

Tools and challenges of the Iranian project in the Arab region

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Abstract:

This research paper addresses the nature of the Iranian project in the Arab region by analyzing its tools, content, and methods. This is a complex matter due to the intricate nature of Iranian-Arab relations and the close relationship between the phenomenon of Iranian intervention—whether it is a strategic project or a tactical option—and the various other foreign interventions in the region on one hand, as well as the historical relations between Iran and Arab countries on the other hand.

Iranian ambitions or desires in the region may stem from a crisis of Iranian national security, which has sensed multifaceted and multi-party threats since the early 1990s. However, this necessity was only one of the reasons behind the Iranian shift towards the region, where the Arab region became the most attractive target for Iranian politicians before and after the Islamic Revolution, especially since this area is the most vulnerable and susceptible to infiltration compared to all other circles surrounding Iran.

While Iran was intervening in the internal affairs of Arab countries, particularly in Iraq and the Arabian Gulf, before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, this was primarily linked to a role that Iran played in favor of the West and the United States in particular. However, this changed after the Islamic Revolution, as the role shifted to a project and the Arab dimension of Iranian foreign policy became important and central, both for its own sake and as a bargaining chip with the West, which is also interested in the region and has substantial interests there.

Keywords: Iranian Project; Arab Region; Foundations; Tools ;Obstacles

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1. INTRODUCTION :

The history of Iran's relationship with the region is old and rooted in history, and has complex social, cultural, demographic and economic implications. Consequently, Iran can only be dealt with as an original and influential state in the region, whether or not it has an expansionist or acquisitive project.

In fact, the current Iranian-Arab relationship, especially with the Gulf states and the Levant, is the product of long and extended historical experiences, which witnessed periods of coexistence and conflict that sometimes took on a very harsh and bloody character, especially in periods when the Iranian government had a political, sectarian or expansionist project, or in periods when the Arab region was experiencing a power vacuum that made Iran descend to fill the void.

The last examples of the Iranian project in the Arab region appeared after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, with the slogan 'exporting the revolution', which was just the beginning of a difficult relationship with the Arabs that was not limited to harassment and implementation of foreign dictates as was the case under the Shah, but this time it expressed a combination of religious authority, national heritage, the will to acquire, the desire for regional sovereignty and the pursuit of international status by force and the will to coerce.

Research Question:

Based on the above, this study attempts to address the following the research question:

what are the Tools and the challenges of the Iranian project in the Arab region ?

Sub-questions arise from this question, including the following:

What is The geographical knot in the Iranian project ?

Which position the Arabs take in the Iranian project ?

What are the Tools of the Project ?

What are the Obstacles and the challenges to the Project ?

In order to answer this question, the following axes will be adopted:

First: The Iranian project succeeded in the application of its strategy in the Arab region .

Second : The Iranian project failed in stopping the obstacles that faced in the Arab region .

Third : Although the obstacles facing the Iranian Project , it has been able to achieve some accomplishments in the Arab region .

2. The geographical knot in the Iranian project

Iran is a large and pivotal country that lies at the center of more than one turbulent regional sphere vital to global security, and some of the most prominent and dangerous events take place or take shape on its borders, which has put it at the center of international concerns and forced its security to be highly sensitive.¹

Iran occupies a vast area estimated at more than 1.6 million square kilometres, with a population of more than 70 million people, who are ethnically heterogeneous, as Iran is known for its ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity, which greatly affects the homogeneity of Iranian manpower, as Iran has never been a homogeneous population unit, but a mixture of diverse peoples, nationalities, linguistic and religious groups.²

To the north, Iran faces the issues of the Caspian Sea and its states, which after the collapse of the Soviet Union became the centre of an international conflict over oil, gas, gold, silver and strategic location; to the south, Iran overlooks the Arabian Gulf,³ through which about two-thirds of the world's oil supplies pass, and its future and the situation of its states are at the heart of the concerns of the major powers, in addition to the ongoing complications in Iran's relationship with its states; to the east, Iran faces the issues of Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion until today and even before that from a succession of successors.⁴

