on philosophical discourse and pursue reform through philosophical methods, while largely avoiding political entanglements. A significant factor behind the strength of this modernist movement is its roots in tradition and the seminary. Many of its leading figures were pioneers of traditional movements and were actively involved in the revolution from its inception. They possess a deep understanding and practice of Islamic heritage. This intrinsic connection to tradition has caused concern among the ruling religious elite, leading to attempts to control and restrict the movement. This, in turn, has prompted the movement to advocate for the separation of political authority from cultural and intellectual affairs. Soroush criticizes the government's guardianship over cultural affairs, arguing that such control leads to the justification of violence and the use of oppressive measures. He contends that the government's role should not include the creation and management of social culture, as this not only results in the erosion of democracy by the ruling power but also leads to the stifling and possible obliteration of cultural development.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Soroush's critique is aimed at the theories proposed by regime philosophers like Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, who argue that force is necessary to preserve the Islamic government,

even against the will of the majority. Yazdi maintained that the preservation of the government does not depend on the majority's support. Instead, the crucial factor is the backing of a committed group of followers of the Infallible Imam or supporters of the legitimate guardianship of the jurist. He posited that even if only 10% of the population supports the government, it must be preserved by any means necessary.⁽⁴⁷⁾ This view justifies the use of violence, including extrajudicial killings, to protect the state's Islamic values.⁽⁴⁸⁾ The modernist philosophical movement in Iran, while rooted in tradition, faces significant opposition from the ruling religious elite. Figures like Soroush challenge the government's cultural guardianship, advocating for a separation of powers to prevent the erosion of democracy and the abuse of authority. The contrasting views on the use of force highlight a fundamental tension between the preservation of traditional religious authority and the pursuit of intellectual and cultural autonomy.⁽⁴⁹⁾

However, other philosophical schools in Iran have continued to theorize alternative forms of governance, ranging from democratic government to Islamic Shura, and sometimes advocating for the activation and amendment of the existing Constitution to refine the regime's behavior and discipline the ruling elite. Thus, philosophy in contemporary Iran remains deeply intertwined with the general political situation. The philosophical perspectives promoted by the ruling elites in Tehran have contributed to the richness of philosophical discourse. This ongoing dialectic between tradition and reform, between the seminaries and the modernists, and between the conservatives and the moderates, has positively impacted the philosophical landscape by fostering breadth and diversification, leading to the emergence of new topics and approaches. Two philosophers exemplify this dynamic and represent significant movements within Iranian philosophical thought. The first is Ali Shariati, who opposed enlightenment and modernity, clashing with both the West and the religious establishment and clerics at home. He criticized the religious establishment in his lectures and writings, advocating for a constitutional state based on Assyrian principles and rejecting the dominance of jurists over public affairs. The second is Abdul Karim Soroush, a prominent modernist philosopher who leads a broad liberal movement that sees democracy as the solution to Iran's challenges and views modernity and following the Western model as a way out of the impasse that began with the Iranian revolution of 1979.

Shariati and the State's Structure

Shariati's philosophy is significant because it diverged from traditional Shiite thought, emphasizing democracy and Shura while rejecting the authority and guardianship of the jurists. Although Shariati was a revolutionary, his political thinking was more advanced and distinct from his contemporaries. Unlike others, he did not emerge from the seminary's embrace, nor did he seek its approval, which led to clashes with the Shiite tradition and eventually to the boycott of his *hossainiya*. He faced criticism from several clerics, notably Morteza

Motahhari, who, after Khomeini's death, attempted to prevent the publication and dissemination of Shariati's works, even labeling him a "cursed person" in a speech. The core disagreement between Shariati and Khomeini and his followers centered on the issue of governance and the form of the state. Shariati advocated that governance in Islam should be based on Shura. His opponents, including Makarem al-Shirazi, argued that Shura is not a principle within the Shiite doctrine, accusing Shariati of denying the "Prophet's descendants' right to succeed him in leading the Muslim community," a principle that asserts the guardianship of Ali and his descendants. Makarem argued that Shura is a Shiite principle; Ali was denied his rightful caliphate through Shura.⁽⁵⁰⁾ One of the most serious accusations against Shariati was that he was a covert Sunni because he interpreted the initial disputes among the companions of Prophet Muhammad differently from the mainstream Shiite perspective. Shariati believed that had Ali assumed the caliphate after the Prophet's death, he would have established a democratic system based on allegiance and Shura.⁽⁵¹⁾ Contrary to claims that he was influenced by the West, Shariati critiqued those modernists and enlighteners who sought to imitate the West in all aspects. His advocacy for democracy and Shura was an attempt at internal reform rather than a reflection of Western influence.

However, the clerics' disagreement with Shariati stemmed from his critical stance toward the religious institution and his attempts to reform it. Consequently, jurists labeled him a renegade, a Sunni, a modernist, or a "cursed person," as Motahhari described him. Shariati did not outright reject the Shiite concept of Imamate but reinterpreted it as a "transitional stage" following the death of Prophet Muhammad. He suggested that the Imamate was necessary until the people matured and the desired society emerged — one that did not require the continuous guidance of a 13th or 14th Imam. He believed that society, based on democratic allegiance and Shura, as advocated by Sunnis and rooted in authentic Islamic principles, would eventually progress and develop. This maturation, according to Shariati, would not occur immediately after the Prophet but would follow the period of the Imamate, representing a time of independence and political maturity for the Islamic community. Shariati's advocacy for Shura and democracy starkly contrasted with the traditional hawza perspective, which was more conservative and less open to such progressive ideas. Additionally, his views clashed with those of Khomeini and his followers, who upheld the doctrine of the guardianship of the jurist (*Wilayat al-Faqih*) rather than endorsing Shura and democracy.

Soroush and Political Philosophy

Abdul Karim Soroush does not focus extensively on political theorization. Instead, he engages in theological and philosophical debates with the hawza and religious establishment, seemingly aiming to induce political change indirectly.⁽⁵²⁾ The foundation supporting the concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih* is deeply rooted in philosophical, mystical, and theological principles. Soroush appears to believe

that challenging and undermining these foundations would suffice to instigate gradual political or behavioral change. He explicitly stated this, noting that Khomeini's mystical philosophical views shaped his political theory: "The late Imam's mystical views on guardianship fundamentally shaped both the overall framework and specific content of his concept of the guardianship of the jurist."⁽⁵³⁾

However, Soroush also engages with political philosophy to some extent, considering the political realities and constraints in Iran. He argues that the nature of a government reflects the nature of its people and society. A religious government corresponds to a religious society, while an authoritarian government corresponds to an ignorant, unjust, backward, non-industrial, and closed population.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Regarding the Assembly of Experts, Soroush contends that if the assembly wishes to remove the leader due to immorality or unfitness, it cannot succeed if the assembly's legitimacy derives from the leader himself. Conversely, if the assembly's right to exist comes from the general public, it can remove the leader when his unfitness becomes evident. This highlights the crisis of the lack of oversight institutions and external checks on the Islamic government.

He highlights an important issue: the theoretical poverty faced by the "Islamic Revolution." There is no new thesis from the hawza regarding this revolution beyond the theory of the guardianship of the jurist. Moreover, this theory has become intertwined with power and so that it is beyond criticism, leading to a lack of scrutiny from both intellectuals and clerics.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Soroush criticizes the religious government for its stance on human rights, arguing that it neglects religious considerations and treats individuals as if they are part of a non-religious society.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Iranian philosophers outside the hawza and the framework of the "Islamic government" do not share the same philosophical foundation as the regime's philosophers and theorists. Their engagement with modern philosophy and its trends is more profound than their engagement with classical philosophical teachings and the school of Transcendent Theosophy. This divergence influences their political philosophical approach. While classical philosophers focus on the centrality of the Imamate and seek to employ this in political strategies, those outside the hawza emphasize Shura and democracy, whether they align with liberal or leftist schools.

