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The strategy of Iranian hegemonic expansionism in Syria and Afghanistan

La estrategia de expansionismo hegemónico iraní en Siria y Afganistán

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ABSTRACT. In recent decades, Iran has launched an ambitious foreign policy program. One of its fundamental objectives is to promote its hegemonic expansionism in areas of special regional interest. This article examines Iran's agenda in Afghanistan and Syria amid two different wars and territorial contexts. Despite the differences, this work highlights the common elements of their expansionist strategy in Central Asia and the Middle East. This strategy is based on the rejection of the intervention of the United States and its allies, and the demand for an Islamic political-religious regime. In the cases analyzed, Iran has mixed political and military support with economic aid and the strengthening of commercial ties with these countries.

KEYWORDS: Central Asia; international conflict; Iran; Middle East; military strategy

RESUMEN. En las últimas décadas, Irán ha puesto en marcha un ambicioso programa de política exterior en el cual uno de sus objetivos fundamentales es promover su expansionismo hegemónico a lo largo de zonas de especial interés regional. Este artículo investiga la agenda desarrollada por Irán en Afganistán y Siria, en medio de dos guerras y contextos territoriales diferentes. A pesar de las diferencias, este trabajo evidencia los elementos comunes de su estrategia expansionista en Asia central y Medio Oriente. Esta estrategia se basa en el rechazo de la intervención de EE. UU. y sus aliados, y la reivindicación de un régimen político-religioso islámico. En los casos analizados, Irán ha mezclado el apoyo político y militar con la ayuda económica y el fortalecimiento de lazos comerciales con estos países.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Asia central; conflicto internacional; estrategia militar; Irán; Medio Oriente

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Introduction

This article analytically questions the Iranian government's foreign policy actions, faced with instability scenarios in its most immediate orbits of peripheral influence. Iranian actions are specifically addressed in two main scenarios. The first involves the actions resulting from the US military campaign in Afghanistan since 2001 due to the attacks of September 11 (9/11). The second examines Iran's actions resulting from the so-called Arab Spring and the complex range of challenges and opportunities it yielded associated with the Middle East's most representative interests¹.

Although the dynamics of the war in Afghanistan are not the same as those seen in the war in Syria, both theaters of operation are significant references in this analysis to identify clear, comparable elements of their foreign policy. In other words, they show approaches aimed at implementing the same strategy of hegemonic expansionism at the regional level, which has been replicated to achieve an unusual influence over vast territories ranging from central Asia to the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. The articulation of these cases illustrates at least three characteristic elements of Iranian foreign policy in areas considered to be of high strategic value.

First, Iran is positioned as a state actor of enormous importance, with serious regional hegemony ambitions, because of its location at the intersection of significant geopolitical relevance areas. Because of its size, location, natural resources, and millennial history, the Iranian political leadership aspires to consolidate the country as the region's natural and undisputed leader. However, on closer examination, their ambitions do not unfold in an entirely favorable environment. The alliance of powerful Sunni monarchies in the Persian Gulf with the United States constitutes a trajectory of antagonisms for hegemonic leadership and religious leadership in the Islamic world.

Second, the Iranian theocratic regime identifies American influence and, even more so, the presence of its troops in the vicinity of its territory as a serious threat. Therefore, its government has not adopted a mere spectator's role in the face of the disturbing security dynamics that have developed near its eastern border since the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. This condition has led to the significant development of its capacity to resist American interests in the area, thus significantly influencing the most complex and conflictive issues in Central Asia.

1 This text adopts Marshall's (2017) Middle East demarcation, namely, the territorial area extending over 1600 kilometers from west to east, from the Mediterranean to the mountains of Iran, and 3200 kilometers from north to south, from the vicinity of the Black Sea to the shores of the Arabian Sea off Oman. Because of the strategic implications of this region, its political and social dynamics affect and influence the vicinity of North Africa and the Persian Gulf, making it a hinge area for extended control of the region.

In turn, this circumstance has also led to an unusual level of selective involvement in some episodes of political conflict in the Middle East, especially in Syria, since the events of the Arab Spring². Therefore, the eventual weakening, or even overthrow, of Bashar al-Assad's dictatorial regime would be a severe setback for the platform of penetration and regional hegemony that has been consolidated through political, economic, and military alliances with local actors for decades, in a clear bid to redefine the *status quo* in the region and achieve a redistribution of power.