In the southeast as well as in the northwest, there are Pakistan and Turkey, both large countries close to the West, the former a nuclear state and the latter a member of NATO, both of which adopt the Sunni faith, and both of which have historical legacies and sectarian fanaticism that provide sufficient reason for tension with the large Shiite neighbour.⁵

Finally, Iran in the West has an Iraqi neighbour that has been the gateway to Persia and then Iran to the Arab world since the Islamic conquest. This

neighbour has a long history of rapprochement or hostility with Iran that predates Islam by centuries and became more difficult after it, leading to the eight-year war and then the US occupation and the developments that took place in and during it until the relationship between the two countries became intertwined and complex and cannot be easily characterised.⁶

All these intersecting lines of strategic pressures threatening national security have contributed to defining the features of Iran's foreign policy and its relations with the regional periphery, especially the Arab one, and have also determined the nature and approaches of its security and political project, which is also based on a number of other factors, including the ideological foundation centred on the concept of exporting the revolution.⁷

Second Requirement: The shift from a guiding role to an ideological project

During the modern era, Pahlavi Iran has been trying to establish a visible dominance in the regional periphery of the Middle East, and the Shah's regime was proud of the title of Gulf policeman, which was associated with a relentless Iranian effort to identify or participate in the US-Western project in the region.⁸

Thus, the Shah's Iran did not have a project in the region as much as it had a role in a larger international project drawn by US scenarios and determined by the rules of the "Arab-Israeli" conflict and its developments, the 'proxy' wars that were known during the Cold War, securing control over oil sources and supply routes, fighting (revolutionary) regimes and allying or supporting other Arab regimes close to the West, as well as allying with "Israel", the Iranian role for several decades was centred on protecting US and Western interests in the region.⁹

Imam Khomeini launched the slogan 'Exporting the Revolution' to announce the birth of a special Iranian regional project with the Arab region as its main arena and vital sphere. The new slogan became the centrepiece of Iran's foreign policy during his lifetime and after his death in 1989, but the Iranian political discourse became more pragmatic and less prone to militancy during Khomeini's lifetime.¹⁰

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political discourse became more pragmatic and less inclined to the militancy that characterised it during Khomeini's lifetime, but the content of this policy did not change and none of Tehran's rulers dared to contradict Khomeini's approach or abandon the concept of exporting the revolution as an integrated political, ideological and movement project with a transnational and global character whose activity and power are centred in the Arab region.¹¹

Although official Iran has been keen to minimise the use of the slogan of exporting the revolution for reasons related to the phased nature of the project rather than a will to abandon it or even a decline in its absolute priority on the Iranian agenda, Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani, the imam of the Tehran Mosque, recalled the Iranian project when he said in his Friday sermon on 4 September 2009: 'Now is the time to export the revolution. Now is the time to export the revolution, it is not the time to treat each other like this.' Commenting on the statements exchanged between reformists and conservatives against the backdrop of the internal conflict that erupted following the recent presidential elections, he added: 'Such statements cause harm to the Islamic community and prevent the export of the revolution.'¹²

This text has reminded us of the priorities of the political system in Iran and affirmed that "exporting the revolution" did not end with the death of Imam Khomeini, but rather continued as a pivotal axis of the Iranian regional project that is indispensable and cannot be replaced by anything better to meet its ambitions in the region. Moreover, it serves as an excellent means to escape from the internal crises of the regime, as clearly demonstrated in Kashani's sermon, who, of course, did not speak merely as a cleric, but as the Friday preacher of Tehran, embodying the thoughts and will of the ruling religious and political institution.¹³

Requirement Three: Foundations of the Iranian Project in the Arab Region

The Iranian project is based on a dual doctrinal and strategic framework that Tehran has successfully integrated, especially since external conditions have facilitated Iran's success in its regional and even international project. The doctrinal aspect is based on two fundamental pillars: (the Guardianship

of the Jurist and the exportation of the revolution), both of which have religious ideological backgrounds that have gained a binding legal dimension by being included in the Iranian constitution. The first chapter emphasizes the pivotal role of the Guardian Jurist as the ruler by God's order on earth and the guardian of all Muslims. In the same chapter, the constitution specifies that Iran has a duty towards the Islamic nation, which is to "achieve political, economic, and cultural unity of the Islamic world." This transnational goal is further clarified in Article (105) within the chapter on foreign policy, where Iran commits, under this article, "to support the just struggle of the oppressed against arrogance throughout the world."¹⁴