Conclusion

Before the Iranian revolution, the philosophical discourse in Iran was integral to the seminary curriculum, particularly through the efforts of Tabatabai. This discourse was primarily contemplative and theoretical, focusing on metaphysical issues, ontology, gnosis, and speculative theology (*kalam*). It engaged in intellectual debates with Greek philosophers and other opponents of Transcendent Theosophy, without being overtly politicized or employed for political ends. However, the "Islamic Revolution" transformed the entire hawza,

including its scholarly materials and methods of thought, and subsequently influenced philosophical discourse as well. Philosophy became entangled in political tensions and emerging political theories. The concept of the absolute guardianship of the jurist (*Wilayat al-Faqih*) began to be supported by theoretical, philosophical, mystical, speculative (*kalam*), and jurisprudential foundations. This was unprecedented, as no previous philosopher, from Nasir al-Din al-Tusi to the proponents of Transcendent Theosophy, had proposed such a framework. Conversely, a counter-philosophy emerged from former seminarians who rebelled against “tradition,” “stagnation,” “loss of independence,” and being above criticism. They first clashed with the seminary as an institution that had become part of the political system’s agenda and a representative of *taqlid* (emulation). They also opposed the theory of the guardianship of the jurist, especially in its absolute form. These critics observed a philosophical and theoretical stagnation in Iran following the revolution, attributing it to the dominance of the guardianship of the jurist theory in the political sphere and its constitutional legitimization, which rendered opposition to it anti-constitutional. Their theories offer alternative approaches and raise challenging philosophical questions in an environment marked by stagnation, *taqlid* and coercion.

Endnotes

- (1) The deconstructionism referred to here is the Iranian school of deconstructionism, founded by the thinker Sheikh Reza Hakimi, who is the most prominent student of Shariati. This intellectual movement emerged in Mashhad and developed as a reaction against the gnostic current, which integrates philosophy, logic, theology and mysticism in the interpretation of revealed texts. In contrast, the deconstructionist current seeks to dismantle the sciences, separate them from one another, and eliminate any extraneous material and impurities.
- (2) The School of Transcendent Theosophy refers to the philosophical school founded by Mulla Sadra.
- (3) Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Tahafut al-Falasifa* [The Incoherence of the Philosophers] Trans. Sabih Ahmad Kamali (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1963). <https://www.ghazali.org/incoherence-of-the-philosophers-s-kamali/>.
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) See Ghazali, *Maqasid al-Falasifa* (Saudi Arabia–Jeddah: Dar Al-Minhaj, 2023), 17. [Arabic].
- (7) Metaphysics pertains to matters related to the unseen and beyond the natural world.
- (8) See: Dr. Tawfiq al-Tawil, *Foundations of Philosophy* (Cairo: Dar Al-Nahda Al-Arabiya 1964), 260. [Arabic].
- (9) Ibn Sina, *Al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat*, with an explanation by Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, ed. Suleiman Dunya (Cairo: Dar al-Maaref, 2018), 2/15. [Arabic].
- (10) The status of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali as viewed by Mulla Sadra, Kamal al-Haidari, episode published on YouTube on: November 2, 2022 <https://bit.ly/3TiDy5T>. [Arabic].
- (11) Irvin Rosenthal, *Islamic Political Thought in the Middle Ages* (Beirut: Nama Center for Research and Studies, 2020), 289. [Arabic].
- (12) Ibid., 335.
- (13) John Walbridge, *In God and Logic in Islam* (Beirut: Nama Center for Research and Studies, 2018), 143, notes that he was known as Suhrawardi the Murdered to distinguish him from other Sufis, such as Shihab al-Din Omar al-Suhrawardi (d. 632 AH/1234 AD) and Abu al-Najib al-Suhrawardi (d. 563 AH/1167 AD). For further reference, see Duncan Black MacDonald, *The Development of the State, Jurisprudence, and Speculative Theology in Islam* (Beirut: Nama Center for Research and Studies, 2018), 235. [Arabic].
- (14) Ibid., 150.
- (15) Farhad Daftary, *History of Shiite Islam* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi 2017), 105.
- (16) Ibid. See: Zabineh Schmitke ed., *The Handbook of Islamic Theology*, trans. Osama Shafi'i, presented by Hassan Al-Shafi'i (Beirut: Nama Center for Research and Studies, 2018), 2/760-761. [Arabic].
- (17) Daftary, *History of Shiite Islam*, 115.
- (18) Qusi, *The Illuminationist Philosophy of Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi* (Cairo-Abu Dhabi: Muslim Council of Elders, 2020,) 34-35. [Arabic].
- (19) See: Farhad Daftary, *The History of Shiite Islam*, 116, and Fazl al-Rahman, *Islam*, trans. Hassoun al-Saray, presented by Abd al-Jabbar al-Rifai (Beirut: Arab Network, 2017), 208. [Arabic].
- (20) Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Origins of the Sabzwari Philosophy*, trans. Bilal Laziq (Beirut: Hadara Center for the Development of Islamic Thought, 2019), 44, 45. [Arabic].
- (21) See: *Criticism of Religious Thought According to Motahhari*, presented by Muhammad Amara (Virginia: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2011). [Arabic].
- (22) See: Muhammad Hussein Al-Tabatabai, *Foundational Articles in Islamic Thought*, trans. Khaled Tawfiq (Beirut: Umm Al-Qura Foundation, 1415 AH), 185. [Arabic].
- (23) Shariati, *Return to the Self*, p. 126.
- (24) See: Mohammad al-Sayyad, "Mysticism and the Revolution in the Course of the Hawza in Qom... The Fall of Theory and the Rise of Ideology," *Journal of Iranian Studies (JIS)* 2, no. 5 (December 2017). [Arabic].
- (25) Yahya Muhammad, "Understanding Religion: The Shiites between the Guardianship of the Jurist and the Shura," *Fahmaldin*, accessed May 29, 2024, <https://fahmaldin.net/index.php?id=144&rid=300>. [Arabic].
- (26) See: Muhammad Hussein al-Tabatabai, *Foundational Articles in Islamic Thought*, Arabized by: Khaled Tawfiq, (Beirut: Umm Al-Qura Foundation, 1415 AH), 185. [Arabic].
- (27) Ibid., 186
- (28) Ibid.
- (29) *Quran (Koran)*, Chapter (33) sūrat l-a zāb (The Combined Forces), Verse (33:21), <https://corpus>.

quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=33&verse=21.

(30) Muhammad Fanaei Al-Eshkuri, "Islamic Philosophy in Contemporary Iran," Nosos Center, September 21, 2017 accessed February 19, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3ULbr1z>. [Arabic].

(31) Ibid.

(32) Ibid.

(33) Taha Abdurrahman, Thaghour Al-Marabata (Beirut: AlMaaref Forum, 2019), 243. [Arabic].

Ibid., 186.

(34) The Great Imam Abdul Halim Mahmoud, *Philosophical Thinking in Islam* (Cairo: Dar Al-Maaref, 2021), 179. [Arabic].

(35) Hamid Parsia, *The Iranian Intellectual Makeup on the Eve of the Revolution* (Beirut: Hadara Center for the Development of Islamic Thought, 2012), 398. [Arabic].

