

JIS



Journal for Iranian Studies

Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual periodical Journal



Year 8, Issue 20, October 2024

20

- The Role of Iran's Revolutionary Guards in the Media Sphere: Propaganda, Strategies and Narrative Power
- Iran and the Houthis' Asymmetric Maritime Warfare Campaign in the Red Sea: A Study of the Sponsor-Proxy Model
- Iran's Maritime Strategy and Perspectives Toward the Mediterranean Sea
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THE ROLE OF IRAN'S REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS IN THE MEDIA SPHERE: PROPAGANDA, STRATEGIES AND NARRATIVE POWER

Abdelkarim Rostami

Researcher in Middle Eastern affairs, the École Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE)

Abstract

Traditional and modern media have evolved into powerful tools for shaping public consciousness, with some regimes skillfully exploiting the media to propagate their narratives and suppress dissenting voices. The Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) stands as a prime example of an Iranian entity that has effectively harnessed the media, in both its traditional and digital forms, to limit its effectiveness as a forum for transparent social and political interaction. This mastery is achieved not merely through censorship but also through comprehensive manipulation to systematically shape public opinion. The questions that arise include: how has the IRGC managed to dominate the media space? What are the IRGC's strategies and tactics in this sphere, and how has the IRGC successfully distorted reality to secure social control and domination? This study addresses these questions by offering a conceptual framework for understanding the mechanisms employed by the IRGC. It aims to identify the diverse tools and strategies adopted by the IRGC, explore their substance, and examine their tangible outcomes and impact on Iranian society.

Keywords: Iran, IRGC, media strategy, social media, media militarization, perception management

Introduction

Due to its ideological structure, the Iranian political system has always sought to control both the public and private spaces of Iranian society. The internet and the increasing expansion of social interaction in the electronic space have created a new virtual world that lacks physical embodiment — a boundless space that presents genuine challenges to the Iranian system's narrative. Over the past two decades, the researcher has encountered in the discourse of Iranian political and military leaders a new conceptual term known as “soft war.” Consequently, the concept of “war” for the Iranian system is no longer limited to the military sphere; it extends now into cultural, social, scientific, and technological spheres. Thus, the new battlefield of the IRGC includes extending its domination over controlled media (traditional media: radio, television, newspapers, magazines and books) through censorship and uncontrolled media (new media: social media platforms) through the deployment of a cyber army to counteract anti-establishment narratives and disseminate propaganda.

This study argues that while media, social networks and cyberspace in general have become an extension of the social space, or in other words, an “extension of inner consciousness” according to McLuhan, the Iranian revolutionary establishment, through the IRGC, has always sought to colonize this social space. Thus, this study analyzes the role of the IRGC in the digital space, its adopted tools and strategies of distorting reality, and its attempts to control narratives, focusing on managing social perceptions and shaping public opinion in line with the ideological goals of the Iranian political system. It aims to provide a basis for a better understanding of how the IRGC operates within the media and virtual spheres and to explain the process of spreading disinformation by highlighting the efficacy of its strategies. In this context, the tools and strategies of the Iranian system in challenging narratives on media and social networks — known as “cognitive warfare” — will be discussed. This will help to understand the nature of the Iranian establishment's tools and strategies in controlling the flow of information, distorting the truth, and the use of media and social networks to strengthen and promote its authoritarian discourse, as well as expose the establishment's methods of persuasion, audience engagement and social control.

Conceptual Approach

The conceptual approach of the study employs a number of concepts that need to be explained before delving into the study. The key concepts include the following:

Soft War/Soft Power

Soft power has attracted significant attention in the field of international relations, often described as the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than force or coercion.⁽¹⁾ Unlike hard power, which depends on military and economic strength to assert influence, soft power seeks to foster harmony and coexistence while promoting a nation's values.⁽²⁾ It works by shaping

the desires and affiliations of others, depending on the ability to attract, captivate, and win over the targeted individual or society.⁽³⁾

Hijacking the Truth

This concept describes the current virtual sphere in Iran. It refers to the takeover of mass communication, particularly the media, by ideologically driven and authoritarian regimes. The main objective of hijacking is to control content and shape social beliefs and norms according to a specific ideological perspective.

Militarization of Media

The Iranian establishment represents a form of religious fundamentalism characterized by its ideological-military nature. This political system promotes a religious ideology that claims to encompass all social and cultural domains while being supported by military strength, particularly that of the IRGC. This backing is so pronounced that the concept of “war” extends beyond military confrontations to encompass cultural, social and even scientific and technological spheres. Consequently, the hardline narrative of the “Islamic Republic” prioritizes *axiological*⁽⁴⁾ and value-driven concerns over national and regional interests. As a result, the concept of “war” and “war conspiracy” permeate all cultural discussions,⁽⁵⁾ labeled in the official narrative as “soft war.”⁽⁶⁾ This concept possesses a teleological dimension that transcends traditional military definitions, becoming a significant concern for Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei over the past two decades. In a speech from the early 1990s, he elaborated on the nature of this “soft war” as follows:

“Soft warfare is a cultural invasion, a cultural raid and massacre,”⁽⁷⁾ and therefore, “controlling the media” that can be managed — such as radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and even books — through censorship and removal, as well as “engaging through the cyber army” against uncontrollable media, like social networks (despite being banned), is fundamentally one of the primary pillars of the IRGC’s “soft war.” The various tools and strategies employed by the “Islamic Republic” in this soft media conflict extend beyond mere information management and control; they also encompass the manipulation and distortion of information, the falsification of facts, and the fabrication of counter-information.

Of course, the primary aim of this study is not to explore the intricate details of these tools and strategies but rather to investigate how the promotion of state narratives has necessitated their use. The nature of this narrative is crucial in determining the scope and scale of the IRGC’s media operations, ultimately providing a clearer understanding of this entity’s objectives.

Undoubtedly, the foundation of Iranian ideology is rooted in a comprehensive religious framework that holds the Twelver Shiite doctrine, as articulated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini —the founder of the “Islamic Republic”— at its core. This ideology encompasses the engineering of all moral aspects of social life. Here, “ethics” extends beyond professional standards to represent a holistic

system of values, suggesting that “ethics” is synonymous with the entirety of the “human sciences.”

Furthermore, the Iranian republic exhibits a tendency to localize natural and mathematical sciences, aligning them with an Islamic heritage. For instance, in fields such as medicine, there is an attempt to position “traditional medicine” as a counterpoint to “modern medicine.” This position fosters a pervasive pessimism within the Iranian republic regarding the “human sciences” and the modern world’s ethos, along with a relative skepticism toward the natural sciences, arts and technology, particularly concerning the concept of “development.” Consequently, any representation or introduction of these subjects — especially through media channels — is perceived as a “threat” that necessitates a response in the form of soft warfare. Thus, all civil protests are framed as a “conspiracy” attributed to external elements.⁽⁸⁾

Scope of Threat

The scope and dimension of the perceived “threats” to the ideology of the Iranian republic extend far beyond those observed in the former Soviet Union that embraced a Marxist-Leninist ideology. In that context, factors such as economics and history could be viewed as threats due to their divergence from the liberal or conservative ideologies of the Western bloc, prompting efforts to eliminate them from citizens’ daily lives. In contrast, the Iranian state identifies threats in even the micro aspects of everyday life, encompassing technical issues in fields like law, politics, literature, and philosophy.

Practices ranging from alcohol consumption to clothing choices and various forms of relationships between men and women depicted in global media, alongside philosophical discourses related to alternative ideas and religions — especially secularism — are all deemed as threats. Consequently, the scope of “criminalization” within the Iranian state is extensive. Unable to address this vast scope comprehensively, the Iranian establishment has instead concentrated on monitoring and managing cultural media narratives, implementing selective and demonstrative punishments to assert its power.

Conversely, the media in Iran exhibits a marked “indifference” to internal cultural developments, often neglecting them entirely. Despite many of its models becoming obsolete in everyday life, the media continues to showcase these outdated representations, resulting in a cultural disconnect from daily experiences in official institutions like schools and government offices. This disconnect is exacerbated by the fact that many individuals affiliated with the Iranian republic lead “double lives.” When this cultural conflict escalates into a significant confrontation, as seen during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, the establishment resorts to severe social repression and does not hesitate from harsh crackdowns on its own citizens. The official media has actually alienated its real audience, prompting the general public to seek information through satellite channels or virtual platforms. In response, the establishment has attempted to block these

sources on a large scale. However, while this approach has yielded limited success, it has also resorted to deploying its cyber army within cyberspace to manipulate and obstruct the flow of information. Additionally, the establishment has produced media content aimed at external audiences, hoping to influence global public opinion, even though this content contradicts the messages intended for domestic consumption.

With the onset of the 1979 revolution, Iranian revolutionaries motivated by Shiite ideology ultimately seized power and sought to impose their way of life in a radical manner on all other social classes, sects, and religions. During this time, the media became entirely homogenized, functioning in alignment with their value system. The IRGC effectively served as the internal enforcement tool to suppress dissent and protests, while other entities operated in parallel to it.

Jihad of Clarification

The significance of the threat landscape and soft war prompted Khamenei to formulate his own concepts, notably coining the term *jihad al-tabyeen*, which translates to “the jihad of clarification.” In 2021, he officially issued this directive, deeming it an urgent and essential duty⁽⁹⁾ in response to what he perceived as the distortion of facts. He asserted, “Today, there is a confirmed media policy hostile to the Islamic Republic and Islam, constantly engaged in distorting facts and disseminating falsehoods, blending news about the Islamic Republic with various types of lies (deliberate fabrications that have been meticulously crafted and relied upon), while simultaneously glorifying the corrupt and oppressive regime and concealing the multitude of crimes and betrayals it has committed.”⁽¹⁰⁾ According to Khamenei, this form of jihad encompasses scientific, research and educational efforts within the media landscape aimed at countering the enemy’s insinuations and elucidating matters requiring awareness within Iranian society and government.⁽¹¹⁾

From the Iranian leader’s viewpoint, this jihad also encompasses various critical issues, including enhancing the political system’s effectiveness, achieving a resilient economy, countering the threat of external influence, and reinforcing public faith in the ideals of the revolution and the ideology of resistance, as well as promoting the establishment’s approved way of life. Thus, this jihad is viewed by the Iranian establishment as a strategic instrument for preserving cultural security, elevating public awareness, and fortifying social and economic structures in the face of soft warfare.

Formation of Institutions

The significance of media and cyberspace has prompted the Iranian leadership to establish various institutions, with a budget allocation of 15 trillion tomans for this purpose.⁽¹²⁾ The three primary bodies overseeing media and cyberspace in Iran are the Supreme Council of Cyberspace,⁽¹³⁾ the IRGC, and the Committee to Determine Instances of Criminal Content (CDICC).⁽¹⁴⁾ These institutions implement a range of policies, including blocking websites, monitoring communications, conducting

cyberattacks, and arresting online activists. The Supreme Council of Cyberspace serves as the decision-making authority for cyberspace policies, responding to the establishment's directives and enforcing measures such as content blocking and monitoring. Meanwhile, the IRGC,⁽¹⁵⁾ as a military entity, is involved in ensuring cyberspace security, actively monitoring communications and safeguarding the establishment's cybersecurity interests.

The CDICC is tasked with establishing and compiling the criteria and definitions for criminal content. It determines which concepts may be deemed contrary to or harmful to the system based on its standards. This institution actively encourages citizens to report criminal websites through its platform, stating that "so far, nearly half a million reports from people have been submitted to this secretariat regarding the display of criminal content and requests for filtering various websites." These reports are then referred to relevant experts for review.⁽¹⁶⁾ In collaboration with these three institutions, the Iranian establishment enacts extensive policies to control and manage cyberspace, which significantly impacts social and cultural development within the country.

The Strategy of Hijacking the Truth

McLuhan, a prominent media theorist, provided a prescient overview of the relationship between technology, ideas, and truth in his book *Understanding Media*. He believes that every new technology or idea is actually an "extension" of the human senses or the body itself. This perspective elucidates the profound impact of technology on our lives and consciousness.⁽¹⁷⁾ Within the structure of the "Islamic Republic, the body and social memory serve as the foundation for cultivating and promoting ideology. In this context, especially within the IRGC, media tools become an arena for implementing strategies for dominating the truth. By controlling the media, the IRGC aims to realize its vision of establishing and reinforcing a state-sponsored narrative which is often at variance with the truth, to the extent that IRGC Commander-in-Chief Hossein Salami, stated "this military force has 2,000 battalions in cyberspace that produce content and conduct operations."⁽¹⁸⁾

IRGC Media Strategies

The Iranian establishment, to maintain its authority across the media landscape, particularly for domestic aims, applies strict filtering and censorship, alongside the management of formal criticism using various fallacies, such as the fallacy of false analogy. On the other hand, it strives to project an acceptable image in spaces beyond its control as well as in international media. Consequently, there is a significant difference between its messaging in national and international media. The following chart illustrates the cycle of media strategies employed by the Iranian establishment:

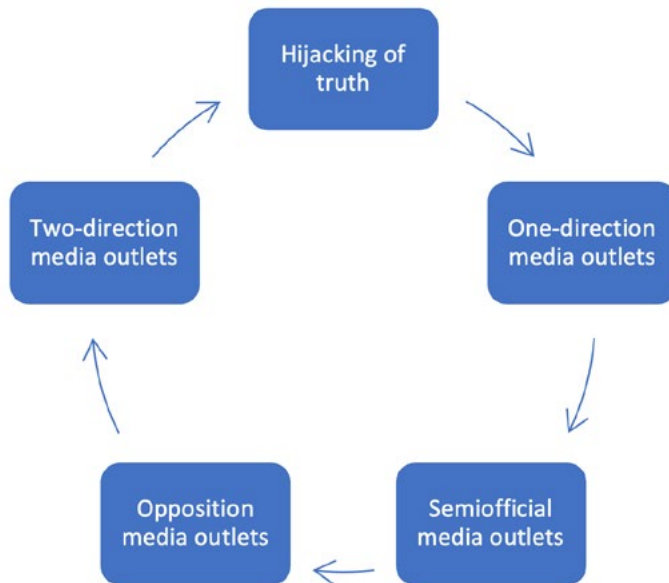


Figure 1: The Iranian Establishment's Cycle of Media Strategies

The following looks at the aforementioned elements of the cycle of media strategies employed for the sake of messaging and manipulating public opinion.

One-direction Media Outlets

Official media (radio, television, and official newspapers): These media forms, whose mission is to directly convey the official narrative, are subject to strict censorship and operate under the direct supervision of the IRGC. There is no leniency, and a very limited number of “critical programs” or “sham debates” are conducted at certain times, for example, during elections, to draw people to the ballot boxes. These criticisms are:

- directed at individuals or governments and never at the establishment, supreme leader, state institutions, or the IRGC
- reductive in nature, focusing on lower-level issues that only generate a false sense of hope and momentum, creating the facade of public participation through the promotion of media figures who advocate for citizens on a limited basis, thus propagating the illusion of democracy.
- temporary, quickly forgotten, and leave no trace.
- trivialize meaningful criticism and destroy its significance.
- sometimes presented in a radical form during times of crisis; however, these are put forward by a critic who is allowed to express these radical criticisms through radio and television. This serves two goals: first, to sacrifice a small interest for a greater one during crises and distract the public from more serious matters;

second, create false hope in society so that public opinion is directed toward another secondary issue. Eventually, this critic, after gaining some fame in the virtual space, alters and amends his rhetoric, allowing the establishment to control the wave of criticism and direct it as needed.

Semi-official Media Outlets

These include “reformist” print media, magazines, movie channels, television series, and similar outlets. Although they hold no place in the official media landscape, they are permitted to broadcast their messages to a certain extent, albeit subject to occasional reprimands. The establishment has deliberately allowed them some room for maneuver, enabling them to ensure that the most powerful critics are preoccupied with issues that remain manageable. Those who run these media outlets are not directly funded by the establishment; instead, a framework of maneuverability has been granted to them to operate within. Ultimately, their objective is to allow a limited degree of public participation while creating a false sense of freedom. While these media outlets observe strict red lines, they occasionally cross these to instill a sense of freedom among the general public.

It is important to note that these media outlets commit minor infractions in order to attract international media and influence foreign audiences. For instance, the attire of presenters on international channels tends to be more open, elegant and modern, yet they still adhere to wearing the hijab. In reality, the “reformist” movement within the Iranian republic has not constituted a genuine reform initiative capable of gradually amending and correcting systemic issues; rather, it has served as a safety valve to release public frustration. However, when this “reformist” movement showed little desire for substantive change, its legitimacy precipitously eroded resulting in the marginalization of this movement and harsh denunciations over its inability to enact meaningful change. Consequently, the safety valve which the “reformist” movement provided was dismantled, leading the public to redirect their protest slogans from secondary issues to the foundational elements of the political system and its key players. This shift provoked a severe reaction from the establishment, resulting in intense repression and widespread violence against dissenters.

Opposition Media Outlets

The IRGC has employed various strategies to promote the establishment’s narrative in response to dissenting and anti-establishment media. For instance, it has employed “experts” to reinforce its messages through media outlets. Dissenting voices on state authorized media platforms have provided opportunities for the Iranian republic to steer public attention toward marginal issues. Overall, the establishment navigates and benefits from the media that shares similar, or even slightly conflicting, narratives in a controlled manner. For example, it selectively amplifies leftist criticisms as long as they serve to distort the narrative surrounding the Western bloc and the European world.

Two-direction Media Outlets

With the emergence of the internet, media has transitioned from one-way communication to two-way communication. Initially, the establishment attempted to eliminate the most popular social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp and even Instagram, through widespread blocking. However, the necessity of these platforms in daily life has led individuals to extensively use VPN applications to bypass restrictions. Consequently, the establishment has continually tested various tools and strategies to control the flow of information including:

- **Direct expert engagement:** The establishment summons its committed ideological cadres to directly defend the “Islamic Republic” in virtual spaces.
- **Indirect expert and activist involvement:** It employs subordinate forces, even regular citizens who may critique some issues, to propagate the establishment's core ideas.
- **Idea dissemination and conflict stimulation:** The establishment seeks to produce and promote ideas and discourses that distract public opinion from criticizing it, including the promotion of fanaticism and ethnic conflicts.
- **Crisis news waves:** A significant strategy is to generate misleading information on an excessive scale during real crises to divert attention. An example includes the extensive coverage of events like the shooting down of the Ukrainian plane after the killing of Qassem Soleimani, which could have led to a legitimacy crisis.
- **Comment waves:** Mobilizing Basij and IRGC cyber brigades to comment extensively on important posts to distort narratives or divert attention.
- **Social media discourse:** Creating or hacking chat rooms to identify, control, distort facts, and inject ideas.
- **Mobilizing weak opposition figures:** Spotlighting ineffectual opposition figures and caricaturizing them.
- **Media distortion and character assassination:** Employing various signatures, memes, and large-scale representations of public figures.
- **Psychological warfare:** Engaging in psychological distortion against writers and prominent figures.
- **Distorting journalism:** Creating an environment where political news is obscured amidst distracting misinformation.
- **Creating a climate of terror:** Arrests and severe media sanctions to instill fear.
- **Creating a culture of silence:** Drawing people into the bystander role while deflecting their attention toward secondary-level discussions and shifting the onus on others, i. e., asking others to take action.
- **Fake and controlled myths:** Fabricating myths in the virtual space to mislead and control narratives.
- **Distortion of criticism and humor:** Reducing critical humor to buffoonery, particularly on significant issues, such as in the television show by Mehran Modiri which confines its criticism to trivial matters; for example, highlighting issues

which are not of fundamental national importance such as scrutinizing workplace conduct.

The Establishment's Media Strategies in Terms of Content

The Iranian establishment's media strategies in terms of content generation are enumerated and analyzed below.

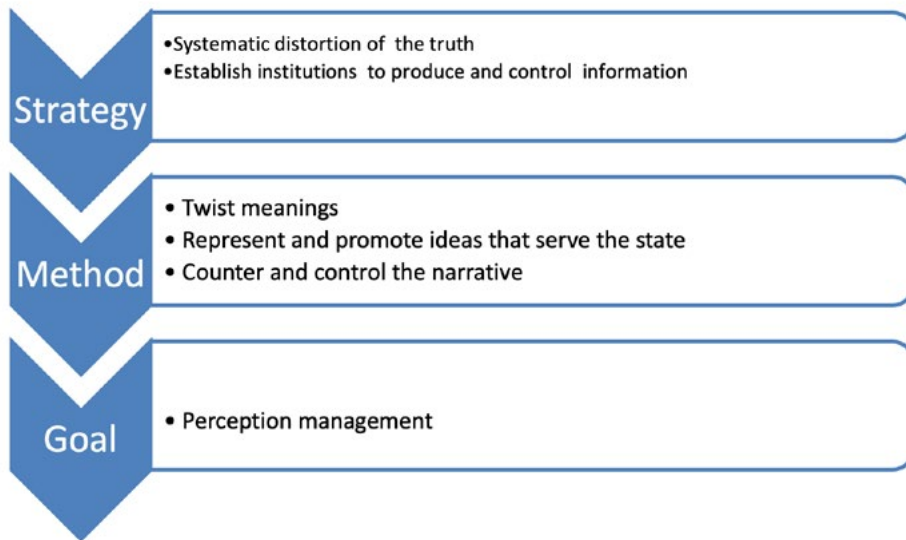


Figure 2: The Iranian Establishment's Media Strategies in Terms of Content Generation

Representation

Representation is the production of meaning through conceptual and discursive frameworks that form the infrastructure of social concepts. This means that meaning is generated through signs, especially language. Language is the window through which we communicate with the world and is the medium of meaning for material phenomena and social methods. It is not just a neutral medium for formulating meanings and knowledge about the world. Rather, social, religious, political and other phenomena always enter the interpretation stage to make these phenomena meaningful through the language network. Therefore, the so-called truth is not outside the process of representation.⁽¹⁹⁾ Controlling the field of representation through monitoring and controlling the generation of content and news is a prime aim of the IRGC to manipulate the truth because the world is created and reconstructed through representation.⁽²⁰⁾

As we know, the truth does not exist in a meaningful way, and representation is one of the effective methods of ascribing meaning because meaning is not clear or transparent in itself, nor does it remain constant over time through

representation; instead, meaning can be subject to distortion.⁽²¹⁾ The main conflict of the IRGC in Iran is actually over meaning, as meanings must accord with the ruling elite's interests.

The IRGC employs several specific strategies in its representation policy. Below, we address various questions that arise from these strategies.

- Whose representations dominate the public sphere?
- Who has the power to represent reality, or who wields authority over social concepts in some way?
- Who must be lured into silence so that this representation can take over?
- Whose voices must be suppressed so that this representation can dominate the public sphere?

The IRGC has censored, eliminated, deported and imprisoned opponents of the Iranian establishment over the past decades in the context of its strategies to dominate the media and representation.⁽²²⁾ In its strategy of distorting the truth, the IRGC has always attempted to present an alternate reality according to its conceptual and ideological orientations by altering facts. In fact, the image that must be conveyed to society is one that reflects the aims of the political system through dedicated media channels. This goal is achieved through the systematic dissemination of propaganda and disinformation.

Representation and Truth Distortion

Since the media is the most effective institution for generating and disseminating information and shaping perceptions in the modern world, the substance of media content is of immense social value. Media representation is important because it shapes knowledge and public perceptions. Therefore, media representation is not a neutral process, as any representation is heavily influenced by the discourse and ideology of the prevailing power. For example, it lends credence to Iran's Shiite discourse, which aligns with aspects of Iranian nationalism, and then replicates and sustains the dynamics that align with the establishment's ideological discourse. In other words, semantics produce a kind of knowledge that facilitates the control and perpetuation of power within the security framework of the IRGC and the organizations under its control. This means that every expression employed by Iran's state-run media stems from power dynamics and simultaneously serves to expand and control these dynamics.

Most media theorists, by adopting a formative view of representation and meaning, believe that phenomena in themselves are not capable of meaning, but that meaning must be represented through culture. The role of the IRGC and its affiliated cyber apparatus is to mediate between the meanings and connotations conveyed to society. In other words, they reconfigure events through processes of description, concept creation, and substitution. There is no doubt that the world exists independently of the representations about it, but for it to carry meaning, it must be represented. Therefore, representation serves as a means to create meaning for reality. If we accept that meaning does not have a fixed, guaranteed

nature, but arises from specific cultural representations, we can conclude that the meaning of anything cannot be fixed. In fact, meaning always emerges from context, is subject to other factors, and follows shifting power equations. For example, former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and Khamenei in their speeches in the early 21st century dismissed pride in the Achaemenid Empire as an illusion, and this message was widely propagated throughout the country through media. Yet, only a few years later, they praised Iran's identity and ancient history in their speeches.⁽²³⁾ Thus, cultural and media representation and manipulation of meanings are not neutral or static; rather, they are intertwined with power dynamics to produce and spread referential meanings in society.

Representation of Concepts and Negative Characterization

The representation is produced and disseminated in the context of meanings such as common sense, but this is subject to the management and control of a system that prioritizes some meanings over others. As a result, certain ideas and meanings prevail, while others are excluded. The IRGC's control over the media, along with the launching of thousands of media and virtual activists, results in the proliferation of ideas, values and viewpoints associated with the Iranian Shiite ideological understanding of governance, whether in domestic or foreign policy, being presented as common sense or instinctual. In other words, what is being presented is not the truth but rather a subjective representation of events that aligns with the IRGC's media discourse.

The world portrayed by the media, like the world we live in and sense, is a culturally organized set of categories or general concepts. We manage the world by creating concepts or classifying them,⁽²⁴⁾ and this way of creating meaning is rooted in an ideological process. In other words, when we classify phenomena, it is not our direct experience or understanding that matters most but rather the stereotypes dictated by society. Stigmas such as enemy resistance, prostitution, homosexuality and others provide the framework and reflect the media's stance on how the world is organized according to certain views and values.⁽²⁵⁾ For example, the image projected by the propaganda apparatus regarding social freedom in the West is conveyed to society as one of immorality and moral decay, and any desire for social freedom is stigmatized. Similarly, when it comes to the concept of development and the transformations in the Arab Gulf states over the last two decades, the Iranian media conveys development and rule of law in these countries by representation and attaching negative implications to them.

To the extent that in representing the concept of development, it is described as a colonial project imposed by Western countries. For example, in a 2017 speech, Khamenei described the construction of towers and airports in the UAE as a form of regression and backwardness.⁽²⁶⁾ This strategy of framing concepts negatively ultimately leads to a kind of resistance in the social subconscious to accepting modern ideas, so much so that any negative confrontation or decision made by the ruling elite in Iran regarding society appears to be normal.

Representation and Narrative

The term “war is a war of narratives” has been widely discussed in the context of the media war and propaganda apparatus in Iran, to the point that Khamenei emphasized its importance by stating, “You must narrate the truths of your society, your country and your revolution. If you do not narrate, the enemy narrates; if you do not narrate the revolution, the enemy will narrate.”⁽²⁷⁾ This term refers to an approach that emphasizes the importance of precise control and information gathering in the media space. In other words, war is not only waged on the military battlefield, but also extends to the information and media space. In this context, the Iranian establishment aims to shape and document narratives consistent with its theories and goals. By adopting this approach, efforts aim at preserving and strengthening the positive image of Iran’s revolutionary discourse and goals in the public consciousness. The aforesaid not only represents a principle in the media war but also symbolizes the overall strategy of Iran’s propaganda apparatus, which seeks to maintain public support for the establishment’s goals under all circumstances. This goal led the head of public relations in the IRGC to announce in 2011 the organization of 21,000 honorary correspondents within the Basij, stating that these “journalists” would collaborate with the IRGC and Basij in cultural spheres.⁽²⁸⁾

Culture functions as a system of stories or narratives that are continuously generated, mediating between existence and awareness of existence, and thereby shaping both. The media, as the most effective storyteller, plays a critical role in instilling popular ideologies, values, and beliefs. In fact, the intersubjective social space is consistently targeted by the IRGC for the dissemination and propagation of its narrative. Narratives serve as cognitive cultural models, simplifying and framing intersubjective experiences of the world. These models include the collective knowledge of a culture, enabling the coordination, interpretation, and direction of actions, beliefs, values, and norms.

Narratives, as cognitive frameworks, shape how individuals perceive and explain reality. In its bid to influence public perceptions, the IRGC’s narrative advances the interests of the Iranian revolution, and in its strategy to alter the truth, linguistic statements and templates are chosen to reflect the vision enforced by the IRGC’s discourse. The decisions people make in their social lives depend on public consciousness, which is heavily influenced by the media and the IRGC’s control over the narrative.

Perception Management

IRGC commanders have frequently addressed⁽²⁹⁾ the concept of a large-scale “war of consciousness,” often referred to in the Iranian republic’s discourse as a “cognitive war.” This war is orchestrated by the establishment on the domestic front by intervening in and reconstructing reality. This theme is reflected in Figure 2, underscoring how various methods are employed to interpret social phenomena for a better understanding of their surroundings.⁽³⁰⁾ These

interpretations, whether in political or social contexts, are shaped by individual perceptions and beliefs. People's behavior, both politically and socially, is largely influenced by how they comprehend and perceive facts.

The primary factors that shape individual behavior include the nature of perceptions, ideas, and beliefs entrenched in the public consciousness. These beliefs and perceptions are intricately linked to the subjects or goals individuals recognize. The context in which perceptions are shaped also significantly influences the formation of these beliefs. Consequently, controlling this context — such as social networks, media, and content — becomes essential for the IRGC in managing perceptions effectively.

In managing perceptions, the IRGC employs a range of tools, including misrepresenting events, simulating scenarios, manipulating meanings, and negatively framing concepts. These strategies are implemented within domestic politics to control public opinion and garner popular support. Consequently, individuals' comprehensive understanding of their environment and their subsequent behavior rely not only on personal perceptions but also on how institutions and agencies deploy these perception management tools.

Manipulating the truth and controlling the narrative are vital in shaping public attitudes. This process significantly influences individuals' understanding and perception of various issues by altering and revising information and events. Tactics such as highlighting specific facts while omitting others, or rearranging the chronological order of events can reshape the overall narrative, guiding people toward a particular understanding.

By controlling the narrative, institutions and agencies can effectively present their concepts and viewpoints to society, impacting public consciousness and shaping opinions on social and political matters. This control also involves prioritizing specific issues and directing thought patterns.

Concepts like “truth filter” and “influential media” underscore the role of institutions in shaping public consciousness. Ultimately, the interplay of manipulating the truth and controlling the narrative constitutes a complex and influential process in managing collective consciousness and shaping public opinion.

Conclusion

The Iranian republic views the media landscape as a battlefield to promote the values and ideals of the revolution by creating concepts and establishing institutions within this sphere. Any discourse that falls beyond the pale of revolutionary values is viewed as the discourse of the enemy, leading the establishment to adopt an offensive stance. The strategy of hijacking the truth has been selected for this soft war.

In accordance with this strategy, the governing structures of the political system, led by the IRGC, utilize mass communication tools to bolster and maintain their authority. These tools include television, newspapers, radio, and internet.

By employing these platforms, information, opinions, and cultural content are organized to present prevailing beliefs and ideologies as the reality of society.