Third, in its agenda of hegemonic expansionism, Iran has deployed strong support to the governments it considers necessary to ensure its strategic objectives, which has promoting an absorbing economic penetration in each of these countries. This influence is commonly leveraged with its enormous financial resources as a global energy power, which allows it to have a wide margin of maneuvering for credit, energy supply, and technology transfer. Above all, it has made possible their participation necessary in large infrastructure projects and the reconstruction of countries devastated by war.

Afghanistan as an Iranian Strategic Front

This analysis must begin by highlighting two fundamental and clearly interconnected facts. First, as shown in Figure 1, Iran is located between Iraq and Afghanistan. Its location is relevant because both neighboring countries have been the object of armed action by the US from two military campaigns since 2001 and 2003. This has naturally led to a significant US operational and military deployment in border areas of extreme sensitivity to Iranian national security interests.

Because of its immediate vicinity, Afghanistan has been, is, and will be a point of reference for Iranian strategic interests. Throughout its 936 kilometers of shared land border, a broad correlation has been consolidated based on the affinity of their religious ties (both are Muslim countries), ethnic-cultural (significant presence of Shiites), and linguistic (Dari and Persian). Additionally, Afghanistan is a third-world country, making it prone to financial policies of cooperation and monetary assistance from Iran, an oil power with a desire to strengthen bilateral relations and economic ties. In itself, Afghanistan has geopolitical implications of great relevance in Central Asia. Therefore, it has also aroused the strategic interest of other state actors with regional influence agendas, especially the United States. (Toscano, 2012).

2 Because this research work's objective is not to develop an analysis of the concept itself, the expression *Arab Spring* is used in the text because of its familiarity to various audiences, and without ignoring that there are other denominations, to describe the protests and revolutions that occurred between December 2010 and June 2011 in countries of North Africa, the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf (Revilla & Hovanyi, 2013).

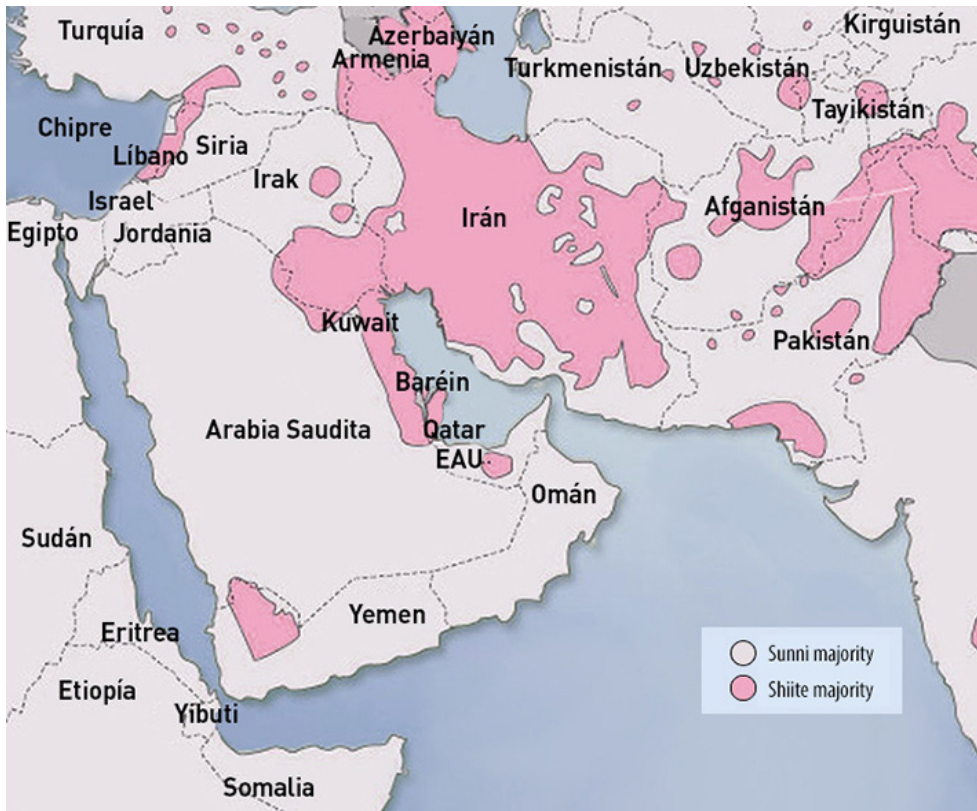


Figure 1. Spatial location of Iran and the Shiite population at the regional level
Source: Russia Today (2015).

Second, this is not the first time that US geostrategic attention has been focused on this country. Afghanistan's geopolitical relevance to the United States is longstanding, pre-dating the military campaign of the beginning of the new millennium (Imran, 2019). The country was already an epicenter of tension for the Americans since the end of the seventies due to the invasion carried out by the USSR and the American support for various forces of resistance during a war that lasted almost a decade.

