

Concept

Iranian Hegemony

01.31.2007

Definition¹

The concept "Iranian Hegemony" discusses Iran's aspiration to acquire economic, military and political power, which will enable it to (1) secure the stability of the Iranian Regime; (2) defend its territorial integrity; (3) utilize its natural resources; (4) influence regional processes; (5) export the Islamic Revolution; based on (6) recognition of its status as a leading state in the international arena.

Background

Iran's aspiration for regional hegemony and recognition of its leading international status stems from its large territory and population, its important geographic location, its central status within the Islamic-Shiite world, its history as a regional empire and its economic and military potential.²

In recent years, Iran is making an effort to expand its regional and international influence.³ Iran's ability to advance this agenda derives from regional and global developments, such as the end of the Iran-Iraq war (1988); collapse of the USSR (1991); US war on terror and democratization agenda it advanced in the Middle East (since 2001); collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq (4/03); rise of oil prices; and tension between China, Russia and the US.

Components of Iranian Hegemony

The current Iranian regime seeks hegemony on the basis of six components:

1. **Recognition of the Iranian regime** – Iran feels that it is subjected to constant attempts by the US and other states to undermine the stability of the Islamic Regime (1979).⁴ Iran's central objective is to obtain international recognition of its regime and stop attempts to topple it. Iran seeks to achieve a status of immunity vis-à-vis the U.S., similar to the status of Putin's regime in Russia or that of the Communist Party in China; in other words, it is legitimate to criticize the Iranian Regime, but not to try and overthrow it.
2. **Security: military guarantees for territorial integrity** – Iran is building military strength in order to defend its territorial integrity and to deter foreign forces from military strikes against it. This is a lesson learned from the war with Iraq (1980-1988), in which Iran was attacked and suffered heavy losses, missiles were fired on its capital, and weapons of mass destruction

¹ The Reut Institute thanks Dr. Emily Landau, from the Institute for National Security Studies, for her contribution to this document. The Reut Institute bears sole responsibility for the content of the document.

² For information on the concept "Regional Hegemony", see Elie Podeh, **The Quest for Hegemony in the Arab World**, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), pp. 8-12.

³ Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony began under the Shah, prior to the Islamic Revolution (1979), when Iran was seen as the "guarder of the Gulf." See, Ephraim, Kamm, **From Terror to Nuclear Power: the Meaning of the Iranian Threat**, (Tel Aviv: INSS, 2004), pp. 31-33.

⁴ The US and Britain's involvement in overthrowing the regime of Prime Minister Muhammad Mussadeq (1953), and their support of the Shah, is one source of the hostility between Iran and the US and Britain. (See Kinzer Stephen, **All the Shah's Men**, Jerusalem: Carmel, 2005). Iran is concerned about an American attempt to bring down the current regime, as it did in Iraq and Afghanistan (2002-03) (See [New York Times](#), 12/20/06).

were used against it.⁵ Moreover, Iran wants to assure that its fate will not be similar to the fate of Afghanistan (on its Eastern border) and Iraq (on its Western border), which were occupied and their regimes toppled by the US.⁶

3. **Economy: the right to utilize its natural resources** – Iran has an abundance of natural resources, mainly oil and gas. However, the utilization of these resources requires access to financing and technology found in foreign companies and states, as well as free movement to and from Iran overland and by sea. Iran's central objective is to guarantee its control over its natural resources and energy sources,⁷ receive the necessary funding and technology for the utilization of its resources and preserve its ability to sell them to foreign states and turn them into revenues.⁸
4. **Influence on regional processes** – Iran seeks to influence regional political developments in the Middle East and Central Asia in line with its interests and ideology. Iran is building political and economic tools in order to achieve political influence over its neighboring states, as well as in farther regions, including Iraq, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan,⁹ the Kurdish areas, Lebanon and the PA.
5. **Recognition of Iran's leading international role** – Iran seeks to be recognized as a leading state in the world. This aspiration stems from Iran's history, resources, current status and future objectives. For this purpose, Iran conducts a global foreign policy, and activates a network of alliances and agreements with China, Russia, India, African states, Latin America, Asia and Europe.
6. **Exporting the Islamic Revolution** – Iran seeks to export the Islamic Revolution in the Middle East and beyond.¹⁰ This will ensure the protection of the Muslim world vis-à-vis the international system which is perceived as unjust towards Muslims, and will also enable Iran to expand its political influence. One of the operational objectives of this concept is the uncompromising struggle against Israel.¹¹

Tools for establishing Iranian Hegemony

⁵ Restoration of the Iranian army and the launch of the nuclear program began shortly after the war against Iraq, and as a direct lesson from it. ([Washington Times](#), 5/31/06; [Ynet](#), 8/19/06, (in Hebrew)). See Fariborz Haghshenas, *Iran's Doctrine of Asymmetric Naval Warfare*, **The Washington Institute**, 12/21/06).