This control gradually shifts social understanding, steering individuals toward new beliefs and values. Dominating the public narrative, as a tool of power, undoubtedly significantly shapes the ideological and social landscape, profoundly impacting the collective worldview.

The IRGC utilizes the Shiite-Iranian ideological discourse as the center and focal point in its media strategy and representation. Within this framework, the media strives to present images and news consistent with the principles and values that define this discourse. This effort involves adapting religious concepts and forging a close connection between the disseminated information and sectarian-national values, thereby controlling public perceptions and reinforcing the exclusively Shiite-Iranian identity of society.

In this context, the media serves as a tool for shaping and defining cultural and social norms, promoting religious and national values and obligations. Analyzing the propaganda tactics employed by the Iranian political system, particularly through the IRGC propaganda apparatus, reveals an attempt to create a unique ideological atmosphere and cultivate a concept of “resistance” against the influence of modern ideas, mirroring real-world dynamics.

By forming Shiite groups, the establishment aims to create an idealized image of struggle and resistance, manipulating meanings and concepts in the process. In its media strategy, the establishment employs tactics such as selectively presenting information, prioritizing certain narratives, and making broad generalizations to influence and control the mindset of Iranian society.

Consequently, this propaganda approach seeks to maintain and strengthen its ideological discourse by establishing a robust ideological cover while amplifying the volume of misinformation. This process not only solidifies the ideological system of the Iranian ruling elite but also diminishes the populace's engagement with modern ideas and Western concepts, fostering a form of resistance against these influences.

Endnotes

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- (5) "I once said that they are attacking us culturally. And this is true. God knows it is true. Some do not understand this. It means they do not see the scene. Those who look at the scene know what the enemy is doing. They know it is an attack, and what an attack it is!" (Khamenei's speech during his meeting with members of the Cultural Revolution Council - 1991).
- (6) The ultimate goal in soft warfare is the same as in hard warfare, which is control and the collapse of a political system, but the tools for achieving this are different. While the overthrow of a political system can be accomplished in hard warfare through the occupation of territory, leading to the collapse of a country's defensive and security systems, efforts in soft warfare aim to influence the beliefs and values of a population, challenging the ideology and governance that grant the political system its identity. If the enemy succeeds in this overthrow, they will effectively achieve success by stripping the political system of its legitimacy and trust.
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- (13) The Supreme Council of Cyberspace was established on March 7, 2012, by order of Ali Khamenei.
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- (15) This military institution was officially established in May 1979 by the order of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, to suppress the counter-revolution and protect the gains of the revolution. Over time, this organization has gradually transformed into a large and multifaceted coalition present in all areas of Iran. Its special status has made the IRGC the most involved institution in internet censorship and the repression of bloggers.
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IRAN AND THE HOUTHIS' ASYMMETRIC MARITIME WARFARE CAMPAIGN IN THE RED SEA: A STUDY OF THE SPONSOR-PROXY MODEL

Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco

Researcher in security affairs, the Gulf State Analytics (GSA)

Abstract

This research article investigates the relationship between the Houthis and Iran within the framework of the sponsor-proxy academic debate using the Houthis' Red Sea campaign as a case study. The primary goal of the article is to highlight how the Houthis have cultivated deeper, more sophisticated security engagements with Iran while preserving significant agency over its command-and-control structures, internal decision-making processes, and agenda-setting of strategic priorities. It starts by examining Iran's military doctrine, focusing on the role that deterrence, forward defense, and the "Axis of Resistance" play in informing the Iranian republic's strategic thinking and shaping its policy options. It focuses on analyzing the origins of the Houthis as a nascent maritime force regionally, specifically singling out Iran's multifaceted role in consolidating Houthi force projection capabilities at sea. It then delves into the study of the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, mapping the strategic considerations and tactical means underpinning the Houthi campaign against international commercial shipping.

Keywords: Houthis, Iran, Red Sea, Proxy Warfare, Asymmetric Maritime Warfare.

Introduction

On November 19, 2023, the Yemeni armed group Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), commonly known as the Houthis, seized the vehicle carrier *Galaxy Leader*, a Bahamas-flagged commercial ship co-owned by the Israel-based Ray Car Carriers shipping company. While transiting the lower Red Sea on its route from Turkey to India, the Houthis boarded and took control of the ship from a helicopter. Since the *Galaxy Leader*'s capture, the Houthis have launched dozens of multipronged attacks on commercial and military vessels in and around the Red Sea. The Houthi maritime offensive has integrated a diverse array of weapons solutions, including anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles, flotillas of fast attack craft, unmanned aircraft vehicles (UAVs), and unmanned surface vessels (USVs). Although traditionally a land-based armed group, the Houthi military expansion to the Hodeida Governorate, home to one of the most prominent Yemeni ports, in 2014 prompted the group to strengthen its maritime guerilla tactics. The increasing sophistication of Houthi maritime offensive capabilities was reflected in the launch of several small-scale hybrid warfare operations in the Red Sea basin starting in 2015. Yet, the scale of attacks, the kinds of weapons systems involved, and the scope of maritime operations conducted since mid-November 2023 are unprecedented. The Houthis have framed their Red Sea campaign as a military move aimed at signaling its support for Hamas and building pressure on Israel to halt the offensive on the Gaza Strip. While acknowledging the role of anti-Israel and anti-US sentiments in informing the strategic and military posturing of the Houthis, this study argues that the pursuit of the Yemeni armed group's domestic and regional strategic ambitions represents the main driving force of the Houthi offensive on international maritime traffic. In this regard, Houthi asymmetric maritime warfare efforts in the broader context of the Israel-Gaza war provide valuable insights into the role of Iran's security assistance in strengthening Houthi maritime warfare capabilities, the complex web of military and foreign policy connections between the Houthis and Iran, and the evolution of the Houthi war machine's role in Iran's regional network of non-state armed groups, known as the "Axis of Resistance."

The article begins with a brief overview of the contemporary scholarly debate on proxy warfare. The following section will present the evolution and main features informing Iran's military doctrine, focusing primarily on deterrence, the forward defense concept, and the "Axis of Resistance." The article will then review the Houthi-Iran relationship in light of the sponsor-proxy scholarly debate. The section thereafter will investigate the origins of the maritime asymmetric warfare capabilities of the Houthis. Finally, the article will review the Houthi Red Sea campaign, delving especially into the strategic considerations that underpin the Houthi maritime offensive and the tactical means through which it is conducted.

An Overview of Sponsor-Proxy Dynamics

Starting with the Cold War, sponsor-proxy wars have become a topic of growing scholarly attention. Framed within the context of a power competition in the bipolar world order, proxy wars were primarily studied through the lens of power confrontation between great powers. Therefore, it is no surprise that the Cold War era literature on proxy wars focused mainly on analyzing the intervening actors and measurable aspects of the sponsor-proxy relationship.⁽¹⁾

However, contemporary scholarship on sponsor-proxy warfare has highlighted how the proxy war concept has significantly evolved since its first introduction during the Cold War era.⁽²⁾ Although terminology and metrics to study sponsor-proxy wars remain objects of contestation on the broader proxy debate, recent definitions of proxy warfare have reached a consensus on some critical features of contemporary proxy warfare. These include overcoming the understanding of proxy wars as an exclusive byproduct of great power competition, acknowledging the role of non-state actors as potential benefactors, and stressing the relational dimension of the principal-agent interaction.⁽³⁾ For instance, Mumford has classified a proxy war “as the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome.”⁽⁴⁾ Mumford maintains that both state and non-state actors can be benefactors, intervening as outside actors in a state’s internal affairs and providing weapons, training, and funding to a chosen proxy.⁽⁵⁾ Similarly, Groh has defined proxy war as “directing the use of force by a politically motivated, local actor to indirectly influence political affairs in the target state.”⁽⁶⁾ Most importantly, Groh has underlined how the patron-proxy dynamic inherently generates a hierarchical relationship between the two actors, with the proxy prioritizing the benefactor’s interests over its own agenda and scaling down its autonomy in order to access the intervening actor’s support.⁽⁷⁾

Daniel Byman has identified strategic, ideological and domestic factors as three main drivers prompting actors to intervene in a state’s internal affairs. Strategic concerns include destabilizing or weakening a neighbor, projecting power, changing the regime, and shaping opposition. Ideological factors include enhancing international prestige and exporting the political system. Finally, domestic political considerations entail providing affiliates with military or operational aid.⁽⁸⁾ The intervening party’s support of a local actor remains a fundamental cornerstone of the principal-agent relationship. Byman has identified six types of state support to non-state groups: training and operations; money, arms, and logistics; diplomatic backing; help with organizing; ideological direction; and sanctuary.⁽⁹⁾

Iran’s Military Doctrine

Since the emergence of the Iranian republic, the role of US forces in the Middle East and the imbalance between its conventional military capabilities and those of its neighboring countries and extra-regional adversaries have deeply informed the Iranian leadership’s threat perception.⁽¹⁰⁾ The overriding imperative to ensure regime security and compensate for the country’s limitations in hard power

means has played a core role in shaping Iran's military doctrine and its strategic choices.⁽¹¹⁾ The experience of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) has played a pivotal role in defining Iran's military outlook for two main reasons: first, it highlighted Iran's shortcomings in fighting a conventional war; second, it heightened the Iranian leadership's sense of insecurity and vulnerability to external attacks. As a result, determined to ensure regime survival vis-à-vis future security threats, Iran invested mainly in developing effective deterrent military capabilities.⁽¹²⁾ The threat to wage unconventional war and the fast-expanding ballistic missile program rapidly emerged as the bedrock of Iran's deterrent posturing.⁽¹³⁾

The Course of Forward Defense

Fundamental reconfigurations of the regional balance of power and political order triggered by the US invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 and the 2011 "Arab Spring" significantly influenced the Iranian leadership's threat perception and, by extension, the country's military doctrine. Fearful of being the next target in Washington's "War on Terror" and being aware of the country's power imbalance against US military might, Iran developed a multilayered defense architecture that contemplated both conventional and non-conventional warfare, the so-called mosaic defense⁽¹⁴⁾ concept. Although still firmly grounded in deterrence-based strategic thinking, mosaic defense revolves around the idea of denying a potential invader from gaining superiority in the air, sea and land domains by engaging its forces in asymmetric warfare and by conducting in-depth attrition combat on national territory through mass popular mobilization.⁽¹⁵⁾ The core rationale of asymmetric warfare is not about inflicting an absolute military defeat on the adversary but taking advantage of weaknesses and gaps in its military forces to exhaust the opponent's willingness to conduct sustained combat operations. In this context, the consolidation of asymmetric warfare capabilities aimed at pursuing anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) started to assume growing relevance in informing Iran's military doctrine. In a nutshell, anti-access capabilities aim to prevent a potential invading force from getting into the country's mainland; area denial capabilities, instead, seek to downgrade the invading force's capacity to conduct operations in the combat areas.⁽¹⁶⁾ Iran has gradually built a complex asymmetric warfare doctrine that is grounded on the integrated deployment of mobile air defense systems, ballistic missiles, electronic and cyber warfare attacks, and naval combat operations.⁽¹⁷⁾

In the aftermath of the 2011 "Arab Spring," Iran opted to design an offensive component to its deterrent defense doctrine, known as the forward defense strategy. The core rationale underpinning the decision to add a new layer to the country's national defense strategy was to provide Tehran with region-wide strategic depth to oppose its adversaries and counter threats to regime security far from Iranian territory. The forward defense doctrine's ultimate goal is, therefore, to avoid exposing Iran's mainland to the negative fallouts of an all-out war by engaging in fights against opponents in buffer zones remote from national soil.⁽¹⁸⁾ Iran's

forward defense toolkit relies on four main pillars: its missile program, cyber warfare capabilities, autonomous systems, and its region-wide network of non-state armed groups,⁽¹⁹⁾ also known as the “Axis of Resistance.”

The “Axis of Resistance”

Although the role of non-state armed groups in Iran’s strategic thinking became more pronounced in the 2010s, proxy forces have played a central strategic function in Iran’s military doctrine since the early 1980s. The “Axis of Resistance” consists of an Iran-led political-security bloc regrouping like-minded states and non-state actors across the Middle East sharing a common understanding of the international system based on an anti-imperialist and Islamic globalist agenda.⁽²⁰⁾ In this regard, significant emotional components of the Iranian state’s identity, such as empathy for the Shiite community and resentment against the West, have significantly contributed to informing the country’s coalition-building strategy in the broader Middle East.⁽²¹⁾ Although it is difficult to provide an exact figure of the members of the “Axis,” the Iran-led network is generally understood to comprise a constellation of armed militias in Iraq, the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and the Houthis in Yemen.⁽²²⁾ Ideologically, the “Axis” has evolved from being “a primarily state-centered enterprise [...] into a transnational project supported by an organic network of popular armed movements from across the region.”⁽²³⁾ The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) has been at the forefront of implementing Iran’s proxy warfare strategy, primarily by providing like-minded non-state actors with weapons supplies, technical assistance to indigenize Iranian-made advanced military technologies, and military training.⁽²⁴⁾ The “Axis of Resistance” has played a central role in Iran’s military doctrine because it has allowed the country to exercise asymmetric deterrence against its regional and extra-regional adversaries, broaden its strategic depth in the region, and try to attain politico-military ends while lowering the risks of being dragged into an all-out confrontation with its antagonists and benefiting from plausible deniability.⁽²⁵⁾ On top of these expected gains, Iran’s militant client strategy also serves the country’s national security imperatives because it has provided Iran with an effective platform to export its revolutionary politico-religious ideology across the region and recruit new allies to uphold its state interests.⁽²⁶⁾ The growing centrality of non-state armed groups in Iran’s deterrence strategy over the past four decades has prompted the country to design a peculiar model of security assistance that combines technical, messianic, economic, and strategic considerations.⁽²⁷⁾

However, deploying the “Axis” as an instrument of foreign policy is not a risk-free endeavor for Iran. Hardening the military posture of its Western antagonists, souring the perception of the country’s role in the eyes of regional neighbors, perpetuating a geopolitical climate conducive to instability and insecurity, and fueling domestic political disorder are among the inherent dangers of Iran’s militant client-based deterrence strategy.⁽²⁸⁾ Especially at the regional level, although

Iran frames the concepts of forward defense and “Axis of Resistance” within its deterrence-based defensive architecture, the country’s ascendant military role in the post-2011 regional uprisings has increased the suspicions of its adversaries that Iran cultivates expansionist foreign policy and military ambitions, fueling security dilemmas that could increase regional tensions.⁽²⁹⁾ Considering the central function of non-state armed groups in Iran’s military doctrine, the country is likely to undertake calibrated actions to preserve its region-wide strategic depth by further entrenching its position in critical enclaves. Yet, this might augment the risk of further aggravating the region’s already fragile politico-security outlook.⁽³⁰⁾ Indeed, although Iran has become increasingly apt at adjusting its proxy strategy to a changing regional geopolitical environment and evolving national security priorities over the last four decades, the ever-present risk of escalation and already-simmering regional tensions loom over the long-term sustainability of the country’s proxy warfare doctrine.⁽³¹⁾

The Houthi-Iran Relationship and the Sponsor-Proxy Debate

Although the Houthis are often depicted as Iran’s proxy of choice in the Arabian Peninsula, equating the Houthis to other armed groups affiliated with Iran’s “Axis of Resistance,” such as Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite armed groups, is misleading and does not fully capture the complexity of the Houthi-Iran relationship. Over the past decade, the Houthis have cultivated greater military and strategic integration with Tehran and the Iran-led regional network of armed groups as a means to promote their political agenda and attain their military goals in Yemen.⁽³²⁾

The attainment of significant symbolic and tangible gains has often prompted the Houthis to undertake actions traditional of Iran’s full-fledged proxy forces, such as when the Yemeni insurgent group revendicated the September 14 attack on the Saudi oil facilities of Abqaiq and Khurais.⁽³³⁾ Similar episodes combined with large-scale security assistance provided by Iran and its regional network of armed groups to the Houthis in the form of military training, weapons and ammunitions supply and technology transfer have inevitably strengthened the perception of the Houthis as a Yemeni version of Lebanon’s Hezbollah.⁽³⁴⁾ However, although the growing entanglement of the Houthis within the Iran-led “Axis of Resistance,” the Houthi-Iran relationship seems to defy conventional patron-proxy dynamics.

Compared to Iran’s deep-rooted and multifaceted relationships with Lebanon’s Hezbollah and the Iraqi constellation of Shiite armed groups, Iran-Houthi ties are the result of relatively recent geopolitical developments. For most of its history, Yemen’s domestic politics has been on the periphery of Iran’s regional priorities.⁽³⁵⁾ Although it is plausible that Iran-Houthi weapons smuggling connections pre-date the outbreak of the uprising against the then-Yemeni President Saleh, elements suggesting Iran’s security assistance to the Yemeni insurgent group became more numerous starting in 2011.⁽³⁶⁾ There is a growing body of evidence and a consolidated consensus in the research community studying the Iran-Houthi relationship that Iran has played a paramount role in strengthening the offensive

capabilities of the Houthis over the past decade.⁽³⁷⁾ Starting with shipments of small-caliber firearms and ammunition, Iran's security assistance has gradually evolved to also include more advanced weapons systems such as air defense systems and UAVs.⁽³⁸⁾ Beyond equipping the Houthis with sophisticated weaponry, Iran's security assistance has also focused on providing them with training and technical assistance on how to operate air defense solutions and, most importantly, how to assemble and manufacture them locally.⁽³⁹⁾

In addition to advancing Houthi combat capabilities, there is significant evidence pointing to how Iran and the "Axis of Resistance" members have provided the Houthis with critical support to strengthen the Houthis' military organizational structure, media outreach, and diplomatic standing.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The full-spectrum security support of Iran to the Yemeni armed group's war efforts has reinforced the idea of the Houthis as an Iranian proxy force in the Arabian Peninsula.⁽⁴¹⁾

Although growing evidence points to the consolidation of military engagement between the Houthis, Iran and the "Axis of Resistance," an expanding body of policy-oriented works and academic studies has highlighted how the Iran-Houthi relationship defies conventional sponsor-proxy dynamics. In this regard, the researcher Peter Salisbury contests the argument that Iran's security support to the Houthis was a critical factor in ushering the insurgent group's rise to power in 2014. He argues that the bulk of the financial and military power of the Houthis originated from local sources, including the alliance of convenience with Yemen's then-President Saleh.⁽⁴²⁾ The researcher Alex Vatanka concurs in deflating Iran's influence over Yemen's balance of power in the early stages of Yemen's civil war. He stresses how Iran sought to capitalize on Houthi military success, even to the point of overstating its role, to advance its strategic interests amid the regional power struggle with Saudi Arabia.⁽⁴³⁾ The researcher Thomas Juneau also identifies competition against domestic actors over the local control of power and resources rather than sectarian and ideological considerations as a pivotal driving factor in motivating Houthi war efforts. Yemen's marginal role in Iran's top strategic priorities prompted Iran to mobilize limited resources and to condition the provision of more complex military support on Houthi fighting successes on the ground. Most importantly, he points to Iran's limited assistance to the Houthis, albeit an increasing one if compared to the pre-Houthi takeover of Sana'a phase, and the lack of a hierarchical relationship between the two actors to rebut the idea of the Houthis as a full-fledged Iranian proxy. Finally, Juneau recognizes that Iran's support to the Houthis represented a low-cost investment for Iran that yielded modest dividends in its efforts to advance its regional agenda.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The Houthi-Iran partnership is not fixed in time and space, it is vulnerable to reconfigurations and adjustments. Indeed, Iran's security assistance to the Houthis has measurably increased in scale and sophistication in the aftermath of the Yemeni insurgent group's takeover of Sana'a.⁽⁴⁵⁾ However, it would be misleading to equate mounting Iranian material support to an increase

in Iran's clout over the Houthis. The researcher Elisabeth Kendall posits that Houthi pragmatism played a central role in drawing the armed group closer to Iran's camp, highlighting the group's independent decision-making. She points to the Houthi alliance of convenience with the then-President of Yemen Saleh as a paradigmatic example of the insurgent group's proclivity to strike practical deals in order to access critical military support.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Vatanka also concurs with the recognition that the increasing sophistication of Iran's security assistance to the Houthis played a central role in bolstering the insurgent group's offensive capabilities. Nevertheless, he argues that the Houthi reluctance to fully embrace Iran's regional foreign policy goals and its strategic overstretch in the Syrian, Iraqi and Lebanese conflict fronts were among the main factors preventing the emergence of a patron-proxy relationship between the two actors.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Similarly, Juneau contends that Iran's security assistance has contributed to facilitating the rise of the Houthis as the dominant domestic actor in Yemen's power struggle. Moreover, he notes how the successful entrenchment of the Houthis into northwestern Yemen's political and military fabric has provided a conducive environment for the Zaydi armed group to develop an independent foreign policy agenda, turning a domestic competition-driven actor into a player with region-wide power projection capabilities and ambitions.⁽⁴⁸⁾ In this regard, Marie-Louise Clausen argues that the emerging close alignment between the foreign agendas of the Houthis and Iran does not neglect the fact that the Yemeni insurgent group has gradually developed an independent foreign policy posture. The Houthis' severe diplomatic isolation prompted them to rely heavily on Iran's support to pursue international recognition. Still, the Houthis have leveraged its strong agency at the domestic level and independent capacity to conduct military actions to boost its credentials as an autonomous actor regionally.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Although Houthi-Iran military cooperation and the armed group's integration into the Iran-led "Axis" camp have exponentially grown since the Houthi takeover of Sana'a, this is not sufficient evidence to present the Houthis as a full-fledged Iranian proxy force. Eleonora Ardemagni posits that the Houthis' financial independence from foreign revenue streams, the centrality of the local power struggle in its political agenda, its structure of power based on family bloodline and class affiliation, and its non-adherence to Twelver Shiite-Khomeinism religious-ideological worldview represent four main factors differentiating the Houthis from other groups in the Iran-led "Axis."⁽⁵⁰⁾

Consequently, as long as the Houthis preserve consistent autonomous agency over decision-making processes and command-and-control military structures, significant financial independence from overseas financing sources and an independent religious-ideological background, it would be misleading and analytically reductive to classify the Houthis as an Iranian proxy force on par with Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iraq's Shiite armed groups.

A Nascent Maritime Asymmetric Force

Born and bred as an armed group in the Sa'ada Governorate, a Yemeni northern region dominated by rugged mountains, the Houthis have historically sought to use the roughness of the terrain to their advantage when fighting against adversaries endowed with more significant conventional firepower. The insurgent group has turned guerrilla warfare and attrition tactics into key pillars of its combat capabilities to level the playing field against its opponents.⁽⁵¹⁾ The six rounds of military confrontations fought by the Houthis against the Yemeni central government, known as the Sa'ada Wars, between 2004 and 2010 are a case in point of the insurgent group's capabilities in waging irregular mountain warfare.⁽⁵²⁾ The Houthi capture of Hodeida marked a turning point for the Houthi warfare doctrine and tactics. The Houthis' extension of control to large swaths of the Yemeni western coast and the country's largest port, on the one hand, and access to the Yemeni army's stockpiles of weaponry and naval assets, on the other hand, presented the Houthis with both the means and the strategic linchpin to also leverage the maritime domain in the pursuit of its domestic politics goals. Critical naval weapons systems and assets that fell into Houthi hands included coastal missile batteries, patrol craft, and ammunition deposits. With the Houthis' tightening their power grip in northwestern Yemen, they have gradually developed a diffused network of military outposts in coastal areas and islands. The Houthis also sought to broaden their capacity to project power over the Bab al-Mandab Strait by launching a southward military expansion campaign between 2015 and 2017. In addition to land incursions, the Houthi assault included a maritime component that focused on launching attacks on vessels in the Bab al-Mandab Strait area.⁽⁵³⁾ With the 2018 UN-brokered Stockholm Agreement to stop fighting around Yemen's Red Sea city of Hodeida and the conquest of the oil and gas-rich province of Marib topping the Houthis' expansionist military ambitions, conducting naval warfare operations in the southern Red Sea took a backseat in the Houthi agenda of strategic priorities.⁽⁵⁴⁾ However, maritime tensions have resurfaced occasionally. For instance, clashes briefly erupted in October and November 2022 when the Houthis conducted missile and drone attacks on oil export terminals in the government-held port cities of Al-Dhabba and Qana to apply pressure on Yemen's internationally recognized government amid truce renewal negotiations.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Since 2015, the Houthis have mastered a fast-expanding arsenal of weaponry and guerrilla tactics to conduct maritime asymmetric warfare. These include a broad range of weapons systems, including anti-ship missiles, UAVs, USVs, and kinetic naval actions such as commercial ship seizures and boat swarm attacks. Missiles and UAVs have emerged as the Houthis' weapons of choice to carry out insurgency-type naval warfare. The Houthis launched several missile and drone strikes on naval assets of the Saudi-led coalition and the United States deployed in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, especially during the 2015-2017 Houthi anti-shipping campaign.⁽⁵⁶⁾ The destructive missile strike on the UAE logistics ship in October 2016, three unsuccessful missile attacks on the Arleigh Burke-class

guided-missile destroyer USS Mason in the same month, and the strike on the Turkish ship Ince Inebolu in May 2018 are among the most dangerous Houthi missile strikes.⁽⁵⁷⁾ While large amounts of the Yemen army's missile stockpiles, including outdated Soviet-era and more recent Chinese-made missiles, ended up in Houthi hands after the insurgent group's takeover of Sana'a, the technology and designs of most of the Houthi missiles and UAVs are believed to have overseas origins. Over the past years, significant evidence has been accumulated highlighting Iran's role in expanding the array and sophistication of Houthi missile and drone inventory.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Indeed, rebranded versions of Iranian-made missiles and UAVs are suspected to represent the bulk of Houthi missile and drone firepower. The close similarities in the design of missile systems and UAVs showcased during Houthi military parades and Iranian-made weapons systems speak volumes about Tehran's complicity in upgrading the Yemeni insurgent group's combat capabilities.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Although it remains difficult to grasp a precise picture of the extent of Iran's assistance to the Houthi missile and drone programs, the Iranian republic is believed to give full-spectrum military sustain to the Yemeni insurgent group, from offering technical support in the set-up of domestic manufacturing lines to providing off-the-shelf components for local assembly and supplying complete weapons systems.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Recurrent seizures of high-tech parts, missiles and rocket propellants from fishing dhows in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden provide more evidence of Iran's multipronged support to the Houthi quest to bolster its missile and UAV power projection capabilities.⁽⁶¹⁾

The Houthis have gradually increased the use of USVs to conduct maritime asymmetric guerilla warfare. The Houthi arsenal of explosives-laden remote-controlled boats includes locally manufactured water-borne improvised explosive devices (WBIEDs), such as weaponized versions of the Yemeni navy's patrol boats and traditional Yemeni fishing skiffs, and purpose-built designs, such as the Toofan ("flood" in Arabic) craft family.⁽⁶²⁾ On January 30, 2017, a Houthi WBIED struck the Royal Saudi Navy frigate Al Madinah, marking the insurgent group's first confirmed use of a USV. Severe damage was reported, including the deaths of two Saudi sailors, the onboard helicopter's destruction, and damage to the warship's stern section.⁽⁶³⁾ To carry out the attack, the Houthis converted a 10-meter interceptor boat, initially donated by the UAE to the Yemeni navy, into a WBIED.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Since the strike on the Al Madinah frigate, Houthi seaborne attacks have grown in frequency and diversity. In late April 2017, the Saudi Coast Guard thwarted a remote-controlled explosive-laden boat's attack on a Saudi Aramco fuel terminal in Jizan Province.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Three months later, in July 2017, a Houthi WBIED targeted the port of Mocha, with the explosive boat's detonation causing damage to berthed vessels.⁽⁶⁶⁾ While initially focused on conducting strikes against the Saudi-led coalition's military assets, the Houthis rapidly broadened the scope of seaborne attacks to also target merchant ships and coastal infrastructure. In January 2018, the insurgent group conducted the first remote-piloted explosive-filled boat attack on a commercial vessel. This Saudi-flagged oil tanker was defended by a

Saudi warship escorting the commercial vessel.⁽⁶⁷⁾ The Houthis significantly ramped up unmanned explosive-filled boat attacks on merchant ships during the Saudi-Emirati military campaign to free the port city of Hodeida in 2018. The uptick in assaults on Saudi-flagged oil tankers prompted Riyadh to halt crude oil shipments through the Bab al-Mandab Strait temporarily.⁽⁶⁸⁾ In March 2020, four Houthi WBEIDs attempted an attack on an oil tanker in the southern Red Sea. The Houthis used weaponized fishing skiffs to conduct the assault on the commercial vessel, showcasing the insurgent group's broadening arsenal of USVs.⁽⁶⁹⁾ In mid-December 2020, a Houthi bomb-laden remote-controlled boat attacked the Jeddah port's fuel terminal, damaging the Singapore-flagged oil tanker BW Rhine.⁽⁷⁰⁾ Although the Saudi-led coalition forces foiled several Houthi assaults and destroyed large numbers of booby-trapped boats,⁽⁷¹⁾ Houthi seaborne attacks have continued to threaten commercial shipping routes in the southern Red Sea and cause serious harm to merchant vessels.⁽⁷²⁾ While WBIEDs are manufactured locally, a growing body of evidence suggests that fishing skiffs, patrol boats and small craft were weaponized through conversion kits supplied by Iran.⁽⁷³⁾

The Houthis also seized some commercial ships. On November 18, 2019, the Houthis took control of a Saudi tugboat and a South Korean tugboat, which were towing a South Korean-flagged drilling rig in the southern Red Sea, claiming that the ships entered Yemen's territorial waters without permission. The three vessels and crewmembers were freed after a three-day seizure at the Houthi-controlled port of Salif.⁽⁷⁴⁾ On January 3, 2022, Houthi militants captured the UAE-flagged cargo ship Rawabi.⁽⁷⁵⁾ The vessel was reportedly carrying medical field equipment from the Yemeni island of Socotra and the Saudi port of Jizan when it was seized in international waters off the Hodeida coast. Held captive at Salif port for nearly four months, the Rawabi's crew was then released in the context of the so-called Ramadan ceasefire agreement.⁽⁷⁶⁾

Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea

Based on the proxy-agent model, there are a host of considerations, tactics and objectives driving Houthi attacks in the Red Sea following Operation Al-Aqsa Flood that can be explained as follows:

Strategic Considerations

When it comes to identifying the motivations of the Houthi assault on commercial shipping in and around the Red Sea, the Yemeni insurgent group's maritime offensive appears to be driven by a mix of ideological and strategic considerations. According to some experts, the Houthis' ideological and religious beliefs and efforts cast the group as a revolutionary liberation movement guided by pan-Islamist goals,⁽⁷⁷⁾ which has played a pivotal role in forming the political ambitions of the Yemeni insurgent group.⁽⁷⁸⁾

However, some analysts have observed that the prospect of achieving significant strategic gains at the domestic and regional levels has also significantly

influenced the Houthis' decision to launch Red Sea attacks.⁽⁷⁹⁾ The October 7 attack and the following Israeli war on Gaza came at a critical juncture for the Houthis. On the one hand, the insurgent group was suffering a decline in public support and experiencing difficulties in delivering services in areas under its control.⁽⁸⁰⁾ The Houthi military confrontation against the United States and the UK in the context of the Israeli war on Gaza has provided the Houthis with an effective escape valve to deflect public attention from the insurgent group's governing failures and boost its reputational standing among Yemenis through large-scale mobilization, recruitment, and indoctrination campaigns.⁽⁸¹⁾

Moreover, tightening the Houthis' power grip on territories already under their control might have contributed to laying the ground for the long-sought-after insurgent group's military expansion into energy-rich and geographically strategic regions such as Taiz, Marib and Shabwa, and areas in southern Hodeida.⁽⁸²⁾ Although the Houthis have strategically sought to frame their maritime aggression campaign to tap into pro-Palestinian sentiments and rally political sympathies regionally, the Yemeni armed group's core ends remain strongly focused on furthering its domestic politico-military agenda.⁽⁸³⁾

On the other hand, the Houthi group was involved in advanced stages of peace talks with Saudi Arabia.⁽⁸⁴⁾ Talks that both Saudi and Houthi counterparts have sought to shield from the maritime escalation's ripple effects.⁽⁸⁵⁾ Therefore, as the Houthis cast themselves as a military force capable of inflicting severe harm to commercial, energy and military shipping in the Red Sea basin, there is reason to believe that the Yemeni insurgent group might leverage its fast-advancing offensive military capabilities as a bargaining chip to extract more concessions at the negotiating table with Saudi Arabia and the international community.

