


The (Changing) Roots and Aims of Iranian Neighbourhood Policy

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Iran's foreign policy in response to both regional and global shifts. It explores how Iranian Neighborhood Policy, initially focused on countering the perceived threat from the Arab-Israeli axis and preventing the realization of the "Deal of the Century" plan, has been impacted by recent geopolitical developments. These include the 2023 Israel-Hamas War, the normalization talks between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and broader shifts toward a multipolar world order. The article argues that while Iran's policy aimed to economically integrate with neighboring countries, including Saudi Arabia, to counterbalance growing Israeli influence, the recent war has altered the regional dynamics. Khataei suggests that the roots of Iranian Neighbourhood Policy might need to shift from a focus on insecurity and anti-Israeli cooperation toward a broader civilizational approach, seeking regional hegemony through cultural and economic influence. Furthermore, the article highlights the role of external factors, such as Iran's integration into Asian economies, particularly with Russia and China, as vital to the future of its foreign policy strategy. The article calls for a reassessment of Iranian goals in light of these developments, emphasizing the importance of adapting to the new geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: Iran's Neighborhood Policy, the palestinian question, Iran's "Look to the East" Policy.



Introduction

The geopolitical context in which Iranian Neighborhood Policy was born is being fundamentally altered. These changes are ongoing on two levels of analysis: the world order at large and Middle Eastern geopolitics specifically. In terms of world order studies, there now has been a true shift from weakened unipolarity to true multipolarity, catalyzed by the Ukrainian Crisis of 2022. Simultaneously, Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and the 2023 Israel-Hamas War have changed the geopolitical outlook of the Middle East. The aim of this paper is to analyze possible changes to the roots and aims of Iranian neighborhood policy in the near future.

While paying lip service to promoting economic growth, Iranian Neighbourhood Policy had truly only one goal in mind, preventing realization of any scenario resembling the “Deal of the Century” Plan of the Trump administration (Khataei, 2022). In short, even before the Abraham Accords of 2020, in witnessing the emergence of anti-Iranian "Arab-Israeli Axis" during the 2015-2018 period, Iranian foreign policy apparatus and foreign policy intelligentsia began a careful examination of the consequences of prolonged Arab-Israeli cooperation, especially in terms of the Palestinian Question. Three main conclusions were made from these discussions. Firstly, Arab leaders had rightfully felt threatened by Iran's rise in regional influence, and Iran must not be further seen as a regional threat even if this requires regional concessions. Secondly, Saudi Arabia should be viewed as separate from the US and entitled to its genuine security interests. Thirdly, one of the main reasons incentivizing Arab leaders to deepen cooperation with Israel was the lack of real economic integration with Iran.

These three conclusions were agglomerated into the Iranian Neighborhood Policy. Aiming to focus on economic relations and integration with its neighboring countries, especially the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in hopes of putting a break on Arab-Israeli cooperation. But the 2023 Hamas-Israeli War, which is a direct consequence of continued Saudi-Israeli normalization talks, undermines the rationale behind the formulation of Iranian neighborhood policy. Which can mean the Iranian resort to new policy tools as the ultimate vanguard of Palestinian cause for statehood. Even if Neighborhood Policy as a tool of hedging against Israeli presence in the region has failed, it can be used to promote other Iranian interests in the region. And most importantly, the very roots of Iranian Neighbourhood Policy can be changed from Iranian insecurity from the formulation of the Arab-Israeli axis to a

civilizational outlook with the goal of Iranian regional hegemony through revitalization of the pre-colonial Iranian civilizational sphere, one close to the "Islamic-Iranian Civilization" rhetoric of the Iranian Supreme Leader. An innovative civilizational outlook with an imperial bias toward time rather than space, judging through an Innisean perspective.