(36) See: Abd al-Jabbar al-Rifai, *The Development of the Philosophical Studies in the Hawza* (Beirut: Dar Al-Hadi for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, 2005), 171. [Arabic].

(37) See: Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti: *Qam' al-mu'arid fi nusrat Ibn al-Farid*, *Collection of Maqamat al-Suyuti*, ed. Durubi, (Cairo: The General Authority for Cultural Palaces, 2007), 2/901-928. For details, see: Al-Hurr al-Amili, *The Ithna Ashariyyah Epistle in Refuting Sufism* (Qom- Iran, Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyyah, n.d.) 169, 177, 178.

(38) Ruhollah Khomeini, *The Islamic Government* (Beirut: Arab Difusion Company FZE, 2011), 26.

(39) Ibid. 42.

(40) Ibid., 46.

(41) Ibid., 51.

(42) Ibid., 52.

(43) Mehdi Jahromi and Muhammad Bagheri, *Collection and Classification, Criticism of Religious Thought According to Sheikh Morteza Motahhari*, presented by Mohammad Amara (Virginia: International Institute for Islamic Thought, 2011), 207.

(44) See *Mutair's attack on the Ash'aris*, 132

(45) Jahromi and Bagheri *Criticism of Religious Thought*, 207

(46) Soroush, *Critique of the Official Reading of Religion* (Beirut: Arab Diffusion Company FZE), 46 [Arabic].

(47) Sadiq Haqiqat, *The Distribution of Power in Shiite Political Thought*, trans. Hussein Safi (Beirut: Center of Civilization, 2014), 294. [Arabic].

(48) Tawfiq al-Saif, *The Limits of Religious Democracy* (Beirut: Dar Al Saqi, 2008), 137 & *The Distribution of Power in Shiite Political Thought*, 295.

(49) Ali Shariati, *A Political Biography* (Beirut: Arab Diffusion Company FZE, 2016) 603. [Arabic].

(50) Ali Shariati, *Return to the Self and Return to Any Self*, trans. Haider Najaf, (Beirut: Alintishar Al-Arabi Foundation, 2020), 336. [Arabic].

(51) Shariati, *History and Knowledge of Religions*, (Beirut, Dar Al-Amir, ed.), 2/156.

(52) See: Zabineh Schmitke ed., *Oxford Handbook in Islamic Theology, biography of Dr. Osama Shafi' al-Sayyid*, presented by the scholar Hassan al-Shafi'i, (Beirut: Namaa Center for Research and Studies, 2018), 2/1228.

(53) Abdel Karim Soroush, *Broader than Ideology* (Beirut: Al-Intishar Al-Arabi Foundation, 2014), 94. [Arabic].

(54) Ibid., 87.

(55) Soroush, *Heritage and Secularism* (Beirut: Arab Diffusion Company FZE,, 2009), 309. [Arabic].

(56) Ibid., 145.

LANDLOCKED ETHIOPIA AND THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF ATTEMPTING TO REACH OPEN WATER

Dr. Mohammed al-Amin bin Awdah

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Ghardaia

Abstract

Ethiopia seized an opportunity amidst ongoing developments by striking a bilateral memorandum of understanding (MoU) with authorities in the Somaliland region on January 1, 2024. This agreement grants Ethiopia access to the port of Berbera, situated on the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden at the entrance to the Red Sea. In return, Somaliland's governing bodies received stakes in Ethiopian Airlines, alongside official recognition of the region's independence from Somalia and acknowledgment of its sovereignty. This agreement has stirred considerable debate and raised questions about its implications and strategic impact on the Horn of Africa region. This study aims to explore the effects of this understanding on Ethiopia's regional standing, as well as the interests of other influential powers.

Keywords: Ethiopia, landlocked country, Somaliland, Somalia, the Red Sea, Horn of Africa, Berbera Port

Introduction

Political and academic articles often focus on the interactions in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea regions, driven by several considerations and motives. This region of the African continent, with its intertwined interactions and peculiarities, has been a witness to bloody events and periods of intraregional and internal conflicts. The African continent as a whole, and the Horn of Africa in particular, have evolved into a field and an attractive space of tense and burgeoning rivalry for various interests of states and major powers, all aspiring to expand their spheres of influence in the context of the changing world order that characterizes the current international system.

Landlocked countries, a geographical phenomenon, are found in many African states and presents several challenges and imperatives. This geographical reality has raised concerns in many cases. The Ethiopian case is not immune to this semi-tense situation. It has strived to escape this situation and impose a new geopolitical reality that suits its growing demographic and socioeconomic status. The Ethiopian government and the authorities of Somaliland signed an MoU at the beginning of this year with the aim to grant Ethiopia a sovereign presence on the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden at the entrance to the Red Sea. The agreement has sparked controversy and debate and raised old and new questions and problems. This study aims to answer the following question: How far did the landlocked geographical reality help Ethiopia adopt different approaches and strategies to reach the Red Sea, and what are the strategic implications of the MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland? This question branches off the following important questions: What is the concept of a landlocked country? What is the political context of the Ethiopian decision? What are the motives behind the Ethiopian government's pursuit of accessing the sea at the entrance to the Red Sea? How does Ethiopia's pursuit of accessing the Red Sea affect the formation of new alliances in the Horn of Africa? What are the most prominent reactions and potential implications for the security and stability of the Horn of Africa region resulting from the Ethiopian decision?

The study is based on the general hypothesis that there is a contradiction between what the Ethiopian authorities promote, which is a desire to have zero problems with neighboring countries due to the landlocked geography of Addis Ababa, and the policy of managing regional issues, particularly regarding access to the Red Sea and the division of the Nile waters. To answer the aforesaid questions, the study adopts the theory of realism which is based on the principles of interest and the logic of global power interactions. It also depends on the case study approach to track and analyze Ethiopian behavior, seeking to access the Red Sea through various policies and strategies adopted by successive Ethiopian governments. The study presents an explanation of the conceptual aspect of a landlocked country and the historical background of Addis Ababa's endeavors to

access open water, highlighting the content of the MoU and the general contexts in which it was concluded, and outlining the significant ramifications of this step.

The Concept of a Landlocked State and Ethiopian Attempts to Access Open Water

Territory, along with the population and the political leadership, has always been the bedrock of establishing states. Due to its vital significance, securing a coherent identified territory has always been a source of dispute and conflict between different states. Territory is highly significant as it grants the state variant sources of power at the geopolitical, economic, strategic and military levels. In this context, the phenomenon of landlocked countries as a case and concept of complex connotations takes up vast space in academic literature and debates. By viewing the literature and writings that have dealt with the concept primarily, the extent of the overlap and complexity of the scholarly cognitive frameworks that have discussed the concept is clearly evident. According to the Office of the High Representative of the United Nations for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and small island developing states,⁽¹⁾ abbreviated as (UN-OHRLLS), a landlocked country is a country that does not have territory connected to the sea, posing two challenges: limited access to world markets, and accumulated development difficulties. These countries have a total area of 15 million kilometers,² housing up to about 533 million people, with a population growth of about 2.3%. The office has estimated the average distance between its land border and the nearest sea coasts, about 1,370 kilometers.⁽²⁾