The decision to seek military intervention in the Israel-Hamas war by opening a battlefield in the Red Sea has allowed the Houthis to achieve three main goals in its relationship with Iran and the "Axis of Resistance." First, the Yemeni rebel group has firmly entrenched itself within the "Axis" camp by demonstrating both the political will and the military means to stand up at the front lines of the Iran-led bloc's resistance fight against the United States and Israel regionally.⁽⁸⁶⁾ Second, the Houthis have sought to differentiate themselves from other armed groups in the "Axis of Resistance" galaxy by pursuing a more aggressive stance against Israel. Contrary to other members of the "Axis" bloc, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite armed groups, which have exercised restraint while engaging in carefully calibrated shows of force, the Houthis have pursued an approach based on escalating and expanding the violent confrontation with Israel and Western countries.⁽⁸⁷⁾ This assertive posture has allowed the Yemeni armed group to sell the "Houthi brand" regionally and to showcase that it retains considerable decision-making autonomy and agency over the conduct of military operations.⁽⁸⁸⁾ Finally, the Red Sea attacks have provided the Houthis with an unprecedented opportunity to pursue and test greater military coordination with other members of

the “Axis” camp, as suggested by the increasing number of joint operations conducted with Iraqi armed groups.⁽⁸⁹⁾

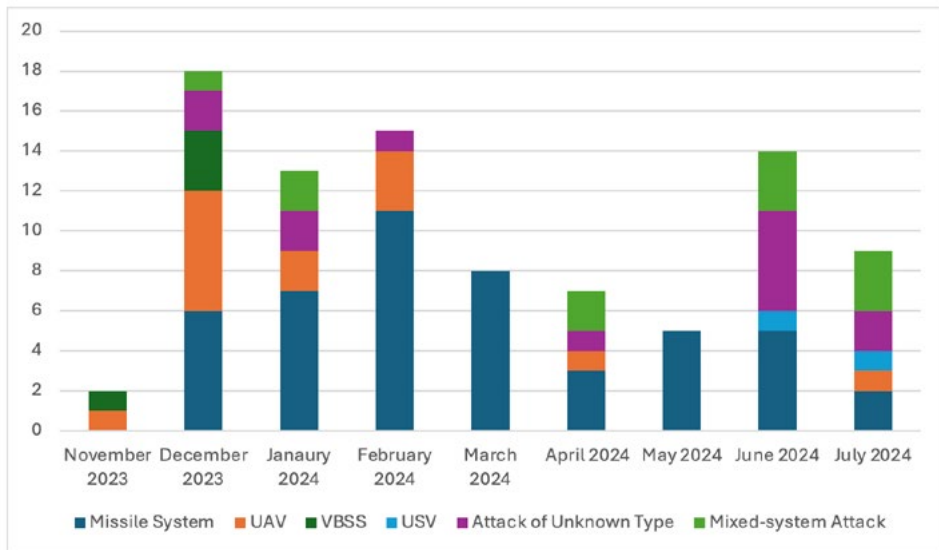
However, the Houthi attacks also carry some risks for Iran. Indeed, the ongoing maritime offensive of the Yemeni armed group might challenge a cornerstone of Iran’s regional defense architecture: avoiding an all-out military confrontation with the United States and Israel.⁽⁹⁰⁾ In this regard, protracted Houthi war efforts in and around the Red Sea have significantly increased regional tensions, as exemplified by the intensification of air warfare skirmishes, such as the US-led air campaign on military targets in Houthi-held territories in Yemen, Houthi airstrikes on southern Israel, and Israel’s bombing of Hodeida port. As a result, the severe uptick in high-intensity armed confrontations might risk setting Iran on a collision course with the United States and Israel.

Tactical Means

The Yemeni armed group has used its densely interconnected string of military outposts in coastal areas and islands as a linchpin to launch attacks against maritime traffic in and around the Red Sea.⁽⁹¹⁾ At first, the Houthis claimed that Israeli-linked commercial vessels were the exclusive focus of their maritime offensive.⁽⁹²⁾ Then, on December 9, 2023, the Houthis announced that all merchant vessels bound for Israeli ports and ships owned by shipping companies having trade cooperation ties with Israeli businesses would be considered legitimate targets.⁽⁹³⁾ Following the beginning of joint US-UK air and missile strikes on Houthi military targets in Yemen on January 11, 2024, the Houthis further broadened their targets to include commercial ships owned by US and UK companies.⁽⁹⁴⁾ Although the Houthis appears to have refrained from conducting an indiscriminate targeting of commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea basin, the Houthi ship targeting behavior has gradually become more erratic, as showcased by strikes on ships with no apparent connections to Israel in terms of port calls or company ownership. Indeed, even commercial ships that broadcasted “no connection to Israel” data through the navigation safety feature, known as the Automatic Identification System, as a preventive measure to avoid being targeted have fallen victim to Houthi attacks.⁽⁹⁵⁾ More surprisingly, the Houthis have also struck merchant vessels whose ownership was linked to or transporting cargo bound for non-Western countries, such as Russia, China, and Iran.⁽⁹⁶⁾ Two main factors seem to be behind the Yemeni insurgent group’s erratic targeting behavior: first, the Houthis’ flawed intelligence-gathering capabilities, such as using outdated information on ship ownership and trade links to inform targeting and a limited detection and reconnaissance infrastructure. Second, some Houthi armaments have inherent constraints, such as weapon solutions fitted with limited navigation and propulsion systems to strike moving targets at long-range distances.

This section investigates in detail the Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in and around the Red Sea between November 19, 2023, and July 31, 2024. To ensure accuracy, the article elaborates only on incidents claimed by Houthi media

accounts and confirmed by independent sources, such as the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) and the US Central Command (CENTCOM). Data on the Houthi maritime attacks are shown in Graph 1, which organizes strikes on merchant vessels into six categories by the weapons system or tactics employed. The first category comprises ballistic and cruise missiles in anti-ship configurations (ASBMs and ASCMs) and more generic missiles that have yet to be precisely identified. The second category regroups UAVs, one-way-attack drones (OWADs), and generic drone labeling. The third category includes visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) operations and swarm boat attacks. The fourth group comprises USVs. The fifth category is for attacks of unknown type. Finally, the sixth category regroups attacks with more than one weapon system. Graph 1 presents successful strikes that hit ships and failed strikes that either missed the target or were shot down. Most importantly, Graph 1 shows the total number of attacks per month, a single attack might comprise more than one assault and more than one projectile shot on the same vessel.



Graph 1. Houthi Attacks on Commercial Ships by Weapons System/Tactics Employed, November 2023 – July 2024

As the data from Graph 1 highlights, missile systems represent the Houthis' weapon of choice to attack commercial ships transiting regional waters. Although it remains challenging to identify the kind of missile used for each Houthi attack, information released by CENTCOM, UKMTO and Houthi social media accounts indicate that a significant number of strikes have been conducted with ASBMs. With large warheads, advanced terminal electro-optical infrared seekers, and powerful engines allowing a high on-target-closing speed, ASBMs have a combat

edge over both ASCMs and UAVs when engaging a moving target. Indeed, Houthi ASBM attacks have displayed a higher lethality rate compared to other air weapons systems. For instance, ASBM strikes caused both the first ship's total loss, sinking the Belize-flagged chemical tanker *Rubymar*, and the first civilian casualties, killing three seafarers on board the Barbados-flagged bulk carrier *True Confidence*.⁽⁹⁷⁾ Although the Houthis have showcased their possession of a large inventory of ASBMs,⁽⁹⁸⁾ the *Mohit*, a converted version of a Soviet-made SA-2 surface-to-air missile, and the *Asef*, an indigenized variant of the Iranian *Khaleej-e Fars* ASBM, are generally considered to be the main ASBMs used in the Houthi anti-shipping campaign. Although ASBMs are the main protagonists of the Houthi maritime offensive, the Yemeni insurgent group has also sporadically resorted to ASCMs to target merchant ships, as showcased by the strike on the Palau-flagged bulk cargo carrier *M/V Verbena*.⁽⁹⁹⁾

The Yemeni insurgent group has also deployed UAVs, primarily the *Sammad* and *Shahed* one-way-drone families, to conduct attacks on commercial maritime traffic in the Red Sea. The extended range of UAVs makes them an effective weapon to target ships in waters further afield from the Bab al-Mandab Strait. However, despite their broad attack range, the limited speed of UAVs compared to missile systems provides international naval coalitions more time to detect and neutralize them. Graph 1 shows that UAV strikes have gradually decreased since the onset of the Houthi maritime offensive. It is important to highlight that the Houthis have also launched multilayered air attacks, such as the barrages of missiles and UAVs targeting the Marshall Islands-flagged bulk carrier *Caravos Harmony* and the Singapore-flagged bulk carrier *Federal Masamune* on January 9, 2024.

Graph 1 indicates that VBSS operations played a significant role in the initial stage of the Houthi maritime attacks. Indeed, it was precisely with the seizure of the *Galaxy Leader* by a Mil Mi-8 helicopter-borne commando of Houthi marines that the Houthis kickstarted its offensive in the Red Sea basin. Eight days after the *Galaxy Leader* incident, the Liberian-flagged tanker *Central Park* was targeted by a hijacking assault.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ Although it remains unclear if the attack was the result of a Houthi assault or an act of piracy by criminal groups active in regional waters, the fact that the target of the hijacking was a vessel owned by the international ship management company *Zodiac Maritime*, a subsidiary of *Ofer Global* owned by the Israeli tycoon *Eyal Ofer*, suggests that the Houthis were behind the attack.

As indicated in Graph 1, Houthi attempts at VBSS operations peaked in December 2023. On December 13, 2023, a Houthi flotilla of skiffs attacked the Marshall Islands-flagged tanker *Ardmore Encounter*. As attempts to board the commercial vessel failed, missiles were shot from Houthi-controlled territories at the ship.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ Two days later, the Houthis attempted a VBSS assault on the Liberian-flagged container ship *MSC Alanya*, which managed to escape the boarding attempt by engaging in evasive maneuvers.⁽¹⁰²⁾ On December 18, 2023, the Marshall Islands-flagged bulk carrier *Magic Vela* was the target of an attempted boarding. Finally, between December 30 and December 31, 2023, a flotilla of Houthi

speedboats launched repeated VBSS assaults on the Singapore-flagged container ship Maersk Hangzhou after having fired ASBMs at the commercial ship. The aircraft carrier USS Eisenhower and the guided-missile destroyer USS Gravelly answered the Maersk Hangzhou's distress call and deployed helicopters to provide protection to the container ship. As the Houthi speedboats ignored verbal warnings and opened fire on US Navy rotorcraft, the latter returned fire in self-defense, sinking three out of four small craft and killing a dozen crewmembers.⁽¹⁰³⁾ Since the Maersk Hangzhou's attempted hijacking, the Houthis have refrained from engaging in VBSS actions. Helicopter-borne commandos and boarding parties on speedboats are pretty vulnerable to detection and interception by international naval coalitions active in the Red Sea basin, a tactical risk that the Houthis appeared increasingly unwilling to take.

When it comes to USVs, Graph 1 highlights that the Houthis have deployed bomb-boats only in the latest phases of their Red Sea campaign. The Yemeni insurgent group conducted the first successful USV attack on June 12, 2024, when a fishing skiff converted into a WBIED struck the Liberian-flagged bulk carrier MV Tutor. An unidentified airborne projectile also hit the bulk carrier, according to the ship's master. The USV strike resulted in the killing of one seafarer and inflicted critical damage to the ship's hull, causing severe flooding and loss of power. Ultimately, the MV Tutor sank six days after the attack.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ Following the MV Tutor bombing, the Houthis have significantly stepped up the deployment of USVs to conduct anti-shipping attacks between June and July 2024. While there are examples of USVs being fielded as a standalone weapons system, it is important to highlight that the Houthis have displayed a preference to integrate WBIEDs in multilayered attacks that combine the use of bomb-boats and airborne projectiles, such as missiles and UAVs. Indeed, four out of the six multilayered attacks conducted by the Houthis between June and July 2024 featured a USV. In addition to MV Tutor, multilayered attacks included strikes on the Liberian-flagged bulk carrier Transworld Navigator, the Panama-flagged tanker Bentely I, and the Liberian-flagged container ship Pumba.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ The significant uptick in Houthi USV attacks speaks volumes about the insurgent group's growing confidence in the WBIED's effectiveness. Although its high number of attacks to lethality ratio, a USV is not a flaw-free weapon. Houthi-made WBIEDs have a limited operational range, a constraint that forces the Houthis to rely on mother-ships to deploy USVs in close proximity to shipping lanes.

As Graph 1 showcases, a significant portion of attacks remains difficult to attribute due to a lack of verified information on the incident. In most of these cases, however, the fact that shipmasters reported explosions in the water in close proximity to the ship or minor damage to the ship's hull suggests the use of missiles and UAVs. Instead, it is more likely that USVs were deployed in the few instances when damage or impact below the ship's waterline were reported.

Although the Houthis did not conduct an under-water unmanned vehicle (UUV) attack in the timeframe analyzed, threats of submersible drones to commercial

shipping in the Red Sea cannot be underestimated. On February 17, 2024, a US-led coalition's defensive airstrike on Houthi-controlled territories in Yemen foiled the insurgent group's first attempt to launch a UUV attack since the beginning of the Red Sea campaign.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ The Houthi UUV specifics remain scant, but open-source intelligence reports suggest that they are commercial submersible drones weaponized to potentially carry naval mines, torpedoes, and explosives as a payload. The UUVs are likely to rely on relatively unsophisticated guidance and targeting systems, such as basic GPS, pre-programmed routes, and wire guidance, to home in on a target.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ Although the deployment of a Houthi submersible drone remains an isolated event, the fact that the Houthis are testing weapon solutions in the underwater warfare domain sheds light on the armed group's commitment to broadening its military arsenal of asymmetric warfare. In mid-January 2024, a US Coast Guard cutter patrolling the Arabian Sea intercepted a dhow reportedly smuggling to the Houthis components to potentially assemble UUVs, pointing at Iran's role in backing Houthi efforts in underwater warfare.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

Since the onset of the Houthi Red Sea offensive, suspicions have mounted regarding Iran's role in backing the Yemeni insurgent group's attacks on international commercial shipping. In December 2023, the White House accused Iran of complicity in the Houthi maritime attacks, pointing to Iran's paramount role in upgrading the Yemeni insurgent group's long-range strike capabilities and providing the Houthis with critical tactical intelligence to plan attacks on commercial ships.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ US CENTCOM Deputy Commander Vice Admiral Brad Cooper echoed these claims in mid-February 2024, arguing that on-the-ground IRGC-QF operatives have been backing the Houthi offensive with technical assistance and targeting information.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ Several reports have identified the Iranian-flagged ship *Behshad*, an alleged IRGC spy ship regularly deployed in the Red Sea, as a critical source of intelligence information on maritime traffic for the Houthis to plan their attacks.⁽¹¹¹⁾ However, as Iran-Israel tensions heightened in the aftermath of Israel's bombing of the Iranian embassy in Damascus, the *Behshad* left the Gulf of Aden in early April 2024 and set course for Iran's Bandar Abbas port.⁽¹¹²⁾ Iran is also suspected of backing the Houthis' war effort through weapons shipments. Since the beginning of the Houthi Red Sea campaign, US naval forces have twice interdicted fishing vessels bound for Yemen smuggling weapons and lethal aid.⁽¹¹³⁾

Conclusion

Since the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2014, Iran's military assistance to the Yemeni insurgent group has significantly evolved in both depth and range, as exemplified by the massive proliferation of Iran-made advanced missile and drone systems in the Houthi arsenal of long-range weapons systems. Beyond supplying weapons shipments and providing technical assistance on how to operate them, Iran has actively supported the Houthi war efforts through tactical military mentorship and guidance in setting up local weapons manufacturing lines. The multifaceted and sustained nature of Iran's military assistance to the Houthis

has undoubtedly contributed to the Yemeni armed group's power consolidation in Yemen over the past decade and to the development of the asymmetric maritime warfare capabilities that have been threatening global commercial shipping in and around the Red Sea since mid-November 2023. However, the increasing sophistication and intensification of the Iran-Houthi military and security relationship has not paralleled with a corresponding growth in Iran's clout over the command-and-control structures of the Houthis and the setting of the group's security agenda. In this regard, the Houthis display significant qualitative differences from conventional Iranian proxy forces such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite armed militias. Although the Yemeni armed group appears to be more integrated in the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance" than before the outbreak of the Israel-Gaza war, the Houthis still retain significant agency over the group's internal decision-making process, the definition of its strategic priorities, and the choice of the tools to adopt to further its security ambitions. Undoubtedly, the Houthis have used the Red Sea attacks to signal the group's close ideological alignment with Iran's traditional anti-Israel and anti-US positions and showcase support to the Palestinians in the Israel-Gaza war. Yet, the pursuit of pragmatic strategic goals at the domestic and regional levels seems to represent the main driving force behind the Yemeni armed group's decision to launch the offensive against international commercial shipping.

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IRAN'S MARITIME STRATEGY AND PERSPECTIVES TOWARD THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

Dr. Khadiga Arafa Mohammed

Head of Community Outreach Pillar, Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC), Egypt

Abstract

This research article aims to explore Iran's strategy in the Mediterranean, driven by various factors that have prompted its resurgence in the region after centuries of absence and a primary focus on its "near abroad." This shift is expected to have significant implications for regional dynamics and power balances. It identifies key elements of Iran's maritime strategy, assessing its alignment with Tehran's objectives, the nature of Iran's role in the Mediterranean, and the connection of Iranian activities to the broader regional context. Ultimately, the article concludes that Iran's Mediterranean engagement is fundamentally about safeguarding its interests, bolstering its regional standing, and maintaining ties with strategic allies. However, at this time, Iranian actions in the Mediterranean do not constitute a top priority within its regional strategy, nor does Iran have a long-term Mediterranean plan. It is likely that Iran will opt for indirect involvement in the near future. Furthermore, the intricate regional landscape and existing power dynamics could complicate Iran's ambitions for a greater role in the Mediterranean, potentially affecting regional stability.

Keywords: Iran, maritime strategy, Mediterranean security, asymmetrical naval warfare, US Navy.

Introduction

In the past decade, Iran has focused its maritime strategy on its nearby areas and has not been present in the Mediterranean Sea. However, recently, Iran has shown interest in establishing a presence in the Mediterranean, driven by several motives. These can be categorized into self, strategic, and regional motives. The self-related motive is linked to Iran's desire to have a more significant role in the region, while the strategic motive is related to the increasing militarization of the Mediterranean amid intense regional competition. The regional motive stems from the instability in some countries, which has provided Iran with an opportunity to gain access to the Mediterranean and exert influence in this strategically important area. Although Iran does not seem to have a specific strategy for the Mediterranean, its efforts to secure a foothold indicate its eagerness to expand its regional influence to this sea and influence the security dynamics in the region. The extent of Iran's involvement in this area is currently limited to specific scopes. However, there are growing concerns about potential developments that could provide Iran with an opportunity to exploit regional turmoil and instability to influence the power balance and stability in the region. This study seeks to assess the impact of Iran's activities in the Mediterranean on the balance of power in the Middle East. To achieve this goal, it will examine Iran's maritime strategy and capabilities, its objectives in the Mediterranean Sea, its actions and their relevance to the regional landscape in the Middle East, as well as its efforts to influence the balance of power in the region and beyond.

Iran's Maritime Strategy: Characteristics and Objectives

Iran's maritime strategy has developed across various strategic, geographical, and doctrinal domains. Influenced by its experiences in the 1980s and its maritime objectives near and beyond its borders, as well as its naval capabilities, potential adversaries, and other pertinent factors, Iran has embraced an asymmetric warfare strategy. This approach is further reinforced by the Iranian navy's inability to secure victory through conventional warfare, whether under the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or the Artesh (the Iranian regular army).

The following section explores the concept of Iran's maritime power, and the current characteristics of its maritime strategy.

Iran's Maritime Power: Concept and Dimensions

Maritime power, also known as sea power, is part of a nation's comprehensive power. It is defined as "a state's ability to leverage the sea to advance its national interests."⁽¹⁾ Roughly speaking, any maritime power relies on four major dimensions: military, economic, technological, and political. The complex interaction between the four dimensions plays an integral role in determining a state's capability to protect its maritime security and interests. The political dimension (maritime diplomacy) is considered the most intricate due to its connection to the political systems of a state and its rivals, as well as the dynamics of international competition and

the structure of the global order. It also encompasses the political challenges that impact the maritime security of nations, ultimately shaping their maritime strategy.

The military dimension plays a crucial role in a state's maritime power. It is closely tied to a nation's military capabilities related to its maritime security, particularly vis à vis its rivals. The significance of the military dimension lies in its direct link to protecting a state's vital interests and maritime borders.

The economic dimension is closely linked to the scale and importance of economic interests in maritime security, considering that 90% of global trade flows through waterways. Therefore, safeguarding maritime routes, particularly the strategically vital ones, as well as ports and shipping lanes, is crucial to ensuring the security of international supply chains.

The technological dimension has become highly significant after intensive investments in various domains of maritime technology. The world has been witnessing a race between nations to use advanced technology to improve their maritime capabilities, which impacts a nation's overall military power and its ranking in the international maritime race. For example, following World War II, the United States, Soviet Union, and United Kingdom became leading maritime powers in the world due to their consistent development of modern technology, including anti-ship missiles and nuclear weapons.⁽²⁾

Iran's Maritime Power

For most of Iran's history post-revolution, the Artesh's navy, formally known as the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) and the IRGC's Navy (IRGCN), have been competitors. However, since 2007, the Joint Staff of Iran's Armed Forces made a significant reorganization of the IRIN and IRGCN, dividing their geographical responsibilities, with the IRGCN taking control over all operations within the geographical area near Iran; the Arabian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the Sea of Oman, and the IRIN handling missions for all out-of-area deployments. Yet the two navies maintain cooperation; the IRGCN's focus on the near geography enables the IRIN to expand further and make longer-range deployments and strategic engagements with partner nations. Hence, the IRIN is comprised of two separate but complementary organizations, each with a distinct role and geographical remit.⁽³⁾

According to the Firepower ranking, Iran is ranked 14th among the 145 world powers included in the ranking. As for maritime power, Iran is ranked 34th among the largest navies in the world, with 101 warships, including seven frigates, three cruisers, 21 patrol ships, and 19 submarines.⁽⁴⁾

Iran's maritime power cannot match the United States' strong military presence in the Mediterranean Sea. The United States has the largest navy in the world, with 473 active warships, including 11 aircraft carriers, nine helicopter carriers, 75 destroyers, 64 submarines, 23 cruisers, and five patrol ships. There is a significant difference between the naval capabilities of Iran and the United States. In

acknowledgment of this fact, Iran has chosen to focus on asymmetric warfare as a strategy to counter US military superiority, realizing that it cannot match the United States in terms of technology and quality.⁽⁵⁾

Iran's Naval Strategy

Iran's naval doctrine relies on asymmetric warfare because it cannot achieve naval supremacy in conventional maritime confrontations, given the advanced naval power of major competitors. Thus, it can better confront its adversaries through asymmetric warfare strategies. Its strategy is based on avoiding direct or sustained confrontations at sea. It instead relies on surprise attacks, ambushes, and hit-and-run operations.⁽⁶⁾ This means that Iran relies on decentralization, which plays a key role in its naval structure. According to the decentralization principles, which experts have named "Mosaic Defense," the military structure of Iran's navy is decentralized.⁽⁷⁾

Asymmetrical warfare is often fought using guerilla tactics through speedboat swarms (lightly armed, highly mobile, and fast boats armed with multiple rocket launchers, heavy machine guns, and sea mines). Given their flexibility and ability to engage in wide-scale operations, these boats have gradually become the bedrock of Iran's maritime asymmetrical warfare.

This strategy does not necessitate long-term deployments or complex and simultaneous ship movements at sea. The IRGCN prioritizes major combat operations and employs asymmetric warfare tactics as necessary, reflecting Iran's avoidance of unnecessary costs in naval confrontations.⁽⁸⁾ It is worth adding that Iran's naval doctrine aligns well with its comprehensive military doctrine, which is implemented through proxy warfare.⁽⁹⁾

Iran employs asymmetric warfare in its naval strategy, which is based on operational considerations, the nature of adversaries, Iran-related values, and the overall principles and objectives of this strategy.

■ **Operational considerations:** Scientifically speaking, this strategy evolved from Iran's experience in the anti-shipping campaigns during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). To attack tankers, the IRIN and IRGCN tried to operate by using speedboats,⁽¹⁰⁾ maritime mines and anti-ship missiles. However, it was difficult for both Iranian forces to beat the US Navy. Iran realized its naval forces could not operate effectively in conventional maritime warfare.⁽¹¹⁾ Thus, the asymmetric warfare tactics adopted by Iran during the 1980s have become the bedrock of Iran's comprehensive military doctrine.

■ **The nature of adversaries:** Iran realizes that major threats arise from military and technological superiority. The United States has the largest navy in the world and the Iran-Iraq War showed that the best way to defy the US Navy is by exploiting its weakness using ambiguous fast attacks on a wide scale with armed speedboats — given that states that focus on modern and heavy weapons and highly skilled personnel are deemed weaker in asymmetric warfare.

■ **Geography:** Iran's maritime strategy is influenced by its geographical location, which suits a model focused on nearby waters. For decades, the Iranian navy has concentrated on securing its near abroad —the assumption being that any naval engagements would occur closer to home. This focus eliminates the need to station ships in distant or logistically challenging regions.⁽¹²⁾

■ **Iran-related values:** Regarding core values, this strategy of ambush and hit-and-run tactics aligns closely with the value of sacrifice (martyrdom), giving it a distinctly religious dimension.

■ **Core principles and objectives:** Studies indicate that Iran's asymmetric defense model relies on several principles and objectives, including deploying conventional arms in unconventional ways. Examples include using armed speedboats to plant mines in enemy naval paths or substituting large warships with small, nimble boats equipped with light arms to counter advanced modern weaponry. The strategy also employs multiple dispersed attacks hoping that at least one will succeed.⁽¹³⁾

The Mediterranean's Importance for Iran

The Mediterranean Sea now plays a crucial role in Iran's regional doctrine and strategy, a significance that can be understood in the following ways:

Significance of the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean, the world's largest inland sea and comprising less than 1% of global marine territory, holds immense significance from both geostrategic and geo-economic perspectives. Economically, it is a vital artery for international trade, linking the Indian and Atlantic Oceans via the strategic passages of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. This connectivity enhances its value to numerous nations — not only the 16 countries bordering it across Asia, Europe and Africa but also nations beyond its immediate region. The sea's geoeconomic importance has further intensified with recent hydrocarbon discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean, spanning the waters of Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt.

The Mediterranean Sea plays a crucial role in global trade, accounting for 30% of the world's oil transport and 25% of overall maritime traffic.⁽¹⁴⁾ It is also a key corridor for migration flows from South to North. Due to its strategic location, rich resources and diverse stakeholders, the Mediterranean has become increasingly influenced by regional and international dynamics, shaping both conflicts and cooperative efforts among coastal nations.

The Mediterranean is the most militarized sea globally and has long served as a major arena for international rivalry. During both World Wars, it was a battleground for regional and global powers, and in the post-World War II era,⁽¹⁵⁾ the Eastern Mediterranean became a focal point of international affairs. Today, intense competition among international and regional powers continues in the Mediterranean, as its strategic value remains central to expanding regional influ-

ence. With rising stakes, global and regional powers closely monitor Mediterranean developments and actively engage with its ongoing issues.⁽¹⁶⁾

In light of this, Iran now sees the Mediterranean as a critical arena for expanding its military presence beyond its borders and bolstering its regional influence, particularly given its foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean via Lebanon and Syria. The Mediterranean also serves as a vital trade route for channeling support to its allies, including groups in Lebanon and the Assad government, a strategic partner of Tehran. Recognizing the sea's significance as a corridor for global economic activity and Western interests — particularly those of the United States — Iran views maintaining influence there as a valuable asset in its negotiations and conflicts with the West, positioning itself as a key player in a crucial maritime passage.

Iran's interests in the Mediterranean overlap with those of the United States, despite differing perspectives on the region. The US view has traditionally treated the Mediterranean as a conduit for goods and energy rather than a central strategic focus, perceiving it as primarily within Europe's sphere of influence and excluding it from its primary strategic zones.⁽¹⁷⁾ However, recent regional developments may have prompted a shift in this stance. Issues like the Eastern Mediterranean gas disputes and the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict have turned the Mediterranean into a more indirect arena of contention with Iran. This evolving context has led the United States to bolster its presence in the Mediterranean, re-deploying strategic assets, including aircraft carriers, advanced naval vessels, and nuclear submarines.

Iran's Moves Toward the Mediterranean

Iran's historical connection to the Mediterranean was severed following the fall of the Achaemenid Empire. The Achaemenid Empire strategically aimed to dominate the Mediterranean to assert control over the Middle East, establishing itself as a powerful naval force in the Eastern Mediterranean in the fifth century BC. However, this control was short-lived; the Achaemenid fleet was defeated by the Athenians in the naval Battle of Salamis in 480 BC. When the Persian Empire later emerged, its priorities shifted, focusing instead on consolidating influence in regions like Mesopotamia and Armenia, leaving the Mediterranean without a direct Iranian presence since that era.⁽¹⁸⁾

In their joint study of Iranian discourse on the Mediterranean since 2001, Ehteshami and Mohammadi observe that references to the Mediterranean as a distinct regional concept are generally missing in Iranian discourse.⁽¹⁹⁾ Nonetheless, Iran's navy has occasionally deployed beyond its usual vicinity — reaching both the Pacific and Mediterranean regions — as part of broader efforts to establish strategic partnerships with nations like China, Russia, Sudan and Syria.⁽²⁰⁾

While Iran lacks a long-term strategy for its Mediterranean presence, several factors have facilitated its efforts to create a connection between its western borders and the Eastern Mediterranean through Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. The re-

gional landscape shifted notably after the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent ousting of Saddam Hussein, which allowed Iran to leverage Iraq as a conduit to its Mediterranean allies, particularly Syria and Lebanon. Furthermore, the onset of the Syrian uprising in 2011 provided a significant opportunity for Iran to bolster its influence in Syria, effectively establishing a land corridor often referred to as the "Axis of Resistance," the "Shiite Crescent," or the "Iranian Corridor," linking its three key allies to the Mediterranean.⁽²¹⁾

The United States inadvertently set the stage for Iran to explore a connection to the Mediterranean following the downfall of Saddam's regime in Iraq. Concurrently, Russia's involvement in Syria and its partnership with Iran in supporting the Assad regime have further bolstered Iran's ambitions to establish an overland route through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon, ultimately reaching the Mediterranean. Syria, in this context, has become a critical logistical hub for Iran, serving as a focal point for its projection of power as Iran seeks to create a corridor spanning approximately 800 miles from its borders to the Mediterranean Sea.⁽²²⁾

Consequently, US policies in the region have facilitated Iran's establishment of a presence in the Mediterranean. Moreover, the sanctions imposed by the United States have not hindered Iran's capacity to conduct military operations, particularly concerning its nuclear program and its involvement in regional conflicts, especially in Syria.⁽²³⁾ While there are claims that these sanctions have limited Iran's naval operations, they have not significantly affected its ability to project naval power over greater distances in pursuit of its strategic goals.