Naturally, this ideological clarity in shaping foreign policy had a direct impact on Iran's relations with both world and regional countries, where Iran's interests became sharply contradictory with all neighboring countries. For example, the relationship with Iraq was hostile due to the ideological clash with Arab nationalism, represented by another ideological regime, the Ba'ath Party. This was one of the direct reasons for the eight-year war that broke out about a year and a half after the Iranian revolution.¹⁵

Although Iran's relationship with other regional countries did not reach the level of war as it did with Iraq, the ideological framing of Iranian foreign policy after the revolution was a direct cause of clear and intense hostility in relations with Gulf countries. Perhaps Iraq provided Gulf states with a seemingly strong opportunity to engage in war with Iran, but tension has characterized the atmosphere in the region since the Iranian revolution. This marked the beginning of the extensive and direct presence of Western and particularly American fleets and bases in the Arabian Gulf and some of its countries, initially to protect oil supplies, which later evolved into a permanent military presence.¹⁶

The idea of exporting the revolution was shocking to the countries in the region, which became directly threatened by military attacks or security breaches, and attempts to destabilize internal stability by mobilizing the Shia populations wherever they were found in these countries. The idea of the guardian jurist was prominently seen as a declaration of the illegitimacy of the ruling regimes from an officially declared Iranian perspective.

Moreover, the slogan of exporting the revolution represented a dynamic basis for the supposed change or internal revolution in the Gulf countries, especially those with Shia population groups that Iran assumed could be stirred against their ruling regimes through propaganda, official material support, organizational efforts, and public incitement. Among the most notable of these countries were Iraq, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia.¹⁷

The Islamic Revolution against a strong regime, such as the Shah's regime, was an event that altered the region's landscape and suggested opportunities for similar changes in neighboring Arab countries. One of the most prominent attempts in this regard was the declaration by Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, one of the leading Shia scholars in Najaf, Iraq, and closely connected to Imam Khomeini, prohibiting membership in the Ba'ath Party in April 1980, as a starting point for the project of the "Islamic Revolution in Iraq" amid Iranian incitement and media attacks against the Iraqi political system. This was followed by events that led, about five months later, to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War.¹⁸

But the Islamic system in Iran removed the Shah's rule and its consequences and effects, while retaining the Shah's legacy and his vision for Iranian interests in the region and the approach of hostility towards its states. The Islamic system affirmed the retention of the three islands belonging to the Emirates, which were occupied by the Shah's regime in 1971, and did not recognize most agreements with Iraq.¹⁹

but insisted on the Algiers Agreement, which granted Iran gains in the Shatt al-Arab in exchange for its cessation of armed support for the Kurdish rebellion in northern Iraq. Furthermore, Islamic Iran surpassed the Shah's regime in its hostile rhetoric against Gulf states, as Imam Khomeini considered the people of Iraq part of the Iranian peoples. Iran's Foreign Minister Sadegh Khatibzadeh stated on April 9, 1980, that "Baghdad and Aden are under our jurisdiction," and Iran has always considered Bahrain part of itself, a position that has not changed with the succession of governments in Tehran, as Iran continued, even 27 years after the Islamic revolution, to consider Bahrain "an Iranian province that must be returned to the homeland, the original, that is, Islamic Iran."

Perhaps Iran asserts that the doctrinal aspect is the main driver of its

foreign policy and its relations with Islamic countries or its issues, but such a matter has never been confirmed in relation to the reality on the ground, as Iranian behavior indicates that the doctrinal aspect is sectarian in nature and is related to Iran's vision of itself as the state that contains the largest Shiite population in the world governed by a regime that recognized its doctrine.