In the introduction of his doctorate thesis submitted to the University of Leeds, UK, Daosadeth Soysouvanh states that the concept of a landlocked country implies a fundamental economic dilemma and this is one of the most hindering factors to economic development.⁽³⁾ However, Samiullah Mahdi, in his master's thesis submitted to the University of Massachusetts, Boston, United States, argues that this phenomenon (a landlocked country) itself does not constitute an obstacle as much as neighboring countries do. According to Mahdi, many of the 42 landlocked countries are designated as rich developed countries, according to the criterion of stability and development and the quality levels of infrastructure that is provided.⁽⁴⁾ In their contribution to the *Journal of Economic Integration*, researchers Lahiri Bidisha and Masjidi Feroz pointed out that while approximately 20% of the world's countries are landlocked, these countries represent around 40% of the world's low-income economies and less than 10% of the world's high-income countries. These statistics highlight the unique economic challenges faced by landlocked economies. They argue that "Landlocked countries are often surrounded by coastal countries that differ with respect to their diplomatic, geographic, and socioeconomic aspects," adding these differences play an integral role in the landlocked countries' visions and foreign and domestic strategies; thus, they should be relatively diplomatic in their regional policy.⁽⁵⁾

The majority of academic studies address the negative connotation associated with landlocked countries compared to other countries around the world. According to Ingo Borchert and others, landlocked countries are victims of geography; therefore, this geographical inevitability forcibly insulates and deprives landlocked countries of many privileges and benefits, including notably the ease of trade flows, tourism, and even knowledge. As per the two researchers, these countries still have to choose among the political, economic or strategic approaches that will improve the process and dynamics of their communication and smooth interaction with the rest of the world.⁽⁶⁾

In this context, it can be said that the history of the Horn of Africa region has witnessed many significant changes and transformations, both in the intra-boundaries of states and those associated with the balance of power equation and major power competition for projection of influence. Regarding the current Ethiopian state, the presence and control over water access to the Red Sea coast have been pivotal issues for ages. Since the founding of the Kingdom of Axum (also known as the Aksumite Empire) in 325 BC by the descendant of the Prophet King Solomon)⁽⁷⁾ and the establishment of a vital port in the city of Adulis, the ruling political leadership of Abyssinia at that time was fully aware of the benefits and important economic and commercial returns of the Red Sea coast. This enabled Ethiopia to dominate the joint commercial activities between the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea later and wield influence and political and military control that lasted for many centuries. However, with the arrival of the Ottomans at the beginning of the 17th century to the region, Ethiopia's control declined when the Ottomans seized most of the ports and water crossings along the coast, mainly the strategic port of Massawa, which marked the beginning of Ethiopia's attempts to access open waters again.⁽⁸⁾

The 1920s to 1932 marked the Ethiopian authorities' latest attempt to break from being a landlocked country and dominate the coast to serve the country's commercial and economic interests. They adopted many geopolitical approaches to achieve this strategic goal, especially given that different European colonial powers dominated the majority of the Horn of Africa states. This reality granted the Horn of Africa states more room and margin to negotiate and win further gains. In this context, Italian-Ethiopian⁽⁹⁾ bilateral discussions emerged related to signing a deal for the exchange of territories between occupied Eritrea and Abyssinia. The Italian proposal accorded Ethiopian sovereignty over Assab, with Italy having the right to establish, operate and own the railway project from the port to the capital, Addis Ababa. The latter deemed this proposal difficult or impossible to accept.

In the same context, the Ethiopian-British understandings of the territorial exchange between Ethiopia and British Somaliland between 1946 and 1952 was a step toward and a second attempt by Addis Ababa to access the sea.⁽¹⁰⁾ Discussions centered on what is known in the academic community as the Heud-Zeila Exchange, which was tasked to extend Ethiopia's authority and sovereignty

over the port of Zeila (*Saylac* in Somali) located in the British part of occupied Somaliland. In exchange, Britain would benefit from fertile lands in the Ogaden and had the right to enjoy concessions in the vital Lake Tana and Baro Salient projects. However, the proposal was opposed by France, which, at the time, had control over the second part of Somaliland. Paris was concerned about the decline in trade activity in Djibouti port.⁽¹¹⁾

The Ethiopian authorities were keen to access the Red Sea coastline. Therefore, they diversified their geopolitical and economic strategies and approaches to ensure that they benefited from the rising trade flows in the Horn of Africa and new markets for the sake of increasing domestic production of commodities for export. Also, through this access, Ethiopia would win strategic political benefits as it would be present along the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. In this context and Ethiopian endeavors over the decades, various projects such as those related to road and railway infrastructure are deemed ideal for landlocked countries like Ethiopia to break free from their geographical constraints.

Electrified Railway Linking Djibouti Port and Addis Ababa

It is the first project (see Map 1) in Africa and part of the Chinese Silk Road Initiative. The project costs \$3.4 billion. It was launched to carry passengers in 2016. Two years later, this project was utilized for commercial purposes on January 1, 2018. The train travels at a speed of more than 753 kilometers and is the lifeline of Ethiopia's international trade and contributes to approximately 90% of trade flows.⁽¹²⁾ Its capacity is about 24.9 million tons, with is expected to increase by 3.1 million tons by 2030, and the transit time will reduce from 50 hours to 10 hours.⁽¹³⁾

Map 1: Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway



Source: © OpenStreetMap.

Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Road Linking Djibouti's Tajoura Port to the Northern Provinces of Ethiopia

The project costs \$78 million and was financed by a loan from the Kuwaiti Fund for Economic Development. It was inaugurated in 2019 and spans over 112 kilometers.⁽¹⁴⁾ Ethiopian authorities deem this project a vital alternative that must be supported and maintained, reflecting their approach to diversify trade and access the sea, to avoid being solely dependent on Djibouti port. This has led Ethiopian leaders to consistently consider investing in other ports in the region, with a primary focus on the port of Berbera in Somaliland.

The observations of successive Ethiopian attempts to access the Red Sea reflect that decision-makers have diversified their visions and strategies to achieve the aforesaid goal. However, in light of the influence and impact of the geographical reality of landlocked countries and the socioeconomic infrastructure of coastal countries (neighbors), the Ethiopian authorities usually resort to two options: cooperation or imposition of *fait accompli* to access the sea. Regardless of national efforts to establish a network of regional understandings to serve its economic and commercial interests, Ethiopia often violates its bilateral obligations; the most recent example was in 2022 when Ethiopia lost its shares in the Berbera Corridor because it did not finance the development of the port as agreed in 2016 with Somaliland. Eventually, this setback led Ethiopia to adopt the politics of *fait accompli* again.⁽¹⁵⁾

Ethiopia's MoU With Somaliland: Motives and Reactions

Observers of Ethiopian policies during the last decade, especially as Abiy Ahmed became prime minister in 2018, can notice the inclusive and accelerated approach in dealing and interacting with various political actors in the East African region in general, and the states of the Horn of Africa in particular. In this context, many researchers and specialists in Ethiopian affairs refer to a mosaic that characterizes the country's course and dynamics. It has many controversies and contradictions, making the prediction of its course and dynamics very complicated. This mosaic developed due to two main reasons as follows:

■ The early days of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's tenure and the administration of Ethiopian foreign policy relied on a "zero problem" approach with neighboring countries. He undertook extensive visits and held meetings with the leaders and heads of states within Ethiopia's regional circle. The reconciliation and normalization of bilateral relations with Eritrea was the most significant development and direction of the policy pursued by Addis Ababa with the region's capitals. In this regard, Abiy Ahmed's government realized that it was significant and imperative for a landlocked country to forge ties with its neighbors — especially with Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti, so that Ethiopia could further benefit from the preferential advantages of trade transactions through their seaports. Abiy Ahmed worked hard to rebuild inter-trust with the leaders

of these countries and to play a leadership role in the Horn of Africa region with a new political approach. However, Abiy Ahmed's policy of "zero-problems" with neighbors conflicts somewhat with his ambition to establish dominance and access to the open sea, which could have negative repercussions in the region and with neighboring countries.