1. The Emergence of the Arab-Israeli Axis Against Iran

By 2016, the astonishing success of the Iranian state in handling the geopolitical competitions set off by the Arab Winter and the conclusion of the Iran Nuclear Deal set off a collective alarm for the regional actors in the Middle East (Black, 2015). Iranian influence in the region had substantially risen in less than a decade, as the Iranian state had created an "axis of resistance," made up of Shia militant groups and sympathetic political movements in strategically significant countries such as Iraq and Syria. For the first time since the anti-communist Iranian intervention in the Oman Sultanate in 1972, Iran began to play its historical role as a proactive regional power with a revisionist ideology, desiring to alter the security structure of the Middle East toward a post-West order free of outsider presence (Khamenei, 2020a).

"The Islamic Republic cultivated the spirit of resistance against tyranny, power-seeking, and the hegemony of dominant powers. Imam Khomeini was the first in the world to declare, 'Neither East nor West.' This spirit, this logic, and these firm words have spread widely. Today, many in the region identify with the resistance front and are prepared to stand in defiance" (Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei, 2022).

The rise of Iran as a regional power is not surprising to those familiar with the history of the Middle East. The political entities ruling over the Iranian plateau throughout written history have had no difficulty acting as a regional power and core hub of international relations in the Middle East. Iran, by its very nature, due to its size, population, resources, and cultural prowess, is poised to become a hegemonic or semi-hegemonic power in the Middle East (Kaplan, 2012). In the absence of a clear regional rival capable of balancing Iran, rationally the countries of the region in opposition to it would find themselves desiring to create regional blocs against it, a fact that now seems widely accepted in Middle East analytical circles (Mladenov et al., 2022).

The result of this aforementioned heightened sense of insecurity by the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf was the emergence of the

Arab-Israeli axis against Iran. Meaning the increasing covert and, at times, open cooperation of Saudi Arabia and its allies with Israel with the aim of thwarting Iranian influence in the region. From the perspective of the Iranian state and Iranian foreign policy intelligence, this Arab-Israeli axis could become a source of existential national security threats for the Islamic Republic (Khataei, 2022), but increased Israeli presence in the Iranian neighborhood was not unique to Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. Israel, by all means, had begun a multifaceted grand strategy of containing and rolling back Iranian influence in the region, for example, via increased Israeli activity in Iraqi Kurdistan and Azerbaijan in addition to increased ties with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain.

Yet the single most important factor behind Iran's fluster with the Arab-Israeli axis was the possibility of normalization agreements between Arabs and Israel (Khataei, 2022), which in hindsight would mean the abandonment of the cause of Palestine by Arab countries of the Persian Gulf (Middle East Monitor, 2023), most specifically Bahrain, UAE, and Saudi Arabia. By tacitly agreeing to the Trump Peace Plan (which Bahrain and UAE did by their respective agreements with Israel (Abraham Accords Peace Agreement), the Iranian Supreme Leader commented on this "US policy" to push for normalization without consideration of the Palestinian issue by saying, "The main policy of the Arrogant Powers and Zionism is to push aside the issue of Palestine in the minds of Muslim communities and to cause it to fade into oblivion" (Khamenei, 2020c). Arab countries would no longer require anything resembling the Saudi peace initiative of 2003, in which Arab countries offered normalization and recognition in return for Israel ending the illegal occupation of non-Israeli territories deemed so by United Nations resolutions. The Iranian Supreme Leader commented on this "US policy" to push for normalization without consideration of the Palestinian issue by saying: "The main policy of the Arrogant Powers and Zionism is to push aside the issue of Palestine in the minds of Muslim communities and to cause it to fade into oblivion" (Khamenei, 2020c). Such a scenario, which at the time was collectively referred to as "Trump's Deal of the Century" by Iranian governmental think tanks, is unacceptable to the Islamic Republic from both strategic and ideological standpoints. It would mean the ideological failure of the Islamic Republic of Iran as the vanguard of Palestine's cause for liberation and a strategic failure in terms of losing its allies amongst the

Palestinian armed resistance groups, which are an important strategic asset. Thus, avoidance of the realization of a "Deal of the Century" scenario has become a top regional priority for the Islamic Republic of Iran (Khataei, 2022).

