

Iran's Islamic Republic and its Conception of Victory

This article is based on Dr Aelius Parchami's presentation at the 'Non-Western Views of Winning' Study Day held at Robertson house on Monday 7th October 2019.

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Note:

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To understand the Islamic Republic's conception of victory, it is essential to recognise the inherent contradictions of modern Iran, including the clerical hierarchy that presides over the country. Iran is ostensibly a republic, with a liberal constitution, and yet it is governed by an authoritarian oligarchy. Although for over two hundred years Iran has not invaded its neighbours, Iranian expeditionary forces and their proxies are deployed across much of the Middle East and are regarded as one of the biggest – if not the greatest – threat to regional stability. While appearing to be uncompromisingly Islamist and ostensibly sectarian, Iran's leadership has demonstrated uncanny pragmatism in its strategic approach and considerable flexibility in the pursuit of its regional ambitions. For a self-styled Islamist state, Iran has curiously close ties with Marxist Venezuela and Communist North Korea; and has supported Christian Armenia in its conflict with Muslim Azerbaijan. Although the leading Shia power in the world, Tehran has funded the Sunni militants of Hamas in the Gaza Strip while periodically shipping arms to Sunni Kurds in northern Iraq and its own Taliban nemesis in Afghanistan.

If the Islamic Republic comes across as a paradox, it is because it is the by-product of competing identities and impulses. Modern Iran was once the heartland of a succession of Persian empires which for centuries dominated the Middle East. Iran continues to be a multi-ethnic land with many local dialects and traditions, but the Persian heritage weighs heavily on a people who are perpetually aware of their imperial past. Despite grappling with the harsh realities of everyday life, Iranians remain intensely nationalistic with a deep-seated desire for their country to regain its former status. As a nation, however, they are also encumbered with a sense of collective humiliation. They have not yet come to terms with the 1953 Anglo-American-engineered coup that overthrew their democratically-elected government; nor have they forgotten how the West and the Arab world supported Saddam Hussein during the bitter years of the Iran-Iraq War. Four decades of international sanctions and isolation have fuelled a sense of national defiance shored up by feelings of injustice and resentment.

This resentment has been reinforced by Iran's Shia identity. Eschewed by majority Sunni Muslims as a deviation, the Shia are often treated as second-class citizens in Sunni majority states. Since the inception of the Islamic Republic, Iran has been on a mission to address what it regards as an historic injustice. Whereas Shiism is sometimes scathingly dismissed by Sunni Muslims as 'Iranian Islam', Iranians espouse Shiism as the 'truest essence' of the Mohammedan religion. Islam – Iranians insist – would have remained an ethno-culturally Arab movement with innate limitations had it not been for the Persians. It was the Persians who opened up Islam to other ethnic groups and it was Persian scholars who ushered in Islam's 'Golden Age'. Accordingly, Iranians view themselves as the true custodians of Islam above and beyond any other group, including ethnic Arabs.

These contrasting impulses shape the policies of a clerical regime which is, at once, determined to unite all Shia communities across the Middle East under its banner and, at the same time, wishes to be recognised by the Sunni majority as the epicentre of the Islamic world. This dichotomy is one of the many schisms that define Iran's Islamic Republic system. Among the regime's other contradictions are its parallel structures, which engender fierce competition among rival state organs and functionaries; and an ongoing internal struggle between centrist forces that seek rapprochement with the outside world and hawkish hardliners who want Iran to remain in a continuous state of revolutionary zeal. Nor, despite its

best efforts, has the regime found itself immune from Iranian nationalism or the age-old Persian penchant for cultural and ideological expansion. It is through these incongruities that one must navigate in order to grasp contemporary Iran's ambitions and its conception of victory.

Regime Security & Regional Proxies

The leadership of the Islamic Republic has always been strident about its two overarching aims: the preservation of the clerical *nezam* (regime) and exporting the ideals of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini once stated that the preservation of the regime he founded, and the safeguarding of the role of the clergy in its governance, overwrote all other considerations. It was a telling statement that reveals two important facets about the leadership of the Islamic Republic: first, that they consider no cost is too high for self-preservation; and, second, that the regime is not as ideological as its critics sometimes make it out to be. Khomeini's successor and current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, has both acknowledged and has energetically followed this diktat. Regime security is, therefore, a priority around which all other notions of winning tend to be calculated.