■ The ruling political elite in Addis Ababa has been keen to attain a symbolic achievement. Since Abiy Ahmed's tenure as prime minister, the government has intensively employed various tools of symbolic and populist rhetoric, which have had the most meaningful impact on Ethiopian public opinion. The narrative of the historical Ethiopian dominant empire over the Horn of Africa has become the central focus of the official speeches of the current prime minister. This invocation of Ethiopia's glorious past has been systematically used to raise and manage several national and regional issues. The first issue was the Nile waters and the furious defense of the right to construct the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam without paying attention to the consensual solutions and approaches proposed by the downstream countries like Egypt and Sudan. With the same approach and narrative, the Ethiopian government is working to access open waters, employing all means and methods available. It recently concluded an MoU with the authorities of the Somaliland region to exploit Berbera port, which resulted in the violation of the sovereignty of Somalia and mixed reactions from regional governments.

The starting point of the current events in the Red Sea region can be identified from the moment when Addis Ababa announced the conclusion of an MoU with the ruling authorities of the Somaliland region to benefit from the services of Berbera port for a short period. On October 13, 2023, in his speech to the Ethiopian Parliament, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed made a provocative statement when he announced that his landlocked country's access to the Red Sea is "an existential matter."⁽¹⁶⁾ He added that land corridors are not enough. Ethiopia should have full sovereign ports through Eritrea, Somalia, or Djibouti. Quoting a famous 19th-century general, Ras Alula, Abiy Ahmed said that the Red Sea was "Ethiopia's natural boundary."⁽¹⁷⁾ His remarks are an example of the populist and symbolic rhetoric he has used since he took power. Regional leaders deemed his remarks as representing a dangerous escalation of Ethiopia's prior intention to use non-peaceful means to gain access to the sea. Some observers argue that this intention is a preliminary step for Ethiopia to announce a deal and sign an MoU with Somaliland.

A bilateral MoU between Addis Ababa and the ruling authorities of Somaliland was concluded on January 01, 2024. The Ethiopian prime minister considered it as a restoration of the sovereign presence on the shores of the Gulf of Aden in the Red Sea after a long period of absence since the declaration of independence of Eritrea from Ethiopian rule in 1993⁽¹⁸⁾ and the signing of the Algiers Agreement (2000), which ended the war between the two countries that lasted for two years (1998-2000). The MoU would grant Ethiopia access to 20 kilometers of coastline

of the Red Sea, including the port of Berbera, through a 50-year lease (see Map 2) — during which Addis Ababa can manage its commercial and economic interests.⁽¹⁹⁾ The coast of Somaliland can be leased by the Ethiopian navy for military purposes.⁽²⁰⁾ In exchange, the Somaliland authorities will be provided with shares in Ethiopian Airlines. Most importantly, Ethiopia will be obliged to officially recognize the independence of the territory from Somalia and deal with it as an independent state, which has not been the case by any state or government since the territory announced its separation from the central government of Mogadishu three decades ago in 1991.

Map 2: The Port of Berbera at the Entrance to the Red Sea



Source: DW.

The key factors that led to concluding the MoU with Somaliland can be summarized as follows:

The State of Tension and Chaos That Marked the Political and Security Situation in the Red Sea Region

Since the outbreak of the Israeli war on Gaza, violence and conflict have steadily increased because of the Houthi militia's increasing involvement in the Gaza conflict. The militia pursues the strategy of targeting ships crossing the Red Sea, especially those heading to Israeli ports. Subsequently, the United States and UK launched a barrage of strikes against Houthi-controlled areas. For Ethiopia, these events provided an opportunity to take the step of concluding an MoU with Somaliland. It was a unilateral policy and a *fait accompli* that has the potential of changing the map of regional and international influence in the region.

The Growing Rapprochement Between the Ethiopian Government and the Somaliland Authorities

Over the past three years, relations between the Ethiopian government and the Somaliland authorities have developed significantly, which has often aroused the anger of the ruling political leadership in Mogadishu. This rapprochement came as part of the Ethiopian tactic to balance the ongoing regional transformations within the framework of what has become known as the “ports war” in the Red Sea region. Djibouti excluded Dubai Ports World (DP World) — an Emirati multinational logistics company based in Dubai — from the management of Djibouti port in 2019, the most used port in Ethiopian trade by more than 90%. In response to being excluded by Djibouti, DP World signed an agreement in 2022 under which Ethiopia would be a strategic partner in Berbera port in Somaliland by 19%.⁽²¹⁾ The UAE took this step to distance Ethiopia from the government of Djibouti, encouraging Addis Ababa to make further gains through an MoU with the authorities of Somaliland. Addis Ababa took advantage of the Somaliland authorities’ need to sign high-level international understandings to double the odds of accelerating international recognition and to be treated as an independent state from Mogadishu.

The Need of the Governments of Ethiopia and Somaliland to Enhance Internal Legitimacy

In the Ethiopian case, the status and popularity of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed were adversely affected by the war conducted by the National Army against the militants of the Tigray region. The war led to negative repercussions on the domestic front and significantly depleted the country’s economy and undermined its infrastructure. Muse Bihi Abdi, the president of Somaliland, lost a lot of legitimacy among his people, especially among the Ishaq tribe in Somaliland, as many of them supported his rule until recently. The situation worsened after the war waged by Muse Bihi Abdi on Las Anoud city, the administrative capital of Somaliland’s eastern Sool region, following the announcement made by tribal leaders that they had joined the Somali federal government. This war claimed many lives, burdened the economy with many crises, and showed the “dark side” of Somaliland, which until recently was considered a peaceful state and democratic in the eyes of many outside observers. Meanwhile, it also undermined the reputation of the president of Somaliland.⁽²²⁾

Afro-Arab Preoccupation With Issues that Have Burdened the Foreign Affairs of Regional States

Arabs, including in Somalia, turned have turned their attention to the repercussions of the Israeli war on Gaza, its security and humanitarian consequences, and the current events in Sudan, which is the common denominator between Arab and African states. All these events have offered opportunities for the Ethiopian authorities to proceed with signing such understandings. Subsequently, it broke

the barrier of precedence by dealing with the Somaliland authorities which have been isolated internationally and regionally. It violated the sovereignty of Somalia, a member of the League of Arab States and the African Union.