2. The Inception of Iran's Neighbourhood Policy (2015-2019)

Already in 2015, both the Iranian state and the Iranian governmental think tanks began exploring the reasons behind the heightened Saudi hostilities against Iran (Khataei, 2022). In the early phase of discussions regarding the Kingdom, there was no consensus as to the main motivations behind Saudi actions. Fundamentally, there were differences of opinion regarding the very nature of Saudi foreign policy. Iranian policymakers had different answers to the question, "Is Saudi Arabia an independent actor in regional politics?". Certain strands of thought somewhat ideologically believed Saudi Arabia to be no more than just a client state of the United States and therefore believed that Saudi Arabia was just acting out the political will of the United States, which, beginning in the Obama years, was the containment of Iranian influence. And with the ascendancy of Donald J. Trump to the office of presidency of the United States in 2017, by all means, US policy became the rollback of Iranian influence rather than its containment (Mehranian, 2021).

Several events led to the emergence of consensus in the Iranian foreign policy elite and Iranian leadership that Saudi Arabia should be seen as an independent foreign policy actor with its own security concerns that are autonomous from US influence. The most important of such events was the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi and the ensuing temporary rift between Saudi Arabia and the United States. The domestic intrigues of Saudi Arabia were also influential in swaying the Iranian attitude toward the Kingdom. The launch of the Saudi Vision 2030 plan in 2016 and the 2017–2019 Saudi Arabian purge signified the emergence of a new Saudi national agenda, focusing on economic development as a tool of providing legitimacy for the Al-Saud royal family in despite rising domestic criticism and as a new social contract (Chatham House, 2017). The initiation of Saudi Vision 2030 was propelled by a convergence of domestic economic factors. The Kingdom's heavy reliance on oil exports, coupled with economic challenges arising from fluctuating oil prices, necessitated a shift toward diversification and economic sustainability. Rapid population growth and the resulting strains on resources and public services, along with high youth

unemployment, underscored the need for comprehensive reforms. Essentially, it is permissible to argue that the Iranian state noticed the significant desire of Saudi Arabia for greater autonomy from the US and the desire of the Kingdom to perform a novel role as an important regional actor.

A quintessential question needed to be addressed when the discourses inside Iran began to identify Saudi Arabia as an independent foreign policy actor. If Saudi Arabia is not acting to the will of the United States in its dealings with Israel, then why is Saudi Arabia increasing its cooperation levels with Israel? And why do so despite low public opinion of Israel amongst Arab countries (Kassin & Pollock, 2022) and with complete disregard toward the Palestinian cause? In short, the policy discussions in the Iranian think tanks showcase that, in the view of Iranian foreign policy intelligence, Saudi Arabia was pursuing two major benefits (Khataei, 2022). Firstly, hedging against Iran via increased security cooperation with Israel and creating a unified Arab-Israeli front against Iran, since the Kingdom is alarmed by Iran's rise in power. And Secondly, receiving the very tangible economic benefits of integration with the tech-based Israeli economy, which are of significance to Saudi Arabia in its efforts to achieve economic diversification from oil dependency.

It rationally stemmed from such conclusions that in case Iran wanted to thwart Saudi-Israeli dealings and prevent the institutionalization of the Arab-Israeli axis at large, Iran needed to meet the security and economic demands of the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. The actualization of this realization was made by the Iranian state in the spirit of Iranian Neighbourhood Policy beginning in 2019. The academic discourses surrounding the topic of formulation of Iranian neighborhood policy began around 2015, mostly with discussions regarding the poor record of trade with Iranian neighboring countries. Countries that are hypothetically the best avenue of trade with the region and the world during the sanctions regime against Iran. An important case here was the unsatisfyingly low trade turnover of Iran with Syria and Iraq compared to Arab countries and Turkey. While Iran had paid the price of victory over ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) with blood and steel, it was losing the peace process and the integration of the Iranian economy with Iraq and Syria as a way of maintaining a foothold in the countries.