The Twelver Shia in the constitution, for example, is what made Iran's relationship with a fundamentalist Islamic regime like the previous Taliban regime in Afghanistan very poor, without any direct reason for that other than the sectarian element.

Additionally, Iran has completely ignored the doctrinal engine of its foreign policy, which can be described as a violation of its constitution when it supported the Christian state of Armenia against another Muslim and Shia one, Azerbaijan, in the war that took place between the two countries in the early 1990s and ended with Armenia's surrender in 2023. It armed Armenia and supported its occupation of the Azerbaijani region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which has a majority Armenian population.²⁰

Iran made its decision to support Armenia based on what it sees as its strategic interests in the Caspian Sea region, in the face of an Azerbaijani-Turkish alliance, and due to poor relations with Azerbaijan against the backdrop of the independence aspirations of Iranians of Azerbaijani origin. It is noteworthy that this stance occurred during the eras of both reformists and conservatives, specifically during the governments of Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad.

Thus, Iran helped fight Shia Muslims, based on its perception of its national security and strategic interests along its northern borders. It also entered into a deep-seated enmity that reached the point of a war with an Islamic regime on its eastern borders, supporting (its greatest enemy) the United States in toppling it and occupying Afghanistan in 2001. Therefore, the doctrinal aspect is an announced framework for foreign policy, and its applications can be felt in supporting resistance movements against "Israel". However, it remains governed by security and strategic interests and does not take precedence over them, even though there are those who

believe that the doctrinal aspect is merely a (cover) for passing Iran's strategic interests, perhaps due to Iranian behavior in many countries in the region.²¹

2. Arabs in the Iranian project:

The importance of the Arab dimension in the requirements of Iranian security and Iranian interests is attributed to historical, geographical, civilizational, and sectarian factors, in addition to other strategic factors. However, the Iranian national security was faced with new challenges following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, coinciding with the strengthening of the American presence in the region after the Gulf War, which reinforced Iran's conviction of the necessity of greater and more effective presence. The project of exporting the revolution acquired a new dimension, represented by making the Arab region a vital area for Iranian security and a central arena for confronting Iran's adversaries outside national borders.²²

The Iranian security geography has faced what Iranian researchers consider serious challenges after the United States filled the vacuum in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, in addition to the actual American presence in the Gulf. This has led to an enhancement of Iran's feeling that it has become "an island besieged by America." Thus, it became essential for Iranian security to break this siege and build new bases for conflict, the essence of which is fighting outside its borders. The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, clearly expressed this since 1983 when he was president, saying: "If the revolution remains confined within the boundaries of Iranian territory, it will fall under the pressure of enemy attacks."²³

The Arab region was considered the largest gap in the American siege from the Iranian perspective, which encouraged Iran to develop its fundamental project that had begun after the outbreak of the Islamic revolution and had been fundamentally disrupted due to the war with Iraq, to encompass this time the mission of defending Iran's vital interests outside its national borders, specifically on Arab territories.²⁴

And of course, several factors encouraged Iran to adopt this option, which were present in the Arab region and not in other neighboring areas of

Iran, which can be summarized as follows²⁵:

- Iran benefited from the ability to maneuver in the Arab region through local forces that are supportive or linked to the Iranian agenda, whether due to sectarian affiliation, security ties, or political relationships with Arab countries established during previous periods, the most notable of which is the relationship described as strategic with Syria, prior to the fall of Assad's regime.
- The existence of a Shiite demographic weight in many countries of the region provides an opportunity for Iranian presence that utilizes sectarian slogans and justifications for defending sectarianism in the absence of any other connections.
- The moral significance of the region on the Islamic level, specifically through support for the Palestinian cause, which will represent a core axis in Iranian propaganda as well as in the Iranian project that has surpassed even its initial ambitions after achieving significant breakthroughs regarding the legitimacy of Iranian intervention in the region to confront the Zionist entity, particularly with the failure of the Arabs to build a policy of confrontation with the Zionist entity.²⁶
- The power vacuum in the region due to the continuous Arab setbacks since 1990, following the Second Gulf Crisis and the subsequent international war against Iraq leading to its occupation in 2003. Throughout these years, Iran skillfully took advantage of the structural Arab problems politically, intellectually, and security-wise, and managed to restore the balance it lost during the war with Iraq, transforming into an influential regional power after the Arabs faded as a unified force and became preoccupied with intra-axis conflicts, in addition to the fact that the occupation of Iraq, which seemed superficially as an additional threat to Iran, was in reality a reason for Iran's regional superiority.²⁷