The Ethiopian step was met with extensive reactions. Since the conclusion of the bilateral MoU, Somalia condemned the Ethiopian move to access the entrance to the Red Sea through the territory of Somaliland. Mogadishu used all ways and means to undermine and repel the Ethiopian move. Initially, the national federal Parliament of Somalia passed a law that cancelled the MoU and deemed it non-institutionalized and a violation of the national sovereignty of the country. In parallel, Mogadishu worked to recruit various regional and international forces and actors. This explains the Somali prime minister's statement⁽²³⁾ in which he called on the United Nations, the League of Arab States, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the IGAD bloc and the European Union to hold emergency meetings to discuss Ethiopian violations, which would have severe repercussions for the region as a whole, at the level of the African regional system. The current Somali-Ethiopian crisis exposed the fragility and weakness of African states in various forms and organizational levels. Given the official positions of both the African Union and IGAD, we note the absence of an explicit condemnation of the step taken by Ethiopia that violated Somalia's sovereignty. This can be explained in two different ways. The first suggests that the two organizations adopted a de-escalation approach as a preliminary move to further control the trajectory of events and exclude all possible triggers of tension. This is an apparently optimistic explanation of the diplomatic behavior of the two blocs. The second presents a different perception associated with the alleged presence of the political dominance and influence of Addis Ababa on the decision-making of the bodies and structures of IGAD and the African Union. This explains the near-total absence of any condemnation of Ethiopian approaches on this issue. The African Union statement only called for de-escalation and mutual respect to defuse escalating tensions.⁽²⁴⁾ IGAD's statement mentioned that "[the organization] is diligently monitoring the situation and recognizes the potential implications for regional stability," adding "IGAD remains steadfast in its commitment to promoting peace, stability, cooperation, and regional integration."⁽²⁵⁾

On the other hand, the League of Arab States' position on the crisis in the Horn of Africa exclusively rejected and fully supported the course of the ruling political leadership of Somalia. The content of the official statement⁽²⁶⁾ of the league issued on January 3, 2024, reflected the organization's commitment to the unity of Somali territory and the rejection of any form of violation and intentional encroachment by Ethiopia. What is striking about the Arab position is that the league viewed the Ethiopian step as a hindrance and threat to peace efforts and Somali reunification initiatives at home between the central government and other federal regions and potentially provoking secessionist tendencies that pose a threat to national and regional stability.

On the other hand, the Egyptian position was consistent with this Arab approach, and it was sharp and persistent in affirming Cairo's commitment to the unity and integrity of Somali territory. Egypt expressed its readiness to help Mogadishu repel any threat to its sovereignty. Observers of the evolution and course of the crisis view the Egyptian position as the most supportive of Mogadishu. This confirms the cautionary approach led by Cairo in the face of Ethiopian "encroachment" in the region, which indicates that the region is entering a new stage involving the reconfiguration of different regional alliances, especially since Ethiopian policies have become a source of destabilization in its regional environment, according to the Egyptian Foreign Minister.⁽²⁷⁾ Cairo has shared its position with several capitals of the Horn of Africa, especially Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia.

Finally, the Saudi position is decisive on this matter. A joint Saudi-Somali statement released at the end of the visit of Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud to Saudi Arabia in April 2024 stressed the utmost commitment to the unity of the Federal Republic of Somalia and sovereignty over its entire territory. Both sides reiterated the need to adhere to the principles of good neighborliness, which implies the rejection of the Ethiopian agreement with Somaliland. This position is consistent with the Arab position and the support of Saudi Arabia for Arab countries at the political and economic levels.⁽²⁸⁾

The Implications of the Ethiopian MoU With Somaliland

The different reactions to the Ethiopian decision to conclude an MoU with the government of Somaliland to take advantage of the seaports on the shores of the Red Sea have several dimensions and interpretations — given the fact that the region has been facing critical issues for a long time. Complexities and reactions increased after the eruption of the military conflict between the Western powers and the Houthis in the context of the Israeli war on Gaza. Needless to mention, Somalia is particularly significant to both the Arab world and Africa, prompting variant reactions and positions that can be explained as follows:

Enhancing Ethiopia's Position and Threatening Somalia's Sovereignty

Rapidly unfolding regional and international developments presented an opportunity for Addis Ababa to achieve a strategic gain at the national and regional levels. This achievement would support the position of the Ethiopian prime minister in the internal political arena, enhance the country's influence, and alter the power balances in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region. At the economic level, the Bab al-Mandab Strait in the south and the Suez Canal in the north receive about 12% of total seaborne oil trade and about 8% of global liquefied natural gas shipments.⁽²⁹⁾ Ethiopia's objective in gaining sovereign maritime access is to develop into a regional hub for industry and logistics, fostering economic growth and enhancing its influence in the Horn of Africa. Therefore, it will be able to link regional economies with the Ethiopian economy, consolidate Addis Ababa's presence and dominance, and make it a destination for

foreign investments.

On the other hand, the Ethiopian decision was a violation of Somalia's national sovereignty and a threat to the territorial integrity of the country, especially given Ethiopia's commitment to recognize Somaliland as an independent state (see Map 3). Mogadishu's concern is not strange or new. By reviewing the historical background of Somali-Ethiopian relations, and with the rest of the countries of the Horn of Africa since the establishment of the Somali Republic in 1960, Mogadishu, "Ogaden" or "Western Somali," which was annexed to Ethiopia by the British colonial authorities after the end of the Second World War, is a thorny issue and a threat to the perpetuation of relations between the two countries. This concern is fueled by Somalia's Constitution, which calls for the nascent republic to act to restore its sovereignty and unity by annexing the rest of the other territories: the Western Somali region "Ogaden," French Somalia "Djibouti," and the northeastern province of Kenya.⁽³⁰⁾

Map 3: Borders of Somaliland



Source: Encyclopædia Britannica.

Affecting the Strategic Balance in the Horn of Africa Region

At the strategic and geo-strategic level, by having access to the Red Sea, Ethiopia will secure a role in the security equation of the Red Sea and own a maritime base next to the Bab-al-Mandab Strait for promoting Ethiopian trade and protecting the passage of international trade and marine navigation. Access to the sea will help Ethiopia to win back Western confidence in the Ethiopian authorities, especially after ties between both sides retrogressed due to the implications of the recent Ethiopian war in the northern Tigray Region. This access also diversifies its strategic options rather than relying on Djibouti port only.⁽³¹⁾

Reformation, restructuring and reconstruction are excessively used terms in the analysis of observers of the Horn of Africa region following the conclusion of the MoU between Addis Ababa and Somaliland. These are related to the prospect of the nature of the alliances between the regional states surrounding Ethiopia. These terms focus on Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti. At first glance, these countries are jointly bound within the Arab dimension unless we exclude Eritrea which also has a significant segment of the “Arab component” in its demographics or, more precisely, in its cultural blend. From a real-political point of view, all these countries are adversely affected to varying extents and accounts by the unilateral action of Ethiopia. The forecasts on further areas of rapprochement between the five mentioned countries will resonate and have an objective justification of no less importance. Egypt and Sudan deem the Red Sea a vital area of influence because their commercial and economic interests will be adversely affected by the continuing concern over Addis Ababa’s regional behavior, especially since Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018. He has pursued unilateral impulsive policies with regard to the Nile’s waters and in the context of the Renaissance Dam’s construction. Eritrea believes that Ethiopia’s blatant attack on the sovereignty of a brotherly state will reoccur if it remains silent and does not confront it decisively and collectively. Asmara’s rejection of the Pretoria agreement, which Ethiopia signed with the Tigray People’s Liberation Front in November 2022 to stop the war, and the reported support of Asmara to the Amhara Fano Popular Front in the recent war against the Ethiopian authorities are factors that have contributed to initially rebuilding the rapprochement between Eritrea and Cairo, especially on their visions of critical regional issues. Djibouti perceives the event as a blow and barrier to its diplomatic efforts aimed at bringing the Somali parties closer, especially since it came only two days after the conclusion of an agreement to resume negotiations between the central government in Mogadishu and the government of Somaliland.⁽³²⁾ It also threatens the economic interests of the port’s revenues, though which more than 90% of Ethiopian trade passes. All these indicators predict a strong possibility of forming a regional deterrent front in the face of the unilateral orientations and policies of Addis Ababa in the region.

On the other hand, given the specificity and significance of the issues of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region, the implications of the Ethiopian decision

have complex dimensions. These are generally related to the interests of political actors and those seeking to play new roles at the political and economic levels. In addition to the above implications of the reconstruction of the power balance and alliances of the Horn of Africa, the decision has repercussions on the policies of other regional and international powers such as the UAE, Turkey, and Iran.