Internally, regime security has entailed repressive measures to silence critics and heavy-handed methods to crush dissent. Similar to other like-minded authoritarian regimes, the leadership of the Islamic Republic is determined never to 'lose face publicly' lest it appears weak before its opponents. When cornered or under intense pressure, the regime seldom retreats and is more likely to lash out and attack. Reprisal is the *modus operandi* of a leadership that views any display of weakness as potentially existential. Conversely, any hint of weakness in adversaries is seen as an opportunity to be exploited. Therefore, externally, self-preservation has gone hand-in-hand with the regime's second objective of 'exporting the ideals of the Islamic Revolution'. As a revisionist power, Iran has sought to recalibrate the balance of power in the Middle East by empowering Shia communities while removing or neutralising hostile forces. Funding and arming Shia paramilitaries across the region is part of a strategy of 'self-defence' that allows the regime to spread its tentacles far and wide and to substantially increase its regional influence. It is a cost-effective strategy for a state that has seen the degradation of its conventional military capabilities over the past four decades.

Operating across Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, Iran's Shia militia are estimated to number around a hundred thousand. In principle, these paramilitary forces can be corralled into doing Iran's bidding: be it by shoring up the Assad regime or intimidating Arab governments. Operationally, they are funded and trained either by the Quds (Jerusalem) Force – the Expeditionary arm of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – or by the Lebanese Hezbollah. The Shia militia provide Iran with a veneer of 'plausible deniability' as they are often Arab speakers and natives of the territories from within which they operate. While helping Iran spread its ideals and refashion the Middle East, they also serve the greater function of deterrence: an attack on Iran, however punitive, could risk a war not just with the rulers of the Islamic Republic but an all-out regional conflict that would dwarf in scale, bloodshed and costs the Iraq and Afghan insurgencies of the noughties. Thus, the Islamic Republic's calibration of winning is not predicated on beating the enemy in a direct confrontation. Indeed, as we shall see later, the regime's network of proxies were partially created with the aim of keeping Iran's adversaries off balance to allow the Islamic Republic to pursue its strategic goals incrementally and insidiously.

Admittedly, the relationship between Tehran and some of its Shia militia is no more than 'skin deep' and could be characterised as transactional. However, other groups are more than mere acolytes and share a much more meaningful relationship with the Iranian regime. Western policymakers often incorrectly ascribe the term 'surrogate' or 'proxy' to the Lebanese Hezbollah. It is true that in its infancy – in the early 1980s – Hezbollah was essentially a surrogate of the Iranian regime. However, over the years the relationship between Tehran and the Lebanese movement has changed significantly as the latter became first a valuable partner and today effectively an extension of the Iranian regime. Hezbollah's relationship with Iran is symbiotic and transcends mere ideological and logistical cooperation. Ostensibly, Hezbollah receives Iranian funds, training, technology and political protection while Tehran utilises Hezbollah for deterrence purposes and power projection as far afield as the Levant. Nevertheless, the true nature of the relationship is revealed by the fact that, at a considerable risk and cost to itself, the Hezbollah entered the Syrian civil war largely at the behest of Tehran. In return, the Islamic Republic has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to sacrifice Iranian national interest – and incur the wrath of the Iranian public – in favour of safeguarding the interests of Hezbollah. So, at the regional level, Iran's conception of winning revolves around Hezbollah and the success of its wider network of non-state surrogates.

These networks also play an important but often overlooked role in the preservation of the Iranian regime. As a growing segment of the Iranian population becomes disillusioned with Islamism and clerical rule, and with the Islamic Republic experiencing mounting internal dissent and mass protests, the regime has increasingly sought legitimacy by reaching out to the Shia constituency outside the country. Accordingly, it pours money and amenities into these communities by styling itself as the *custodian* of the Shia and, more generally, Muslims rather than the mere ruling elite of the Iranian State. In so doing, the regime hopes to build support among the masses in different parts of the Middle East and guarantee its long-term survival irrespective of the growing hostility of the Iranian population.