The weakness and fragility of the Arab axis allowed the Iranians to achieve more than just creating footholds for themselves in the Arab region. More importantly, Iran has built for itself a 'moral' popular presence in the region and has extended its reach to the furthest boundaries of the Maghreb, presenting itself as the (sole) defender of Palestine in contrast to the

(inaction) of Arab regimes. Since the mid-1990s, there have been repeated reports of the emergence of local supportive forces linked to Iran within Arab countries, whether these were cases of Shiite conversion or armed organizations.

Whereas Iran sought in 1980 a (revolutionary) movement to overturn the regime in Iraq, after 2003, thanks to the American occupation, it began to control, through its allies, the most significant power structures. By 2009, it had largely controlled the course of political and security developments in Iraq, especially after the Americans announced their intention to withdraw and began arrangements for that, a situation that the Iranians prepared for after President Ahmadinejad declared back in 200_ that his country was ready to fill the vacuum in the region and in Iraq with the help of its (friends), as the power of the Americans began to collapse rapidly. Two years after that statement, the Iranian authority was in control of determining the identity of the next Iraqi Prime Minister who would run in the 2010 elections.

3. Tools of the Project

The Iranian project fundamentally relies on local Arab tools that are linked or allied with Iran either sectarian-wise, ideologically, or due to the necessities of interests and considerations of political developments in the region.

Iran mobilizes a key part of its security forces, specifically from the Revolutionary Guard advisors, to carry out security, political, media, religious, or economic missions in Arab countries. However, the local tools that may take the form of parties, resistance movements, secret organizations, media, thinkers, writers, charitable associations, or even companies are the ones that carry out the larger tasks. Therefore, one of the most distinguishing features of the Iranian project is that it does not leave much of a trace behind; it advances behind a facade of claims of change, internal movements, resistance operations, intellectual debates, and freedom of religious affiliation, as well as relief efforts, financial aid, freedom of the media, and so forth.²⁸

It is not necessarily about using tools prepared by Iranian circles directly, or even using these tools to implement specific agendas. It can be limited to

financial, political, or media support that later leads to expanding Iran's circle of allies among Arab popular sectors and creating an acceptable stereotype. What is important in the end is to create centers of influence everywhere that can play a role at some point, even if that role is limited to not opposing Iran or not participating in criticizing it.

It does not matter in this Iranian endeavor whether these forces, movements, or currents are Shia or Sunni; Tehran is aware that the overwhelming majority of Arabs are Sunni Muslims. Therefore, it is keen to avoid any public sectarian trials so as not to threaten the differences in sectarianism that could jeopardize the support of the Arab public and to benefit from these movements or organizations later on. However, Tehran's support for Sunni or secular Islamic organizations differs from its support for certain organizations whose members are Shia, as Iran uses some of these organizations as covert cells aimed at conducting specific operations to bolster its negotiating capabilities on both regional and international levels. This was exemplified in the hostage-taking operations in Lebanon, which Iran greatly benefited from to gain international and regional advantages since the mid-1980s, including acquiring weapons from the United States during the war with Iraq.

During the years of the American occupation of Iraq, Iran utilized its long experience in building local organizations that it could use as tools to implement its agenda. The kidnapping of five British hostages by a local organization linked to Iran called "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq" was merely a model through which Iran sought to compel Britain to stop its support for separatist forces in Ahwaz, the Arab region in southwestern Iran. Despite the killing of several hostages, Britain did not speak of any retaliatory operations, and both it and the United States did not object to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki receiving members of the "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq" group and their entry into the political process.

