The Geopolitics of Iran: A New Narrative

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The revolutionary Iran’s foreign policy has caught eyes and thoughts for more than three decades. While much ink has been spilled on the foundations of Iran’s foreign policy, most of scholars have either misinterpreted or misunderstood the pivotal factors responsible for Iran’s foreign policy. This weakness can be referred to two final arguments behind the surface of these textbooks on Iran’s grand strategy: A Persian expansion narrative and a threat of Shiism narrative. Proponents of the Persian narrative place emphasis on Iran’s past history, particularly its pre-Islamic history, claiming that the Iranian leaders attempt to resuscitate Iran’s past dominance on the Middle East. Based on this reading, forging Iran’s ties with political-militant Non-State Actors is a critical step to reflect the nation’s glorious past and aimed at re-establishing its ancient Persian empire in the Middle East. In this view, the ‘will’ for the expansion of Iran’s leverage is “naturally” embedded in Iranians, no matter whether under the pro-West Shah or under Anti-American Ayatollah Khomeini. Thus conceptualized, the 1979 Revolution does not mark a genuine change of heart in the trajectory of Iran’s connections with NSAs. Accordingly, a direct consequence of this analytical bias is uncritically classifying Iran’s foreign policy unsusceptible to the fluctuations of Iran’s domestic politics since they belong to a permanent Persian-Aryan nature that has nourished and generated specific codes and modes of decision and action.

The second argument is that Shiism takes an irreversibly Messianic approach toward Iran’s foreign policy. In contrast to the previous argument, this argument holds that the Islamic Revolution marks an inflection point in Tehran’s grand strategy. From this perspective, the Revolution brought about a path-breaking transformation of Iran’s national identity, marginalizing pre-Islamic Iran’s history and civilization and framing a national destiny and an apocalyptic mission for Iran marked by Shia themes that were politically embodied in the Islamic Republic. In this reading, the formation of Iran’s networks with militant groups is the initial phase of the re-establishment of an “Islamic Ummah,” led now by Shia leaders.Attributing to Tehran apocalyptically offensive and religiously imbued interests, a natural consequence of this approach urge annihilation of Iran’s capabilities through systematic wars or sanctions, and “regime-change” strategy. In short, most of these analyses, either deliberately or intuitively, center their explanation on less Iran’s national and regional interests than on essentially and immortally cultural-ideological-normative narratives manifested in Iranian leaders’ Persian-Shia offensive intention.

Though significant, the present article argues that the Islamic Republic’s “Export of the Revolution” strategy has not been the decisive force in shaping the trajectory of Iran’s foreign policy. On the contrary, it is a deeper, more macroscopic, long-term
understanding of geography that pushes Iran’s foreign policy. Located at the heart of the greater Middle East or what is called the Oikoumene, Iran sees itself as “the castle of the Near East”. Its lack of natural defensive borders and vast territory – characteristics that have historically attracted different tribes and nations to the Iranian Plateau – has bequeathed Iran with a deep historical insecurity. Combined with the fact that it is the only Shia Muslim and Persian-speaking country in the region, Iran has long suffered from what has been called “strategic loneliness.” First coined by Mohiaddin Mesbahi, the director of Middle East Studies at Florida International University, the term refers to the fact that “Iran by design and by default has been strategically ‘lonely’ and deprived of meaningful alliances and great power bandwagoning.” Both the 1979 Islamic Revolution and its bloody, eight-year war with Iraq intensified that sense of strategic loneliness. While Baghdad received massive support from the Persian Gulf monarchies, the United States, and the Soviet Union at the height of the war, Tehran received virtually no help from external powers. For many Iranians, it was a war of “all against Iran”.

To compensate for this strategic deficit, Tehran’s leaders have sought to defend Iran’s national integrity and independence beyond its borders. In fact, the very logic of its geography and history demonstrates that Iran’s ultimate deterrence capabilities are based heavily on its ability to project power externally. That is why the Shah countered the threat of Baathist Iraq by supporting Mulla Mustafa Barzani and Iraqi Kurds. And that is why building connections with militant groups like Lebanese Hezbollah, Syria’s Shabiha militias and the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, Iraq’s Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, and the Houthis in Yemen - although how much material support Iran has provided to them remains uncertain - has been a strategic tool to defend the nation far beyond its territory.