⁶ A commander of the 'Suicide Battalion' said: "If the Gulf States allow the American forces to prepare an attack on Iran from their territories, these states should not expect to remain safe, as we [the Iranians] will take their security away" (See **Memri**, 12/5/06).

⁷ The attempt of former Iranian Prime Minister Muhammad Mussadeq to nationalize Iran's natural resources led to the toppling of his Regime by the US and Britain. See Kinzer Stephen, **All the Shah's Men**, (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2005).

⁸ Although Iran holds approximately 11.5% of the world's oil resources and significant reserves of natural gas, the Iranian economy suffers from difficulties and has to import gasoline. In 2005, Iran imported \$4.5 billion worth of gasoline, which represents up to 38% of Iran's internal needs. See Paul Rivlin, "Iran's Energy Vulnerability", **Meria**, Vol.10, No.4, (12/06), p.109.

⁹ Rod David, "Iran tries to expand its influence: investing billions in Afghanistan," (**Ha'aretz**, 12/28/06).

¹⁰ In a letter which Ahmadinejad sent to President Bush (5/06), he wrote that: "We increasingly see that people around the world are flocking towards a main focal point – that is the Almighty God. Undoubtedly through faith in God and the teachings of the prophets, the people will conquer their problems. My question for you is: 'Do you not want to joint them?'" ([Washington Post](#), 5/10/06).

¹¹ The Iranian Regime has been opposed to the existence of the State of Israel since its establishment. Ahmadinejad represents the most radical stream in the Iranian Regime: "Israel has to be wiped off the map." (**Memri**, 8/11/06).

Iran is developing a number of tools for establishing its regional and international influence:

- **'The Resistance Network'** – Iran is the principal initiator of the Resistance Network against Israel and supports it financially, militarily and politically. The Resistance Network is composed of states and organizations that act against Israeli, American and Western interests and undermine moderate regimes, such as in Lebanon and the PA, with the purpose of advancing an Islamic agenda and serving Iran's interests.¹²
- **"The Shiite Crescent" and the Islamic Network** – Iran is building regional political-strategic alliances, stretching from Iran to Lebanon via Iraq, based on the status of the Shiite communities in each state. Moreover, Iran is developing a network of relationships with Islamic communities worldwide.
- **Nuclear Project** – The nuclear project is the central pillar of Iran's security establishment¹³ and it's National Security Concept.¹⁴ Completion of its military nuclear capabilities will serve Iran's aspiration to guarantee its security, economy, and regional and international status.¹⁵
- **Establishment of alliances, agreements and cooperation** on an economic, diplomatic and military basis with Russia, China,¹⁶ and India, as well as with other states in Asia, Africa, Latin America.¹⁷ This cooperation serves Iran in its struggle against US attempts to impose sanctions or consolidate diplomatic moves against Iran.¹⁸

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¹² Bar'el, Zvi, "Iran Profits, Saudi Arabia Benefits, and a Bone gets Thrown to Syria" (**Ha'aretz**, 1/26/07, (in Hebrew)).

¹³ See Shahram Chubin, **Iran's Nuclear Ambitions**, (Washington: Carnie Endowment, 2006), p.12.

¹⁴ An Iranian commentator stated: "Today, the same state [Iran] which became known as barbarian by the West, takes pride in being one of the fifteen states which can develop local nuclear technologies." (**BBC Monitoring**, 2/2/05).

¹⁵ Iran's nuclear program was intended to increase Iranian national pride and unite the population behind the regime. See Shahram Chubin, **Iran's Nuclear Ambitions**, (Washington: Carnie Endowment, 2006), p.26.

¹⁶ In recent years, Iran signed numerous contracts with Indian, Chinese and Russian companies (see **Iranian WS**, 12/27/06; **Dawn**, 9/7/06). Moreover, since 2003, Iran has been seeking solutions to ease US economic pressure by choosing "to transform the state's dollar-denominated assets into euros and to use the European currency for foreign transactions". (**EuroNews**, 12/18/06). See also Anne Korin and Gal Luft, "Ahmadinejad's Gas Revolution: A Plan to Defeat Economic Sanctions," **Institute for the Analysis of Global Security**, 12/06. In contrast, Iran is not a member of the WTO, despite its request to join the organization in 1996.

¹⁷ During Ahmadinejad's trip to Venezuela he stated that "they [the Americans] want to govern the world." Regarding the developing cooperation between Iran and Venezuela, he added "The message from what occurred today is that revolutionary and independent peoples, with mutual help, are capable of providing for themselves. Venezuela and Iran have shown that, together, beyond the reach of US hegemony and imperialism, they can work and progress" (**Washington Post**, 9/18/06).

¹⁸ Russia and China were the main objectors to the original version of the sanctions which were consolidated by Europe and the US as a consequence of Iran's refusal to halt the development of its nuclear program. As a result of their objection, the wording of the sanctions had to be toned down (**Ynet**, 11/2/06). Following UNSC Resolution 1737 to exert sanctions on Iran, the Iranian Minister for Oil announced that Iran would use the "oil weapon" if necessary. (**Ynet**, 12/26/06).