Hezbollah is referred to as the most prominent card in the Iranian arsenal and the most successful, powerful, and influential local tool at both the Lebanese and Arab levels, as well as internationally, after this party became one of the most prominent Arab forces confronting.²⁹

He has previously stated multiple times that he believes in the Guardianship of the Jurist and that he is loyal to the Iranian Supreme Leader, Mr. Ali Khamenei. However, the proponents of this view also emphasize that this does not mean Hezbollah is subservient to Iran or lacks independence in making its decisions, even if it coordinates with its allies in Tehran and Damascus. Regardless of the accuracy of either perspective, Iran has maximized its benefit from its relationship with Hezbollah, regardless of the depth of this relationship. It has presented itself to the Arab public and the world as the entity fighting “Israel”, claiming victory over it and launching missiles at it, rather than the Arab fighters belonging to Hezbollah who have made significant sacrifices to achieve their victories, regardless of the source of their armament.³⁰

This has allowed Iran to achieve a significant moral presence in every Arab home, enabling it to pass many threads of its project after its propaganda linked Hezbollah's achievements to Iranian support. Iran has also benefited from the anti-Iran rhetoric in the region, which repeatedly talks about its manipulation of Hezbollah, suggesting to the general public in the region that it shares in this party's achievements in the conflict with “Israel”.³¹

This, of course, is not accurate; Iran's military or financial support for Hezbollah does not grant it the right to participate in its achievements. Otherwise, Arab countries would have shared in the Palestinian resistance's accomplishments against “Israel” throughout its history, and the Soviet Union would have shared in the achievements of those it supported against their adversaries. The essence lies in who pulls the trigger and receives the enemy's response and aggression, not in who supplies the weapons that can be purchased from various sources. The ones who have always pulled the trigger are Lebanese Arab fighters, and not a single Iranian among them.³²

Iran does not stop at that; it invests in the Arab division and the complex relations in the Palestinian arena to support Hamas, and then to benefit from it in terms of propaganda, media, and psychological warfare, also implying its participation in what it achieves against “Israel,” as it does in the case of Hezbollah, despite the fact that its relationship with this party differs in form and content from its relationship with Hamas. Moreover, Hamas has

long declared that its relationship with Iran is one of necessity because it does not find sufficient Arab support.³³

4. Obstacles to the Project

The Iranian project seems to be making strides toward achieving its goals, which may increase in scope over time with growing successes here and there. However, this reality is only part of the overall picture that reveals the complexities and difficulties Iran faces in its regional ambitions, which are still far from being realized, despite what appears on the ground.³⁴

Iran ranks fifth on the list of the world's top oil exporters, and it actually holds the third-largest oil reserves in the world according to OPEC documents, and the second according to official Iranian information. However, this advantage, which should be considered a source of strength for Iran, has not been fully exploited due to the serious problems facing the oil sector and its facilities, due to international sanctions on this sector, to the extent that Iran is unable to produce its full quota set by OPEC, which is four million barrels per day. This situation puts continuous pressure on the government budget, especially since oil represents about 70% of Iran's gross national product.³⁵

Iran does not stop there; it invests in the Arab division and the complex relations in the Palestinian arena to support its agenda. Although Iran is an old oil-producing country, it lacks sufficient oil refining facilities, most of which were destroyed during the war with Iraq, and Iran has failed to repair them. This has forced it to import 40% of its gasoline consumption from abroad and spend about 15 billion dollars annually on purchasing gasoline and subsidizing its prices, which adds a continuous burden on the budget, alongside the pressure this represents on Iran from the United States. Furthermore, sanctions have deprived Iran of foreign investments that could have contributed to the development of the oil sector and increased production, thus providing more hard currency revenues for the state budget.³⁶

The gasoline problem exemplifies what economic issues can cause in terms of internal repercussions that reflect on the social situation and the

government's ability to control affairs outside the realm of security dominance. Cutting imported gasoline supplies or raising its prices can lead to social unrest and widespread increases in transportation and goods prices, resulting in significant damage to the entire economic cycle.³⁷

This will multiply the number of Iranians living below the poverty line, which, according to official statistics in 2008, exceeded 14 million people out of a population of 70 million in Iran, representing 20% of the population.