However, the United States' military campaign since 2001 included two novel variables concerning the strategy implemented during the Cold War. On the one hand, it involved a direct military struggle by the US military forces themselves. In the past, they had delegated to local allies the confrontation against the Soviet enemy. On the other, it now served as a platform of territorial proximity to Iran. For most of the 1970s, Iran was a close American political ally. However, since its Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the consequent overthrow of the *Shah* of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, this country became

its most avowed regional antagonist. Since then, a revolutionary structure of political-religious leadership has been consolidated in Iran, with a markedly anti-American mood that remains to this day.

Iranian resistance against US interests in Central Asia

The fact that the US deployed its troops in Afghanistan less than a month after the 9/11 attacks made it impossible for the high spheres of Iranian power to consider this an irrelevant circumstance. However, the US political establishment linked the objectives of this military campaign to its new millennium fight against terrorism as a transnational threat, Al Qaeda's military defeat and the degradation of the jihadist ideology that supported it and, of course, the neutralization or capture of its leader, Osama Bin Laden (Larson & Savych, 2007; Tellis & Eggers, 2017).

However, it could be said that, given Afghanistan and Iran's territorial proximity, the US military campaign also had less mediatic objectives from the official narrative. These fundamentally consisted of limiting the capacities of Iranian hegemonic expansionism in the region. For the sake of argument, it could also be considered that the US invasion of Afghanistan since 2001 has had a profound impact on this country's geopolitical realities. In turn, it impacted the regional environment because, among other things, it activated a complex strategy of Iranian reaction to counteract any force of contention to its interests.

Accordingly, the staging of Iranian anti-American antagonism formally originates in 1979, from the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Paradoxically, before this event, as Sariolghalam (2016) argues, Iranian diplomacy was focused on its close and productive relations with Europe and the United States. However, after the Revolution, its diplomacy took a clear turn towards the Muslim world, establishing three fundamental elements driving its foreign policy. The first was the establishment of an Islamic policy based on Shiite foundations. The second was the defense of Muslims, support for liberation movements, and an evident disputing attitude with Israel and the West (especially the US). The last one was the defense of its territorial integrity, national sovereignty, and the promotion of its growth and economic development engine.

Of course, this approach placed Afghanistan in the most immediate circle of post-revolutionary diplomatic attention. However, during the 20th century, the Taliban's operational capability had served as a buffer to any Iranian penetration efforts in the country. However, the circumstances changed with the American invasion. Thus, several factors caused the 21st century to begin with a window of opportunity for the interests promoted from Tehran. One factor was the Taliban's military attrition caused by its prolonged irregular fight against an enemy that was clearly technologically superior but ineffective amidst the irregular dynamics of asymmetric warfare. Another was that this

war required arming pro-Iranian militias that, given their geographical proximity, could be trained in Iranian territory to then cross the border and deploy their firepower as an organized insurgency. The last one was Hamid Karzai's rise to power as a national political leader, in whom similar interests converged with the Americans against the Taliban (Nader et al., 2014).

Despite this, the Iranian political and military leadership has been fully aware of its scope and limitations. Therefore, amid this regional turbulence in Afghanistan, it did not seek territorial control of such a topographically complex country. Instead, its objectives were more associated with a pragmatic strategy; that is, oriented to the consolidation of shock tactics that would allow the weakening of the Taliban, limit the strengthening of US interests on the ground, and promote a stable and secure Afghan central government with which to strengthen ties.

Clearly stated, Iran's priority was to direct the deployment of Shiite militias, in line with its regional political agenda, to exert a kind of armed pressure in its eastern border area. Its objective was to degrade US dominance, preserve the water passage from Afghan territory, control the flow of illegal narcotics entering Iranian territory, strengthen bilateral diplomatic relations, and consolidate itself as a bridge for the distribution and connection of goods and services between the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, India, and China (Milani, 2006).

The Iranian regime employed a multiple-strategy to achieve this ambitious agenda in Afghanistan. Not unlike the one subsequently developed in Iraq and Syria, the strategy consists of shaping and influencing the central government by using *soft power* to build prestige and, in turn, provide support to various factions of non-state actors fighting American forces in the country (Hansen, 2019; Katzman, 2020).