Iran has implemented various measures to realize its objective of connecting to the Mediterranean. Between 2011 and 2013, the country gained control of the route through Iraq leading to the Al-Waleed border crossing, which faces the Syrian Al-Tanf border crossing. Following the events in Mosul in 2014, Tehran unveiled its land corridor initiative, investing millions of dollars into this project due to the route's strategic significance in linking Iran to the Mediterranean via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.⁽²⁴⁾

The corridor connecting Iran to the Eastern Mediterranean is divided into two primary routes: northern and southern. The northern route extends from the Kurdish Region of Iraq to Kirkuk, then to Erbil, and onward to Mosul and Rabia. Parallel to the Turkish border, the M4 highway traverses Syrian territory, allowing for a direct link to the transport hub of Aleppo and the port of Latakia, where both Russian and Iranian forces are stationed. Additionally, a more secure route can be established from Aleppo to Homs via the M5 highway, with further access to Beirut through another corridor.⁽²⁵⁾

The southern route navigates through central Iraq, utilizing the Baghdad Expressway (M1) to reach Al-Tanf in Syria, subsequently continuing to Damascus and Beirut. An alternative to this southern route exists, following the Euphrates River to Al-Qasim on the Iraqi border. From there, the route proceeds via Al-Bukamal to Deir Ezzor in Syria, ultimately connecting to the transportation hub in Homs. This route also facilitates access to the port of Tartus.⁽²⁶⁾

Analyses indicate that this bridge constitutes a key element of Iran's strategy to enhance its regional influence and serve its defensive purposes. Through this initiative, Iran aims to connect to the roads and railways along the main supply routes from Iran to the Mediterranean coast.⁽²⁷⁾

One of Tehran's proposals involves a railway line that could traverse the Kurdistan Region of Iraq or extend from the Gulf through central Iraq. However, this project faces significant challenges, particularly in terms of financing and international sanctions.⁽²⁸⁾ If realized, this bridge would enable Iran to fulfill its interests and bolster its regional standing, granting it a substantial role in the security architecture of the Eastern Mediterranean. This would position Iran as a significant player in the intricate dynamics of the region, equipping it with regional leverage to safeguard its security, protect its interests, and pursue its goals against the United States and Israel.⁽²⁹⁾

Undoubtedly, the US presence in Syria and the sanctions implemented by Washington under the Caesar Act were aimed at undermining Iran's role and influence, particularly regarding the corridor project that connects Iran to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, ultimately reaching the Mediterranean. US pressure and military deployments were bolstered by Israeli strikes targeting this corridor and the militias affiliated with Iran that utilized it to transport weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon and other resistance factions. Consequently, discussions surrounding this corridor have diminished somewhat.

This does not imply that Iran lacked a direct presence in the Mediterranean. During the peak of US sanctions on Syria, Iran strategically deployed its oil trucks to alleviate fuel shortages faced by Syria. According to Haaretz, Iranian tankers docked at the port of Banias on the Syrian coast 17 times, and a total of 20 trips from Iran to Syria were recorded between October 2022 and April 2023, transporting approximately 17.1 million barrels of oil.⁽³⁰⁾ Russian warships offered protection for these Iranian tankers under a tripartite agreement involving Russia, Iran and the Assad government, which mandated the intervention of the Russian naval fleet to safeguard Iranian oil shipments destined for Syria.⁽³¹⁾

Recently, following the Gaza war, IRGC Commander-in-Chief Hossein Salami made a noteworthy statement in May 2024 regarding Iran's intentions to expand its military fronts and assert control over the Eastern Mediterranean. He declared, "We will close the road to the enemy in the eastern Mediterranean and expand the fronts so that the enemies are scattered." This was not the first instance of an Iranian military leader issuing threats related to operations in the Mediterranean; in December 2023, IRGC Deputy Coordinator Mohammad Reza Naqdi asserted, "We will close the Mediterranean, the Strait of Gibraltar and other waterways if the United States and its allies continue to commit crimes in Gaza." While these statements align with the ongoing pattern of Iranian threats, they also reflect a renewed effort by Iran to establish a presence in the Eastern Mediterranean after a prolonged absence spanning decades.⁽³²⁾

Consequences of the Iranian Role in the Mediterranean

For decades, the Mediterranean has experienced cycles of tension, competition and conflict, interspersed with periods of relative calm, as the interests of various parties intersect amid the region's increasing strategic significance. The emergence of an Iranian presence in the Mediterranean would undoubtedly complicate the conflict dynamics in this area. While the United States lacks a comprehensive strategy for the Mediterranean, the region remains significant in US foreign policy due to the importance of coastal states, particularly Israel. Consequently, the United States is unlikely to permit the expansion of Iran's influence in the Mediterranean, as it seeks to protect the interests of its allies in the region. This situation suggests the potential for a new dimension to the conflicts unfolding in the Mediterranean.

The Iranian presence in Syria and its return to the Mediterranean have raised alarm in the United States. In response former US National Security Advisor John Bolton declared in July 2018 that US forces would remain in Syria as long as Iran was active there, reflecting a broader US strategy to contain Iranian influence.⁽³³⁾ This context is further highlighted by US support for the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), introduced at the G20 summit in New Delhi in 2023. This initiative aims to create a trade route starting from Mumbai in India, traversing the Sea of Oman and parts of the Arabian Peninsula, reaching the port of Haifa in the Eastern Mediterranean, and concluding in Europe via maritime connections. The project's objectives include obstructing competing routes such as the Iranian corridor and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while also severing ties between Europe and Russia by linking parts of Europe with the Middle East and South Asia. Additionally, the project positions Saudi Arabia — Iran's primary regional rival — as a central player, thereby diminishing Iranian influence.⁽³⁴⁾ Although this initiative remains a memorandum of understanding among various parties, it is crucial to consider its implications alongside Iranian and Russian maneuvers in the Mediterranean, as the successful implementation of this project could significantly alter the political geography of the region.

Russia relies heavily on Iran to maintain its presence in the Mediterranean, establishing a strategic partnership that has grown increasingly vital amid Western sanctions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Iran serves as a logistical hub for Russian naval operations, with Russian ships frequently stopping at the port of Bandar Abbas before continuing their journey to the Mediterranean. This cooperation is not new; it dates back to December 2012 when the Russian Udaloy-class destroyer Marshal Shaposhnikov first docked there. Given the challenges posed by the Western siege and isolation of Russia,⁽³⁵⁾ this logistical stop is crucial for facilitating the establishment of a permanent Russian task force in the Mediterranean. Russian naval vessels cannot transit from the Pacific Ocean to the Middle East without utilizing Iranian ports, thereby making Iran an essential partner for Russia in this strategic context.⁽³⁶⁾ In addition to leveraging its naval capabilities

to further its own strategic ambitions, Iran utilizes this relationship to bolster ties with its allies and enhance regional cooperation.

The Russian-Iranian partnership is primarily centered on supporting the Syrian government, which serves as a common ally for both countries. This collaboration reflects a complex interplay between Russian support for Iranian activities in the Mediterranean and its reliance on Iran to bolster its own position in the region. In contrast, the United States firmly opposes any Iranian influence in the Mediterranean, highlighting the conflicting interests between Russia and the United States in this strategic area. Any developments regarding Iran's role in the Mediterranean could introduce new international dynamics, drawing both Russian and US interests into the fray.

Regionally, the shadow war between Iran and Israel has extended into the Eastern Mediterranean since 2019, characterized by a series of maritime confrontations. Both nations have engaged in targeting commercial vessels in open waters, with Israel striking Iranian ships in the Eastern Mediterranean and Red Sea, while Iran retaliated with naval attacks on Israeli vessels in the Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea.⁽³⁷⁾ A notable incident occurred in March 2021 when the Iranian cargo ship *Shahr-e Kord*, en route to Europe, was attacked in the Mediterranean.⁽³⁸⁾ Such exchanges have heightened concerns over the potential escalation of this shadow war into a broader conflict in the Mediterranean, which would significantly impact the region and complicate the existing conflict landscape.

Iran exerts an indirect influence in the Eastern Mediterranean through Hezbollah's escalating threats to deploy its missile capabilities against Israeli offshore gas fields, posing a significant threat to regional stability. For instance, in July 2024, Israel reported intercepting a Hezbollah drone that was allegedly en route to an Israeli oil field in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁽³⁹⁾ While there were differing opinions on whether the drone was launched for merely reconnaissance purposes or for an actual attack on Israeli gas facilities, the incident underscored Hezbollah's readiness to take advantage of its military resources in response to any potential escalation of conflict with Israel.⁽⁴⁰⁾

There are significant concerns that Hezbollah, supported by Iran, may seek to exert influence over the Mediterranean in the event of a conflict with Israel. This could be aimed at disrupting global maritime trade, similar to the actions of the Houthis in the Red Sea. Hezbollah is reported to possess at least 85 anti-ship missiles.⁽⁴¹⁾ Should the regional conflict further escalate, tensions are likely to extend into the Mediterranean, multiplying security threats and introducing a new dimension to the Iranian confrontation with the West, particularly the United States and Israel. Armed groups like Hezbollah, potentially along with other factions, are expected to play a pivotal role in this unfolding conflict, complicating the security landscape in the Mediterranean and the broader region, with possible far-reaching repercussions on both regional stability and international maritime interests.

In the aftermath of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, it appears that Israel and the United States are orchestrating a concerted campaign aimed at diminishing Iran's regional influence and weakening its alliances, including Hezbollah. Should this strategy prove effective, it could significantly alter Iran's focus and interests in the Mediterranean. The Houthis, as Iran's allies in Yemen, have showcased their capability to disrupt and influence global trade routes in the Red Sea. This example is likely to motivate Washington to take measures to mitigate any potential threats posed by Iran's expanding presence in the Mediterranean as they seek to prevent similar disruptions in this critical maritime region.

Conclusion

Iran's recent push toward the Mediterranean is not merely a revival of past ambitions; it is fundamentally tied to the protection of its interests, the reinforcement of its regional standing and the maintenance of relationships with strategic allies. However, this endeavor is constrained by numerous local and regional limitations.

Currently, Iran does not prioritize the Mediterranean within its broader regional policies, nor does it possess a long-term strategy for the area. Instead, it is likely to opt for a non-direct intervention approach in the near future, while still supporting its ally Hezbollah in its capacity to exert influence over the Mediterranean.

Regarding the potential land corridor stretching from western Iran to the Eastern Mediterranean, Syria plays a critical role as Iran's outlet. While there are indications that Iran is interested in establishing ports along the Mediterranean coast, it lacks the naval capabilities to safeguard these ports in Syria against potential US and Israeli strikes in the foreseeable future.

Nonetheless, evolving developments in the Mediterranean may compel Iran to increase its involvement, influenced by the shifting dynamics of international power, particularly the roles played by the United States and Russia. Furthermore, Iran's role in the Mediterranean extends beyond mere international balances; the positions of regional powers are also significant, especially European perspectives, as the Mediterranean is traditionally viewed as a European sphere of influence. Moreover, Turkey's strategy in the Mediterranean, encapsulated in its "Blue Homeland" doctrine, adds another layer of complexity.

In light of these factors, Iran's aspirations for a greater role in the Mediterranean are likely to face significant challenges, complicating the regional landscape and potentially destabilizing the area further.

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THE FUTURE OF IRAN-RUSSIA RELATIONS UNDER PEZESHKIAN'S PRESIDENCY

Dr. Hamdi Bashir

Researcher in regional security and counterterrorism

Abstract

This research article analyzes the future of Iran-Russia relations after the election of “reformist” Masoud Pezeshkian as the Iranian president in July 2024. During the presidential term of the late President Ebrahim Raisi, the relationship between the two countries grew closer, but Pezeshkian has shown a keen interest in restoring relations with Western countries, reflecting a possible shift in Iran-Russia relations. This study examines the impact of the newly elected Iranian President Pezeshkian on Iran-Russia relations, comparing his policies with those of his “conservative” predecessor. It also explores the factors that are influencing Pezeshkian's reform agenda regarding Iranian foreign policy toward Russia and the constraints he faces in implementing them. Finally, it suggests potential scenarios for Iran-Russia relations under Pezeshkian, considering current internal, regional, and international developments.

Keywords: Russia, Iran, sanctions, nuclear program, Gaza war, Hezbollah, Houthis.

Introduction

The victory of Iran's "reformist" President Masoud Pezeshkian in the presidential election is a significant variable in Iran's political landscape. It will have implications for Iranian foreign policy, particularly the future of Iran-Russia relations. Under Raisi, these relations evolved significantly in all political, military, and economic fields. However, since Pezeshkian's election, he has made many remarks on his foreign orientation toward Western countries. He has called for defusing tensions and resuming the nuclear talks. These remarks alarmed Russia, signaling a potential downturn in Iran-Russia relations in the future.

Pezeshkian's victory raises many questions about the future of Iran-Russia relations including the factors and determinants that will influence Iran-Russia relations, their likely anticipated trajectories and scenarios, the limits of change, and the sustainability of relations between the two sides compared to what was witnessed under Raisi. This is all within the context of variables in the regional and international and regional environment.

Iran-Russia Relations Under Raisi

The 2021 election of Raisi marked the beginning of a new phase in Iran-Russia relations. Raisi's administration adopted a more conservative and hardline stance toward Western nations, prioritizing an eastward-looking policy. This policy is based on the belief that Eastern countries, particularly China and Russia, are more dependable partners for Iran than the West. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine, alongside the escalating global competition between the United States and Russia and China, bolstered this Iranian inclination. According to Raisi, this policy served as an effective means to counter the impact of US sanctions and to enhance Iran's long-term strategic positioning. This policy garnered support from "hardliner" factions associated with Raisi, who viewed it as a strategic choice rather than a tactical maneuver.⁽¹⁾

Raisi's "Look to the East" policy was influenced by various factors, particularly his failure to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and lift US sanctions. Simultaneously, the shifting geopolitical landscape in Eurasia and the Middle East, including the Russia-Ukraine war, offered new opportunities for the two countries' ties. Moreover, a growing wave of militancy swept the Iranian political landscape since the 2021 presidential election, in particular, the large-scale exclusion of all "moderate" and "reformist" candidates by the Guardian Council and the mounting widespread protests in Iran. The Raisi administration saw an increasing role for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) because its former commanders assumed high-level political positions. The IRGC-affiliated Quds Force played an increasingly prominent role in shaping and implementing foreign policy.⁽²⁾

Iran-Russia ties witnessed significant developments under the Raisi administration as the two countries coordinated their positions on several international issues, including the Iranian nuclear program, the war in Syria, the situation in

the Caspian Sea, political and security developments in Afghanistan and coordination in energy markets. Iran played a significant role in supplying weapons to Russia following the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war. After 2022, Iran became an essential partner in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) to circumvent sanctions, and accelerate bilateral economic relations.⁽³⁾

Russia and Iran converged in the political and military fields. Tehran and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union⁽⁴⁾ signed a free trade agreement. Iran-Russia military cooperation accelerated significantly since the eruption of the Russia-Ukraine war. Iran started shipping hundreds of long-range surveillance and attack drones to Russia in August 2022 after Russia depleted its missile supply. These drones aided Russia in maintaining and increasing pressure on Ukrainian air defenses while working to expand its own production lines and modify its missile systems. Iran also helped Russia build a massive factory in Russia's southeastern Tatarstan region that is capable of producing thousands of drones.⁽⁵⁾

Russia allegedly provided advanced surveillance programs, financial support, and technical aid to Iran's rocket and space launch vehicle programs. This alleged Russian help is crucial for Iran as it could facilitate the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles that are capable of carrying nuclear warheads. On September 2, 2023, Russia delivered two Yak-130 training jets to Iran. Additionally, it was reported that Russia shared confiscated weapons from the United States and NATO with Iran to assist in their refurbishment and bolster their anti-weapon capabilities. There are also reports indicating that Iran sought Russia's help in obtaining additional nuclear materials for the production of nuclear fuel.⁽⁶⁾

This growing convergence prompted both countries to sign a comprehensive cooperation agreement. On June 25, 2024, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Andrey Rudenko stressed that his country anticipated signing a comprehensive cooperation agreement with Iran very shortly. Both countries agreed in 2020 to work on a new deal to replace the old document. The 2001 agreement called for cooperation in security and energy projects, including the peaceful use of nuclear energy and the construction of nuclear power, as well as technology plants.⁽⁷⁾ The death of Raisi likely impeded and delayed the signing of this new strategic agreement until after the election of a new Iranian president.

Their mutual understanding touched on many regional issues. Yet, their perspectives on regional issues varied, including the Russian position on Iran's occupation of the three UAE islands. In July 2023, the late Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian confirmed that his country did not tolerate any party that interfered on issues related to the territorial integrity of Iran. He signaled that Tehran received Russia's interpretation, but it was not good enough. This came after Iran sharply criticized Russia for supporting an Emirati request to end the three islands issue through peaceful solutions.⁽⁸⁾ The Iranian and Russian perspectives toward Syria vary for many reasons. They include primarily the Russian coordination with regional and international parties in Syria, especially the convergence of Turkish-Russian interests amid the collision of Iranian-Turkish ambitions and

their different sectarian affiliations, the Russian priority given to Israeli security considerations, and Russia's desire to reduce militias in Syria. However, Iran still strengthened its armed presence to manifest parity to Russia's military presence in Syria.⁽⁹⁾

Pezeshkian's Foreign Policy

When Raisi and Abdollahian died in a helicopter crash on May 19, 2024, the Iranian government did not show any sign that it had an intention to change its strategy: the engineering of the election to keep "conservative" control over the country's executive branch. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei publicly praised Raisi's policies and called for their continuation. This meant that the election of Pezeshkian as Iran's president was a surprise for many. He promised to revive diplomatic relations with the West and reinstate the nuclear deal. Pezeshkian said, "You can survive the sanctions, but you cannot move ahead." He also stressed the need to defuse tensions with the West, arguing, "We seek good relations with Europe based on mutual respect and equality. The lack of political relations with the United States should not lead to tensions and costly conflicts."⁽¹⁰⁾

Many analysts and observers of Iranian affairs believed that Pezeshkian's call during his election campaign for "dialogue and openness to the outside world" reflected a pragmatic approach to restore the balance between the ideological and pragmatic dimensions of Iran's foreign policy, and lift the economic sanctions to end the siege on the country; Pezeshkian viewed this step as an effective option to address internal issues that had fueled anti-government protests. According to Pezeshkian's vision, openness to the outside world contributes to creating a fertile environment for improving deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, enhancing economic growth, and averting the brain drain that is critical to rebuilding a new Iranian state.⁽¹¹⁾

Pezeshkian's speech during his first televised debate in the second round of the presidential election on July 1, 2024, signaled the need for compromise and engagement with opponents to resolve all outstanding differences. He stated, "We must sit down and compromise to solve our problem with the world," and further explained, "My foreign policy aims to benefit the people and encourage them to survive, build, grow economically, and develop. In his article "My Message to the New World," published on July 12, 2024, he identified the principle of interest as fundamental to his foreign policy orientation by saying that the principles of dignity, wisdom, and interest would guide his government's foreign policy. The close bond of the former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif with the new president before the election and after assuming his duties is significant evidence of the new president's pragmatic approach in foreign policy. This scenario mirrors the Rouhani-Zarif approach toward the United States and Europe.⁽¹²⁾ The most important aspects of Pezeshkian's foreign policy orientations are the following:

The Resumption of Dialogue With the United States and the West

Pezeshkian's statements during the election campaign signaled a different approach than Raisi's with an emphasis on returning to dialogue with the United States and the West. He believes isolation has hindered achieving the supreme leader's ultimate goal of transforming Iran into a leading regional power in all fields by 2025. Therefore, he argues that Raisi's policy of economic resistance in response to the sanctions was ineffective. It cannot alleviate the impact of sanctions and improve living conditions or reduce the widespread protests because it is based on the long term. However, Iran's current crises require immediate and rapid solutions. This necessitates the resumption of dialogue with the United States and the West to lift the sanctions and provide significant financial returns that improve Iran's economic and living standards. He believes reviving nuclear talks is an urgent priority to lift the sanctions that have imposed heavy burdens on the Iranian economy, curtailed Iran's capacity to export oil and fueled popular discontent. Therefore, Pezeshkian promised to review the law entitled "Strategic Action to Plan Lift Sanctions and Protect the Iranian Nation's Interests," which was approved by the Iranian Parliament in December 2020. The Iranian president also expressed his desire to engage in constructive dialogue with European countries to reset relations based on principles of mutual respect.⁽¹³⁾

Neutrality and Non-alignment Toward East and West

In the presidential debate held on July 1, 2024, Pezeshkian discussed the advantages of directing Iran's foreign policy toward the East, revealing his approach to achieving a balance in relations with the East and the West. Pezeshkian cited the slogan of former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, "neither East nor West," in addition, he defended the nuclear agreement and highlighted the need to restore Iran's traditional neutrality and non-alignment in foreign affairs. Thus, he indicated that he would pursue a different policy from his predecessor, which would re-engage Iran with the West.⁽¹⁴⁾ Although Pezeshkian has been aiming for openness toward the West, he has stressed the need to bolster relations with Russia and China, especially in the context of building a multipolar world. Strengthening ties with these countries would bolster Iran's power and negotiating position. "China and Russia have consistently stood by us in difficult days. We deeply value this friendship," Pezeshkian said. "Russia is a valued strategic ally and neighbor to Iran. My administration will remain committed to expanding and enhancing relations. I will continue prioritizing bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Russia, particularly within the frameworks such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Eurasia Economic Union.⁽¹⁵⁾

On July 12, 2024, Pezeshkian identified the principles of his foreign policy in an article published in English by the *Tehran Times*, stressing that his administration "will pursue an opportunity-driven policy" aimed at "creating balance in relations with all countries." Pezeshkian referred to Russia as "a valuable strategic ally" and said "We Look forward to collaborating more extensively with Beijing .

Nevertheless, Pezeshkian's tone toward the West remains a familiar combination of warnings and typical historical grievances as expressed by Iranian officials. The article mentioned that any improvement in relations should start with the first step taken by the West. Some observers stated that the principles identified by Pezeshkian from prioritizing relations with neighbors to strengthening partnerships with Russia and China and active participation in the SCO and BRICS, mirror the principles pursued by Raisi over the past three years.⁽¹⁶⁾ Hamid Abutalebi, a political adviser to former President Hassan Rouhani, labeled Pezeshkian's article as "confused, non-prioritized, dreamy and incoherent with a group of generalities." Pezeshkian said, "European countries have reneged on all these commitments, yet unreasonably expect Iran to unilaterally fulfill all its obligations under the JCPOA." He later contradicts this statement, "Despite these missteps, I look forward to engaging in constructive dialogue with European countries." Mohammad Kazem Sadjadpour, a former Iranian diplomat, believes that the central message of Pezeshkian's article is "balance and balance." He believes that Pezeshkian's foreign policy will be "a combination of sustainability and change."⁽¹⁷⁾

The Catalyst for Change in Iran's Policy Toward Russia

Under Pezeshkian's presidency, Iran is confronted with various factors that could compel it to strike a balance in its approach to the East and West or, alternatively, to continue and advance the policy of Raisi. The reasons and motivations for Tehran's shift in policy toward Russia include the following:

Internal Political and Economic Pressures

President Pezeshkian faces immediate internal pressures, primarily a weak economy exacerbated by years of mismanagement and sanctions and deep-rooted social divisions after brutal crackdowns on protestors since 2022. Observers suggest that Khamenei and his inner circle, which approved the list of presidential candidates, confess that the recent unrest has dramatically undermined the legitimacy of Iran's ruling elite and that Pezeshkian's election to the presidential office reflects the overall failure of Raisi's "hardliner" policies regarding how to respond to internal economic and social issues.⁽¹⁸⁾

The relatively weak turnout in the presidential election revealed the extent of public despair with the political system dominated by the "conservatives," and the Iranian people were convinced that the government was unable to resolve the problems they face. The election was preceded by numerous protests that heightened in scale and intensity. This prompted Khamenei to engineer the election in search of a way out of the internal crisis. It is understood that internal problems mainly stem from banking and international sanctions. Therefore, it is believed that Khamenei could provide Pezeshkian with the opportunity to open channels of dialogue with the West, hoping that this may lead to sanctions relief to avert the eruption of a new wave of protests.⁽¹⁹⁾

Some observers believe that the eastward looking policy has provided only limited economic opportunities that have not been sufficient to offset the negative impact of sanctions. Iran has been subjected to a wide range of sanctions because of its nuclear program, support for terrorism, and human rights record. When the Trump administration reimposed many sanctions in 2018, the Iranian economy deteriorated rapidly, oil exports fell, and inflation rates soared to record levels, exceeding 40% in February 2024.⁽²⁰⁾

Internal Debate on the Benefit of Iran-Russia Relations

There is reportedly a growing debate within Iranian political circles regarding the trajectory of relations with Russia. There are two trends in this regard. The first, represented by the IRGC, its leadership, and some government officials, calls for supporting relations with Russia. The second trend, represented by “moderate” current figures such as Zarif, calls for being cautious about aligning with Russia and anti-Western countries. Observers suggest that Russia, in response to Tehran’s support in the Russia-Ukraine war, is capable of quickly achieving its highest level of cooperation with Iran. If, in the future, Russia reaches this peak and subsequently reduces its support for Iran, it could strengthen the position of the second trend among the Iranian elites, who appear to be bewildered by the unprecedented protests occurring at home.⁽²¹⁾

Pezeshkian’s election makes it evident that the Iranian people support efforts to lift sanctions which have contributed to their socioeconomic hardship. Western sanctions have increased Iranian motivations to promote trade and depend on Russia and China. The sanctions weakened Iran’s private sector and middle class. However, they enabled the political elite to reward its supporters with access to foreign currency and economic opportunities, increasing its strength in Iranian society.⁽²²⁾

However, Pezeshkian, like the “moderates” in Iran, opposes Tehran’s unilateral dependence on Russia. He believes that cooperation with Russia is not easy and states that the full potential of Iran-Russia relations will unfold only after sanctions relief and establishing a multidirectional policy. Many members of the “reformist” currently defend this approach. They believe that helping Moscow in the Russia-Ukraine war has only increased the burden of sanctions imposed on Iran.⁽²³⁾

Russia’s Cautious Position Toward Crises in the Middle East

Russia’s position toward the Middle East has not met the aspirations of a large segment of the Iranian elite who believe that Moscow still maintains a cautious position and when it comes to regional crises, there is only limited cooperation between Russia and Iran. Russia’s ties with Israel and the Gulf states present challenges in terms of its relations with Iran. Russia works to neutralize the Israeli role in the Russia-Ukraine war and prevent Israel from providing military support to Ukraine in this war. Israel is likely aware of this issue because of Israel-Russia understanding to avoid confrontation in Syria and other hotspots in the Middle East. Moscow is trying as much as possible to maintain a pragmatic and neutral

attitude toward the Iran-Israel conflict. At the same time, Moscow does not want to go too far in its relations with Tehran, as this would negatively impact its ties with the Gulf states.

Some believe that Moscow likely takes advantage of the escalation in the Middle East because US military support mainly focuses on protecting Israel and alleviating US and Western troubles when it comes to the Ukrainian battlefield. Perhaps the Russians are no longer in need of Iranian drones because they have managed to localize this industry. Although Russia has had communication with Hezbollah, the Houthis and Hamas for years, it has not resulted in Russian security assistance for these actors — but it has managed, through this communication, to keep the war within its desired limits.⁽²⁴⁾

Despite Iranian military support in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia has not returned the favor by providing Iran with the demanded military equipment. The Iranians have long wanted certain military equipment from the Russians but have not yet received this, such as the Sukhoi-35 fighter jets. Observers assess that Russia's reluctance to respond to Iran's shopping list is reflective of its unwillingness to provoke animosity, in particular, with Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Moscow is concerned about its interests with these countries and coordination in OPEC + in the face of US pressure.⁽²⁵⁾

Europe's Desire to Persuade the "Moderate" President and Defuse Tensions in the Middle East

Observers believe that the Europeans desire for disengagement between the Iranian and Russian governments. The Europeans fear all-out war in the Middle East. They are concerned about the military cooperation between Iran and Russia in the nuclear field. Therefore, the victory of Pezeshkian in the Iranian election may be an appropriate opportunity for Western capitals to woo him, especially in light of Iranian signals and messages sent by the Iranian president and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi confirming Tehran's desire to return to the nuclear talks. Therefore, the European response to these Iranian messages may strengthen Europe's efforts to prevent further military escalation in the Middle East, neutralize Iran's role in the Russia-Ukraine war, encourage European countries to pressure Israel to accept a ceasefire in Gaza, and stop the conflict spiraling into a regional war.⁽²⁶⁾

Following the assassination of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah by Israel on September 27, 2024, and the intensification of Israeli strikes on southern Lebanon, some Western countries such as the United States, France and their allies issued a joint statement on September 25, 2024, calling on Israel and Hezbollah to agree to a 21-day ceasefire, during which negotiations would be held on a diplomatic solution to the crisis on the Israeli-Lebanese border.⁽²⁷⁾ Although Western politicians have been criticized for their support of Israel, some Western leaders, such as French President Emmanuel Macron, have called for a halt

on arms deliveries to Israel, sparking a wave of massive anger inside the Israeli government.⁽²⁸⁾

Factors Influencing the Endurance of Iran's Policy Toward Russia

Despite the catalyst for change that pushed Pezeshkian to pursue a policy different from his predecessor regarding ties with Russia and Western countries, the Iranian president faces constraints and challenges such as the following:

A Spike in US-Iran Tensions in the Middle East

The Middle East is overwhelmed by a state of tension and instability, and there was anticipation of an Israeli military strike in response to the Iranian strike that targeted military sites and bases in Israel on October 1, 2024. It was in response to Israel's assassination of Hamas Political Bureau Chief Ismail Haniyeh on July 31 and Israel's assassination of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah on September 27. This Iranian strike sparked further military escalation between Iran and Israel. Tel Aviv asserted its right to retaliate. Israel considered its options for delivering a solid blow to Iran. In this context, many observers expected that Tel Aviv would strike Iranian nuclear sites or oil platforms and refineries, and even the headquarters of the Iranian supreme leader. If this happened, the region would enter a vicious cycle of violence, military attacks, and counterattacks between Iran and Israel. Further escalation between the two forces would likely lead to US military intervention to protect Israel. The United States deployed more troops and assets and mobilized its regional troops in anticipation of Israel's response. The region is beset with crises, including tensions between Iran and the United States, the likelihood of further escalation between Israel and Iran, the ongoing Israeli military strikes on Hezbollah positions, the targeting of its leadership, and the continuation of Houthi attacks on commercial vessels and US responses to them. Consequently, these crises could spike tensions between Iran and the United States and diminish the chances of a return to dialogue.

