



Why does Iran what it does across its borders?

This ABS Policy Paper is written by Sir Richard Dalton KCMG, who has served as British Ambassador to Iran, to Libya and as Consul-General in Jerusalem.

It is very difficult to foresee how things can possibly get better soon across Western Asia.

No regional order is in prospect. The region is littered with on-going wars and with the half-alive corpses of bad US policies. Deterrence works to reduce the chances of inter-state war, but scarcely affects lower-level conflict. There are no respected international rules of the road and there is no dominant power to keep people in line. States are not interested in searching for cooperative solutions other than with their friends. Animosity and mistrust prevail. Bad analysis is common: for example the knee-jerk "instability is all Iran's fault" and US withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear JCPOA. Poor judgement on intelligence is rife, too, as with Israeli mistakes before 7 October 2023. And many states active in the region under-estimate the difficulties, and are over-confident in the utility of military force, despite the lessons of Yemen and Gaza and, before, those of Afghanistan and Iraq.

How does Iran see itself fitting in to this picture? Two prominent factors have little impact on the answer to that question but must be mentioned. First, both domestic economic and social distress, and rejection of the Iranian system of rule are higher than ever. Second, the dominant political faction is the purist "paydari front", which considers that Islamic rule should be maintained by whatever means are necessary: that is what is important, not the people's views and the republican elements of the constitution.

Islamic Iran's strategic aims have been constant for decades:

- preserve Islamic rule in Iran and be the vanguard of Islam in its struggles with materialism and Western power.
- maintain independence from foreign pressures and threatened attack.
- achieve recognition of Iran's interests and inclusion in regional decision-making.
- survival.

The main ways in which Iran works to achieve these aims are:

- maximising oil exports including evasion of US sanctions. Iran's key partner is China, which is prepared to fend off US attempts to enforce US unilateral sanctions on Iranian oil exports.

- developing stronger armed forces and defence industries, especially missile and UAV manufacturing. Key to this is securing Russian investment in Iran and arms trade with Russia in both directions.
- ensuring forward defence through alliances in the Levant and maintaining a network of 'resistance' forces that are active in pre-existing conflicts (e.g., break-downs of authority and civil wars in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, in all of which several foreign actors are jostling to influence outcomes). Syria is the bridgehead to Lebanon, where Hizbollah's missile arsenal and loyalty to Ayatollah Khamenei provide Iran with the deterrence against major attack by Israel and the United States that its inferiority in conventional weapons renders so necessary.
- fostering an expectation of retaliation among those who seek to harm Iran. Since 1 April 2024, and the refusal of the West to criticise Israel's destruction of the Iranian consulate in Damascus, Iran's leaders are on a shorter fuse. They know for sure, as in the Iran-Iraq war, in which the current leadership were involved, that the West will do nothing for them, whatever the action taken by Iran's enemies.
- keeping Saudi Arabia in check in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, and opposing further Saudi normalisation with Israel.
- maintaining a vigorous presence in the Persian Gulf: the straits of Hormuz will be safe for Iran or for no-one. They advocate inclusive long-term multilateral, not exclusive US-allied, security structures for the region.
- nuclear hedging, having achieved threshold status. They consider building nuclear weapons to be too risky and unlikely to enhance their security. They remain parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and accept core IAEA inspections, but have pushed against past restraints by way of retaliation for US repudiation of the JCPOA and to create leverage for future bargaining with the United States.
- refusing to accept Israel's existence. It is an obsession of an aged egotistical leader with an ideological vision, that Israel is an enemy of Muslims, and has always been bent on harming Iran's interests. Tehran seeks to roll back Israeli and US advances in the region, especially the US presence in the Gulf. They support armed struggle, claiming that it is essential for freeing Palestine, given the failure of other approaches. They maintain rhetorical calls for the elimination of Israel but have no expectation of that happening, and they would support a negotiated two-state solution if the Palestinians were to accept it.

The Future?

Near term: the unlawful Israeli attack on the Damascus consulate on 1 April was reckless. It was probably intended to raise Israel-Iran tensions to near-war levels. Whether or not it was intended to draw the United States further in and to lay a foundation for a regional pro-Israel alliance, that is how Israel hopes to exploit it.

The Iranian response on 13 April was also reckless. Both sides have since opted for a halt to escalation, but it's a fragile halt: the shift towards hard-liner predominance in Israel and Iran and a miscalculation or bad/good luck in targeting, together with Israeli bellicosity and Iranian pride, might get Iran into a war in which it would suffer greatly but land some damaging blows first.

Medium term: with the slow waning of the US post-1956 "moment" in the Middle East, there is a drive to establish an Israeli post-2023 moment, viz military destruction of Hizbollah and Israeli control of all Palestine "from the River to the Sea", in alliance with the United States and Arab neighbours, while freezing out Iran and keeping it weak.

Several factors could work against such an outcome: Israeli refusal to countenance a Palestinian state, Saudi and other Gulf Arabs' reluctance to alienate the big Iranian power next-door, and a new period of great power politics. The West is not getting stronger in the region and on the other side are China, Russia, and Iran. They want stability but insist that their interests should be included, not excluded. These authoritarian powers "are more and more aligned," as Jens Stoltenberg told the BBC in mid-April.

The squandering by the United States, at Israeli behest, of the post-2015 opportunity to build on the JCPOA was one of many recent tragedies. A reset in that direction would be the best way forward. There is no chance at present of negotiating a fresh nuclear limitation and monitoring agreement, but after Ayatollah Khamenei there will be a fair chance of a less ideological and more pragmatic leadership: for example, one that would accept what Palestinians are prepared to accept (as enunciated by President Khatami in 2002).

Without justice for the Palestinians, successful negotiations on the issues inflaming Israel's northern border, and an accommodation with Iran, there will be no peace.

China, Russia, the EU, the United States and the Gulf Arabs should work together in an Iran contact group and, at the right time, should seek, amongst other things, fewer sanctions on Iran; an up-dated nuclear agreement that would limit Iran's access to fissile material and re-establish intrusive monitoring; deconfliction in Syria and Yemen; and the creation step-by-step of a multilateral dimension to regional security. This would be to revive the 2003 "grand bargain" approach suggested by Iran but ignored in Washington at the time. A wide-ranging agreement of this kind on cooperative solutions across lines of enmity will be the only way of neutralising the issues dividing Israel and Iran and of calming the region.