

IRAN

Beyond the Surface



The Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies

The Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies (ECSS)

Iran: Beyond the Surface

General Manager: **Dr. khaled Okasha**

Deputy General Manager: **Gen. Mohamed Ibrahim Eldewery**

Edited by: **Dr. Dalal Mahmoud**

ISBN: 978.977.86231.7.8

ISSN: 2022/26825

Copyright:© 2024 The Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies (ECSS).

All rights reserved

100 Al-Merghani St., Heliopolis, Cairo

+20226905861 | +20226905862 | +20226905863

info@ecss.com.eg

www.ecss.com.eg

contecnts

Introduction	4
Part One Shades of the Iranian Interior	10
Chapter One Iran's Geographic Location: Opportunities and Geographic Challenges	11
Chapter Two The Ideological Foundation of the Iranian Regime	46
Chapter Three The Iranian Political System: Structure and Specificity	78
Chapter Four The Iranian Revolutionary Guard: Structure, Role, Capabilities, and Challenges	108
Chapter Five The Iranian Military Establishment: An Independent Role or Institutional Duality?	140
Chapter Six The Iranian Economy Between Restriction and Liberation	170
Part Two The Unspoken in Iranian Foreign Policy	212
Chapter Seven The Asian Sphere in Iranian Foreign Policy	213
Chapter Eight The Role of Soft Power in Iranian Foreign Policy	248
Chapter Nine The Backdoors of Iranian Politics: Relations with Terrorist Organizations	294
Chapter Ten Iran's Agents: Between Pragmatism and Ideology	318
Conclusion	368

Introduction

*DR. DALAL MAHMOUD

There is a plethora of writings, both Arab and non-Arab, about Iran due to its involvement in numerous regional and international issues, making the Islamic Republic of Iran one of the most prominent active regional powers in the Arab region and the Middle East. Since the revolution it witnessed in 1979, Iran has presented a model of theocratic states based on religious foundations. This revolution relied on a religious reference that its followers believed in and imposed their perspective on all aspects of the Iranian state, forming this unique model that pragmatically employs religion. Despite the contradiction inherent in this phrase, it reflects Iranian policy that uses its religious outlook to present itself as a patron not only of the Shia sect and its followers but also of the oppressed, both Shia and non-Shia.

Iran's theocracy stands out as a foundation for consolidating the power of the regime and extending Iran's influence. Initially, it aimed to spread the revolutionary model in neighboring countries, which evolved into extending its influence in these countries, making it an expansionist regional project known as the "Shia Crescent." Iran employs

*DIRECTOR OF SECURITY AND DEFENSE PROGRAM, EGYPTIAN
CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

its religious sect in its internal policies to control societal movements and constrain opponents, as well as in its relations with its proxies from armed groups spread across Arab countries. These proxies, in turn, serve Iran's interests and consolidate its influence in these countries, at the very least ensuring an influential Iranian presence and obstructing any efforts to weaken the Iranian influence in Arab states. Numerous examples highlight the power and influence of these proxies. Who can deny the significant influence of "Hezbollah" in Lebanon's internal and external policies? Similarly, the influence of the "Houthi group" in Yemen is evident as the crisis there has developed, leading to its international recognition as an essential party in any potential settlement of this crisis. In Iraq, Iran's influence in the region is most prominent, intervening in Iraqi affairs without clear boundaries.

On another level, the Iranian nuclear program emerges as a central issue and a potential threat to the security of the entire region, particularly the Arabian Gulf. The most dangerous aspect of this program is its Iranian goal, characterized by significant ambiguity. Iran declares its intention to use nuclear power for peaceful purposes, but the program's development confirms Iran's direction towards producing nuclear weapons, along with it possessing the capability to use them in missiles. This raises questions about whether Iran aims to achieve deterrence or regional dominance. In reality, both pose a significant threat to the security of the Arab region, considering the expansionist project in the region. Despite the opposition from major powers and some regional powers to the growth of Iran's nuclear capabilities, and despite the signing of the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" between Iran and the P5+1 countries in 2015, developments since January 2018, when the United States withdrew from this agreement, push towards a direction contrary to the agreement's aim, which is to constrict Iran's nuclear capability and prevent it from reaching the stage of producing nuclear weapons.

Many countries reserve their stance on Iran's internal and external policies and impose international sanctions that strongly impact its economy, causing recurrent crises. Despite this, Iran maintains strong, active, and influential relations with some major powers, foremost among them China, which signed a strategic alliance with Iran in 2021, lasting for a renewable 25 years. Trailing this is Russia, where cooperation between the two countries is increasing, and the impact of conflicting issues between them is gradually diminishing. Specialists' opinions differ on the motives of these two powers to approach Iran. One view

considers this rapprochement an attempt by Iran to overcome the impact of international sanctions, which have made Iran nearly regionally isolated, an aim that also drove Russia after the international sanctions imposed on it following the Ukrainian war that began in February 2022. The second view sees this Iranian rapprochement with both China and Russia as forming a regional axis that is contradictory to the interests of the United States and its allies in the region, within the intense international competition between the United States and emerging global powers who challenge the American hegemony over the global system.

Contemplating Iran's policies and their extensive impacts in the region raises a question: how has Iran, since the beginning of its revolutionary regime in 1979, managed to develop its capabilities, increase its influential power, and play an active regional and international role, despite the strong crises it has gone through and continues to face? The regime began its rule with a war against Iraq (the second-largest Arab army at that time) that lasted for more than eight years, combined with a major crisis with the United States after the American hostage crisis in 1980, followed by continuous economic and diplomatic crises to this day due to Iranian intervention in neighboring countries' affairs.