The need to truly integrate the Iranian economy with the regional economies of its neighbors now was also motivated by several other

aspects. Firstly, the Iranian economy was in dire need of growth after Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA. Secondly, Iran needed to offer its neighbors alternatives to the economic incentives Israel had to offer in return for greater economic association. And thirdly, Iran could strategically choose to enter specific sectors of its neighboring economies with the aim of establishing a foothold against possible Israeli efforts to enter those markets. Overall, integration of Iran into the regional economy was seen as somewhat of a functionalist approach toward re-establishing friendly and cordial relations with the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf.

As a result, discussions surrounding Iran's Neighborhood Policy swiftly evolved into the state's regional policy and a new economic framework for shaping its relations with neighboring countries. The Iranian Neighborhood Policy was designed as a unified response to two distinct challenges: addressing Iran's economic difficulties and countering the growing institutionalization of Israeli ties with major Arab states, in hopes of thwarting the "Deal of the Century." Additionally, it sought to keep Israel out of the Persian Gulf's security architecture, in line with Iran's long-standing stance that the region's security should be managed by its own inhabitants rather than external powers. This policy has proven particularly successful in Iran's rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, with the final rounds of negotiations taking place in Beijing. This rapprochement is key to re-establishing full relations with all members of the GCC, reflecting a broader trend of improving Arab-Iranian relations. As Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei observed in 2023, "The United States announced that it wanted to create a united Arab front against Iran, against the Islamic Republic, so they could jointly oppose Iran. Today, the opposite is happening, as relations between the Arab world and Iran are strengthening." This highlights how, despite U.S. efforts to isolate Iran, the country has strengthened its ties with key Arab nations, marking a significant shift in regional dynamics.

3. Reevaluating Iran's Neighborhood Policy in Light of Shifting Global and Regional Dynamics

The international context in which Iranian Neighbourhood Policy was formulated has been intrinsically altered, and because of this, the aims of Iranian Neighbourhood Policy are in need of reevaluation. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, Iran's ascension to full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, increased tensions in the Strait of Taiwan, Saudi-Iranian

rapprochement in, and the 2023 Israel-Hamas War are all events in the view of which Iranian Neighbourhood Policy must be reevaluated. Careful examination of the regional and international consequences of these processes is a must in creating an all-encompassing neighborhood policy that sets long-term strategic goals for the Islamic Republic of Iran in order to provide the security and development of the Iranian neighborhood.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought about the initiation of the metamorphosis of world order toward true multipolarity. Russia, in the true sense of the word, engaged in rebellion against the US-dominated world order, wanting to prevent what it saw as the existential threat of Ukraine as a full member of the NATO alliance. The most significant consequence of this war of attrition (between Russia and what Russian academia refers to as "the collective West") for Iran is the sanctions regime against Russia. With the Russians showing no desire to budge to Western sanctions against it and abandoning their war aims, Russia has been fully thrown into a post-West state of affairs. Of course, this resulted in an exceptional opportunity for the Islamic Republic of Iran to pursue deep economic integration with the Russian Federation, going as far as integrating the two countries' respective payment systems, the Iranian Shetab and the Russian MIR, which would have been impossible just a few years ago because of the reluctance of the Russian financial sector to get involved with Iran due to US sanctions.

Accordingly, it can be said that Russia is not just a partner for Iran but also a gateway toward greater integration with Asia. The lack of a true unified policy vision toward the Asia-Pacific region is very clear in Iranian foreign policy. Preoccupation with the nuclear issue and regional matters at hindsight have limited the abilities to engage in Asian integration matters. Yet Iran's ascension to full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) after 15 years as an observer is a step in the right direction. Of course, the competence of the SCO as a framework and as a body is up for debate, but indeed, the very inclusion of Iran in it is significant because of its face value and legal implications. As the charter of the SCO states, the areas of cooperation are not limited to security but also every single area of mutual interest to member states, including economic ties. This is the main point of reflection. Three great powers-India, China, and Russia-have publicly removed Iran's "persona non grata" in economic affairs.