Pezeshkian has identified some of his regional priorities in "supporting the resistance rooted in the established Iranian policy." He thanked the Houthis for "their support for the Palestinian people and praised their attacks on international shipping lines in the Red Sea as a courageous decision." Therefore, Pezeshkian's contact with Iran's "Axis of Resistance" not only confirm the centrality of these groups in Tehran's efforts to confront Israel, especially as the Israeli army attacks Lebanon, but also signals the long-term continuation of Iran's regional policy.⁽²⁹⁾

Analysts contend that the recent intensification of conflict in the Middle East can be attributed to Iran's engagement in the Russia-Ukraine war. They argue that, there is now an implicit risk that the conflict could encroach upon Iranian territory. A weapons factory in Isfahan was attacked by three drones on January 29, 2023, and marked the beginning of a new stage of confrontation with Iran. Although the attack was not the first against a strategic facility in Iran, Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolak's statement that "the logic of war is abhor-

rent and makes the perpetrators and accomplices pay the price” prompted Iran to doubt Ukraine’s involvement with Israel in the attacks, however, Iran accused Israel immediately of carrying out the attack. ⁽³⁰⁾

Iran Bets on Russia’s Role in Syria

Despite Russia’s limited support for the Iranian position in the Israel-Iran conflict, Tehran still depends on Russia’s role in maintaining the current equation inside Syria to serve Iran’s interests. There are severe repercussions for Russia if it emerges from the war in Ukraine defeated or at least exhausted in a long war it was not prepared for, inevitably affecting its strong presence inside Syria. This would make Iran vulnerable in the face of the Syrian armed opposition. Therefore, Tehran works to avoid incurring the cost of Russia’s defeat in the war and avert the repercussions of this defeat on its interests in Syria. ⁽³¹⁾

Russia still depends on Iranian military support in its war against Ukraine. Russian National Security Council Secretary Shoigu visited Tehran and described Haniyeh’s assassination as “tragic and something impossible to bypass” in talks with the Iranian government. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said in a separate statement that Moscow “calls on everyone to refrain from escalating the situation into a disaster for all regional players.” ⁽³²⁾ Russia’s Permanent Representative to the UN Vassily Nebenzia stressed that by killing Nasrallah, Israel deliberately escalated the conflict and bears all the blame for escalating tensions in the Middle East. ⁽³³⁾

At the level of the Russia-Ukraine war, recent developments have reinforced the approaches of the two countries to maintaining the current level of cooperation, especially after the incursion of Ukraine into Russia’s Kursk region on August 6, 2024. This was the most significant development since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Ukraine managed for the first time since the outbreak of the war to reverse the equation balance to its advantage on the ground, penetrating more than 1,000 kilometers into Russia’s territory. This pushed Russia to escalate further to expel Ukrainian troops from Kursk and to receive military support from allies such as Iran amid the growing Western military support provided to Ukraine. ⁽³⁴⁾

US Election: Approaches of Democratic and Republican Candidates

Observers believe that Iran’s policy options for strengthening relations with the United States will become more difficult following Trump’s electoral victory and the potential revival of his maximum pressure campaign against Iran. ⁽³⁵⁾ Therefore, Trump’s victory will limit the prospects of restoring the JCPOA. The Trump administration may demand, if it wants to maintain the nuclear agreement with Iran, to include some other files, such as Iran’s regional influence, which Tehran considers one of its red lines. ⁽³⁶⁾

IRGC and “Hardliner” Pressures

Many observers agree that Pezeshkian will have limited ability to change foreign policy toward Russia, especially as the “hardliners” dominate power inside the

country. Pezeshkian faces the difficult, perhaps impossible, task of mobilizing support from the Iranian supreme leader, who makes the final decision on most national security issues. In recent years, Khamenei's decisions on these issues have been primarily dominated by the directives of the IRGC and Iran's "hardliner" political factions.⁽³⁷⁾

The Iranian political system grants the supreme leader broad powers, especially in foreign policy. The official powers of the president are limited primarily to domestic policy, with the supreme leader retaining control over key foreign policy decisions. The April 2024 confrontation with Israel, which marked the first time the two countries attacked each other directly and openly despite the ongoing hostility for 35 years, indicated that the Iranian establishment is more confrontational than ever.⁽³⁸⁾

Therefore, expecting a significant or fundamental change in Iran's foreign policy under Pezeshkian is unrealistic, especially if the unelected centers of power show an unwillingness to change. Iran's structure and power flow allow unelected institutions to disrupt and thwart plans drawn up by elected bodies such as the government and Parliament. Pezeshkian and his foreign minister mainly execute official diplomatic functions in terms of interactions between governments. However, they do not act independently as the IRGC-affiliated Quds Force will continue to play a decisive role in implementing Iranian foreign policy.⁽³⁹⁾

Future Trajectories of Iran-Russia Relations

Pezeshkian's assumption of the Iranian presidency comes amid transformations in the regional and international geopolitical landscapes. At the international level, the world anticipates the impact of a second Trump administration. The Russia-Ukraine war continues to step up and cause repercussions on Russia's external moves. The regional environment witnessed a spike in tensions between Israel, Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah after Israel assassinated Haniyeh, Hezbollah leader Fuad Shukur, and Nasrallah. The IRGC and Iranian supreme leader called for a strong response to Israel. This prompted the United States to mobilize its forces in the region in anticipation of an Iranian response to Israel. The Iranian president faces many internal challenges that require considered responses, especially the deteriorating socioeconomic situation due to Western sanctions on Iran and the state of internal divisions and disputes over a robust military strike against Israel. In this international, regional and Iranian context, three future scenarios regarding Iran-Russia relations can be expected:

Strategic Alliance

This scenario predicts that Pezeshkian's administration will work to strengthen relations with Moscow and raise them to the level of a strategic alliance by signing further security and defense agreements that ensure mutual support politically and militarily. Tehran will continue to provide military support to Moscow in the war against Ukraine, with Moscow providing Tehran political support in

the Middle East. Moscow will provide the weapons that Tehran unconditionally demands. This scenario suggests that regional tensions between Iran, Israel and the United States and the continued escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war will provide favorable opportunities to push the two countries toward this scenario and for Iran to proceed with its eastward looking policy. This is reinforced by Pezeshkian's announcement that Russia and Iran would sign a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement at the BRICS summit in October 2024.⁽⁴⁰⁾

This scenario seems unlikely for several reasons, most notably the reluctance of the Pezeshkian government to sign the strategic agreement with Russia, which was delayed as the Iranian president wanted to review and reconsider the agreement. This means that Tehran is reviewing its relations with Russia, and there is division in the Iranian political elite regarding ties with Moscow.

Observers mention that there are many factors that will make it difficult for Iran and Russia to enter a strategic alliance similar to the partnership between Russia and Belarus. The most significant factor is that each side has its different priorities. The Russia-Ukraine war is a priority for Russia, while Iran views the conflict in the Middle East as a priority. The two countries have poor historical trust; each side uses the other as a bargaining chip and a means of leverage with Western countries. Moscow has always impeded the signing of a nuclear deal between Iran and Western countries. There are also signs of tacit understanding between European countries and Iran that ballistic missiles will not be delivered to Moscow. Russia is still reluctant to provide Tehran with some weapons and defense systems, such as the S-300 system, in order not to stir up animosity between Israel and Tehran's adversaries in the Middle East, including some Gulf states. It is worth mentioning the profound differences between the two countries' moves in the Caucasus region, especially Russia's recent rapprochement efforts with Azerbaijan and support for the establishment of the Zangezur corridor and the damage that Iran sees as a result of these Russian moves for its vital interests in this region. Russia is reluctant to complete the Bushehr nuclear power plant. Moscow-Tehran disputes have not been fully resolved. We should not forget how Moscow ignores Israeli attacks against Iranian forces in Syria or how Iran prevented Russian fighters from using its military bases in Syria.⁽⁴¹⁾

Tactical Alliance

This scenario predicts that the two countries will maintain a temporary political and military alliance because of the necessity imposed by the Russia-Ukraine war, Western sanctions on Moscow, and the Iranian necessity because of tensions with Western countries in the context of its nuclear program, Western sanctions, and the Israeli escalation in the Middle East. Therefore, Russia and Iran will work to support each other temporarily within a specific geographical and military remit. A tactical alliance in the face of US pressure seems convenient but it may disappear if Moscow reaches a deal with Western countries to end the war in Ukraine or Tehran reaches a nuclear deal with Western countries.

This scenario assumes that Russia and Iran have reached the threshold of their cooperation and thus cannot continue supporting each other, neither can they reap strategic gains as they can from potential agreements with other actors. This scenario might materialize if Western countries reach an agreement with Putin to end the war in Ukraine or if they strike a deal with Iran to halt military support to Russia in its war in Ukraine.

This scenario is likely amid the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine and the diminishing possibility of US-Iran rapprochement. The Biden administration has not made specific promises or offered proposals to defuse tensions with Iran over its nuclear program. Tensions between Israel, Iran and the "Axis of Resistance" are ongoing despite the attempts made to de-escalate and reach a ceasefire agreement in Gaza. Further tensions in the Middle East are expected in light of expected reprisals from Tehran and Hezbollah against Israel in response to the assassination of Shukr and Haniyeh. This lends the tactical alliance scenario between Iran and Russia further credence.

Pragmatic Cooperation

This scenario projects that the two countries will maintain political cooperation while committing to neutrality and non-interference when supporting each other. This means that Iran will not lend further military support to Russia in the war against Ukraine. On the other hand, Moscow will not intervene to help Tehran in Syria and its war against Israel, nor agree to arms deals that will provoke Israel and Tehran's adversaries in the Middle East.

This scenario is consistent with the vision of Pezeshkian, who calls for maintaining a balance in relations with the East and the West. While Iran tends to keep calm and pragmatic relations with Russia, it is pursuing rapprochement with the United States and the revival of Iran's nuclear negotiations.

This scenario suggests that the Iranian supreme leader must be flexible regarding Pezeshkian's foreign policy orientations in order to lift sanctions, contain internal tensions, and open communication channels with Western countries to revive the nuclear agreement. It also assumes that a new US administration may consider it appropriate to open dialogue with Tehran to contain mounting tensions in the region.⁽⁴²⁾ However, Pezeshkian is unable to initiate the revival of the JCPOA without the approval of Khamenei and the IRGC.⁽⁴³⁾

The future of Iran-Russia ties will rest between the second and third scenarios. This will range between a tactical alliance to counter US pressure and a pragmatic rapprochement to ensure a balance of Iran's relations with the East without harming its relations with Western countries. This will also grant Russia freedom of movement in the Middle East while achieving a balance in its relations with Iran, Israel, and the Gulf states.

Conclusion

The Iran-Russia relationship under Raisi was largely tactical rather than strategic. It is unlikely to elevate to a strategic level under Pezeshkian. Despite progress in bilateral ties, political differences prevent the relationship from being labeled as a strategic alliance, similar to the relationship between Russia and Belarus. This dynamic is likely to continue, driven by pragmatic cooperation and influenced by regional and international contexts. The Russia-Ukraine war, escalating tensions in the Middle East, and pragmatic cooperation are steering the relationship toward pragmatic collaboration rather than the formation of a strategic alliance. While Russia maintains strategic ties with Iran without fully siding with Israel or the Gulf states, Iran is seeking a deal with Western countries to lift the sanctions. Therefore, the future of Iran-Russia cooperation is expected to be confined to a tactical alliance and pragmatic cooperation. The direction of the relationship will hinge on developments in the battlefields in Ukraine and the Middle East, the extent of US involvement, and the approach of the next US administration toward Russia and Iran. This approach may continue to isolate the two countries or lean toward engaging in dialogue with Iran. It also depends on the flexibility of the Iranian supreme leader and the influence of the IRGC and the “hardliners” on Pezeshkian.

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RUSSO-HOUSHI TIES AMID THE GEOPOLITICAL DISPUTE WITH THE WEST

Yousef Maree

PhD candidate in International Relations and Politics, St Petersburg University

Abstract

In the early 2000s, Russia appeared to distance itself from the former Soviet Union's traditional support for its allies in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Under Yeltsin and, to a degree, Putin, Moscow's approach in the Middle East leaned more toward Israel. However, Russia's stance has since shifted, seemingly aligning once again with Israel's adversaries. A key turning point came during the 2007 Munich Security Conference, when Putin signaled that Russia was no longer content with a secondary role on the global stage or merely as a regional superpower.

The events of October 7, 2023, and their broader regional fallout have prompted many to question Russia's evolving role in the Middle East. Putin has seized this moment to assert that the longstanding US strategy in the region has faltered. These shifts have also sparked debate over Moscow's potential gains from alternative logistical routes, its interest in maintaining high oil prices, and its readiness to leverage the situation to weaken its Western adversaries — especially those challenging it over Ukraine. This study seeks to analyze the relationship between the Houthis and Moscow, examining how the Kremlin might capitalize on the instability in the Red Sea region as part of its broader geopolitical confrontation with the West, particularly in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Keywords: Russia, Houthis, Yemen, the United States, Red Sea, Bab al-Mandab.

Introduction

The ongoing developments in the Middle East, especially since the launch of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, have created a new battleground for major global powers. As the conflict has escalated regionally, it has reached vital geostrategic areas like the Red Sea, drawing in various international actors looking to expand their influence. Russia is one of the key powers that may see this conflict as a strategic opportunity to weaken and exert pressure on the United States and its Western allies, who are already engaged against Moscow in the Russia-Ukraine war.

This approach aligns with Russia's broader strategy of imposing pressure on the United States and West, a tactic highlighted by former President and Deputy Chairman of the Russian National Security Council Dmitry Medvedev. In a message via his Telegram channel, Medvedev called for revenge against the West "everywhere possible," emphasizing that Moscow should retaliate for the Ukraine crisis and the severe sanctions imposed on Russia and its people. Labeling the West as "enemies," he advocated for creating economic hardships, fostering public unrest in Western nations due to poor leadership, and advancing international actions that would undercut Western interests. Medvedev also suggested that these measures should be pursued "systematically, consistently, and as openly as possible," and hinted at unspecified activities "on Western territory" that go beyond typical public discourse. This emerging trend, which appears to be an official strategy, revolves around the idea that Russia should leverage the ongoing conflict in the Red Sea as a counterbalance to Western and US efforts against Russia in Ukraine. By supporting the Houthis with weapons, Russia may be seeking to harm the United States in a manner similar to how Washington has supplied Ukraine with weapons aimed at weakening Russia.

US news reports have suggested that Russia is indeed providing military assistance to the Houthis in their conflict with the United States, and it seems increasingly possible that Moscow could deepen its involvement in this regional conflict. Such involvement would offer Russia significant geopolitical advantages against the United States, particularly as it engages in its own confrontation in Ukraine. This could also enhance Russia's broader objective of undermining US hegemony and weakening its influence in the region.

These developments raise several critical questions about Russia's evolving relationship with the Houthis: What factors are shaping this partnership? How has the relationship changed following the outbreak of the Gaza war and the Houthis' entry into the broader regional conflict? And more importantly, how might Russia utilize this situation to strengthen its position against the United States and the West? The consequences of Russia's deepening involvement in the conflict, and how it will leverage the situation in its geopolitical struggle, remain to be seen.

Factors Affecting Russia's Ties With the Houthis

Russia's relations with the Houthis are affected by a host of factors, most notably the following:

The Changing Nature of Russia's Foreign Policy

Referring to the principles outlined in the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation under President Putin, particularly those introduced in 2016 and 2023, it is evident that Russia's approach to global conflict prioritizes the invocation of international law, the role of the United Nations, multilateral diplomacy, and support for legitimate regimes. Article 34 of the 2016 Russia Foreign Policy Concept "Russia facilitates the resolution of regional conflicts by political and diplomatic means through collective action by the international community, believing that such conflicts can only be resolved through inclusive dialogue and negotiations involving all sides rather than by isolating any of them."

Meanwhile, Article 92 specifically addresses the Middle East, underscoring Moscow's strategy of pursuing political and diplomatic resolutions in this region based on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the right to self-determination without external interference.

Russia's foreign policy concept for 2023 reaffirms the country's commitment to its core foreign policy principles. Article 6 indicates that Russia's approach remains peaceful, transparent, predictable, and consistent. It is grounded in realism and respect for widely accepted principles and rules of international law. Moreover, it stresses Russia's dedication to fostering equal international cooperation aimed at solving global problems and advancing shared interests.

The new Russian foreign policy concept, responding to international shifts, reflects a stronger tendency toward intervention and engagement. Article 11 in Chapter Two acknowledges that the intensification of prolonged armed conflicts in various regions heightens global security risks, including the potential for clashes between major powers, even nuclear-armed states. This raises the likelihood of such conflicts escalating into regional or global wars. In response, Article 24, in its fourth paragraph, emphasizes the need for political and diplomatic action to counter interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, particularly efforts to complicate political situations, facilitate unconstitutional regime changes, or threaten territorial integrity. Additionally, Russia's new concept prioritizes safe access to seas and oceans, vital for ensuring unobstructed export routes for Russian goods. Article 36, in particular, outlines the importance of securing Russia's free, safe, and comprehensive access to vital areas, transport routes, and resources in global maritime domains.

The new concept also highlights in Article 17, paragraph 3, the importance of developing effective and comprehensive international responses to shared challenges and threats, including regional conflicts and crises. While the concept underscores Russia's commitment to international law in conflict resolution, it also introduces a pragmatic approach in paragraph 7 of the same article. This section emphasizes Russia's support for its allies and partners in advancing mutual interests, ensuring their security, and promoting sustainable development — even if these allies lack international recognition or membership in international organizations.

Russia's new foreign policy concept introduces a dimension that raises critical questions about its support for various entities. Specifically, it opens debate on whether Russia's backing will be limited to entities it already recognizes as independent republics within its former Soviet sphere, like South Ossetia and Abkhazia, or if it extends to groups outside this space, such as the Houthis. The Houthis have long sought Russian recognition for their political council, particularly before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. This raises the possibility of a strategic connection between Russia's stance and the Houthis' recognition of Luhansk and Donetsk as independent republics.

The Nature of Russia's Intermediary Role Between the Parties to Yemen's Crisis

Following their 2015 coup, the Houthis sought to engage with Russia for support, leveraging the alliance between Moscow and Tehran, particularly over shared interests such as their cooperation in Syria. Despite this, Russia refrained from offering any direct support to the Houthis during their internal conflict. Instead, it consistently opposed international resolutions against them. Notably, in April 2015, Russia threatened to veto a Gulf Cooperation Council draft resolution in the UN Security Council aimed at imposing sanctions on Houthi leaders and former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, as well as an arms embargo.

In August 2016, Russia further utilized its veto power to block a Security Council resolution urging the Houthis and Ali Abdullah Saleh to cooperate with the then-UN envoy to Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed and calling for intervention to implement a proposed peace agreement. Instead, Russia advocated for an arms embargo that would encompass all factions, including the internationally recognized Yemeni government. While a resolution was ultimately passed by the Security Council, Russia's actions demonstrated its inclination to maintain a balanced stance. In March 2021, Russia continued this trend by opposing a Security Council resolution that called for an end to Houthi assaults on the gas-rich region of Marib.

Despite Russia's early stances that hindered significant international action against the Houthis, the group remained skeptical about Moscow's involvement. This skepticism appeared to stem from the perception that Russia's position was primarily a reflection of its opposition to the West rather than a strategic alliance with the Houthis, unlike its robust support for the Syrian regime. Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi articulated this sentiment, "Russia has its own calculations, interests, and policies, and we do not tease it or rely on it. I hope the Russian bears will wake up from their winter hibernation because of the American fire."

Russia has demonstrated a commitment to maintaining good relations with all parties involved in the Yemeni crisis. Since 2016, it has gradually positioned itself as a key mediator in the conflict, particularly following a message from the Houthis outlining their vision for resolving the decade-long crisis.

This shift occurred against the backdrop of a division between the legitimate

government and the Southern Transitional Council, which is supported by the UAE. Despite the withdrawal of UAE forces from Yemen, Abu Dhabi's earlier efforts facilitated Russia's emerging role. By late August 2019, Russia began facilitating meetings between the Southern Transitional Council and Mikhail Bogdanov, Putin's special envoy to the Middle East and Africa. On the same day, Russian officials also met with the Houthis and Saleh's son, while continuing to engage with representatives from President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi's government. Russia also hosted various Yemeni delegations in Moscow.

Russia's Relations With the Regional Powers Involved in Yemen's Crisis

Regionally, Russia has been careful to maintain its policy of non-alignment with competing regional blocs in the Middle East. In the context of the Yemeni crisis, Moscow was particularly cautious not to jeopardize its friendly relations with Saudi Arabia. The main objective was to distance Saudi Arabia, a key US ally in the region, from Washington. Consequently, the Kremlin has employed a balanced approach that remains open to all parties involved in the Yemeni issue.

In this regard, Russian orientalist Pavel Gostrin, who worked within the Russian diplomatic mission in Yemen during the early 2000s, emphasized that Moscow cannot side with either party in the conflict. Such a stance would damage relations with Iran, which supports the Houthis, as well as with Saudi Arabia, an influential regional power and an important ally of Russia in OPEC+. Gostrin also pointed out that Mahdi al-Mashat, the representative of the Houthis, does not represent the legitimate government, which is recognized internationally under President Hadi, elected in 2012. He further noted that providing military assistance to the Houthis would contradict one of the fundamental principles of Russian diplomacy.

Thus, the Kremlin has adopted cautious approaches in Yemen, largely influenced by its relationship with Riyadh, particularly given Saudi Arabia's stance of strict neutrality regarding the Russia-Ukraine war and its refusal to join the West in imposing sanctions on Moscow. As a leader in the global oil market and a prominent country in the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia is keen to avoid antagonizing Moscow to prevent a confrontation over energy prices, similar to the price war that erupted in 2020. Such a confrontation would be costly for Moscow, especially amid its ongoing conflicts with the West, whether related to energy, economic sanctions, or military and political tensions in Ukraine. Maintaining high oil prices aligns with the shared interests of both Russia and Saudi Arabia, as Moscow views this as crucial for stabilizing its national currency, which, in turn, helps maintain the stability of its internal front. The White House is heavily invested in undermining Putin's regime.

Moscow also recognizes that Riyadh holds significant leverage, particularly through its energy resources, which the West needs as it seeks to diversify its strategic partnerships with various international players. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has successfully strengthened its economic partnership with China, further

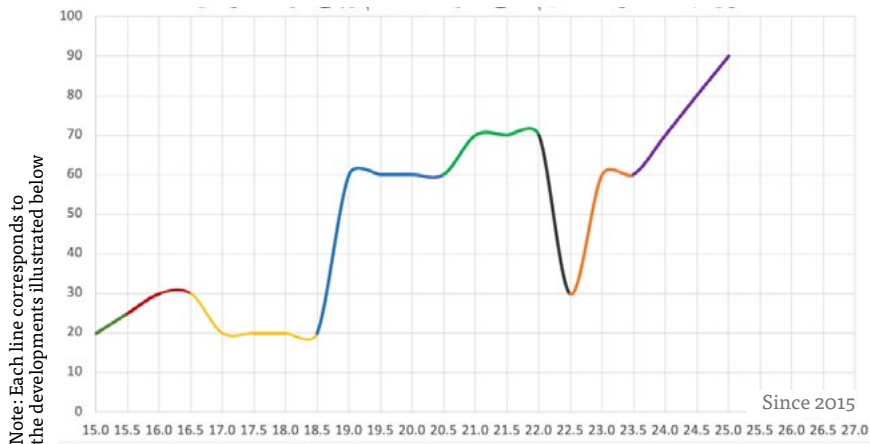
enhancing its geopolitical significance. There is a clear alignment of interests between Riyadh and Moscow, especially in their mutual goal of maintaining high oil prices and continuing to adhere to the OPEC+ production cut agreement. Saudi Arabia's ambitious Vision 2030, which entails numerous projects requiring substantial investment, aligns with Russia's need for a stable national currency, the ruble, crucial for maintaining internal cohesion. Furthermore, Riyadh is focused on addressing its security concerns through regional arrangements rather than relying on military solutions.









Significance of the Red Sea in Managing the Dispute With the West

The Red Sea region holds significant strategic importance for the West, serving as the shortest vital passage for trade between East and West. This is evident in the heavy Western military presence, with numerous military bases along the shores of the Red Sea and near its southern entrance at the Bab al-Mandab Strait. In contrast, Russia faces stringent Western economic sanctions and efforts to isolate it globally in response to its actions in Ukraine.

Given the escalating global tensions stemming from the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which has devolved into a proxy war between Russia and NATO, the Red Sea has become increasingly crucial for Russia. This region presents an opportunity for Russia to exert pressure on the West, particularly as the Yemeni situation has garnered heightened attention from Moscow. The Houthis have emerged as a focal point in this regard. Notably, following the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia's relationship with the Houthis has evolved. In August 2022, a Houthi delegation, led by spokesperson Muhammad Abdul Salam, visited Moscow, where he indicated a significant shift in Russia's stance toward the group. He emphasized that Yemen could play a strategically influential role. The line chart below illustrates the fluctuations in the Houthi-Russia relations from 2014 till the present (the time of conducting this study).

Fluctuations in Houthi-Russia Relations (2014-Present)



Major Developments in Houthi-Russia Relations	
	Russia refrained from voting on UN Resolution no. 2216 and received the Houthi delegation in Moscow and retained the Russian Embassy in Sana'a.
	The Russian military operation in Syria and its condemnation of the Arab Coalition's Support to the legitimate government in Yemen in addition to its rapprochement with the Houthis.
	The Houthis faced significant setbacks due to the assassination of Saleh, leading to increased tensions with Moscow. This strain was evident when the Russian embassy relocated from Sana'a to Riyadh. Despite the deteriorating ties, Moscow leveraged its veto power against a draft resolution that aimed to condemn Iran, opting instead for an alternative approach that extended the sanctions regime without explicitly naming Iran.
	Riyadh's decision to increase oil pumping into the market created an environment that fostered Moscow's rapprochement with the Houthis.
	Russia has refrained from issuing a press statement at the UN Security Council condemning the Houthis, even as they escalate their attacks on Marib.
	Russia's vote in the Security Council in favor of Resolution 2624, which condemned the Houthis and classified them as a terrorist group following their ballistic missile attacks on the UAE, was perceived as a quid pro quo arrangement between Moscow and Abu Dhabi. This vote allowed the UAE to abstain from supporting a resolution condemning Russia for its invasion of Ukraine.
	Mohammed Abdul Salam's visit to Moscow followed the Houthis' recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent republics, prior to their annexation by Russia. During this visit, Abdul Salam expressed that there was a "real change" in Russia's stance toward the Houthis.
	Moscow and the Houthis shared aligned visions regarding the events in Gaza, as the Houthis launched their strikes in the Red and Arabian Seas. This occurred despite Russia abstaining from voting on Security Council Resolution 2722, which allowed its passage. However, the recent US aid package to Ukraine, coupled with the Houthis' promise not to target Russian ships, led media outlets aligned with the Kremlin to advocate for the establishment of a military alliance with the Houthis. This alliance would aim to target Western interests.

Russia's Employment of the Houthi Attacks

The Gaza war marked a pivotal moment in the Middle East, igniting unprecedented regional chaos and foreign interventions. One significant consequence of this conflict was the Houthis' involvement in what became known as the Gaza Support Front. Their participation raised alarms as it threatened critical global trade routes, prompting responses from the United States and its Western allies.

In this context, Russia and China, both seeking to challenge US dominance and diminish its influence in the Middle East, saw an opportunity to leverage these developments. They aimed to advance their own policies and strengthen their foothold in the region by applying increased pressure on the United States. This shift in dynamics also explains the change in Russia's stance toward the Houthis, particularly in the face of the US-led campaign against them known as Operation Prosperity Guardian. Following the Gaza war, several notable developments in Russia's position regarding the Houthis can be observed, particularly in relation to their attacks on ships transiting the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

Reassessing the Relationship With the Houthis

Russia has ramped up its diplomatic engagements with the Houthis, with the conflict in the Middle East prominently featuring in discussions between the two parties. Following an escalation in the Red Sea, which the Houthis framed as part of their "support for Gaza," a Houthi delegation led by Mohammed Abdul Salam visited Moscow on January 25, 2024. During this visit, he met with Mikhail Bogdanov, the special envoy of the Russian president for the Middle East and African countries, and deputy foreign minister. Most recently, on July 2, 2024, Abdul Salam returned to Moscow, where he was received by Bogdanov again. The Russian Foreign Ministry later announced that the discussions covered the urgent need for a comprehensive resolution to the military and political crisis in Yemen, which has persisted for nearly nine years. The talks underscored the importance of enhancing international efforts to create conducive conditions for a broad national dialogue among Yemenis, facilitated by the United Nations.⁽¹⁾ In addition to addressing Yemen's crisis, the meetings also placed significant emphasis on the tragic developments in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the deteriorating situation in the Red Sea.