The Impact on the Orientations of Regional and International Powers in the Red Sea Region and the Horn of Africa

In terms of the potential regional repercussions, we find the UAE's role in the Red Sea region the most dynamic and effective, at least when compared to the rest of the region's non-African Arab countries. For an indefinite time, the UAE has focused its economic and political orientations on constructing a strip of ports along the Red Sea coast to ensure smooth trade supply chains related to its national and global economy. Except for Djibouti and Eritrea, Emirati interests are represented across all ports in the region by the companies DP World and Abu Dhabi Ports, comprising a network comparable to the Chinese the Silk Road. Abu Dhabi seeks to draw a trade line in East Africa from Egypt to Mozambique. This range includes the in-depth discussion to sign a deal on developing a special economic zone (SEZ) in Dongo Kundu, near the port of Mombasa for \$300 million.⁽³³⁾ This is consistent with the Ethiopian move to conclude an MoU with Somaliland. The UAE has no objection to this issue practically since DP World granted 19% of Berbera port's shares in Somaliland to Addis Ababa in 2022.⁽³⁴⁾ It was an adverse move because Djibouti terminated a concession contract to exploit its main port in 2019, a step that will enhance the influence of Ethiopia on the Red Sea coast.

On the other hand, we cannot overlook the growing Turkish role by considering the complex interests in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea regions. The decision-making circles in Ankara, with a rich history, legacy, and orientation dating back to the Ottoman period on the shores of the warm waters of the Red Sea, play a significant role in steering the country's foreign policy toward this increasingly important geographical area. Therefore, Turkey's expansion of its spheres of influence in Africa is focused on entrenching its influence in regional countries and with political actors.

Following Ethiopia's signing of an MoU with Somaliland at the beginning of this year, Turkey and Somalia signed an agreement in the field of defense cooperation, allowing the Turkish army to protect the sea coasts of Somalia, and Ankara's right to exploit 30% of the wealth of the Somali coast, the longest on the African continent. The agreement includes defense and economic cooperation, combating piracy, preventing foreign interference and illegal fishing, and training, building and supplying equipment to the Somali navy.⁽³⁵⁾ It also provides Turkey with the privilege of exploiting the port of Mogadishu for 20 years under the bilateral agreement in 2016. According to this agreement, the Turkish Albayrak group was tasked with managing Mogadishu port with a total revenue share of 45%, thus adversely affecting the Ethiopian presence on the coast of

Somaliland. Somalia via these agreements and understandings enters into the political calculations of Ankara. This explains the establishment of the Turkish military base in Somali territory in 2011, aid programs and development projects, including the construction of schools and hospitals and the construction of roads. The military dimension of Turkish policy in the region has played a historical role, as the Turkish navy previously joined the International Joint Task Force (CTF-151)⁽³⁶⁾ to combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea on February 25, 2009. It also established the second military base in Djibouti in 2016.

In the context of Iran's foreign affairs, the explanation and analysis of the potential implications of the signing of the Ethiopian-Somaliland MoU are complex and contradictory in some of its aspects. Undoubtedly, the growing importance of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region has dominated Tehran's foreign policy since 1979. However, its engagement in Addis Ababa's efforts to access the Red Sea is difficult to explain. Tehran offered large-scale military cooperation with Ethiopia, especially during the conflict and the internal war waged by the central government against the militants of the Tigray Region, through the significant supply of (espionage/offensive) drones Mohajer 6.⁽³⁷⁾ It attempted to establish a strong presence and link with one of the largest countries in the region, Ethiopia. This clashes with the Ethiopian potential scenario of having a foothold on the Red Sea through Somaliland so it can exploit international maritime navigation of trade and get closer to Western powers. The Houthis, Iran's proxy in Yemen, keep hindering international navigation in the Red Sea by their attacks on Israel due to the latter's war on Gaza, ultimately negatively affecting Iran's strategic political interests in the Red Sea.

The Saudi rejection of this agreement reflects the significance of Horn of Africa in Riyadh's policy, given the fact that this region has become a center of geopolitical competition and regional and international attention in recent years. It is worth noting that Saudi-Somalia relations have evolved in recent years, especially at the economic level. The volume of intra-trade in 2022 increased by around 105% compared to 2021. The kingdom is looking to pump more investments into Somalia. It crowds out other regional and international roles, but Saudi Arabia intends to forge cooperation, support stability, and stimulate development and mutual economic relations.⁽³⁸⁾ In November 2023, Saudi Arabia signed a security agreement with Somalia. This agreement aims to enhance security cooperation, combat terrorism, exchange intelligence, and provide capacity-building between the two countries. It also reflects the kingdom's desire to play a significant role in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea regions, in line with its regional ambitions and projects.

Creating Regional Havoc and Undermining Joint Efforts to Confront Extremist Groups

Extremist groups in the Horn of Africa may view the tensions caused by the Ethiopian step as an opportunity to strengthen their activities. In his remarks,

Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud did not hide his concerns about the repercussions of the content of the MoU in the near term throughout the region. He hinted at the possibility of undermining international and regional efforts to combat extremist armed groups. He singled out the “youth Mujahideen” movement that is active in the regions and states of the Horn of Africa in general, as the latter may exploit the security instability and havoc that may result from the hostile Ethiopian move.⁽³⁹⁾ Therefore, according to different observers’ readings, the evolving dimensions of the disagreement between Ethiopia and Somalia may negatively impact bilateral coordination of efforts to combat the movement. This movement’s operational command is based in Somalia and it is active in neighboring states. Ethiopia provides military personnel for the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), Burundi, Djibouti, Kenya, and Uganda. This was based on the tasks entrusted to it in April 2022 upon the decision of the African Peace and Security Council and with the approval of the UN Security Council.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Conclusion

The developments and changes in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea regions over the last decade have progressively led to the formation of a new geopolitical landscape characterized by intricate alliances and interactions. These have set the stage for forecasting potential future scenarios. The recent crisis resulting from the repercussions of signing the MoU between Addis Ababa and Somaliland is only one example in a long series of developments that could adversely affect the security and stability of the region. As explained previously, in taking this step, Ethiopia took into consideration all developments and tensions in the region and how they coincided in time and place with the rising tensions and maritime insecurity in the Red Sea. These developments help forecast the future balance of power in the region in the near future. In its policy, Ethiopia, since 2018, has adopted the *fait accompli* approach despite its remarks in which it affirms its adherence to the “zero problems” principle with regional states. This was evident in the continuous developments in the Nile waters file and its confrontation with Egypt and Sudan.

The *fait accompli* policy has been used by Somaliland as a strategic card to gain international recognition from new political units and actors; thus, it will be the biggest winner from these accelerated tensions. In addition to the fact that the crisis has increased the prospects of further rapprochement between Cairo, Mogadishu and Asmara, the three parties believe that the persistent approach to access the sea is a threat to the region’s stability and their national security and vital economic and trade interests. Therefore, the situation in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa will likely be open to variant scenarios and complex equations.