This is why when Western powers demand that the Iranian regime should retract its forces from neighbouring countries, and to desist from its extra-territorial activities, it betrays a misunderstanding of the nature and character of the Islamic Republic. For the clerical regime to cut off its ties with Hezbollah and other Shia militia would be tantamount to amputating its own limbs. For existential reasons, Tehran will never willingly – even under economic duress or the threat of a major war – give up its paramilitary entities nor will it retreat from its Shia strongholds in Iraq and southern Lebanon. Maintaining its presence in these extra-territorial pockets, and protecting and proliferating its loyalist forces, is viewed in itself as a victory by the Iranian regime.

The 'Shadow War'

To achieve its twin aims of self-preservation and exporting its revolutionary zeal, the grand strategy of the Iranian regime has been to subvert and weaken regional adversaries and to expunge the influence of Western powers from the Middle Eastern arena. Drawing on the traditional Persian instinct for hegemony, Tehran has both created and promoted parasitical entities across the region with the intention of creating 'states-within-states'. In funding and nurturing these entities, Iran helps them develop sufficient military and political autonomy to either circumnavigate the authority of established governments or to incrementally hollow them out. The overarching aim, however, is not to take over the country but to insidiously exploit existing state structures without drawing unwanted international attention or risking in-

ternational sanctions. Through a process of proliferation and gradual evolution, Iran is steadily but systematically creating a network that connects all these paramilitary-cum-political non-state actors to the mainframe of the clerical regime in Tehran.

To foster suitable geopolitical conditions for its network, the Islamic Republic has also promoted instability and radicalisation with the intention of weakening the status quo. As the insurgency in Iraq or the conflict in Syria have demonstrated, Iran's clerical leadership is a skilful operator that knows how to reap benefits from chaos. While it recognises that it cannot win a direct conflict against US-led Western powers, Tehran has carefully pursued a strategy of ensuring that they, too, will fail in their objectives by setting out to nullify Western gains. Iran might not achieve a conventional win in this confrontation but neither will it allow the West or its regional client-states the luxury of a meaningful victory. To that end, Iran's strategy is predicated upon what could be described as 'haemorrhage'; inflicting heavy financial, political, and military costs on Western powers and their regional client-states while avoiding a head-on confrontation. Entangling the Western community in corrosive battlefields is a risky strategy but one that has paid ample dividends so far, especially in the aftermath of the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Tehran views its 'spoiler' approach as relatively successful but it is confident that, strategically, it is actually winning.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic has been successful so far in its twin objectives of ensuring the preservation of the clerical regime against internal and external antagonists; and containing or nullifying the influence of its regional and international adversaries. In pursuing a revisionist strategy predicated upon breeding instability and radicalisation, Iran hopes that a perpetually volatile region will prove too costly for Western resolve and, in the intermediate to long-term, Iran will regain its traditional and rightful place of suzerainty in a re-calibrated Middle East. The Iranian leadership might be Islamist in its ideology and Shia in its orientation, but it also exhibits the enduring Persian impulse to expand and dominate: perhaps not territorially, but by projecting influence and exporting its revolutionary ideology.

To achieve its aim, Iran relies on an ever multiplying and increasingly formidable network of loyalist paramilitaries dotted across the Middle East. Its successes to date notwithstanding, Iran's strategy contains its own inherent perils: instability can foster forces which are intrinsically hostile to the Islamic Republic – such as the so-called 'Islamic State' group. A miscalculation or gradual escalation, too, could quickly spiral and bring Iran into conflict with a regional foe or with the United States. Likewise, some of its proxies might become too autonomous or entangle Iran in undesirable situations. The regime's strategy has also come at a great cost to the Iranian people and Iran's national interests. Nevertheless, for a regime that identifies itself more with its Shia constituency outside of Iran's borders than with the Iranian public, these risks are acceptable. Ultimately, the Islamic Republic believes that, in the 'long strategic game' it is playing, time is on its side.