Taking Advantage of the Houthi Attacks to Impact the West's Economic Interests

While Russia has shifted much of its trade toward China and Far Eastern ports via rail transport — resulting in no more than 10% of its foreign trade passing through the Suez Canal — the ongoing escalation in the Red Sea has presented Russia with an opportunity to economically influence trade movements toward the West. Moscow recognizes the potential to leverage the Red Sea crisis and align itself with those opposing Western countries. In this context, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov emphasized this point on February 27, 2024, when he likened the actions of the Houthis in the Red Sea to the sanctions imposed on Russia. During

a press conference following talks with Yemeni Prime Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak, Lavrov stated, "The impact of the Houthis' actions in the Red Sea on global trade can be compared to the impact of illegal Western sanctions against the Russian Federation." He noted that the West had encouraged Ukraine to utilize so-called safe corridors while the UN secretary-general's initiative on Black Sea grain was still active. Lavrov explained that this situation complicated logistical deliveries for goods and significantly increased insurance costs.⁽²⁾

It is noteworthy to highlight a statement from the conservative Tsargrad channel, owned by Konstantin Valeryevich Malofeev, a Russian politician and billionaire with close ties to the Kremlin. He suggested that if the Houthis did not exist, they would have had to be invented, emphasizing that recent events in the Red Sea illustrate why the Americans and the British maintain military bases on strategically crucial trade routes. While Russia currently lacks such bases, the Houthis are present and can be leveraged to Russia's advantage. Even if Israel was to agree to refrain from military action in Gaza — a scenario that seems unlikely given Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's struggle for political survival — the Houthis are unlikely to cease their attacks, particularly against Western ships. This situation raises a critical question posed by Medvedev regarding the West's stance: why should Russia alone endure "endless restrictions?" He warned that if the West desires a hybrid war, then that is precisely what they will receive.⁽³⁾

The Russian media has reframed the Houthis as a strategic asset that the Kremlin can leverage. This coverage highlights a notable absence of a similar group within Russia's own regional sphere. Two decades ago, it would have been essential for Moscow to cultivate organizations and movements aiming to break free from US influence in Bulgaria or Romania, which would have created fertile ground for subversive action. During that period, conditions were conducive for Russia to establish movements and groups aligned with its interests in the Baltic states, potentially becoming a significant challenge for local Nazis.⁽⁴⁾

An exclusive report from *The Wall Street Journal* indicates that Viktor Bout, the notorious Russian arms dealer often referred to as the "Merchant of Death," has reemerged to facilitate arms transactions with the Houthi movement. Bout had already served 12 years in US prisons. He was arrested in Thailand in a 2008 sting operation led by US Drug Enforcement Administration agents posing as Colombian leftist rebels. When Bout was released in the December 2022 prisoner swap, White House officials described it as a difficult decision but the only way to get Brittney Griner, a US basketball star, out of Russian prisons. "The small arms deal that Bout was said to have been brokering was with two Houthi representatives who had travelled to Moscow under the cover of buying pesticides and vehicles and visited a Lada factory [...] The people familiar with the deal didn't know if the deal was being negotiated at the Kremlin's behest or merely with its tacit approval. While the Houthis have been seeking Russian-made weapons, *The Wall Street Journal* couldn't determine the specific source of the planned supply," the report concludes.⁽⁵⁾ In an interview with REN TV, Bout described this exclusive

report as a “gift” to President Putin on his birthday, while also stating that it lacks factual basis and is filled with specific speculations. However, he did emphasize that the Houthi group is an ally of Russia that requires support. He believes the Houthis are quite effective at taking down US reconnaissance drones, adding the more drones they shoot down, the fewer opportunities the United States has to deploy them in the Black Sea against Russia.⁽⁶⁾

Maintaining Balanced Relations With Regional Powers — Drawing Them Away From Washington

It was not surprising that Operation Prosperity Guardian, quickly assembled by Washington, excluded key regional players in the Yemeni conflict — namely, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Both countries avoided participating, likely due to concerns about their image in the Arab world and the potential backlash from publicly siding with the United States against the Houthis, who have voiced support for Gaza. Additionally, their security calculations played a role in this decision.⁽⁷⁾ Russia’s abstention from voting on the UN Security Council resolution condemning the Houthis was a calculated move. This abstention allowed the resolution to pass, reflecting the Kremlin’s desire to maintain balanced relations with dominant regional actors, as well as various Yemeni factions. Furthermore, Russia condemned subsequent US-UK strikes on Houthi positions, viewing them as violations of sovereignty and international law, which potentially undermined Saudi Arabia’s peace efforts with the Houthis. Moscow’s stance was also likely influenced by concerns about its substantial oil exports to India, which transit the Red Sea.

Waging a Diplomatic Campaign Against the United States and UK

Moscow is currently leveraging anti-colonial rhetoric to gain favor with the Global South, criticizing US hegemony and consistently opposing US actions on the world stage. The conflict in the Red Sea has provided Russia with an opportunity to undermine the United States, portraying its actions as violations of international law and imperialist in nature. This approach aligns with Russia’s broader goal of challenging the international system, weakening US dominance, and using US military interventions against Washington and its allies. Russia firmly opposed the attacks launched by the United States and UK on Yemen, condemning the missile strikes as destabilizing for the region.⁽⁸⁾ The Kremlin labeled these actions illegal, with the Russian Duma going so far as to call for President Joe Biden to be put on trial. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova emphasized this stance, stating, “The American air strikes on Yemen are yet another example of the Anglo-Saxons’ distortion of UN Security Council resolutions and their complete disregard for international law, all for the sake of escalating the situation in the region to serve their own destructive purposes.”⁽⁹⁾

The Russian Federation promptly called for an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council “in connection with the US and British strikes on Yemen.” Dmitry Peskov, the Russian president’s press secretary, emphasized that “the UN Security Council

resolution, which urgently called on the Houthis to cease their attacks in the Red Sea, did not authorize any strikes.” He further stated that the strikes conducted by the United States were illegal and constituted a violation of international law. Peskov added that Russia had repeatedly urged the Houthis to stop attacking international commercial vessels, which Moscow considers inappropriate.⁽¹⁰⁾

At the rhetorical level, Moscow is framing the Red Sea crisis as yet another manifestation of the decline of US hegemony. The Kremlin philosopher and thinker Alexander Dugin commented on his Telegram channel, stating that “what is happening only serves Russia’s interests and will not lead to any meaningful result. The continuation of the bombing further underscores the waning power of American hegemony.”

Russia’s intervention in the conflict provided Moscow with an opportunity to expose the contradictions and double standards of the West. The conflict also compelled the return of certain US military assets to the region and led to increased arms support for Israel, undoubtedly impacting Western aid to Ukraine. Given the strategic importance of the Red Sea corridor for US and Western interests, the flaring-up of this region serves as a leverage point for Russia, presenting difficulties for its adversaries and acting as a pressure card against the United States and the West. Additionally, the China-brokered reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia has enhanced Russia’s influence in the Yemeni issue, positioning it to exploit the situation as a means to relieve Western pressure in Ukraine by engaging in other global hotspots, such as Yemen.⁽¹¹⁾

The Opportunities and Challenges Facing Russia

Just as the Houthi attacks on the Red Sea present opportunities for Russia, they also come with significant challenges. The opportunities and challenges can be outlined as follows:

Losses and Challenges

The economic impact of the unrest in the Red Sea due to the Houthi attacks may not be limited to Western interests but could also indirectly affect Russia. Although Russia imports goods from China via land routes that bypass the Red Sea, it still relies on European products, many of which depend on Chinese components that transit through the Red Sea. Disruptions in this vital route could raise production costs for these goods, consequently increasing costs for Russia. Additionally, the Red Sea has become a critical route for Russian oil exports due to the shifts caused by the Russia-Ukraine war. Western sanctions and the European Union’s price cap on Russian oil, set at around \$60 per barrel, forced Russia to redirect its oil from Europe to Asia, particularly China and India. This strategic shift made the Red Sea a crucial corridor for Russian oil transport. By the end of November 2023, Russian shipping companies were moving approximately 1.7 million barrels per day through the Suez Canal, compared to the earlier, minimal 0.12 million barrels destined for Asia before the war.⁽¹²⁾

In light of the growing risks in the Red Sea, shipping companies may increasingly turn to the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Moscow is actively promoting alternative routes, particularly the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which connects Russia to the Indian Ocean via Iran, and the NSR. If the conflict in the Red Sea escalates and further disrupts shipping, Moscow might consider rerouting oil tankers around the Cape of Good Hope. However, Russia currently lacks the capacity for this option on a large scale, underscoring the urgent need to renew its fleet of cargo carriers. This shortage of resources may explain why Russia abstained from voting on, and did not veto, UN Security Council Resolution 2722 on January 11, 2024. The resolution authorized US-UK air strikes against the Houthis. Despite abstaining, Moscow has consistently condemned the Houthi attacks, reiterating its stance for “free and safe navigation in the region.” The Kremlin has repeatedly urged the Houthis to cease their actions, labeling them as “extremely wrong.” This balanced approach likely reflects Moscow’s broader geopolitical and economic calculations, particularly its interest in maintaining stability in vital maritime routes like the Red Sea.

The Houthis’ leveraging of their relationship with Russia could impose regional costs on Moscow, particularly given the concerns of Saudi Arabia and the UAE about how this growing polarization affects regional security and their interests. Russia’s apparent shift from mediation to actively seeking to influence events for its own benefit and in its conflict with the West has begun to raise concerns in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. The renewed conflict between the Houthis and the internationally recognized Yemeni government highlights these tensions, with Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi attacking Saudi Arabia in response to measures taken by the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden against banks operating in Houthi-controlled areas. Although these measures were later canceled, leaving the economic file to be discussed between the legitimate government and the Houthis, the group’s ongoing maneuvering in the Red Sea suggests that it is seeking international recognition while presenting itself as a “free ally” of Russia. Moscow, in turn, may use the Houthis as a bargaining chip in its broader geopolitical games in the region. After a Houthi delegation’s visit to Moscow, some Russian news outlets framed the visit as part of Yemen falling under Russian influence, arguing that if Russia was to control the southern gates of the Red Sea, it would gain substantial global influence. Talks of launching a direct shipping line between the Russian port of Novorossiysk and Hodeidah have surfaced, allowing agricultural exports to bypass third-party countries. Additionally, the possibility that an Israeli raid on Hodeidah was linked to the Houthi visit to Moscow has been suggested, reflecting fears of Russia’s expanding influence in this strategic region. Competitors, particularly Israel, seem unwilling to let Russia gain ground in such a pivotal area.⁽¹³⁾

While the Kremlin anticipated that the war in Gaza and the escalation in the Red Sea would divert Western attention from the Ukrainian front, the recent announcement of a \$61 billion financial aid package for Ukraine by Congress highlighted that the West remains focused on the conflict. This reveals a continuing

resolve to deliver a strategic defeat to Russia, undermining its geopolitical ambitions.

Russia may be particularly wary of Ukraine's successful attacks and territorial incursions in regions like Kursk, alongside strikes targeting critical Russian interests, including oil-producing areas.

Gains and Opportunities

From the onset of the Red Sea events, it was evident that the risks the Houthis posed to Moscow's oil exports were minimal. In fact, Russia was the only country that did not reduce its oil transit through the Red Sea. Throughout the attacks, the fleet of shadow oil tankers continued to navigate this route without significant interruption. Notably, the Houthis did not intentionally target Russian vessels; this was largely due to Moscow's beneficial relationship with Iran, which provides the Houthis with intelligence on the routes taken by Russian oil tankers, thereby helping to avoid mishaps. Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, a senior member of the political bureau of the Houthis, confirmed this in an interview with the Russian newspaper *Izvestia*. He stated that the Houthis are prepared to ensure the safe passage of vessels from all nations, except Israel, and specifically highlighted security guarantees for Russian and Chinese ships.⁽¹⁴⁾ This assurance was evident when, just hours after the Israeli-owned ship *Swan Atlantic* was attacked by a Houthi drone on December 18, 2023, the Russian tanker *Butterfly*, laden with Rosneft oil and bound for India, safely crossed the danger zone. On the same day, five additional tankers carrying Russian oil also traversed the Red Sea after passing through the Suez Canal.

Russia has successfully secured its trade movement through the Red Sea by exploring various strategies to protect its vessels. A study conducted by researchers Kupriyanov Alexei Vladimirovich and Ramnik Ilya Alexandrovich, published in 2021, proposed potential cooperation with the Houthis to enhance the safety of maritime routes. The study outlined two main paths for collaboration: first, establishing protective structures, which involves creating either private or public entities to directly safeguard ships in the Red Sea. This could include deploying specialized agents or a dedicated force in the region to ensure the security of Russian vessels and those carrying Russian economic interests, with potential partners including East African nations, particularly Eritrea. Second, the study suggests developing a conditional information exchange system that facilitates a "friend-or-foe" framework, enabling tripartite collaboration between Russia, Iran, and the Houthis. This system would enhance communication regarding ship transit through the Red Sea, helping to prevent disruptions to Russian maritime traffic and reducing overall military tensions in the area. While the first option for ensuring the security of Russian ships necessitated considerable financial expenditure, the second option appears to be more promising and effective, as it focuses on the informational and diplomatic sphere, which does not require substantial financial investments.⁽¹⁵⁾

Reports from Bloomberg on March 21, 2024, indicate that the Houthis assured both Russia and China that they would not attack their ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This understanding reportedly emerged from negotiations held in Muscat, during which the Houthis expressed expectations for political support from Moscow and Beijing in international forums, particularly in the UN Security Council.⁽¹⁶⁾ For Russia, maintaining secure shipping routes is strategically crucial, as over half of its seaborne oil exports — approximately 2 million barrels per day — transit through this area.

Despite Russian objections to Washington's approach and condemnation of its actions throughout the crisis, Moscow did not intervene against US operations in the Red Sea. On January 11, the United States succeeded in securing UN Security Council Resolution 2722, which legitimized attacks on Houthi infrastructure in Yemen. Contrary to its usual practice, Russia refrained from using its veto power against this resolution. This suggests that Russia aimed to implicate Washington and the West in the conflict. Following the US-UK strikes against the Houthis on January 12, 2024, immediately after the resolution's adoption, Russia began to assert that the resolution did not grant the right to strike Yemen.⁽¹⁷⁾ It is difficult to believe that the Russian representatives, when voting on this matter in the UN Security Council, were unaware that the Americans could interpret the clause regarding "the need to eliminate the root causes that lead to increased regional tension and destabilization" as a basis for launching a campaign against the Houthis, particularly given the clear trajectory of events leading toward imminent strikes by the United States and the UK.⁽¹⁸⁾

Conclusion

Russia has adopted cautious approaches toward various conflicts in the Middle East, particularly regarding Yemen, due to its complex regional entanglements and the nature of its relationships with the parties involved in the Yemeni situation. Despite the Houthis' hopes of leveraging Tehran's relationship with Moscow to gain international recognition — especially following Tehran's acknowledgment of the Sana'a coup government, the only recognition the group has received — and Moscow's own recognition of the Hadi government as the legitimate internationally recognized authority, the Houthis have continued to seek a closer alignment with Moscow and Beijing. This effort is underscored by Houthi leader Mahdi Al-Mashat's message to Moscow, requesting intervention to resolve the Yemeni crisis, stop the aggression, and lift the siege on Yemen. The Houthis also recognized the independence of the Luhansk and Donetsk republics immediately after Moscow announced its military operation, indicating their awareness of Moscow's interests. Russia's cautious stance, which aims for a balanced approach among regional actors in Yemen, is seen as a way to improve its relations with key Gulf countries, namely Saudi Arabia and the UAE, particularly as it seeks safe havens for capital amid Western sanctions linked to the war in Ukraine. Additionally, this balancing act helps maintain ties with Iran, especially

in light of the Israeli war on Gaza, with the Houthis linking their operations in the Red Sea to this conflict. Russia's position, which often appears to support the Palestinian resistance in the United Nations, is likely influenced by its ongoing conflict with Western capitals over Ukraine. The Kremlin's prior friendly relations with Netanyahu's government have shifted, leading Russia to recognize the importance of opening new fronts to weaken Western hegemony and to divert its focus from Ukraine.

The Red Sea crisis provided Moscow with an opportunity to highlight the benefits of its alternative logistics routes and increase activity along the railway connections linking the Chinese mainland with Russia and extending to Europe. It also underscored the perceived suffering of US hegemony, as characterized by Kremlin thinkers. However, the crisis also revealed confusion in Moscow's stance. While Russia condemned the Houthi attacks, it abstained from voting on a UN Security Council resolution, allowing it to pass, and later denounced the US-UK aggression against Yemen. This inconsistency may stem from Moscow's desire to maintain a balanced position in the region, despite a clear tilt toward Tehran, as well as its concerns over the substantial oil exports passing through this route to India. By linking its condemnation of the US-UK strikes on Houthi targets to Washington's efforts to undermine peace initiatives in Yemen and disrupt the Muscat negotiations between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, Moscow aims to avoid antagonizing Riyadh, which is keen on alleviating its security concerns. This careful approach seeks to ensure that relations with Riyadh do not negatively impact OPEC+ agreements on production cuts. Additionally, Moscow acknowledges Riyadh's independent foreign policy, particularly its "strict neutrality" regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, which aligns with the support of Global South countries for Moscow's push toward establishing a multipolar world order.

In the last few months of the crisis, a striking development has been the continuous calls from Russian media outlets close to the Kremlin for providing the Houthis with the necessary expertise, technology, and weapons, suggesting that the group is regarded as an important ally of Moscow. This emphasis appears to be linked to the rapid developments on the Ukrainian front, particularly the increased volume of Western support for the Kyiv regime, which indicates a potential escalation of the conflict with NATO into a more dangerous phase.

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PROSPECTS OF CHINA'S DIPLOMATIC MEDIATION BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

Dr. Mohamad Zreik

Researcher in Chinese affairs

Abstract

This study explores China's mediation in the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, examining its transition from the use of soft power to the adoption of a more geopolitical approach. It investigates the historical context of Iran- Saudi relations and the significance of the recent diplomatic agreement brokered by China. The study analyzes China's mediation strategy, its effectiveness, and the implications for regional stability and global diplomatic dynamics. It also delves into the potential success or failure of China's geopolitical shift and the costs associated with this new diplomatic stance. The study employs an analytical descriptive methodology, utilizing secondary sources to critically examine the impact of China on Middle Eastern and international relations.

Keywords: China, Iran-Saudi conflict, mediation, geopolitics, regional stability.

Introduction

The Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict is a complex rivalry deeply rooted in historical, religious, and geopolitical factors. It can be traced back to the establishment of the Iranian republic in 1979, which marked a significant shift in regional power dynamics.⁽¹⁾ The Iranian revolution, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, imposed a Shiite theocracy, challenging the Sunni-dominated status quo in the Middle East.⁽²⁾

Saudi Arabia, a Sunni monarchy and the custodian of Islam's two holiest sites, perceived the new Shiite establishment in Iran as a direct threat to its religious authority and regional influence. The ideological divide between Sunnism and Shiism further fueled the rivalry, with both countries vying for leadership of the Muslim world.⁽³⁾

Geopolitically, the conflict has been exacerbated by the struggle for dominance over key strategic areas, such as the Gulf region. The rivalry has also led to military competition, with both countries investing heavily in their defense capabilities and seeking alliances with major global powers.⁽⁴⁾ The conflict has adversely impacted regional stability, often hindering efforts to resolve other disputes and contributing to sectarian tensions across the Middle East.

China's emerging role as a mediator in the Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict represents a significant shift in its foreign policy and diplomatic approach. Traditionally known for its principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, China has gradually become more proactive in international conflict resolution, particularly in the Middle East.⁽⁵⁾

China's mediation efforts are driven by its growing economic and strategic interests in the region. As the world's largest importer of oil, China has a vested interest in ensuring stability in the Middle East to secure its energy supplies.⁽⁶⁾ Additionally, the region is a crucial part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to enhance connectivity and economic integration across Asia, Africa and Europe.

China's approach to mediation is characterized by its emphasis on dialogue and negotiation, as well as its neutral stance. Unlike Western powers, which often take sides in regional conflicts, China positions itself as an impartial mediator, leveraging its good relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. This neutrality, combined with its economic presence, gave China a unique advantage in facilitating dialogue between the rival countries.

China's mediation strategy also reflects its broader foreign policy goals of promoting a multipolar world order and reducing the influence of the United States in the Middle East.⁽⁷⁾ By playing a constructive role in resolving regional conflicts, China aims to enhance its global stature and assert itself as a responsible major power.

In recent years, China's diplomatic efforts have gained more visibility, as evidenced by its role in brokering the landmark agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia to restore diplomatic relations. This success demonstrated China's poten-

tial as a mediator and its growing influence in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.

The purpose of this study is to critically examine China's role as a mediator in the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with a focus on the shift from the use of soft power to China adopting a more geopolitical approach. The study aims to assess the effectiveness of China's mediation strategy, its impact on regional stability and the implications for global diplomatic dynamics. By analyzing China's approach to conflict resolution and its influence in the Middle East, the study seeks to contribute to the understanding of emerging trends in international diplomacy and the role of rising powers in shaping global politics.

The significance of this study lies in its timely examination of a pivotal development in the Middle East, a region of strategic importance for global security and energy markets. As China continues to assert its presence on the world stage, understanding its role in mediating regional conflicts becomes crucial for policymakers, scholars and international observers. The findings of this study will provide valuable insights into the complexities of China's foreign policy and its potential as a peacemaker, offering a nuanced perspective on the evolving dynamics of power and diplomacy in the 21st century.

Theoretical Framework

Conflict Mediation Theories

Conflict mediation theories provide a framework for understanding and resolving disputes through the intervention of a neutral third party. These theories encompass a range of approaches and strategies that aim to facilitate communication, negotiation and agreement between conflicting parties. The following lines look at some of the foundational theories in conflict mediation:

■ The Interest-Based Relational (IBR) approach, which focuses on identifying and addressing the underlying interests of the parties rather than their stated positions.⁽⁸⁾ This approach emphasizes the importance of building relationships and finding mutually beneficial solutions that satisfy the needs of all involved.

■ The Transformative Mediation theory aims to change the way parties perceive and interact with each other. This approach seeks to empower individuals and encourage mutual recognition, leading to a transformation in their relationship and the resolution of the conflict.⁽⁹⁾

■ The Narrative Mediation theory emphasizes the role of storytelling in conflicts, suggesting that disputes arise from conflicting narratives.⁽¹⁰⁾ Mediators help parties to reframe their stories, understand each other's perspectives, and co-construct a new narrative that acknowledges both sides.⁽¹¹⁾

■ Integrative Negotiation theory, also known as Win-Win Negotiation, is a strategy that seeks to find solutions that satisfy the interests of all parties. It encourages collaborative problem-solving and creative thinking to achieve outcomes that are beneficial for everyone.⁽¹²⁾

In the context of international diplomacy, these theories can be applied to understand how mediators, like China in the Iran-Saudi conflict, navigate complex geopolitical disputes. By employing various mediation strategies, they aim to bridge differences, foster dialogue, and promote peaceful resolutions.

Soft Power and Geopolitics in Diplomacy

Soft power and geopolitics are two critical concepts in the realm of diplomacy that influence how states interact and assert their influence on the global stage. Soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye, refers to the ability of a country to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction, rather than coercion or payment.⁽¹³⁾ It is derived from a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies, which can engender goodwill and foster international cooperation. In diplomacy, soft power is often wielded through cultural exchange, educational programs and public diplomacy initiatives to build positive perceptions and relationships that facilitate the achievement of foreign policy objectives.⁽¹⁴⁾

Geopolitics, on the other hand, involves the study of how geographical factors, such as location, resources and physical terrain, influence political decisions and power dynamics. In diplomacy, geopolitics plays a crucial role in shaping strategies and actions, as states seek to protect their interests, secure resources, and exert influence in strategically important regions.⁽¹⁵⁾ Geopolitical considerations often drive alliances, conflicts and negotiations, as countries navigate the complex interplay of power, security and territorial ambitions.

The interplay between soft power and geopolitics is evident in modern diplomacy, where states employ a combination of cultural influence and strategic positioning to advance their interests. For example, China's BRI showcases its use of soft power through economic development and cultural exchange, while simultaneously pursuing geopolitical objectives by expanding its strategic footprint across Asia, Africa and Europe.

Relevance to China's Mediation Strategy

The concepts of soft power and geopolitics are highly relevant to China's mediation strategy, particularly in its role as a mediator in the Iran-Saudi conflict. China's approach to mediation is deeply rooted in its broader foreign policy objectives, which seek to balance its soft power appeal with its geopolitical ambitions.⁽¹⁶⁾

China's soft power is evident in its diplomatic efforts to present itself as a neutral, benevolent mediator that respects the sovereignty and interests of all parties. By promoting its culture, economic development model and principles of non-interference and peaceful coexistence, China aims to build trust and credibility among Middle Eastern countries. This soft power approach facilitates China's entry into the region's diplomatic landscape, enabling it to act as a mediator in conflicts like the Iran-Saudi dispute.

Simultaneously, China's mediation strategy is influenced by its geopolitical interests. The Middle East is a vital region for China's energy security and the success of its BRI.⁽¹⁷⁾ By mediating conflicts and fostering stability in the region,

China seeks to protect its economic interests and enhance its strategic presence. Moreover, China's mediation efforts align with its broader goal of positioning itself as a major global power capable of shaping international affairs.

Historical Context

Overview of Iran-Saudi Relations

The relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been marked by decades of rivalry and tension, shaped by religious, ideological and geopolitical factors. The two countries, representing Sunni and Shiite Islam respectively, have vied for influence and leadership in the Arab and Muslim world, exacerbating sectarian divisions.

The 1979 Iranian revolution, which established a Shiite theocratic regime, was a turning point in Iran-Saudi relations. The new Iranian government's revolutionary ideology and its calls for the overthrow of monarchies in the Gulf region were perceived as direct threats by the Saudi monarchy.⁽¹⁸⁾ In response, Saudi Arabia sought to counter Iran's influence by bolstering its own religious and political credentials and forming alliances with other Sunni-majority countries.⁽¹⁹⁾

The rivalry intensified during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, with Saudi Arabia supporting Iraq as a counterbalance to Iran's expanding influence.⁽²⁰⁾ In the following decades, the conflict assumed an indirect character with the employment of proxies, most notably in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, where both countries have backed opposing factions.

Despite occasional diplomatic engagements and attempts at dialogue, the relationship remained fraught with mutual suspicion and hostility. Recent developments, such as the 2021 attack on Saudi oil facilities, which Riyadh blamed on Tehran, and the ongoing conflict in Yemen, continue to strain relations, making any prospect of reconciliation challenging.⁽²¹⁾

Evolution of China's Foreign Policy

The evolution of China's foreign policy has been marked by significant shifts since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Initially, China's foreign policy was heavily influenced by its ideological alignment with the Soviet Union and its focus on supporting communist movements worldwide. However, the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s led China to adopt a more independent foreign policy stance.⁽²²⁾

In the 1970s, China's foreign policy underwent a major transformation with the normalization of relations with the United States.⁽²³⁾ This shift was driven by strategic considerations to counterbalance the Soviet Union's influence and to pursue economic modernization. China's opening up to the world under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and early 1980s marked a further departure from ideological foreign policy toward pragmatism and economic development.⁽²⁴⁾

Since the 1990s, China's foreign policy has been characterized by its "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development" strategy, which emphasizes non-confrontation,

economic cooperation, and multilateralism.⁽²⁵⁾ China has sought to assure the world of its benign intentions as it grows in power, focusing on building partnerships and integrating itself into the global economy.

In recent years, under President Xi Jinping, China's foreign policy has become more assertive, as demonstrated by its BRI, territorial claims in the South China Sea, and efforts to increase its presence in international institutions. China's growing economic and military capabilities have led to a more confident approach in pursuing its interests and asserting its role as a major global power.

Shift From Soft Power to Geopolitics

The shift from soft power to geopolitics in international relations reflects a change in how countries exert influence and pursue their interests on the global stage. Soft power, a concept popularized by Nye, emphasizes the use of non-coercive means to enact change.⁽²⁶⁾ It is about shaping preferences and building positive perceptions to achieve desired outcomes.

In contrast, geopolitics focuses on the strategic use of geographical factors, such as location, resources and physical terrain, to gain political leverage and secure national interests.⁽²⁷⁾ It involves a more traditional, realist approach to international relations, where power dynamics, territorial control and military capabilities play a central role.

The shift from soft power to geopolitics can be understood in the context of the changing nature of global challenges and the rise of new powers. As countries face more complex and multifaceted security threats, such as cyberwarfare, terrorism and resource competition, there is a growing emphasis on geopolitical strategies to navigate these challenges. Additionally, the rise of countries like China and Russia, which are increasingly assertive in championing their regional and global interests, has led to a renewed focus on geopolitics.⁽²⁸⁾

This shift has implications for diplomacy, international cooperation and conflict resolution. While soft power remains an important tool for building alliances and fostering goodwill, the resurgence of geopolitics highlights the enduring importance of strategic positioning and power politics in shaping global affairs.

China's Mediation Strategy

Diplomatic Approach and Tactics

China's mediation strategy in international conflicts, such as the Iran-Saudi dispute, is characterized by a distinct diplomatic approach and set of tactics that reflect its broader foreign policy principles and objectives. One of the key elements of China's diplomatic approach is its adherence to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.⁽²⁹⁾ This principle allows China to position itself as a neutral mediator, capable of facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties without being perceived as having a vested interest in the outcome. This neutrality is crucial for gaining the trust of both sides in a conflict and for creating an environment conducive to negotiation.

China also employs a low-profile, behind-the-scenes approach to mediation.⁽³⁰⁾ Rather than seeking public attention or taking a leading role in high-profile peace initiatives, China often prefers quiet diplomacy, engaging in discreet discussions and offering its good offices to facilitate talks. This approach helps to avoid exacerbating tensions or provoking resistance from other external actors involved in the conflict.

In terms of tactics, China leverages its economic influence and development assistance in the mediation process. By offering economic incentives, such as investment, aid or trade opportunities, China can encourage conflicting parties to engage in dialogue and seek peaceful resolutions.⁽³¹⁾ This economic leverage is particularly effective in regions where economic development is a priority, as it provides a tangible incentive for cooperation.

China's mediation strategy also involves a long-term perspective, recognizing that complex conflicts cannot be resolved overnight. Chinese diplomats are known for their patience and persistence, gradually building relationships and trust over time, which is essential for effective mediation.

Role of Economic and Political Interests

The role of economic and political interests is central to China's mediation strategy in international conflicts. These interests not only motivate China's involvement in mediation efforts but also shape the tactics and approaches it employs.

Economically, China has significant interests in the Middle East, particularly in securing energy resources and expanding its BRI. The region is a key supplier of oil and gas to China, and stability is crucial for ensuring uninterrupted energy supplies.⁽³²⁾ Through its mediation efforts, China aims to foster a stable environment that safeguards its energy interests and facilitates the implementation of BRI infrastructure and investment projects. By positioning itself as a peace broker, China also seeks to enhance its reputation as a responsible global power, which can attract more economic partnerships and investment opportunities.

Politically, China's mediation efforts are aligned with its broader foreign policy goals of promoting a multipolar world order and reducing the influence of Western powers, particularly the United States, in the Middle East. By successfully mediating conflicts, China can increase its political presence and assert itself as a major player in regional and global affairs. This enhances its diplomatic clout and strengthens its position in international forums.

Furthermore, China's mediation efforts are part of its strategy to project soft power and build strategic partnerships. By contributing to peace and stability in the Middle East, China can cultivate goodwill and strengthen its relationships with regional countries, which are important for both economic and strategic reasons.

Comparison With Previous Mediation Efforts

China's mediation efforts in conflicts can be compared to previous mediation efforts by other actors in several key aspects.

■ **Approach and style:** Unlike Western powers, which often adopt a more direct and high-profile approach to mediation, China's style is characterized by discretion and a low-profile demeanor. Western mediators, such as the United States or the European Union, may employ public diplomacy, make strong statements, or impose conditions for negotiations.⁽³³⁾ In contrast, China prefers quiet diplomacy, focusing on behind-the-scenes negotiations and avoiding public ultimatums or pressure.

■ **Principles:** China's mediation efforts are guided by its principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This principle stands in contrast to some Western-led mediation efforts, which may be perceived as having a hidden agenda or attempting to impose external values or solutions on the conflicting parties. China's approach is seen as more neutral and respectful of the sovereignty of the countries involved.

■ **Economic leverage:** China often uses its economic power as a tool in its mediation efforts. By offering economic incentives, such as investments or trade opportunities, China can encourage conflicting parties to come to the negotiating table. This economic leverage is a distinctive feature of China's mediation strategy, compared to traditional diplomatic efforts that may rely more on political or military pressure.