Thus, at the beginning of the new millennium, Afghanistan was established as the first formal meeting ground between Iran and the US in their antagonistic dispute to influence Central Asia. Haji-Yousefi (2012) corroborates this scenario. He points out that the US's most important strategic objective for entering Afghanistan, and its troops' indefinite permanence, was not driven only by fighting terror and the retaliation and search for appeasement and reconstruction of a nation in the hands of Taliban-led terrorism. It also sought to prevent Iran's influence in Afghan territory in its entirety.

In short, the juxtaposition of these antagonistic interests in Afghanistan created a dramatic interaction of manifestations of political violence in which they converge as fundamental actors. On the one hand, the international forces (US and NATO) deployed on the ground. On the other, extensively, the Taliban, the pro-Iranian militias, Al Qaeda, and other fundamentalist groups aligned with their radical ideology or interests.

It is not surprising, then, that Tehran's regime observes the development of the recent peace negotiations between the US government and the Taliban with suspicion. While it is true that Iran promotes the withdrawal of US troops stationed in Afghanistan, it rejects any interference by the US in determining the future of Afghanistan. Indiscriminately, one thing is certain; it will always be much more attractive to Iranian regional interests to act in an area of strategic value without the pressure of the armed presence of large American war contingents. This condition will allow for greater trade maneuverability, proximity to the central government, border permeability, and approaches to groups with similar political agendas (Cordesman & Hwang, 2020).

Support to the central government in Afghanistan (economic factors)

One must consider that Afghanistan is a developing country that has experienced massive infrastructure destruction due to war. Therefore, Iran's long-term commitment in Afghanistan also involves participation in recovery, rehabilitation, and new infrastructure development projects. Thus, in parallel with the instrumentalization of pro-Iranian Shiite militias on the ground, Tehran's top leaders have implemented a series of economic measures to promote greater participation in the Afghan economy. These measures have made economic interactions between the two countries increasingly important, both qualitatively and quantitatively (Kagan et al., 2012).

Here, it is worth noting the considerable increase in exports between the two States. To illustrate, by 2002, the level of exports was about \$150 million; by 2012, it had reached a gross value of over \$2 billion (Koepeke, 2013). This circumstance has also been particularly favored by the harsh sanctions that weigh on the Iranian economy and the devaluation of its currency in international markets. Iran has found in the Afghan economic reality an important niche of economic interest and acceptance of resources with adequate levels of profitability.

According to Kagan et al. (2012), this trade relationship was notoriously disproportionate, with 75% of the products exchanged of Iranian origin. This author also points out some clear examples of cooperation and intervention from Iran towards Afghanistan that served as an additional platform to boost these economic interactions, such as the delivery of large economic support to the development of important energy, institutional, transport, and communication infrastructure projects. These projects include the Iranian regime's commitment to building two power plants to provide energy to Kabul, the training of postal service employees nationwide, the contribution of millions of dollars in assistance to political reforms, and the preparation and training of government officials in Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat, among others.

It is worth noting that these initiatives have been State policy during the presidency of several Iranian leaders. So far, they have added up to billions of dollars to reconstruct Afghanistan (Akbarzadeh, 2018). The examples are clear. For instance, in 2001, Iran supported the Northern Alliance in its fight against the Taliban. It was also an important actor in the Bonn Conference to establish an interim government in Kabul. During the Tokyo Conference in 2002, it granted a significant \$560 million in aid for the country's reconstruction. Later, during the 2006 London Conference, it added \$100 million for the same purpose. This aid in economic matters has been considered decisive for the development of infrastructure, especially in the province of Herat (Agarwal, 2014).

We can also mention the Iranian investment projects for 150 million dollars in a cement factory in Afghanistan, as well as the signing of bilateral agreements between the Afghan government and the Iranian oil refining company to import one million tons of Iranian fuel per year. Similarly, in 2011, pan-regional initiatives included a mining project with an Indian participation, whose investments were close to one billion dollars. It projected the construction of a railway communication channel connecting the Afghan province of Bamiyan (rich in minerals) and the Iranian province of Chabahar. (Kagan et al., 2012)

Based on economic participation and capital exchange, an alternative form of influence has been consolidated from Tehran to position the Iranian country, through the *soft power* of money, as an important actor in developing the most important events in the Afghan political agenda. However, the interactions between the two States go beyond the monetary orbit of direct support. The Iranian regime has been equally involved in the migration and refugee crisis in Afghanistan. It has served as a haven, support, and relief for millions of refugees, whose migration dates back to the time of the Soviet invasion.