Given the current situation, it is imperative for Iran to proactively

enhance its integration with Asian economies, with a particular focus on deepening ties with China, India, and the ASEAN region. Iran stands to benefit significantly from fostering high-tech trade partnerships, given the booming knowledge-based economy. By taking the initiative to strengthen economic cooperation with leading Asian nations, Iran can tap into the technological advancements and market opportunities prevalent in these regions. Collaborating with China, a global tech powerhouse, and engaging with the dynamic ASEAN markets will not only facilitate the exchange of expertise but also open avenues for joint innovation and investment. Such strategic initiatives not only bolster Iran's economic resilience but also position the nation at the forefront of technological progress in the rapidly evolving landscape of Asian economies. This proactive approach to integration aligns with the imperative of the Iranian "Second Step of the Revolution" plan.

On the matter of China, the escalation of tensions in the Taiwan Strait poses potential dangers for Iran, primarily due to its dependence on secure maritime routes for energy exports. As a significant oil producer and exporter, Iran relies on the smooth passage of its vessels through global waterways. Any disruption or conflict in the Taiwan Strait could lead to heightened geopolitical instability, impacting global trade routes and potentially affecting Iran's oil exports. Iran should actively pursue a non-escalation policy in this regard and act as a middleman, at least until the Chinese point of no return is reached and the Communist Party of China moves to forcefully reunite China's final province with the mainland.

Furthermore, Iran should be mindful of China's increased involvement in the Middle Eastern political processes. More than anything, the main priority of China with regards to the Middle East is keeping the energy exports to China flowing. Rationally, China would try to avoid any sort of prolonged, large-scale conflict in the Middle East that could harm its energy security. The Iranian state must also reflect on the long-term consequences of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and ponder whether Iranian long-term interests are at odds with Chinese policies. The Chinese policy of no conflict signifies China's openness toward Saudi-Israeli normalization. This could come as a source of contention between Iran and China.

In terms of the Palestinian Question, Iran has failed in its goal of preventing the continuation of normalization talks between Saudi Arabia and Israel, as normalization talks have continued in the recent past (Kurtzer-Ellenbogen et al., 2023). This comes in contrast

to the policy presupposition that rapprochement with Saudi Arabia is a key strategic objective to prevent normalization between Israel and the Kingdom. The only event that stopped normalization talks between Israel and Saudi Arabia was the initiation of the Israel-Hamas War in October 2023. The Iranian state, the United States, and even Israel itself have denied evidence of Iranian participation in preparation for the Hamas October 7th attack against Israel. The unfolding of this war has changed the geopolitics of the Palestinian Question; while it appears that the war has changed international public opinion (especially in younger generations) in support of Palestinian statehood, in defiance of the dominance of the Israeli narrative in western social media, the onslaught of the Palestinian people is continuing without any real international pressure against Israel. The reluctance of the "axis of resistance" to engage against Israel on a larger scale is due to the full security guarantee of the United States to Israel. This is more than anything a consequence of the Hamas October 7th attack, being unprecedented and with unacceptable civilian casualties, which lead to the unification of the American political elite toward the complete defense of the continuation of the existence of the State of Israel.

As the situation stands, Israel has been given the green light to act freely in Gaza, without the fear of retaliation by Iran and its allies in the Resistance, because of the security guarantee of the United States (Lau & Posaner, 2023) and, in consequence, the unwillingness of both Iran and the United States to directly attack one another. This means that Israel will wipe out the fighting capacity of the Palestinian armed resistance groups, taking control over Gaza, and by doing so entering a new phase of Israeli policy in which the very limited autonomy of Palestinians even in the West Bank is taken away. The end result of such a move is a major blow to the Palestiniannian cause for liberation, and putting the ball in the court of Israel's Arab neighbors regarding their unified reaction to these turns of events.