■ **Long-term perspective:** China's mediation efforts are characterized by a long-term perspective, recognizing that complex conflicts require time and patience to resolve. This contrasts with some previous mediation efforts that may have sought quicker, but less sustainable, solutions to conflicts.

■ **Geopolitical context:** The geopolitical context of China's mediation efforts is also different. As a rising global power, China's involvement in mediation is part of its broader strategy to assert its influence on the international stage and challenge the traditional dominance of Western powers. This is in contrast to previous mediation efforts, which may have been driven by the strategic interests of established powers in maintaining their influence in certain regions.

■ **Outcome and impact:** The outcomes of China's mediation efforts are still evolving, and it remains to be seen how effective they will be in the long term. Previous mediation efforts by other actors have had mixed results, with some leading to lasting peace agreements, while others have failed to achieve a durable resolution.⁽³⁴⁾ China's success in mediation will depend on its ability to navigate the complex dynamics of the conflicts it engages in and its ability to offer solutions that are acceptable to all parties involved.

Impact on Regional Stability

Short-term and Long-term Impacts

China's mediation efforts in conflicts have both short-term and long-term impacts on regional stability. In the short term, China's involvement as a mediator can help de-escalate tensions and prevent the escalation of conflicts. By providing a neutral

platform for dialogue and negotiation, China can facilitate communication between conflicting parties, reducing the likelihood of immediate violence or military confrontation. This can lead to temporary ceasefires or agreements that provide immediate relief to the region and prevent the further loss of life and destruction.

Moreover, China's economic leverage and investment opportunities can incentivize conflicting parties to engage in negotiations, leading to short-term agreements that stabilize the situation. These economic incentives can also foster a sense of interdependence, making conflict less appealing due to the potential economic costs.

In the long term, successful mediation by China can contribute to the resolution of deep-seated issues and the establishment of lasting peace in the region. By addressing the root causes of conflicts and facilitating agreements that are acceptable to all parties, China can help build a foundation for long-term stability. This can lead to increased cooperation and integration among countries in the region, further enhancing stability.

Furthermore, China's active role in promoting peace and stability can reshape the regional power dynamics and reduce the influence of external powers, leading to a more balanced and multipolar regional order. This can create a more conducive environment for addressing other challenges, such as economic development, governance and human security.

However, the long-term impact of China's mediation efforts will depend on their effectiveness in achieving sustainable solutions and the willingness of regional actors to embrace and uphold these solutions. It will also be influenced by the broader geopolitical context and the evolving interests of China and other global powers in the region.

Influence on Neighboring Countries

China's mediation efforts can have a significant influence on neighboring countries in the Middle East. Firstly, successful mediation can lead to a reduction in regional tensions, which can have a stabilizing effect on neighboring countries. Reduced tensions can decrease the likelihood of spillovers, such as refugee flows, cross-border violence or the spread of extremist ideologies.⁽³⁵⁾ This can create a more secure environment for neighboring countries, allowing them to focus on their own development and governance challenges.

Secondly, China's mediation efforts can influence the balance of power in the region. By acting as a mediator, China can increase its own presence and build stronger relationships with countries in the Middle East. This can alter the traditional power dynamics, which have been dominated by Western powers and regional heavyweights like Iran and Saudi Arabia. Neighboring countries may seek to align themselves with China to benefit from its economic and diplomatic support, leading to a shift in alliances and partnerships.

Thirdly, China's emphasis on economic development as part of its mediation

strategy can also have positive spillover effects on neighboring countries. Investments in infrastructure, energy and trade can boost regional connectivity and economic integration, benefiting neighboring countries through increased trade opportunities and economic growth.⁽³⁶⁾

Implications for Global Power Dynamics

China's mediation efforts have significant implications for global power dynamics. By actively engaging in conflict resolution in the Middle East, China is challenging the traditional dominance of Western powers, particularly the United States, in the region. This shift reflects the broader transition toward a multipolar world order, where multiple powers, including China, are exerting influence on the global stage.

China's successful mediation can enhance its global stature and diplomatic credibility, showcasing its ability to contribute constructively to international peace and security. This can strengthen China's position in international forums and negotiations, increasing its leverage in shaping the rules and norms of the international system.

Moreover, China's approach to mediation, which emphasizes neutrality, economic development, and non-interference, offers an alternative model to the interventionist approaches often associated with Western powers.⁽³⁷⁾ This can appeal to countries that are wary of external interference in their internal affairs, leading to a realignment of alliances and partnerships in favor of China.

China's growing involvement in the Middle East also has implications for its strategic competition with the United States. As China seeks to expand its presence in a region that has been a traditional sphere of US interests, it can lead to increased geopolitical competition between the two powers. This competition can extend beyond the Middle East to other regions, further reshaping the global power dynamics.

However, China's rise as a mediator and global power also brings challenges. It will need to navigate complex regional politics, manage its relationships with other powers, and address concerns about its intentions and the sustainability of its mediation efforts. The impact of China's mediation on global power dynamics will depend on its ability to balance its interests with those of the international community and contribute to lasting peace and stability.

Possibilities of Success or Failure

Factors Contributing to Success

The success of China's mediation efforts depends on several factors:

- **Neutrality and credibility:** China's ability to maintain a neutral stance and be perceived as a credible mediator by all parties is crucial. This requires a balanced approach that respects the sovereignty and interests of the conflicting parties without favoring one side over the other.
- **Economic leverage:** China's economic presence in the region, through trade,

investment and development projects, can be a powerful incentive for parties to engage in dialogue and reach agreements. The promise of economic benefits can encourage cooperation and compromise.⁽³⁸⁾

■ **Diplomatic skill:** The effectiveness of China's diplomatic efforts, including its ability to understand the complexities of the conflict, build trust with the parties and facilitate constructive negotiations, is key to the success of its mediation.

■ **Regional and international support:** Support from other regional powers and the international community can enhance the legitimacy and impact of China's mediation efforts. Collaborating with other actors can also bring additional resources and perspectives to the mediation process.

■ **Long-term commitment:** Successful mediation often requires sustained engagement and follow-up to ensure that agreements are implemented and that underlying issues are addressed.⁽³⁹⁾ China's willingness to commit to the long-term process of peacebuilding is essential for lasting success.

■ **Addressing root causes:** The ability of China's mediation to address the root causes of the conflict, rather than just focusing on short-term solutions, will determine its long-term success. This includes tackling issues such as sectarian tensions, power imbalances and regional rivalries.

Potential Obstacles and Challenges

China's mediation efforts face several potential obstacles and challenges:

■ **Deep-seated hostilities:** The longstanding and deeply entrenched nature of the Iran-Saudi rivalry, driven by religious, ideological and geopolitical factors, poses a significant challenge to mediation efforts. Overcoming deep-rooted mistrust and animosity requires time and sustained engagement.

■ **Regional dynamics:** The complex regional dynamics of the Middle East, with multiple actors and interests at play, can complicate mediation efforts. Balancing the interests of different regional powers and addressing their concerns is a challenging task.

■ **External influences:** The involvement of external powers, such as the United States and Russia, in the Middle East can impact the effectiveness of China's mediation. These powers may have competing interests and agendas, which can influence the willingness of conflicting parties to engage in negotiations.

■ **Implementation and enforcement:** Even if an agreement is reached, ensuring its implementation and enforcement is a significant challenge. The lack of a robust mechanism for monitoring and verifying compliance can undermine the durability of peace agreements.

Scenario Analysis

Scenario analysis is a useful tool for exploring the potential outcomes of China's mediation efforts in the Iran-Saudi conflict. By considering different scenarios, policymakers and analysts can better understand the range of possibilities and prepare for various eventualities.

■ **Successful mediation:** In this scenario, China's mediation leads to a break-

through agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The agreement addresses key issues such as security concerns, regional influence and economic cooperation. China's neutral stance and economic incentives contribute to building trust and facilitating dialogue. The successful mediation enhances China's global stature and contributes to regional stability.

■ **Partial success:** China's mediation results in a partial agreement that de-escalates tensions but does not fully resolve the underlying issues. The agreement might include confidence-building measures or limited cooperation in specific areas. While this scenario does not achieve a comprehensive peace, it reduces the risk of conflict and opens the door for further negotiations in the future.

■ **Stalemate:** Despite China's efforts, the mediation process reaches a stalemate, with neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia willing to make significant concessions. The deep-rooted rivalry and external influences hinder progress. In this scenario, China's role as a mediator is limited, and the status quo in the region remains unchanged.

■ **Escalation of conflict:** The mediation efforts fail, and tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia escalate into a more direct conflict. This scenario could result from a breakdown in negotiations, external provocations or domestic pressures. The escalation of conflict would have significant implications for regional stability and global security, and it would undermine China's position as a mediator.

Each scenario highlights different challenges and opportunities for China's mediation efforts and underscores the importance of a nuanced and adaptable approach to conflict resolution in the Middle East.

Costs for China

Economic, Political and Strategic Costs

China's mediation efforts involve various economic, political and strategic costs:

■ **Economic costs:** China's mediation efforts may require significant financial investments, including funding for peacekeeping missions, humanitarian aid or reconstruction efforts in post-conflict scenarios. Additionally, China's economic interests in the region, such as energy supplies and infrastructure projects, could be risked if the mediation efforts fail and lead to further instability.

■ **Political costs:** Engaging in mediation carries political risks for China. Failure to achieve a resolution could damage China's reputation as a reliable mediator and global power. Moreover, China must carefully balance its relationships with different countries in the region, as favoring one side over another could lead to diplomatic fallout and harm its interests in other parts of the Middle East.

■ **Strategic costs:** China's involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts could entangle it in complex regional dynamics and power struggles, potentially diverting attention and resources from other strategic priorities. Additionally, China risks being drawn into conflicts with other major powers, such as the United States or Russia, which have their own interests in the region. This could lead to increased

geopolitical tensions and challenges to China's pursuit of peaceful ascendance.

Risks of Involvement in Middle Eastern Conflicts

China's involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts, such as mediating the Iran-Saudi dispute, presents several risks:

■ **Reputational risk:** Failure to successfully mediate a resolution could tarnish China's image as an effective global mediator and undermine its credibility in international diplomacy. This could impact China's ability to play a constructive role in other conflicts and global issues.

■ **Entanglement in regional rivalries:** The Middle East is a complex region with deep-seated rivalries and shifting alliances.⁽⁴⁰⁾ China risks being drawn into these rivalries, which could strain its relationships with regional powers and complicate its foreign policy objectives.

■ **Impact on economic interests:** China has significant economic interests in the Middle East, particularly in energy and trade. Escalation of conflicts or instability in the region could disrupt oil supplies, endanger investments and affect global energy markets, impacting China's economy.

■ **Security risks:** Increased involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts could expose China to security threats, including terrorism and cyberattacks. Protecting Chinese citizens and assets in the region could become more challenging.

■ **Geopolitical tensions:** China's mediation efforts might lead to tensions with other global powers, such as the United States, which have their own interests and strategies in the Middle East. Navigating these geopolitical dynamics requires careful diplomacy to avoid escalating conflicts or triggering a broader confrontation.

Impact on China's Global Image

China's involvement in mediating conflicts can have a significant impact on its global image:

■ **Positive impact:** Successful mediation can enhance China's reputation as a responsible global power committed to peace and stability. It can showcase China's diplomatic prowess and ability to contribute constructively to international affairs. This can bolster China's soft power and strengthen its relationships with countries in the Middle East and beyond.

■ **Demonstration of leadership:** By playing a proactive role in resolving complex conflicts, China can assert itself as a leader in global governance. This can position China as an alternative to traditional Western powers and increase its influence in shaping the international order.

■ **Neutral or negative impact:** If China's mediation efforts are perceived as biased, ineffective, or driven by self-interest, it could harm its global image. Failure to achieve tangible results or being seen as exacerbating conflicts could lead to criticism and skepticism about China's intentions and capabilities.

■ **Balancing act:** China's involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts requires a delicate balancing act. It must navigate regional sensitivities, manage relations with

competing powers and uphold its principle of non-interference, all while pursuing its own interests. How China manages these challenges will influence its global image and the perception of its rise as a major power.

Conclusion

China's role as a mediator in the Iran-Saudi conflict represents a significant development in its foreign policy and growing influence in the Middle East. By adopting a neutral stance and leveraging its economic power, China has positioned itself as a key player in regional diplomacy. The success of its mediation efforts could enhance its global stature, contribute to regional stability and promote a multipolar world order.

However, China's involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts is not without challenges. The deeply entrenched rivalries, complex regional dynamics and the presence of other global powers pose significant obstacles to successful mediation. Moreover, China must carefully manage the economic, political and strategic costs of its engagement, as well as the risks of becoming entangled in regional conflicts.

The impact of China's mediation on global power dynamics is profound. As it seeks to assert its influence in the Middle East, China's actions have implications for its relationships with other powers, particularly the United States, and for the broader international order. The success or failure of its mediation efforts will not only affect regional stability but also shape perceptions of China's role as a global leader.

In this evolving geopolitical landscape, the outcomes of China's mediation in the Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict will be closely watched. They will provide valuable insights into the possibilities and limitations of China's diplomatic approach, as well as its ability to navigate the intricate web of interests and rivalries in the Middle East. As China continues to assert its presence on the global stage, its role in mediating conflicts will be a critical test of its aspirations and capabilities as a major power in the 21st century.

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THE POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE US MILITARY WITHDRAWAL FROM IRAQ

Dr. Abdelraouf Mustafa al-Ghoneimi

Researcher, the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah)

Abstract

This research article primarily investigates the potential repercussions of a prospective US military withdrawal from Iraq on both the future of the Iraqi state and its regional relationships, as well as on the United States' international standing. This analysis is crucial, especially considering the timing when non-state actors are gaining influence in Iraq, coupled with ongoing internal and external instability. The research also evaluates how the withdrawal may conflict with the interests of both Iraq and the United States in light of prevailing issues within Iraq and the broader Middle East. The findings indicate that such a withdrawal could drag Iraq back into a precarious state across multiple dimensions, while also risking historical parallels with the US experiences in Saigon and Kabul. In the event of withdrawal, Iraq, alongside its Sunni and Kurdish factions, as well as US interests and allies in the region, would face significant setbacks, while Iran and its affiliated militias would emerge as beneficiaries. In conclusion, it suggests that the prospect of a US withdrawal remains uncertain, with ongoing negotiations largely viewed as a strategy to buy time for both Washington and Baghdad. Both parties recognize the potential consequences of a withdrawal on the United States' global stature, and Washington is likely hesitant to repeat the events of Kabul and Saigon, which could undermine its position in the international power hierarchy. Thus, a new US withdrawal could considerably diminish its influence in ongoing global power contests against revisionist forces.

Keywords: military withdrawal, great powers, interests, strategic regions, strategic vacuum, strategic fill, non-state actors.

Introduction

International relations theories suggest that when major powers withdraw their military presence from strategically significant countries — especially those located in regions of geopolitical importance — at a time when it is not feasible to maintain the existing balance of power, and the local security and military institutions are not fully equipped to maintain sovereignty and control independently, the outcomes are often negative. These withdrawals tend to create a “strategic vacuum,”⁽¹⁾ which is quickly exploited by regional and international powers with geopolitical and economic ambitions. This shift not only destabilizes the country from which the withdrawal occurs but also diminishes the influence, global standing and authority of the withdrawing power, as rival powers present the situation as a victory over the departing state.

The potential US military withdrawal from Iraq is a major topic of discussion among experts and think tanks, given its significant implications for both Iraq and the United States. This debate is particularly relevant due to the sensitive period Iraq is experiencing, marked by a range of complex challenges facing its still-developing security forces. These challenges include the proliferation of uncontrolled weapons backed by Iran and repeated attacks on US targets without the state’s approval. Additionally, Iraq’s institutions have struggled to resolve complex crises for over two decades despite the country’s substantial resources. The debate also focuses on how such a withdrawal could impact the United States’ global influence and leadership, especially amid the intensifying geopolitical rivalry between dominant and revisionist powers, which could shape the future of the international order.

The study focuses on the conflicting perspectives of Iraq and the United States regarding a potential US military withdrawal from Iraq. For Iraq, there is a contradiction between the government’s calls for the departure of US forces and the potential risks to national interests, as a withdrawal could mirror the aftermath of 2011. At that time, the US exit led to the rise of ISIS, which gained control over nearly a third of Iraq’s territory and whose sleeper cells still pose a threat today. For the United States, the dilemma lies in the desire to continue its pattern of withdrawals while recognizing that pulling out from a strategic region like the Middle East could harm its interests. Such a move would further diminish the United States’ global influence, potentially benefiting regional and international rival powers. It could also impact the perception of US allies toward its leadership role, recalling moments like the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, which led to the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul, and the fallout from the US exit from Vietnam, known as the “Saigon Moment.” Iraq’s current security challenges and the growing influence of non-state actors echo the instability seen before those events. Therefore, the central question of the study is: How well do the discussions of a US withdrawal from Iraq align with the interests of both the US and Iraqi governments?

The study aims to address several key sub-questions: What are the underlying motivations behind the calls for a US military withdrawal from Iraq? How do

various Iraqi political forces view these demands for withdrawal? What potential impacts could a US withdrawal have on Iraq's future and the global standing of the United States? And finally, who stands to gain or lose if the US military was to withdraw from Iraq?

Demands of Withdrawal — Between Sovereignty Requirements and External Pressures

Since taking office on October 27, 2022, the Iraqi government led by Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani has ramped up efforts to push for the withdrawal of foreign entities and forces from Iraq. This includes the International Coalition to Fight ISIS,⁽²⁾ established in 2014 and led primarily by the United States, as well as the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI),⁽³⁾ which was created following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. To achieve this, the Iraqi government has pursued two main approaches:

First Approach: Since August 2023, the Iraqi government has engaged in security negotiations with the United States, leading to the formation of the joint High Military Committee (HMC) in January 2024. Headed by Prime Minister Sudani, the committee has held multiple sessions to assess the threat posed by remaining ISIS cells, evaluate the security and military situation, and analyze the capabilities of Iraqi security forces in addressing security challenges. The primary aim is to establish a timetable for the final withdrawal of coalition forces from Iraq and transition toward a comprehensive bilateral security partnership with coalition countries that aligns with the Iraqi government's vision.

Second Approach: On May 8, 2024, the Iraqi government formally requested the UN Security Council to end the mandate of the UNAMI by the end of 2025, allowing Iraq to take over its duties. The Security Council, in a session on May 31, 2024, unanimously approved the request, setting December 2025 as the final date for the UNAMI mission. Despite efforts made through discussions with the US Embassy in Baghdad, meetings with US officials during visits to Iraq, and visits by senior Iraqi officials to Washington, no specific timeline had been set for ending coalition military operations in Iraq by the study's publication date. However, Reuters reported on September 6, 2024, that a tentative agreement between Washington and Baghdad was awaiting final approval. This agreement proposes the withdrawal of hundreds of coalition troops by September 2025, with the remainder departing by the end of 2026, while establishing a new advisory relationship that would permit some US forces to stay in Iraq after 2026.⁽⁴⁾

Iraqi Justifications for the Demand

The Iraqi government's official request⁽⁵⁾ to the United Nations to end the UNAMI mission after two decades in the country was driven by several factors. First, the government viewed Iraq as having reached a state of political and security stability. Second, the request emphasized the importance of asserting Iraq's national sovereignty as the host country. Third, the combat capabilities of the Iraqi

forces had significantly improved, enabling them to address security challenges, particularly in combating remaining active and dormant ISIS cells. Additionally, successive Iraqi governments, with assistance from friendly countries and specialized UN agencies, had made significant progress in overcoming challenges. For these reasons, the Iraqi prime minister regarded the Security Council's vote to end the UNAMI mission as a recognition by the international community and the UN of Iraq's positive advancements across various sectors.⁽⁶⁾

Iraqi government spokesperson Bassem al-Awadi provided additional reasons for the request to end the UNAMI mission, emphasizing Iraq's recovery from the crises it faced since 2003. He highlighted the country's emergence from the phase of sectarian violence that followed the US invasion and the period when ISIS controlled parts of Iraqi territory. Awadi noted Iraq's resurgence and the resumption of its prominent regional role. He also mentioned the recommendation of the UN Strategic Review Committee, led by German academic Volker Perthes, which assessed all aspects of the Iraqi situation and endorsed proceeding with ending the mission based on the notable progress across various fields.⁽⁷⁾ The Baghdad government saw the alignment between Iraqi and international perspectives as a validation of the demand's realism and credibility.

An analysis of the official statements from senior US officials regarding Iraq's request to schedule the withdrawal of coalition forces reveals that Washington has displayed flexibility in its withdrawal conditions. The primary objective remains the elimination of ISIS and its remnants in Iraq, along with halting attacks by armed militias on US targets, which include diplomatic facilities, military bases, civilian contractors, and logistical support vehicles. To address these concerns, a series of discussions have been initiated with Iraqi officials about the withdrawal timeline, particularly in light of ongoing operations against remaining terrorist cells and repeated militia attacks on US positions. However, a January 2024 cable from the US State Department indicated that Sudani does not actually desire a complete US withdrawal. It also mentioned that a senior advisor to Sudani communicated to US officials that the prime minister's demands were part of a strategy to appease domestic political factions and public sentiment that oppose the US presence in Iraq.⁽⁸⁾

Real Motives Behind the Request

Many observers of Iraqi affairs remain unconvinced by the official justifications provided for the demand to withdraw foreign forces from Iraq, citing persistent fluctuations in political and security stability, as well as enduring economic, living, and infrastructure crises, such as electricity shortages, water scarcity, unemployment, and widespread corruption. Additionally, the ongoing presence of weapons and their use against US targets without state oversight, along with continued terrorist activities from remaining ISIS cells, further complicates the situation. Several factors have been identified as driving the Iraqi demand for the expulsion of foreign forces, with escalating Iranian pressure being a significant

one. This pressure intensified since the United States adopted a maximum pressure strategy against Iran, leading to retaliatory actions from Iran, such as targeting oil tankers and international trade vessels following the US withdrawal from the 2018 nuclear agreement. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has repeatedly urged Iraqi leaders to expel US forces, emphasizing the detrimental impact of their presence on the region's countries and peoples. In a 2018 meeting with former Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi, Khamenei stated, "The presence of American soldiers in the countries of the region harms the countries and peoples of the region," adding, "You have to make the Americans withdraw their army from Iraq as soon as possible."⁽⁹⁾ Furthermore, he stated, "Iran does not interfere in Iraq's relations with America, but it expects Iraqi friends to know America and to know that America's presence in any country is a source of corruption, ruin and destruction," adding, "Iran expects the decision to expel the Americans to be followed up because their presence causes insecurity."⁽¹⁰⁾ Khamenei also renewed an escalating demand and threatened to continue targeting American forces after the killing of former Iranian Quds Force Commander General Qassem Soleimani along with Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis near Baghdad International Airport in early January 2020. During his meeting with Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid in Tehran in April 2023, he demanded the expulsion of the US-led coalition forces, stating, "The presence of one American soldier in Iraq is too much."⁽¹¹⁾

The second motive behind Iraq's demand for the withdrawal of foreign forces is that the country has become an arena for settling scores between US and Iranian parties. Pro-Iran militias have targeted US assets as part of a strategy that counters the US maximum pressure approach. This escalation has pushed Iraq's crises into a new stage of complexity, which is proving costly for its governments. Both parties have employed armed force to resolve their conflicts, effectively returning Iraqi security to a precarious state. The militias have prioritized the expulsion of foreign forces from Iraq, disregarding state decisions in the process. They have adopted continuous missile and drone attacks against US targets as one of their pressure tactics aimed at achieving this goal. In response, the United States has increased its military actions against militia concentrations in Iraq, delivering a significant blow to Iran by assassinating Soleimani, the architect of the Iranian regional project. This action served to send strong deterrent messages to both Iran and its affiliated militias.

The militias used the killing of Soleimani as a pretext to adopt a strategy aimed at pressuring Washington by intensifying attacks against US targets and on the Iraqi government, seeking to push it toward demanding the withdrawal of US forces. Additionally, the militias exploited regional developments stemming from the outbreak of the war in Gaza as justification for escalating their attacks against US targets in Iraq. They argued that these actions were necessary to pressure Washington and Tel Aviv to cease military operations in Gaza. For instance, during the first four months of the Gaza war alone, US military forces recorded no fewer than

170 attacks against its personnel in Iraq and Syria.⁽¹²⁾ In response, the US military targeted several militia leaders, including Abu Baqir al-Saadi, the military commander of the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades, and Mushtaq Talib al-Saidi, nicknamed “Abu Taqwa,” in January 2024. The militias possess multiple pressure tactics to influence the Iraqi government regarding the expulsion of U forces, including the use of weapons, the capability to create instability, and their influential alliances within the government and Parliament. These factors have played a role in pushing the Iraqi Parliament to demand the expulsion of foreign forces on two occasions: first, after the killing of Soleimani in 2020 and again in February 2024.

The third motive centers on the decline of the US role in the Middle East, with the exception of a recent period during which Washington intensified its military presence in the region to create a deterrent force in favor of Israel and to prevent the outbreak of a major regional war that many fear following the escalation of the war in Gaza. This decline in US influence is attributed to a shift in US priorities regarding threats to national security. In the past year, US defense and national security documents identified the Indo-Pacific region as the most dangerous area for the United States, as China emerges as a revisionist power aiming to reshape the international order. In response, Washington has formulated the “Eastward Direction” strategy to encircle and contain China within its regional sphere. The American National Security Strategy for 2022 emphasized what it referred to as the “decisive decade,” denoting the 2020s of the 21st century, with the objective of enhancing the United States’ capacity to surpass its geopolitical competitors.

The decline in the region’s priority within the US strategy has led to the rise of countries with geopolitical ambitions and non-state actors, most of whom are armed militias loyal to Iran, at the expense of state actors. As a result, the influence over Iraqi decisions has increased, and consequently, so has the pressure on the Iraqi government to expel US forces and monopolize the Iraqi arena due to Iraq’s centrality in Iran’s strategy. It is evident from this that the demand to withdraw US forces from Iraq does not reflect a genuine national Iraqi demand stemming from a vision rooted in Iraq’s supreme interests and comprehensive national consensus. Instead, it primarily represents an external demand driven by armed militias loyal to Iran. Therefore, despite the importance of state independence and full sovereignty in the process of state-building and development, the context and circumstances surrounding this demand do not serve Iraqi interests but rather facilitate Iran’s expansionist agenda. Iraq is not prepared for the withdrawal of foreign forces, which carries significant implications for achieving a balance both internally and externally. A US withdrawal will create a strategic vacuum, leading to repercussions for Iraq and its people. This demand reveals the governance and influence equation in Iraq, characterized by the prioritization of military power over political authority, ideological motives over national interests at home, and external interests over those of Iraq itself.

Political Alliances and the Question of the US Withdrawal

The positions of the main alliances in Iraq — Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish — regarding the demand for the withdrawal of US military forces are divided into two directions.

Those Supporting and Pressing for the Withdrawal of US Forces

This position is leading the political and media campaigns calling for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq, represented by the Coordination Framework, which is supported by Iran. This framework includes several Shiite political and military figures, such as the State of Law Alliance led by former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, the Fatah Alliance led by Badr Organization leader Hadi al-Amiri, the Rights Movement led by the spokesman for the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades — Iran's strongest ally — Hussein Mu'nis (Abu Ali al-Askari), the National Wisdom Movement led by cleric Ammar al-Hakim, the Victory and Reform Alliance led by former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades led by Abu Hussein al-Muhammadawi, the al-Nujaba Movement militia led by Akram al-Kaabi, and the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia led by Qais Khazali. The majority of these alliances and militias also adopt the principle of the sectarian state, revolving around the concepts of sectarianism, consensus, subordination, and Iranian interests. The Sadrist Movement's position is also consistent with the Coordination Framework's stance on this issue.

For example, the military spokesman for Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq, Jaafar al-Husseini, stated in an interview with BBC Arabic in July 2021, "All American bases — whether those of American forces or joint forces — in Iraq were subjected to strikes by what he called the resistance factions," adding, "The effort and focus of the factions now is not focused on the American forces present on Iraqi territory, but rather the main goal is to expel all American forces from West Asia."⁽¹³⁾ Following the killing of PMF members in a US raid in November 2023, Kaabi called for the necessity of declaring war on the United States and expelling its forces from Iraq. In January 2024, his movement threatened those it called "traitors who sold their religion to the occupier, with what happened in Afghanistan, so that he would either flee shamefully or remain to be tried for his crime soon."⁽¹⁴⁾ Khazali considered the Iraqi demand to be a step in the right direction toward reinforcing national sovereignty, and the militias' statements did not stop at the limits of expelling US forces, but rather called for the closure of US diplomatic headquarters. The Sadrist Movement's position is consistent with the Coordination Framework on this issue, as the movement's leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, called in January 2020 for a peaceful million-person demonstration to demand the expulsion of US forces. His movement also calls for the closure of US military bases and diplomatic headquarters in Baghdad.

Cautious Approach Regarding the Withdrawal of US Forces From Iraq

Pragmatic calculations indicate that the US withdrawal is not in the interest of the Sunni alliances (National Progress, Sovereignty, United, Azm, the Iraqi Islamic

Party) and the Kurdish alliances (the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and therefore some of their key figures expressed their rejection of the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in light of the current crises. For example, the former Sunni parliamentarian Mishaan al-Jubouri posted on the X platform in February 2024, "The voices of the Shiite leaders, factions and blocs close to Iran are rising, demanding the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq... It is no secret that the majority of Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds do not support this demand and agree on the desire for them to remain,"⁽¹⁵⁾ as explained by Arafat Karim, the political advisor to the head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, "No party can control the fate of a state according to its imported religious ideology. They remember sovereignty when America bombs and forget it when Iran bombs."⁽¹⁶⁾

There are many considerations behind Sunni and Kurdish fears over the potential withdrawal of US forces, most notably the fear of losing the basis of the balance between the alliances, the comprehensive dominance of the Shiite alliances over the Iraqi government and even over the apparatuses of the Iraqi state itself, a power shift in favor of the militias at the expense of the national army, and thus the imposition of Shiite hegemony loyal to Iran by armed force over the rest of the alliances, which allows for "cloning an IRGC similar to the IRGC," and greater dominance over the key apparatuses of the state and influence over its strategic decisions. Additionally, there is a fear of the Shiite factions continuing to impose a sub-identity on the collective national identity, which prioritizes the Iraqi establishment, with all its apparatuses and bodies, to work for the benefit of the Shiite factions only.

But the question is: Do the Coordination Framework alliances, in their demand for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq, represent the entire Shiite street? The answer is definitely no. The reality of the Iraqi Shiite scene reveals that the Coordination Framework alliances have only two types of audiences in the Shiite street: the audience that belongs to the framework ideologically and organizationally, and the audience that associates with them pragmatically. Both groups represent the smallest number when compared to the broader Shiite audience in the southern governorates, which has expressed its rejection of the sectarian projects that the framework strongly seeks.