Christensen (2011) explains how this population has located itself in Iran over the decades and how this circumstance has given Iran an additional point of indirect influence vis-à-vis the Afghan regime. This author emphasizes that the Iranian government can influence deportation programs for refugees' mass return to their original country. In doing so, it can generate significant social, political, and economic pressures that would eventually increase Afghanistan's fiscal needs if it so desired. A clear example of this is Kabul's growth resulting from these mass deportation programs. Afghanistan's capital city grew from 1.5 million people in 2001 to 4.5 million in 2008.

Often, the Iranian authorities frame the expulsion of Afghan refugees in the context of legal problems to justify such actions with normative irregularities regarding these individuals' presence in their territory. However, it is also common for such justifications to be publicly questioned by Afghan authorities (Zarif & Majidiyar, 2009). Therefore, just like Turkey with the Syrian refugee crisis and its role as a point of contention for the

overwhelming arrival of these refugees in European territory, Iran has strategic control over Afghanistan and the eventual return of its own population. This fact places it in a favorable position to demand certain actions from Kabul that will favorably project its political interests at the regional level.

Thus, it is evident that the synchronic and articulated alternation of economic cooperation mechanisms and their support in the refugee problem and the consolidation of a pro-Shiite militias support network has granted Iran an important influence in Afghanistan. Regarding the economic component of this influence, the strategy of absorbing Afghanistan into Iran's sphere of economic influence and subordination through bilateral and pan-regional initiatives is clear (Vatanka, 2017). This strategy is deployed within the framework of a macro-regional antagonism that, among other objectives, seeks to undermine the presence and political determinism derived from US interests in the territorial areas closest to Tehran's regime (Omidi, 2013).

Now, the particularity of this strategic approach can be seen again in Syria, adapted to a territorial orbit more distant from Iran's borders and the Arab Spring's challenges. In other words, in Syria, there have also been similar strategic actions involving resistance to US interests, support to a central regime for Iranian objectives in its platform of regional hegemony, and an economic wager in terms of credits and development of eventual energy projects and the country's reconstruction.

Syria and the effects of the Arab Spring on Iranian interests

The context around the emergence and subsequent consolidation of the strategic alliance between Iran and Syria is, to say the least, paradoxical. This observation is understandable, given that there is a partnership between the two countries that is as deep as it is complex, and at first glance, seems unlikely. This stems from the fact that Syria is a mainly Arab country located in the heart of the Middle East, mostly Sunni and secular. Meanwhile, Iran is a mainly Persian country, almost nestled in Central Asia, mostly Shiite and deeply controlled by the Islamic clergy.

This strategic alliance has been tested by the Arab Spring. Given that each of the revolts under the label of "Arab Spring" had different political, cultural (religious), and social nuances, the selective response that the high Iranian political establishment has had to each of them is curious and ambivalent. For example, on several occasions, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei expressed to his fellow religious brothers that the events in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain were a continuation of the same Islamic awakening that caused the Iranian Revolution of 1979. However, under comparable circumstances in Syria, his position was completely different. He associated the uprisings with conspiracy theories, the illegitimate interference of foreign powers and reaffirmed support for a

solution that would not necessarily lead President Bashar al-Assad's removal from power (Alfoneh, 2011; Fürtig, 2014). Under these circumstances, questioning this ambivalence is opportune. Why did these uprisings in Syria not have the same Irani support as the uprisings and revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain?

Iran's government claims that its support for the Syrian government is consistent with the right to self-determination. It is the Syrian citizens who decide the future of their country. They denounce that this right is being curtailed by the presence of terrorist groups in Syria that seek to overthrow the legitimate government of Bashar al-Assad, an action sponsored by state actors inside and outside the region.

Paradoxically, Iran's government seems to downplay the fact that it too is a country accused of supporting armed organizations and terrorist groups in conflicts around the region. In addition to supporting the Al-Assad government, Iran is also accused of supporting Hutu fighters in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria. Moreover, it is accused of being a determining actor concerning the dynamics of the conflict in Iraq (with a Shiite majority) and Afghanistan (with a significant percentage of Shiite population), as well as supporting radical Palestinian groups (Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad). Even those in support mention the rejection of a bill against the financing of terrorism in the 2018 Council of Guardians of Iran. It was considered ambiguous, even incompatible with the Islamic legislation and the Iranian constitution (Al-Jazeera English, 2016). A possible hypothesis around these circumstances is its interest in consolidating an important role of regional hegemony and counteracting US interests in the area, which requires allies that share its strategic objectives of political expansion from Central Asia to the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea.