The economy, despite its significant importance, is not the only reason for any potential threat to the regime. The violent unrest that occurred in Iran in protest of the results of the 2012 presidential elections and the large protests in 2022, which were violently suppressed by the Iranian government, focused on election outcomes and economic problems, as well as the issue of women's freedom, which exploded in an unprecedented manner. The slogan for women's rights topped the chants, and protesters historically demanded the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. Women chanted slogans such as "Death to the dictator," "Death to Khamenei," "Death to the oppressor," and "Women, life, freedom." These protests present other reasons related to the desire for change and the decline in the appeal of revolutionary slogans, highlighting a significant portion of the youth in Iran's need for a different model of state and society.³⁸

However, these widespread protests, characterized by unprecedented boldness since the Islamic Revolution and breaking the barrier of fear and the regime's divine authority, subjected the authority of the Supreme Leader himself to criticism and insult. They provide a model of what could happen if the will for change and political and social reforms were linked to economic decline, rising poverty, unemployment, and inflation rates, especially since the Iranian people are naturally inclined to mobilization, whether in support of or against the government. This is due to the ethnic and racial mosaic.

that is considered a factor of instability and an easy target for foreign intelligence infiltration. Regardless of the credibility of the regime's accusations against the opposition, which led the protests in recent years in collaboration with foreign entities, the regime's opponents in Iran can

indeed intervene at certain stages to stir up more problems for the regime and manipulate the fragile internal situation in the country, whether by mobilizing minorities seeking separation or demanding more rights, such as the Azerbaijanis.³⁹

Iran should focus on itself and develop its economy instead of challenging the West, which was reflected in some of the slogans chanted by the protesters, emphasizing that the leaders of these protests were all part of the leadership of the Iranian regional project in its various phases.⁴⁰

The truth is that this dual approach, which seems contradictory, where the state spends heavily to build a large regional and even international project at the expense of securing the economic and living conditions of the population at home and ensuring social unity and state strength, has been repeated in many previous cases, most notably the case of the former Soviet Union, which had the largest army in history and extended its influence east and west while its citizens stood in line for bread. This pattern has also been repeated in other countries, most notably and recently in Iraq.⁴¹

In all cases, regardless of their causes and the legitimacy of the need for them, the result has been that the regime reaches a dead end and perhaps the state collapses, and sometimes disintegrates. This makes the Iranian project a gamble with elements of failure as well as components of success. In every case, the Iranian regime has a limited time to achieve its goals or part of them,⁴² whether related to the nuclear project or the regional project, both of which are interconnected in one way or another. The outcome remains linked to the developments in the conflict between Iran and the West, the internal Iranian dynamics, or the Arab response to the project, which seems to be the weakest link so far.⁴³

3. CONCLUSION

Finally, we conclude The Iranian project seems to be making strides toward achieving its goals, which may increase in scope over time with growing successes here and there. However, this reality is only part of the overall picture that reveals the complexities and difficulties Iran faces in its regional ambitions, which are still far from being realized, despite what appears on the ground.

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Iran invests in the Arab division and the complex relations in the Palestinian arena to support Hamas, and then to benefit from it in terms of propaganda, media, and psychological warfare, also implying its participation in what it achieves against “Israel”, as it does in the case of Hezbollah, despite the fact that its relationship with this party differs in form and content from its relationship with Hamas. Moreover, Hamas has long declared that its relationship with Iran is one of necessity because it does not find sufficient Arab support.

The importance of the Arab dimension in the requirements of Iranian security and Iranian interests is attributed to historical, geographical, civilizational, and sectarian factors, in addition to other strategic factors. However, the Iranian national security was faced with new challenges following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, coinciding with the strengthening of the American presence in the region after the Gulf War, which reinforced Iran's conviction of the necessity of greater and more effective presence. The project of exporting the revolution acquired a new dimension, represented by making the Arab region a vital area for Iranian security and a central arena for confronting Iran's adversaries outside national borders.

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