This rejection is evident in two significant instances. First, the resounding blow dealt to the Coordination Framework alliances in the 2021 parliamentary election cycle, where Shiite alliances loyal to Iran lost their strong presence in Parliament, largely due to the withdrawal of Sadr's representatives. Second, the massive Iraqi popular protests against the Iranian project in Iraq have emerged not only in Sunni provinces but also in the heart of Shiite provinces. Protesters have consistently expressed their opposition to the Iranian project through various means, including targeting Iranian diplomatic headquarters, Shiite alliance headquarters, armed militia concentrations, and setting fire to pictures of the supreme leader and Soleimani. This demonstrates the existence of a national, cross-sectarian

Iraqi bloc, opposing sectarian entrenchment and the rampant Iranian influence in the Iraqi state.

The general Shiite position indicates that the issue of the US withdrawal from Iraq lacks “consensus between the Shiite alliances and the Shiite community in general,” reflecting the existence of two prevailing perceptions within the Iraqi Shiite component regarding this issue. The first perception is a popular Shiite viewpoint that aligns more closely with that of the Sunni and Kurdish components. This perspective emphasizes the necessity of addressing the issue in terms of the supreme interests of Iraq, rather than those of external parties, particularly Iran. From this standpoint, the matter is viewed as a strategic concern related to the security, sovereignty and the future of Iraq, and it must be discussed and decided upon within a comprehensive, unified national consensus. The second perception is an elite Shiite viewpoint that approaches the issue through a lens that serves the Iranian agenda. This perspective treats the withdrawal as a geopolitical matter tied to the future of the Iranian expansionist project, asserting that decisions regarding it should be made within the consensus of the Shiite alliances that implement the Iranian agenda.

On the other hand, it is noted that the positions of the Sunni Arab masses align with those of the Sunni alliances regarding this issue. Data indicate that Sunni Arabs are uncomfortable with the current withdrawal of the United States, believing it will leave them vulnerable to militia threats and the remnants of ISIS. Additionally, the positions of the majority of the Kurdish masses regarding the issue completely mirror those of the Kurdish alliances, as they reject any US withdrawal from Iraq. The positions of the Turkmen faction toward the issue are divided, comprising both Shiite and Sunni Turkmen. The Shiite Turkmen are split into two factions: one that supports the demand for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq due to its ideological and organizational affiliation with the alliances backed by Iran, and another that opposes their withdrawal, sharing the same concerns as the Sunni, Kurdish, and Arab Shiite alliances. As for the Sunni Turkmen, they are also divided into two groups: one that supports foreign withdrawal from Iraq, believing it to be in the interest of the Sunni Turkmen — especially if it affects northern Iraq — because it would weaken certain Kurdish forces empowered by the US presence in targeting the Turkmen. The other group rejects foreign withdrawal and shares the same concerns as the Sunni, Kurdish, and Arab Sunni alliances.⁽¹⁷⁾

Overall, the previous data reveal that the issue of the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq lacks the basis of “comprehensive national consensus.” The issue does not enjoy the consensus of the Iraqi people — Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish — nor does it benefit from a comprehensive Shiite-Shiite consensus.

The Potential Repercussions of the US Withdrawal From Iraq

If the US withdrawal is carried out in an uncalculated and unstudied manner, amid security and military institutions facing security challenges, and lacking a national consensus, it will be viewed as connected to external agendas within

a sectarian framework that do not prioritize the supreme interests of Iraq. The following potential repercussions are expected for Iraq:

The Imposition of Sanctions and Its Potential Impacts

The chances of imposing US sanctions on Iraq are increasing under the pretext of its cooperation with Iran, which is also subject to sanctions, particularly in the energy sector. Such sanctions would deprive Iraq of oil sales revenues, which constitute the mainstay of the economy and the largest source of the budget. Washington effectively controls Iraqi oil revenues by requiring Iraq to deposit its revenues into an account affiliated with the Central Bank of Iraq at the US Federal Reserve. This mechanism has been in place for over a decade and a half, following the establishment of the “Development Fund for Iraq” by the United States in 2003.⁽¹⁸⁾ This fund was created pursuant to a UN resolution designed to protect Iraqi funds from legal claims by international companies seeking compensation for losses incurred due to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.⁽¹⁹⁾ Additionally, the removal of Iraq from the list of countries exempted from US sanctions on Iran could deprive it of the ability to import gas and electricity from abroad, exacerbating the severe deficit in electricity production.

Potential sanctions could also drive investors away from Iraq and adversely impact foreign trade relations, further aggravating the existing crises within the country. Living conditions are expected to worsen, leading to intensified crises in electricity, water, and unemployment. For instance, the number of hours of power outages is likely to increase during the summer due to the financial inability to fund the completion of new power stations needed to address the electricity deficit crisis. Moreover, difficulties in continuing to pay for electricity imports from neighboring countries may lead to rising levels of public discontent, potentially resulting in widespread chaos. Thus, the mere warnings from some Iraqis regarding these outcomes are sufficient to maintain an internal balance of power.

Collapse of the Internal Balance of Power, Entrenching the Non-State Trajectory

Over the past years, Iraq has made progress in establishing a balance between state and non-state trajectories. Since the October 2019 protests, alliances adhering to the state path have emerged, advocating for a civil state within a comprehensive national vision for a new Iraq. This vision seeks to transition from a consensual government formation to a national one, shifting from the dominance of a Shiite sub-identity to a collective identity. It aims to achieve sovereignty and independence in decision-making and implementation, limit the presence of weapons to state control, and end Iraq’s subordination to Iran and its project.

In contrast, the non-state path alliances, supported by Iran and dominating the Iraqi political landscape for over two decades, maintain a sectarian orientation that prioritizes a sub-identity. This ensures the continuation of weapons and Iraq’s subordination to Iran to further the Iranian agenda. A US withdrawal would destabilize the balance, favoring the non-state path and ushering in a new

internal phase characterized by “strengthening Iran’s sole hegemony over Iraq.” In this scenario, Iran would exert significant influence over Iraqi decision-making, including the appointment of successive prime ministers, while loyal alliances would gain extensive control over ministerial portfolios and parliamentary seats. This dynamic would facilitate the passage of sectarian laws at the expense of civil laws, strengthen Iran’s control over the Iraqi economy and market, and promote Shiite cultural activities and rituals to solidify Shiite identity. Moreover, it would expand militarization in strategic areas and ease the establishment of a corridor linking Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea, further entrenching corruption in a country already plagued by it. Iran relies on non-national figures to execute its agenda, undermining accountability efforts and facilitating the plundering of wealth, which would exacerbate popular resentment and potentially ignite mass protests. Internationally, Iraq’s political orientation may shift toward Iran after it has made steps toward reconnecting with its Arab surroundings. The narrative could promote the withdrawal as a victory for Iran in its conflict with the West, distancing Iraq from the Western bloc led by the United States in favor of the Eastern bloc led by China and Russia.

The Return of Chaos and Ending the State of Fragile Stability

The United Nations and international forces led by the United States played a prominent role in addressing the security chaos resulting from the sectarian conflicts that followed the US invasion of Iraq. They achieved this through the continuous training of Iraqi forces to enhance their effectiveness, intensifying deployments in hotbeds, providing intelligence about terrorist cells, and participating in military operations that Iraq conducted — and continues to conduct — against ISIS and its remnants. They also helped maintain a balance of roles and influence on security decisions between the military establishment and auxiliary forces. The international coalition is credited with significantly contributing to the organization’s loss of “spatial control” over most of the territory it had occupied in the Sunni provinces since 2014, which constituted approximately one-third of Iraqi territory. Their efforts were instrumental in Iraq’s recovery of the oil fields seized by the organization, leading to a substantial reduction in its financial revenue sources. Moreover, coalition forces, leveraging advanced intelligence capabilities, succeeded in eliminating the organization’s first two leaders: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2019 and his successor Ibrahim al-Qurashi in February 2022. They also targeted and eliminated numerous second and third-tier leaders, although some active remnants continue to exist across Iraq and Syria.

Therefore, the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq risks triggering a resurgence of security chaos reminiscent of the period after 2011. This period saw an ill-considered US withdrawal from Iraq, which led to the spread of terrorism in the Sunni provinces. It was during this time that ISIS was established in 2013, and in June 2014, the group declared the formation of an “Islamic Caliphate” in Iraq. Under

the slogan “Remaining and Expanding,” the organization signaled its ambition for unlimited territorial expansion, appointing Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its Caliph.⁽²⁰⁾ The organization actively called upon Muslims worldwide to migrate to the so-called Caliphate. UN reports on terrorism noted that by 2015, approximately 40,000 individuals from over 120 countries had entered Iraq and Syria to fight, with around 80% joining ISIS and living under its rule. Additionally, more than 50 terrorist groups pledged allegiance to the organization.⁽²¹⁾ As a result, by early 2017, ISIS had taken control of nearly one-third of Iraqi territory. The following are key indicators suggesting a potential recurrence of the post-2011 scenario if a US withdrawal was to occur.

The Actual and Gradual Return of ISIS

Currently, ISIS remains active in multiple Iraqi cities. For instance, the organization claimed responsibility for several attacks, including the bloody assaults in Diyala and Kirkuk in northeastern Iraq in December 2023, the bombings in Tarmiyah district that targeted a military convoy with explosive devices in March 2024, and the Mutaybija bombings east of Salah al-Din, which resulted in the death of five soldiers, including a regiment commander, and injured six other soldiers in May 2024. Estimates suggest that between 5,000 to 7,000 ISIS fighters are operating between Syria and Iraq. Additionally, around 11,000 militants suspected of ISIS affiliation are detained in facilities managed by the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces in northeastern Syria. The organization’s resurgence in Iraq highlights the ongoing weaknesses within the country’s security institutions and the lack of development projects in regions liberated from ISIS, which could otherwise deter the group’s activities.

Data from the US Central Command (CENTCOM) highlights that the number of joint operations against ISIS reached 137 in the first half of 2024, underscoring Iraq’s ongoing need for US military support. Additionally, statistics show that ISIS conducted 120 attacks in Iraq and Syria during the first six months of 2024 alone, matching the total number of attacks recorded throughout 2023. This indicates a rise in terrorist activities in Iraq.⁽²²⁾

The Persistence of ISIS’ Ideological Incubators

Intellectual incubators for ISIS persist in Iraq, fueled by growing social discontent over Shiite dominance and the ruling regime’s reliance on sectarian policies to reinforce Shiite identity. This approach has marginalized other sectarian and ethnic groups, contributing to the emergence of disillusioned youth and making them more susceptible to recruitment by terrorist organizations. This context underscores the significance of former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi’s 2017 announcement that the defeat of ISIS was primarily a military victory, not an intellectual one. This statement acknowledges the presence of ideological conditions that could foster the resurgence of the terrorist group.

A Fragile Security Environment

Iraq faces numerous security vacuums, particularly in areas with dense woodlands or rugged mountainous terrain, such as Taji, Tarmiyah, and Sharqat. These conditions allow ISIS elements to hide and move swiftly, especially prevalent in regions liberated from ISIS and along the borders with Syria and Turkey. The issue is exacerbated by the presence of multiple security entities, including the Ministry of Interior, army and the PMF. The overlapping responsibilities and differing priorities among these entities weaken security coordination. While the army and Ministry of Interior prioritize national interests within a broader vision, the PMF often promotes sectarian interests. This dynamic has hindered the formulation and execution of effective strategies against terrorist groups. The Iraqi military's general weakness is further highlighted by military expert Ahmed al-Sharifi, who notes that Iraq lacks the technical capabilities needed to address security challenges without US support, particularly in countering ISIS.⁽²³⁾ An analysis by the International Institute for Strategic Studies similarly describes Iraq's military as "relatively weak."⁽²⁴⁾ Additionally, tribal leaders have observed that ISIS exploits the deployment of militias in Sunni areas by disguising themselves in uniforms similar to those worn by the militias, given the fact that the militias do not seem to harbor deep enmity for ISIS even though they are with the coalition to combat ISIS.⁽²⁵⁾ Despite their stated aim of combating ISIS, militias have focused more on controlling liberated areas, launching numerous attacks against coalition forces rather than ISIS since the large-scale campaign in 2017.

ISIS Resuming Operations Overseas

The organization has reestablished itself in Syria, which shares a border with Iraq, and has resumed operations in regions such as the Badia of Homs, Sweida, Hama, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Aleppo. Northeastern Syria hosts two camps, Al-Hawl and Roj, where approximately 55,000 people reside, including more than 11,800 Iraqis, about 16,000 Syrians, and others from over 60 countries.⁽²⁶⁾ Intelligence reports suggest that many of the camp residents have familial ties to members of the organization, making them susceptible to recruitment. ISIS is particularly focused on recruiting children through its "Cubs of the Caliphate" program. Many of its fighters have shed their military uniforms for civilian attire after battles ended in various Syrian cities, blending in with local populations to obscure their affiliations. This tactic is facilitated by the weakened security presence in these areas, allowing ISIS fighters to conduct operations across the border in Iraq. Additionally, regional instability since the onset of the Gaza war has created a favorable environment for the organization's members to hide and operate along the Iraqi-Syrian border.

Increasing Potential for Sectarian, Ethnic Disputes

Among the potential repercussions of the US withdrawal is the recurrence of sectarian and ethnic conflicts similar to those Iraq experienced during the early

phases of the US invasion. This risk is heightened by increasing discontent within Sunni and Kurdish communities, who perceive the Shiite-dominated government as pursuing exclusionary policies and seeking external support at the expense of national interests. Such tensions raise the likelihood of sectarian and ethnic strife, potentially draining resources and inviting further foreign interventions that could perpetuate conflicts for strategic gains. This scenario could also revive discussions about plans to divide Iraq's rich civilization and history along religious and ethnic lines. These challenges come at a time when Iraq has made progress toward security and has even taken on some regional roles, such as mediating the Saudi-Iranian dialogue that led to the signing of the reconciliation agreement under Chinese sponsorship in March 2023.

Overall, the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq further complicates the situation and strengthens Iran's influence in the Iraqi arena. This shift is likely to lead to significant security turmoil, exacerbate political, security and service-related crises, and create a fertile environment for increased terrorist activities and the reactivation of sleeper cells in Iraq and Syria.

The US Withdrawal and Potential Regional Repercussions

The US withdrawal from Iraq would impact the regional equilibrium, impacting ties with partners in the Gulf.

Regional Equilibrium Collapsing in Iran's Favor

Since Iraq serves as the primary launchpad for Iran's geopolitical ambitions, featuring an armed military arm and a critical corridor for smuggling weapons to its militias in Syria and Lebanon, the withdrawal of US forces would create a new regional equation, with the regional balance shifting in Iran's favor. This shift could lead to the formation of a more unified and robust force of armed militias across the Iraqi and Syrian arenas, akin to the strength of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. These militias represent weaker links in Iran's influence network, but their consolidation would bolster Hezbollah's military capabilities in Lebanon, potentially altering the balance of power in the Middle East and reshaping regional dynamics in favor of Iran's so-called Axis of Resistance. This situation would elevate the roles of non-state actors as influential players, creating environments conducive to the resurgence of terrorist cells, as history has shown that the expansion of non-state actors often coincides with the rise of terrorist organizations.

The potential regional shifts would generate further chaos, intensify rivalries, complicate conflicts, and likely dissolve existing truces and agreements as regional powers compete to manage the security fallout from the US military withdrawal. Iran, having made substantial investments — both financial and human — in its expansionist agenda, is expected to attempt filling the vacuum by bolstering the role of its militias in the region. This could result in increased armed confrontations between Iran and regional actors opposed to its expansionist project. A

notable regional development that has adversely affected regional and international security is the decline of the US role in the region. The Iran-backed Houthis, for instance, seized control of Yemen's capital, Sana'a, in 2014, and subsequently expanded their military presence in the Red Sea. This has led to ongoing threats and attacks on international navigation and trade routes in the Red Sea, impacting regional and global security, including the United States. The Houthis have further extended their influence, affecting maritime security in the Mediterranean and participating militarily in the conflict in Gaza.

Iraq Losing Gulf Partners

The future of Gulf-Iraq relations is likely to be jeopardized, not due to the Gulf states' desire to strengthen ties with Iraq, but because of the realities imposed by the sanctions that Washington is expected to use as leverage against Iraq to curtail its relations with Iran. This sanctions policy could inhibit the Gulf states from enhancing their relations with Iraq.

One of the first negative repercussions of imposing sanctions would be the disruption of Gulf-Iraq electricity interconnection projects, exacerbating the ongoing electricity crisis. Iraq currently faces a significant deficit in electricity production, estimated at about 14,000 megawatts (a 49% shortfall), which has resulted in frequent power outages throughout the day. Iraq generates approximately 16,000 megawatts of electricity, including the full contribution from Iranian gas and electricity, which accounts for about one-third of the total supply.⁽²⁷⁾ However, the country's electricity needs are nearly double that figure, at around 30,000 megawatts, to ensure reliable power supply throughout the day.⁽²⁸⁾ This ongoing crisis allows Iran to exploit the situation as a means of exerting pressure on the Iraqi government. It also contributes to growing public discontent, which could ignite protests, particularly during the hot summer months.

The second potential repercussion is the inability to implement cross-border development project proposals with the Gulf states, particularly the Development Road project proposed by Iraq. This initiative aims to support sustainable economic growth, diversify income sources, and establish Iraq as a major transit hub for trade connecting the Gulf states, Turkey, and Europe. Successfully implementing this project would not only address Iraq's various crises but also link the country to nine others, most of which are Gulf states.⁽²⁹⁾ Consequently, failing to realize this project would result in Iraq losing significant strategic and economic opportunities that it hopes to achieve through its implementation.⁽³⁰⁾

The third repercussion is the potential weakening of the Gulf-Iraq trade and investment boom that has been developing since the mid-2010s. The UAE has emerged as a vital trade partner for Iraq, with an annual trade volume of no less than \$27 billion and a growth rate of at least 6%.⁽³¹⁾ Additionally, Qatar has been actively working to strengthen and diversify its investments in Iraq; the two countries signed investment agreements worth \$7 billion in June 2023, focusing on real estate and tourism development. Over the past six years, trade between Riyadh

and Baghdad has increased to approximately \$1 billion annually, marking the beginning of an accelerating trade relationship driven by Saudi companies' efforts to double their exports in response to growing Iraqi demand for goods such as food, construction materials, and electrical supplies.⁽³²⁾ Iraq and the Gulf states are mutually strategically dependent, not only due to shared religious, linguistic and national ties and common history but also for strategic reasons tied to Iraq's connections with two Gulf states: Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Moreover, coordination on oil policies within OPEC is crucial, given Iraq's significant oil reserves.

Potential Repercussions for US Global Standing

Historical experience indicates that the "strategic vacuum" resulting from military withdrawals by a superpower, such as the United States, not only disrupts the internal balances of the country from which it withdraws but also has significant strategic repercussions on the position and status of the United States itself, as discussed below:

The United States: From Dominance to Hegemonic Wars

US withdrawals from strategic regions are one of the fundamental reasons for the decline of US power in the hierarchy of international powers. These withdrawals contribute to reducing the United States' global presence, which it relies on to impose its agenda and maintain global hegemony. Consequently, this creates opportunities for revisionist powers to alter the distribution of power in their favor and for regional and international powers to rebel against US global rules. According to prominent theorists like Robert Gilpin and Robert Keohane, this situation may lead to more hegemonic conflicts, preparing the ground for what are termed a "hegemonic war" between the United States and China. As Washington becomes increasingly aware of the adversely shifting power dynamics, it may enhance its use of "coercive persuasion" strategies, leveraging its superior elements of power or executing costly preemptive strikes against rising powers to halt this shift.⁽³³⁾

An article titled "America Is Not Leading the World" in *The New York Times* noted that China, Iran, and North Korea have increasingly allied with Russia to counter US hegemony, while the broader global community is not eager to align with the United States. Only US allies have imposed sanctions on Russia. In Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, perceptions of Russia and China have actually improved since 2022.⁽³⁴⁾ Similarly, *The Economist* has reported that the liberal world order is collapsing, and this collapse may be irreversible.⁽³⁵⁾ Consequently, any withdrawals by the United States are likely to diminish its global influence further.

Revisionist Regional and Global Powers Vying to Fill the Void

The strategic vacuum resulting from US withdrawals in key regions creates opportunities for revisionist powers such as China, Russia and Iran, which are quick to exploit these openings through a strategy of filling the vacuum. This

phenomenon occurs because politics abhors a vacuum; it seeks to find someone to occupy it. The objective is to undermine US global hegemony while fostering a convergence of power among dominant and competing forces. Additionally, these actions aim to impose new arrangements in the regions from which the dominant powers have withdrawn. As a result, regional powers allied with the withdrawing nations are likely to gain confidence in the competing revisionist powers, viewing them as potential international poles capable of influencing global affairs to their advantage and enhancing their own status within the international system, ultimately seeking a larger role in global leadership.

Regional Allies' Confidence in the United States Diminishes

The strategic vacuum resulting from US withdrawals creates confusion within existing regional arrangements, leading to new dynamics where the United States' commitment to its allies' security diminishes. This chaos exacerbates current conflicts and ignites new, volatile tensions, thereby increasing the burden and costs for allies as they confront the fallout from a destabilized security environment. Such circumstances foster a crisis of confidence among allies regarding the US ability to provide essential protection, compelling them to bolster their own capabilities or seek alternatives beyond the US framework. In both scenarios, the global standing of the United States is adversely affected. The network of strategic alliances is a cornerstone of US power, crucial for achieving international hegemony. The United States relies on allied regional powers to enhance its influence and strategic presence while countering rival regional and international forces. Furthermore, these alliances are vital for sustaining its influence, maintaining international leadership, and upholding the global rules established to serve its interests and reinforce its hegemony.

The Rise of Israeli Disobedience Toward Washington

In the wake of successive US military withdrawals — be it the partial withdrawal from Syria, the chaotic exit from Afghanistan, or the increasing speculation about a withdrawal from Iraq — a trend has emerged in Tel Aviv that emphasizes self-reliance in addressing urgent issues and complex challenges. Security and strategic research centers closely aligned with the Israeli government have raised alarms regarding the implications of US withdrawals for the Middle East and Israel. Some analysts suggest that US administrations are adopting a strategy indicating a desire to disengage from the region, which, in their view, would bolster Iranian influence.

Yaakov Amidror, a researcher at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies and former National Security Advisor to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, argues that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan foreshadows a similar exit from Iraq. He contends that such a shift would position Israel at the forefront of confrontation with Iran, exacerbating the influence of Islamic movements in the region. This dynamic, coupled with escalating regional tensions driven by Iran's nuclear and geopolitical ambitions, threatens the stability of US allies while un-

dermining the United States' global standing as it grapples with challenges from China and Russia.⁽³⁶⁾

Military analysts from *Israel Hayom*, an Israeli daily newspaper, including Yoav Limor, Yaakov Amidror, and Udi Dekel, the director of the Israel National Security Research Center at Tel Aviv University, agree that the swift collapse of Afghan forces and the rapid takeover of Kabul by the Taliban signify a significant US failure in Afghanistan. This situation compels Tel Aviv to closely monitor potential developments in the region in light of a possible US withdrawal, particularly regarding Iranian influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. As a result, Israel must assess its military capabilities and redefine the boundaries of its self-reliance in confronting the challenges that may arise from US disengagement. Udi Dekel poses a critical question, "Can Washington be relied upon in the face of an existential threat?⁽³⁷⁾" This concern may partly explain Israel's actions in its ongoing conflicts in Gaza and southern Lebanon.

More Nations Daring to Break the Rules of the Monopolar World Order

The decline of the US role in the Middle East may reinforce the perception among countries of diminishing US hegemony in international leadership and the necessity for a more equitable distribution of global power. This shift encourages bolder actions that challenge the rules governing the unipolar international system. Numerous theorists link the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan to various factors that reflect this newfound assertiveness among nations regarding the longstanding international norms established since the end of the Cold War:

- **Russia's decision to wage war against Ukraine:** Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a country historically aligned with the West, demonstrates its willingness to defy established norms by occupying parts of Ukrainian territory.
- **China's escalation toward Taiwan:** China has shifted its approach toward Taiwan from political posturing to military and economic aggression, conducting extensive military maneuvers that simulate scenarios of isolation.⁽³⁸⁾ Furthermore, Beijing has challenged the US monopoly on sanctions by imposing its own sanctions on Washington.
- **European division on Taiwan:** The European response to the US stance on Taiwan has been divided. While many European capitals initially supported Washington's position toward Taipei, the costly repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine war have complicated Europe's strategic calculations.
- **Reevaluating reliance on the United States:** Countries in the Middle East, East Asia, Latin America and Africa are increasingly wary of relying solely on the United States for their foreign relations. Many are beginning to reassess their strategies to establish new international alternatives and partnerships that align with their regional and global interests.

Conclusion

The potential US withdrawal from Iraq, a pivotal country in the Middle East, poses significant implications for both the region and global power dynamics. Historically linked to the theory of “strategic plurality,” Iraq is one of the world’s most crucial regions and serves as a testing ground for nations aspiring to international leadership. Control over this territory enables dominance in regional and even international decision-making, making it a hotspot for international competition. Consequently, the impending US withdrawal will inevitably result in both winners and losers.

Iraq as the Primary Loser: Iraq — specifically, its state structure and the Sunni and Kurdish communities — stands to incur substantial losses that could lead to a paralysis of governmental functions. Should sanctions be imposed, Iraq risks losing vital oil revenues, foreign investment and trade relations, mirroring the repercussions faced by Iran after sanctions were enacted. Additionally, the fragile stability and sensitive intelligence previously obtained from US sources regarding terrorist threats will be jeopardized. This deterioration will intensify the burdens on the Iraqi army across intelligence, combat and air support dimensions necessary for addressing security challenges. The withdrawal would also disrupt the delicate balance among the country’s political, sectarian and ethnic components, reigniting ethnic and sectarian conflicts. Furthermore, Iraq would forfeit critical Gulf-Iraq electrical interconnection projects aimed at addressing its electricity crisis, exacerbating existing state crises and pushing living conditions to a critical level that could result in social unrest. The potential weakness of state institutions in maintaining control could lead to increased influence from non-state actors, reminiscent of the chaos seen in Afghanistan.

Lessons from the Past: Iraq’s leadership should heed the lessons from recent history; Nouri al-Maliki’s insistence on expelling US forces in 2011 had dire consequences, leading to the emergence of ISIS and its territorial control. This situation ultimately forced Iraq to invite US forces back to assist in combating the terrorist organization.

The United States and Its Allies: The United States and its allies in the Middle East are also poised to be significant losers from this potential withdrawal. The impact on the US global military presence is profound, as it plays a vital role in sustaining US international hegemony. The loss of influence in Iraq evokes memories of the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, creating adverse regional and international ramifications that could undermine US standing globally and empower revisionist powers like China and Russia.

Moreover, this withdrawal risks eroding the remaining confidence of allies — not just in the Middle East, but across Asia, Africa, and Europe — regarding the US commitment to their security. This erosion may prompt these nations to seek closer partnerships with revisionist powers, potentially accelerating the transition toward a new international order favoring rising powers. The anticipated military withdrawals will also heighten security concerns for US allies, increasing their

national security costs and sending negative signals to nations contemplating a shift away from the Western camp, while simultaneously boosting confidence in the Eastern bloc.

As for the potential winners, Iran and its affiliated paramilitaries in Iraq will likely emerge as the foremost beneficiaries, positioning themselves as the victorious party in the struggle against US influence. This development would enable Iran to establish sole hegemony over Iraq, facilitating the expansion of its regional ambitions beyond mere militarization and integration. Such a scenario would further solidify Iran's Shiite identity and ensure control over the state's power resources and production capacities. Consequently, this dynamic could pave the way for Iran to implement its geopolitical projects, such as the Iranian corridor and the so-called Shiite Crescent, transforming previously aspirational projects into tangible realities and escalating the costs of confrontation.

China and Russia also stand to gain from the US withdrawal. They are poised to exploit any power vacuum left behind as part of their broader strategy to compete with the United States for international leadership and dominance within the global system. For Asian powers allied with the United States, the US withdrawal from Iraq signals positive developments as it offers an opportunity for Washington to intensify its encirclement of China.

Given these factors, the prospect of the US withdrawal from Iraq remains uncertain. Negotiations for withdrawal appear to be more about buying time for both Washington and Baghdad, as the United States recognizes the potential repercussions and losses to its international standing that could arise from such a decision. The specter of repeating the chaotic withdrawals from Kabul and Saigon looms large, with significant implications for the United States' position in the hierarchy of global powers. A new withdrawal would be interpreted as a victory for the Eastern bloc, particularly for Iran, which seeks to expel US forces from the Middle East. The presence of US troops in Iraq maintains a crucial balance against Iranian influence in both Iraq and the broader region, thereby safeguarding the security of US allies, particularly Israel.

Additionally, it is difficult to envision a withdrawal at a time when the United States is reinforcing its military presence in the region amidst escalating tensions, making the prospect of withdrawal nearly impossible. The Iraqi prime minister appears cognizant of the severe consequences of a withdrawal, prompting him to initiate negotiations with the United States by establishing the joint HMC. This initiative continues the approaches taken by former prime ministers Adil Abdul Mahdi and Mustafa al-Kadhimi, aiming to balance the demands of various political factions calling for a US withdrawal while addressing the broader US-Iraq relationship without setting a clear timeline for troop withdrawal.

The outcomes of the 2024 US presidential elections may further influence this situation. If Kamala Harris wins, she is likely to continue President Biden's strategic focus, as outlined in the US National Security Strategy for 2022, prioritizing the Southeast Asian theater over the Middle East to contain China. Consequently,

a reduction in US forces in Iraq could be expected. Conversely, if Donald Trump wins, his anticipated return to a more hardline stance against Iran may transform Iraq into a central battleground in the contest for influence with Iran.

However, Washington must also be aware of the growing popular — and occasionally official — anger regarding its military and political support for Israel during conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon. This backlash could intensify pressure on the US military presence in Iraq, potentially leading to accelerated discussions about scheduling a withdrawal.

Endnotes

- (1) Strategic Vacuum: The term refers to regions of interest that create opportunities for external powers — whether regional or international — to intervene and exploit these areas. This intervention allows them to assume new roles or establish arrangements that further their interests, enhance their standing within the international system, and achieve strategic and security advantages. Strategic vacuums typically arise from the collapse of regional arrangements caused by the withdrawal or decline of a major power or superpower, the diminishing or absence of a leading regional state, or the complete collapse of a state, which consequently opens up space for external powers to operate.
- (2) The International Coalition to Defeat ISIS was established in 2014 under US sponsorship, with the participation of 87 countries, with the United States enjoying the largest participation, with 2,500 soldiers after it had been 5,500. The coalition aims to fight ISIS in Iraq by striking the organization's economic and financial infrastructure, confronting the flow of foreign fighters across the border, and supporting stability in areas liberated from ISIS. Source: <https://zu.pw/VcdHxsn>
- (3) UNAMI is a UN political mission established in 2003, pursuant to Security Council Resolution No. 1500, at the request of the Iraqi government, to help Iraq meet the requirements of rebuilding the state. The mission works to provide advice, support and assistance to the Iraqi government on promoting comprehensive political dialogue and national reconciliation, and plays a supervisory role on government performance through its offices spread throughout Iraq, which have about 648 employees, including 251 international employees and 397 local employees. Source: <https://zu.pw/kVd6ux7y>. However, this supervisory role arouses the resentment and anger of some political parties that do not want its presence.
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