The axis of resistance against US interests in the Middle East

Iran's anti-American stance emerged in the global political sphere after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Even today, this position is based on the criticism coming from the country's clerical intelligentsia on the triumphalism of liberal values and the vision of a global order promoted mainly by the United States and some of its European allies since the second half of the last century (Aydin, 2015). Notably, the manifestations of this position have broad social, ideological, and political ramifications. However, they are all articulated around the rejection of the alleged villainy of the Western state actors' growing and negative influence on traditional Islamic values, which causes an alteration for them. For example, in the social sphere, this is evident in restrictions on women's autonomy and free will, freedom of expression, or the promotion and respect of human rights.

However, this position goes far beyond this. It has problematic ramifications around various ideological and political aspects, especially considering that, since the 1979

Revolution, relations between the US and Iran have been characterized as complex, antagonistic, and hostile. Since then, Iran's Islamic Republic's leadership has adopted a political and ideological position that considers American influence the main enemy of Islam and, therefore, of Iran. According to Clawson (1993), this anti-American approach is perfectly illustrated by Ayatollah Khamenei's words when he defines the American government as a tyrannical and aggressive regime, bent on world domination and with a clear animus against Islam and Muslims³.

Amid this evident bilateral hostility, the use of metaphorical and pejorative expressions has become frequent. Iranian leaders catalog the US as the "Great Satan," while the official US speech during President George W. Bush's mandate included Iran in the so-called "axis of evil." President George W. Bush used this expression in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, grouping countries such as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as threats to global peace and security (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007).

The United States also exercises a frank opposition to Iran's pretensions of hegemonic control of the entire region and consolidating itself as an allegedly genuine standard of Islam and, with this, an undisputed leader in the Muslim world. In light of multiple current events, national security must be added to North American interest in the area, resulting from the violent actions of diverse armed Islamist movements that promote transnational terrorism. The US Department of State lists the Iranian regime as one of the greatest supporters of organizations classified as terrorists by this government agency (Bureau of Counterterrorism, n. d.). According to Byman (2015), this means that terrorism and support for violent sub-state movements have been an integral part of Iran's foreign policy for a wide-ranging variety of reasons. Through this means, Iran has allegedly obtained the means to attack its enemies worldwide, influence its neighbors' policy, and exert a particular deterrent pressure against the US and Israel, among other advantages.

In this regard, the US Government's Council on Foreign Relations has provided a list presenting evidence of Iran's involvement in terrorism-promoting activities, including, among others, the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran. In this event, in November 1979, embassy officials were held hostage for 444 days by a crowd of students apparently spon-

3 Interestingly, while Iran does not possess the same political, economic or military capabilities as the United States, the level of antagonism between these two actors has been reflected even in Latin America. Iran's close relations, since the mandate of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, with different regional leaders are well known. During this government, Iran came to have 11 embassies and 17 cultural centers in the region, and made various agreements and arrangements with neighborhood governments to, among other things, found HispanTv, the first Iranian television network that broadcasts in Spanish 24 hours a day from Tehran (Moya, 2014). These terms of cooperation between governments are not, *per se*, negative. Interestingly, the instrumentalization of the ideological platform that the Venezuelan government projected with other regional actors such as Bolivia, Nicaragua, Cuba, Argentina and Ecuador, who maintained ideological sympathy with its political project and promoted an inter-American agenda at that time (Colmenares, 2011).

sored by the revolutionary regime. Also included in this list is the kidnapping and subsequent murder of US Colonel William Higgins, a member of the UN observer mission in 1988 in Lebanon, as well as the bombings in Buenos Aires (Argentina) of the Israeli Embassy and the AMIA (Israeli Mutual Association of Argentina) in 1992 and 1994, respectively. Iran is also linked to supporting the organization responsible for the 1996 attack on the al-Khobar Towers, a US military personnel residence in Saudi Arabia. These facts provide more evidence of the long-standing Iranian rejection of the American and its allies' influence in the Middle East.

The previous allows us to understand why Iran has deployed significant resources in the theater of military operations in the armed conflict in Syria. In this sense, preserving the Syrian regime within the axis of resistance against the United States becomes an imperative need. In the face of this, Iran has not been ambivalent. This objective's utility is also strengthened by the fact that Syria provides a strategic depth that allows Iran the indirect projection of its borders and its power to the Levant region while providing a larger area of operation and rearguard for Hezbollah on its front lines against Israel, the US's main ally in the area (Mohseni & Ahmadian, 2018).

Support to Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria (economic factors)

The armed conflict in Syria has left the country in a state of absolute destruction over most of its territory. Today, hundreds of cities and towns, which before were references for their beauty, lie in ruins, practically desolate. The scenario is particularly heartbreaking in towns like Aleppo and Homs, which suffered bloody combats amidst the crossfire and were later subjected to indiscriminate bombing.