Endnotes

- (1) United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, *Landlocked Developing Countries: Things to Know, Things to Do* (New York: UN-OHRLS, 2024), 1.
- (2) Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, *Landlocked Developing Countries Fact Sheet 2022* (New York: UN-OHRLS, 2020), 1.
- (3) Daosadeth Soysouvanh, "Freight Transport in Least Developed Landlocked Countries: A Case Study of Laos PDR" (Master's thesis, Institute for Transport Studies, June, 11, 2018), 1.
- (4) Mahdi and Samiullah, "Security and Foreign Policy of Landlocked States" Master's thesis, University of Massachusetts Boston).
- (5) Bidisha Lahiri and Feroz K Masjidi, "Landlocked Countries: A Way to Integrate with Coastal Economies," *Journal of Economic Integration* 27, no. 4 (December: 2012): 506.
- (6) Ingo Borchert, et al., "Landlocked or Policy Locked? How Services Trade Protection Deepens Economic Isolation," Paper prepared for the workshop: "Aid for Trade: What Have we Learnt? Which Way Ahead?" (Geneva International Conference Centre, 6 December 2012), 2.
- (7) Tarek Qabil, "The Forgotten Axum ...Finding the Lost Historical City of the Negus Kingdom," *Al Jazeera*, December 29, 2019, accessed February 29, 2024, <https://bitly.ws/3eCMF>. [Arabic].
- (8). Gulaid Yusuf Iidaan, "Undying Ambition Ethiopia's Enduring Quest for Access to the Sea-Historical Foundations, Geopolitical Strategies, and Regional Implications," December 24, 2023, accessed February 29, 2024, <https://bitly.ws/3eCNG>.
- (9) Samuel Negash, *Ethiopia's Elusive Quest for an Outlet to the Sea: The Case of the Haud-Zeila Exchange from the 1920s to the 1950s*, Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement. Volume 1: Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies [online]. (Addis Ababa, Los Angeles: Centre français des études éthiopiennes, Février 25, 2024) 14.
- (10) Ahmed Cadde (@AhCadde), X Post, January 2024 ,1, accessed March 6:53 ,1,2024 p.m., accessed May 21,2024, <https://bitly.ws/3eHLA>.
- (11) "Ethiopia Offers Britain Land in Exchange for Zeila Port of Somaliland - 1946," *Somalialandsun*, December 10,2013, accessed March 01,2024, <https://bitly.ws/3eHMR>.
- (12) "Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway (Ethiopia - Djibouti)," *Global Infrastructure Hub*, accessed March 1,2024, 2, <https://2u.pw/OkmYzCd2>.
- (13) *Ibid.*, 75.
- (14) "Djibouti President Inaugurates a Road Linking Between Tajoura Port and Northern Ethiopia," *Al Jazeera*, November 7, 2019, accessed March 6, 2024, <https://bitly.ws/3faqV>.
- (15) Markus Virgil Hoehne, "Trade, Conflict and Fragmentation: The Horn's Crisis of Sovereignty," *African Argument*, March 22, 2024, accessed March 23, 2024 <https://bitly.ws/3gBmx>.
- (16) Mustafa Ahmed, "For Warm Water...Will Abiy Ahmed Start a War in the Red Sea?" *Al Jazeera*, December 23, 2023, accessed March 10, 2024 <https://bitly.ws/3fsSv>. [Arabic].
- (17) "Ethiopia PM Abiy Ahmed Eyes Red Sea Port, Inflaming Tensions," BBC, November 8, 2024, accessed May 18, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67332811>.
- (18) "Prime Minister of Ethiopia: We Will Not Invade any Country to Reach the Red Sea," *Ashar Al Awsat*, November 14, 2023, accessed March 10, 2024, <https://bitly.ws/3fsWn>. [Arabic].
- (19) Abdurrahman Abdullahi Baadiyow, "The Negative Effects of the Memorandum of Understanding Between Ethiopia and Somaliland on the Horn of Africa," *Al Jazeera*, February 13, 2024, accessed March 10, 2024 <https://bitly.ws/3ft5R>. [Arabic].
- (20) "What Do We Know About Somaliland and the Memorandum of Understanding With Ethiopia?" BBC Arabic, January, 09 2024, accessed March 10, 2024, <https://bitly.ws/3ft4d>. [Arabic].
- (21) Ahmed Askar, "International Competition for Seaports in sub-Saharan Africa," *Series of Strategic Pamphlets* 31, no. 342 (November 2022): 10. [Arabic].

- (22) Hoehne, "Trade, Conflict and Fragmentation."
- (23) "The Somali President Signs the Law on the Termination of the Agreement Concluded Between Ethiopia and the Territory of Somaliland," *Russia Today*, January 06, 2024, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://bitly.ws/3fIMU>. [Arabic]
- (24) "The African Union Is Holding the Stick in the Middle in the Emerging Dispute Between Somalia And Ethiopia," *Al Arab*, January 5, 2024, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://bitly.ws/3FXuu>. [Arabic].
- (25) "Statement of the IGAD Executive Secretary on the Recent Developments in Relations between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) and the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS)," IGAD, January 3, 2024, accessed May 18, 2024, <https://zip.lu/3jaqN>
- (26) "Arab condemned Ethiopia and Egypt Considered It a Source of Unrest in the Region," *Al Jazeera*, accessed January 17, 2024, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://bitly.ws/3fZok>. [Arabic].
- (27) "Arab condemnation of Ethiopia and Egypt, which it considers a source of chaos in the region," *Al Jazeera*, January 17, 2024, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://bitly.ws/3fZok>. [Arabic].
- (28) "In a Joint Statement... Saudi Arabia Confirms the Sovereignty of Somalia Over Its Entire Territory," *Asharq Al Awsat*, April 7, 2024, accessed April 30, 2024, <https://2h.ae/YMLC>. [Arabic].
- (29) Ahmed, "For Warm Water," *Asharq Al Awsat*.
- (30) Mahmoud Zakaria, The Access to Sea: How Did Tensions Between Ethiopia and Somalia Heighten ?" *Interregional Strategic Analytics*, October 26, 2023, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://bitly.ws/3fTNI>. [Arabic].
- (31) Ahmed, "For Warm Water."
- (32) Badr Hassan Shafei, "Egypt and the Likelihood of Encircling Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa," *Al Jazeera*, January 31, 2024, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://bitly.ws/3h7UC>. [Arabic].
- (33) Nazir al Arabi, "What Are the UAE Goals of Invading East African ports?" *Arabic website 21*, April 14, 2023, accessed March 31, 2024; <https://bitly.ws/3h7Mx>; "One Port, One Node: The Eleonora Ardemagni, "Emirati Geostrategic Road to Africa," *ISPI*, accessed May 2-, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4braS2u>.
- (34) Askar, "International Competition for Seaports in Sub-Saharan Africa," 10.
- (35) Arwa Hanish, "The Defense Agreement Between Türkiye And Somalia...Does It Allow Turkey to Be a Player in the Balance of the Horn Of Africa?," *Arab Journal*, March 12, 2024, accessed April 15, 2024, <https://arab-j.net/21355>. [Arabic].
- (36) "Turkey's Growing Influence in the Red Sea With Soft and Hard Powers.. Why Now?," February 9, 2024, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://www.turkpress.co/node/78057>. [Arabic].
- (37) Mohammad Mohsen Abul Nour, "The Implications of Iran's Open Military Support for Ethiopia and Its Dimensions," *AFAIP*, October 29, 2021, accessed March 31, 2024 <https://bitly.ws/3h7QF>. [Arabic].
- (38) "In a Joint Statement... Saudi Arabia Confirms the Sovereignty of Somalia Over Its Entire Territory."
- (39) "Somali President to Al Arabiya: the Memorandum of Understanding Between Ethiopia and Somaliland Is a Tool for Recruiting Extremists," *Al Arabiya net*, January 21, 2024, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://bitly.ws/3fTRv>. [Arabic].
- (40) Zakaria, "The Access to Sea: How Did Tensions Between Ethiopia and Somalia heighten?"

JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES
Specialized Studies