Conclusion

The main aims of the Iranian Neighborhood Policy must be reevaluated in light of both regional and global developments. The contextual changes affecting this policy highlight the necessity of moving beyond it and formulating new regional strategies, such as an Iranian Asia-Pacific Policy and an Iranian West Asian Policy. It is important to recall that initial discussions of the Iranian Neighborhood Policy focused primarily on economic matters, with

the term *neighborhood* emphasizing Iran's direct geographic access to these countries, which would facilitate trade without relying on financial institutions dominated by the United States. As Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei stated on October 3, 2023, "Today, Palestine is the main issue of the Islamic world. Of course, it has been this way for several decades. This is not just true today. For several decades, the issue of Palestine has been, in the true sense of the word, the main issue of the Islamic world." This assertion underscores the need for Iran to adapt its policies to reflect ongoing geopolitical realities, including the enduring significance of the Palestinian cause within its broader regional strategy.

Yet Iran is no longer in a position of isolation in the international arena. Despite US sanctions, Iran has joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a full member after 15 years of being on the waiting list. Iran has been blessed by the seclusion of Russia from the West, since Asian countries continuing full-scale relations and increasing integration with Russia have no reason not to do the same with the Islamic Republic of Iran since both are not under sanctions by the United Nations. Therefore, in order to fully enjoy this critical opportunity, Iran must develop a new long-term plan of integration into the political and economic processes of the Asia-Pacific region. Doing so by a new energetic expansion of relations with ASEAN, China, and India. ASEAN specifically has great potential for Iran, and the rapidly accelerating relations between Indonesia and the Islamic Republic of Iran is a great first step. Iran and Indonesia have expanded political, economic, and security ties, and the 2023 Iran-Indonesia trade deal was the first Iranian trade deal with another country since the 2003 deal with Pakistan. Creation of an Iranian plan of association with ASEAN is a must, and its realization will greatly boost Iran-ASEAN integration.

On the matter of Palestine, currently only speculations could be made on what could be the aggregate response of GCC countries toward Israeli actions in Gaza. The Israeli government has stated its goal is to take over "overall security responsibility" in Gaza (Federman, 2023) which essentially means the recreation of the West Bank scenario in Gaza, most likely with the eventual return of illegal settlements in Gaza if the far-right government in Israel persists. In either scenario of Israeli action, there will be a periodic halt of normalization talks between Saudi Arabia and Israel, which is an opportunity for Iran to be taken advantage of. It is unlikely that the recipe of integration with Saudis as a bulwark against Israel would work, given it already showed no success in the recent past.

But the seemingly increasing agitation of Arab public opinion over Arab states' cuddling of Israel might in fact be taken by Arab leaders as a domestic legitimacy concern. Without pressure from Arab citizens and the lack of visible economic benefits to integration with Iran (instead of Israel), the termination of the normalization track between Saudi Arabia and Israel is improbable.

Finally, as mentioned before, the context in which Iranian Neighbourhood Policy was created was Iranian insecurity. That moment in time is gone, and now Iran must formulate a new neighborhood policy based on the steadfast vision of revitalizing the Iranian-Islamic civilization space. The constant missing factor in discussions of Iranian neighborhood policy amongst academic and governmental circles is the cultural aspect. Of course, anti-Western cultural discourses are nothing new to Iranian academia, but what is meant here is not just the status quo agendas of missionary spread of Shia religion. Iranian-Islamic civilizational culture is not only Shiism but encompasses non-religious elements as well. Thanks to careful strategic decisions, Iranian influence has spread over the Middle East, but the prolonging of this sphere of prosperity created by Iran will in the end be a question of cultural hegemony. In the view of Innis (2008), throughout history the careful balance that enabled great Middle Eastern empires to survive in the multiethnic atmosphere of the Middle East was a balance between time (cultural and religious hegemony) and space (military prowess and state efficiency). For the Islamic Republic of Iran now, the scale is tipped toward control of space, with Iran having a lack of any real cultural hegemony in the region because of domestic disagreements on cultural issues. The revival of the Iranian-Islamic civilization cannot be achieved without a revival of Iranian culture in the region, a revival where Iran comes into terms with the nuances of modernity and mass media. Which is a revival where the main aim is to attract the younger generations of the Iranian neighborhood, essentially to recreate an Iranian version of the Korean Wave. Creating an Iranian sphere of cultural influence to support the aims of Iranian Neighbourhood Policy, which are to boost Iranian long-term security and affluence.

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