According to the World Bank report (2017) on the economic and social consequences of the conflict in Syria, the devastation has been felt at virtually all levels. It has destroyed a significant amount of public service infrastructure networks, roads, schools, hospitals, and housing in its wake. The report reveals that about 7% of residential units in Syria have been destroyed, and about 20% have been severely damaged.

Staffan de Mistura, the UN's special envoy to Syria, has assessed this desolate scenario, stating that estimates of the country's reconstruction once the war is over are close to a minimum of \$250 billion. Some experts point out that the actual figure could be even double (Hodali, 2018).

It should be noted that throughout the years of armed confrontation, Iran has provided Bashar al-Assad's regime significant military and political support. To a large extent, this has been decisive for the continuity of the Alaouite government. However, despite the support, these areas have not been able to avoid bankruptcy. In the decade immediately

before the war, Syria's macroeconomic indicators were acceptably moderate without being outstanding. In that period, the economy had an economic growth of 4.3 % per year (Khan & Itani, 2013). However, with the onset of the armed conflict, the government suffered enormous and increasing political and social instability. Over time, this resulted in an economy that collapsed from a combination of elements, such as hyperinflation, severe currency devaluation, billions of dollars in international reserves, decreased foreign trade, and massive destruction of infrastructure.

In addition to political and military support, Iran has also provided significant economic assistance. This assistance is reflected mainly in lines of credit to mitigate the difficulties faced by the Syrian regime. According to Daragahi (2018), in general terms, it is estimated that Iran has invested more than \$30 billion in Syria since the beginning of the hostilities, a significant amount from every point of view.

The previous is especially significant if one considers how, since the beginning of the war, Iranian economic attrition has been complicated due to its support to Bashar al-Assad's regime. This erosion was exacerbated by the multiple economic sanctions that, from various spheres of Western power, were imposed on Iran due to the development of its nuclear program. Relatedly, during the first years of the war, Iran experienced a notable fall in its gross domestic product, a decline in its exports, and high inflation, resulting in enormous economic tensions for its population. Only from 2015 to 2016 did Iran show a rise in its indicators. This rise resulted from the nuclear agreement with the P5+1 (USA, UK, France, China, Russia, and Germany), coupled with favorable conditions in the energy consumption market, the country's main source of income.

During this period of economic tensions, a climate of dissatisfaction developed in large segments of Iranian society. This awakened the regime's concern, given that, above all, it seeks its continuity and does not want popular uprisings or revolts that could threaten it. Despite the significant upturn in its economic indicators in recent years, the new series of sanctions imposed by US President Donald Trump's administration, after withdrawing from the 2015 nuclear agreement, may generate new economic complications in the medium term. Therefore, it is currently a state imperative for Iran to find ways to recover the enormous flow of money that for so long went into the armed conflict in Syria and not into the more socially sensitive sectors of its domestic economy.

Four fundamental conclusions can be drawn from this scenario. The first one is that the almost decade-long war has been very costly both for Syria and Iran in their role as squires. Second, that Bashar al-Assad's government is still in power, among other reasons, because of the aid received from Iran. Third, because of the war, Syria is languishing economically and cannot self-finance its reconstruction once hostilities end. Lastly, the

economic aid provided so far by Iran is not free. This country hopes to recover it, mainly because the Persian economy has faced serious difficulties itself. From these conclusions, it can be stated that beyond the geopolitical advantages it obtains from Syria, the Iranian political leadership is aware of the enormous potential for financial return that its credits and investments in its Syrian ally can generate.

Regarding the economic order, these returns materialize, among other forms, in the signing of trade cooperation agreements between the two governments. These agreements are mainly oriented to allow important economic concessions for Iran in the post-conflict phase, which will favor its decisive participation in infrastructure reconstruction programs in vital sectors. This, of course, includes the energy sector but is not limited to it. In this regard, it is important to mention how, in October 2018, Mahmoud Ramadan, director of the Syrian Public Authority for Power Generation, and Abbas Aliabadi, director of the MAPNA Group, an Iranian conglomerate specializing in infrastructure development, signed a new memorandum of understanding. This document formalized Iranian participation in a \$475 million project to build a power generating plant in the coastal city of Latakia. The signing was attended by the energy ministers of Syria, Reza Ardakanian, and Iran, Mohammad Zuheir Kharboutli (Paraskova, 2018).