This question leads to another: do Iran's political tools, which often stray from legal standards and international norms, align with a theocratic state that adopts Islam as its policy approach? The excessive use of force, interference in others' affairs, destabilization, sponsorship of ideological proxies, and links with terrorist organizations are all policies far detached from the true Islamic approach committed to the essence and principles of the religion.

Many questions arise when following Iran's conditions and its internal and external policies. Despite the abundance of writings on Iran, many questions remain unanswered, as most of these writings focus on relatively limited topics compared to the strategic importance Iran represents in the Middle East and its impact on its countries and developments. This drives the question of how well we know Iran and its strengths and weaknesses, and whether these matters are clear. For instance, there is speculation about the strength of the ruling regime, but are its various institutions and their interrelations known? To what extent is the nature of the ideological bond that the regime relies on internally and in its relations with proxies understood? Does the role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) extend to participating in maintaining and protecting

Iranian national security, or does it secure the ruling regime itself? Here, does it cooperate with the regular army, or do the relations between them run parallel in two separate tracks?

We seek many answers to explain Iranian policies and clarify the limits of their current and potential impacts in the region in general, and in Arab countries in particular. We need to study the deeper dimensions of Iranian policies to understand the elements of strength and structural weaknesses in the Iranian state. This is where the idea of this book came from, which essentially focuses on studying the most significant structural elements that profoundly influence Iranian policies.

Based on this, the book is divided into two main parts: the first part, titled “Shadows of the Iranian Interior,” contains six chapters, each analyzing one of the structural dimensions of Iranian policies, which significantly influence their formulation and directions, and are not directly visible in the ever-changing decisions and events Iran goes through. Hence, the first chapter, “Iran’s Geographic Location: Opportunities and Geographic Challenges,” focuses on analyzing Iran’s natural and human geography after reviewing the components and elements of this geography, then presenting the impact of this geography on Iranian policy, especially with its immediate neighboring countries. The second chapter, “The Ideological Foundation of the Iranian Regime,” provides an explanation of the ideological bond that establishes the hierarchical relationship within the Iranian regime, through its legal formulation in the constitution and the religious reference it relies on internally and externally. The third chapter, “The Iranian Political System: Structure and Specificity,” clarifies the mechanisms of the political system’s operation in Iran by illustrating decision-making institutions and their actual relationships, and explaining the distinctive characteristics of the Iranian regime that have given it the ability to hold out over the past decades. It also addresses the major challenges facing the regime at present times.

The following three chapters in this part deal with the most influential institutions in Iranian policies; the fourth chapter, “The Iranian Revolutionary Guard: Structure, Role, Capabilities, and Challenges” clarifies the role of the IRGC and its organizational structure, as well as the entities affiliated with it, whether from a military or economic perspective, which help in the multiplicity

of roles and tasks carried out by the IRGC inside Iran and in its foreign policy as well, forming a significant part of the mental image of Iran. The fifth chapter, “The Iranian Military Establishment: An Independent Role or Institutional Duality?” presents the other side of Iranian military power represented in its regular army and reviews the circumstances that relatively limited its role in the post-1979 revolution period and the nature of its relationship with the IRGC, despite the significant military capabilities the regular army possesses. The sixth chapter, “The Iranian Economy Between Restriction and Liberation,” discusses the nature of the Iranian economy and the numerous crises it has faced and is currently facing, resulting from the sanctions imposed on Iran due to its stringent policies.

While the first part sheds light on the structural dimensions associated with the Iranian interior, the second part completes the revelation of structural dimensions in Iranian foreign policy, which enabled it in the past and still enables it to penetrate many circles, increasing its influence primarily in its regional surroundings. The second part, titled “The Untold in Iranian Foreign Policy,” focuses mainly on those dimensions that have not received sufficient attention in studies interested in Iranian affairs and that add to Iranian influence. This part contains four chapters: the seventh chapter, “The Asian Circle in Iranian Foreign Policy,” focuses on analyzing Iran’s policy in Central Asia, which is an important part of Iran’s vital sphere of influence and an extension of some ethnic groups in Iran, adding to Iran’s power and influence due to its importance for Iran’s relations with major powers. The eighth chapter, “The Role of Soft Power in Iranian Foreign Policy,” indicates how Iran employs its soft power, characterized by clear specificity due to the sectarian dimension being one of the most important tools of Iranian soft power. This chapter also discusses the different places of Iranian interest and highlights the varying methods of managing its soft power from one place to another.

The ninth and tenth chapters present the main hidden paths for executing Iranian foreign policy interests; as the ninth chapter, “The Backdoors of Iranian Foreign Policy: Relations with Terrorist Organizations,” addresses a thorny area in Iranian foreign policy, showcasing the ambiguous relations between Iran and major terrorist organizations, particularly the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the Muslim Brotherhood, by presenting a review of the history of these relations and their key milestones. The tenth chapter, “Iranian Proxies Between Pragmatism and Ideology,” continues to clarify these paths by revealing Iran’s patronage of some

regional proxies, who are ideologically connected to achieve pragmatic interests for both Iran and themselves, increasing their influence in their countries, thereby providing growing influence for Iran. This chapter presents the most notable examples of these proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories.

This book, as its title suggests, aims to deepen knowledge about Iran and serve as an objective basis for studies interested in Iranian affairs, answering questions that seek to uncover the ambiguity and duality of many Iranian policies both internally and externally.