Iranian profit interests also lie in the reconstruction of schools, hospitals, airports, roads, and communication infrastructure. A clear example of this was the signing of five memorandums of understanding during Syrian Prime Minister Emad Khamis,' visit to Tehran in January 2017. These granted rights to a subsidiary of the Iranian Telecommunications Company to become the third authorized mobile operator in Syria. In summary, it can be stated that the economic aid that Iran provided for many years is serving as seed capital to reap enormous economic benefits that the Iranians plan to materialize in the future.

Conclusions

Iran is a major state actor. For more than forty years, after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has undergone a dramatic internal transformation process and its political vocation at the regional level. In this process, it has proclaimed itself as a political and religious model that truly follows Islam's founding principles. Simultaneously, it has rejected the influence of US values and interests in the region and criticized some of the major monarchical systems of government in the Persian Gulf.

However, Iran is operating amid a turbulent and competitive geopolitical environment. Because it became a vehement opponent of American influence, Israeli interests, and the leading Sunni oil monarchies in the Persian Gulf, their aspirations for regional

hegemony have not enjoyed full acceptance and recognition because powerful regional forces resist their project of expansionism.

Despite this, the Iranian regime has transformed a historically unfavorable reality to its hegemonic interests throughout the last decades. For the first time in a long time, it is the high Iranian political-religious establishment that has determined the dynamics of regional politics, placing many regional Sunni powers on the defensive, who see these aspirations as serious threats to their own regimes' continuity.

We must bear in mind that the Iranian constitution itself establishes the pertinence of exporting revolutionary values beyond its territory in a clear bid for regional penetration. Now, in an area full of oil monarchies, exporting the same revolutionary values that in 1979 overthrew one of the region's main oil monarchies may not be all that appealing. In this complex power struggle, the Iranian regime has implemented a multiple-diplomacy to materialize its ambitious agenda, adapting its implementation to each particular case.

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify several reiterative instruments of its foreign policy in situations as diverse as those presented in Afghanistan and Syria. On the one hand, it uses indirect influence instruments through its enormous economic resources derived from its energy-derived wealth. This way, it promotes its economic interaction and the consequent interconnection of financial dependence to subsidize the economic needs of those countries relevant in its hegemonic proposal with credits and the development of large infrastructure projects. In the case of Afghanistan and Syria, the conditions for this are favorable. As we have seen, the Iranian regime has found fertile ground for the implementation of its strategies. These funding needs are more pressing for these countries due to the massive destruction of their national infrastructure, resulting from the prolonged armed conflicts they have been engaged in.

On the other hand, Iran has developed a strategy of reaction and military participation in both countries, which varies according to the diverse realities of each situation. In the case of Afghanistan, it has funded and supported the war needs of many *proxy* groups sympathetic to its proposed regional leadership. A fifth of the Afghan population is of Shiite origin, which has been caught in the crossfire of Sunni organizations such as the Taliban, Al Qaeda, or the Islamic State itself in the country's complex history of political violence. Added to this is the fact that the extensive US military deployment in the area has led, as a reaction, to the financing of organized armed groups to combat these foreign troops and, with it, to exert military pressure on US strategic interests.

Now, something similar happens in the Syrian case. While the circumstances of the armed conflict in Syria are different from those in Afghanistan, the Tehran regime also

developed and implemented a military engagement strategy based on the dynamics of the conflict. Initially, while the government of Damascus maintained a certain advantage on the ground during the hostilities, its role as a natural ally was limited to the accompaniment and strategic advice for the conduct of the hostilities and the management of the popular mobilizations of rejection. As the war progressed and conditions were increasingly adverse to Bashar al-Assad's regime, the Iranian leadership did not hesitate to strengthen its level of military support to strengthen the operational capabilities of the ruling forces. To this end, it sent its contingents of Iranian troops and at the same time deployed experienced *proxy* organizations, such as Hezbollah, to participate in the hostilities.

Therefore, Syria and Afghanistan are two fundamental pillars in this agenda of Iranian hegemonic expansionism. In each of these countries, the Iranian government prefers the stability of an unchanged *status quo* that favors its regional interests. In the first case, it seeks to distance the Afghan government from the orbit of American influence. In the second, it tries to keep Syria within its orbit of influence. This finds many detractors who precisely seek the fall of the Al-Assad regime to ensure, among other objectives, the strategic weakening of Iranian hegemonic expansionism in the Middle East.

Thus, Iranian foreign policy has converged in a series of actions aimed at materializing support (political, economic, and military) to the governments of these respective countries to continue the search for a new era of regional hegemony and Iranian control from Central Asia to the Mediterranean Sea and the Middle East.

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