

Islamic State's political perspectives on Iran

This short briefing paper discusses IS' political perspectives on the Iranian regime. It surveys IS' newsletter, *al-Naba'*, and the magazines *Dābiq*, *Rumīyyah* and *Dār al-Islām*, to investigate the group's perception of the country.

The alliances that Iran made are highlighted, in an attempt to destroy the credibility of the country. Since the 1979 revolution, the legitimacy of the Iranian regime has rested on an anti-Israeli and anti-American narrative and an ideological opposition to the presence of both states in the Middle East. IS uses this argument and deconstructs it, to make the case that the historic opposition between the United States and Iran is a lie and that the two states work together to reshape the identity of Muslim communities across the MENA region.

The United States and Iran, together with Syria and Russia, form what IS calls the "Front Stage Cooperation" (*Dābiq* 11, p. 48). An article published in *Dābiq* explains why Iran should be considered as "the most important ally of the Americans" (*Ibid.*). This cooperation, IS claims, started within the framework of the United Nations' 'Six Plus Two Group on Afghanistan' between 1997 and 2001. Then, the Geneva Contact Group "entailed Iran providing intelligence to the crusaders [...] and arresting [mujāhidīn] who attempted to cross the Iranian border on their way to Iraqi Kurdistan or other destinations". This led, IS argues, to the creation of the "apostate puppet Afghan regime" (*Ibid.*).

In 2003, Iran and the United States allegedly cooperated again, this time "mainly through the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office", which resulted in "the formation of the Safawī regime of Iraq". IS accuses this newly-created Iraqi regime of being "a puppet of Iran". The last and current stage of this cooperation is the fight against the Islamic State itself. In order not to show their cooperation publicly, IS argues, "the Americans cooperate with Iran, its forces, and its militias, but through the Safawī Iraqi regime" (*Dābiq* 11, p. 49).

This teamwork "was all topped by the 'Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action' nuclear agreement. IS claims that the United States pretends to oppose the nuclear programme, since this one "would probably only be used against the [Sunnah] in defense of the Jews who will follow the 'Mahdī' of the [Rāfidah]" (*Dābiq* 12, p. 46; *Dār al-Islam* 7, p. 28).

This argument fits into a larger narrative which IS has coined to express what can be termed as the 'Crisis of the *Ummah*', which should be understood not only as a struggle for power (between Muslim and non-Muslim and between Sunni and Shi'a) but also as a struggle over identity. In this struggle, Iran – as the religious and political leader of Shi'a Islam – is considered as a threat, and thus a direct and geographically close enemy of the Islamic State. The latter positions itself as the guarantor of the *Ummah*'s survival,



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challenges state and non-state actors, and accuses them of incessantly endangering Muslims worldwide (*al-Naba'*, 86, p. 9; 109, pp. 3-5). The Iranian threat is explained in issue 113 of *al-Naba'* (p. 3); “Iran's tyrants hid behind a revolutionary cloak to misguide fools and the ignorant people [...] they [became] so arrogant that they believed that what happened to them in Iran could be repeated in all Muslim countries, under the banner of exporting the revolution”.

In the same vein of the abolishment of the ‘Sykes-Picot borders’ between Iraq and Syria, IS does not recognize the international border between Iraq and Iran. The group often refers to those as “artificial”, such as in several issues of the newsletter *al-Naba'* issue (24, p. 4; 108, p. 4; 114, p. 5).

Within this narrative of IS, Iran is believed to be trying to revive the ‘*Safawī* Empire’. This empire, IS argues, has a long history of enmity towards Sunni Muslims. A long article featured in *Dābiq* claims that the first ruler of the ‘*Safawī* Empire’ – Safaviyya Sheikh Safī Al-Dīn Abolfath Is'hāq Ardabilī – “was the most anti-Sunnī ruler to come into power since the fall of the Ismā'īlī ‘Ubaydī state based in Egypt” (11, p. 52).

Ever since, IS claims, the successors of the ‘*Safawī* Empire’ have tried to change the religious demography of several Arab and non-Arab countries in order to impose a Shia' form of Islam on these communities. According to IS, this grand strategy accelerated with Khomeini, who “gave the Rāfidī clerics direct power in politics via the concept he had been propagating known as ‘wilāyat al-faqīh’ [...] they were exporting their [shirkī] religion to [Shām], Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, [Khurāsān], India, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The [Rāfidah] then overtook much of Yemen while siding with the American puppet Ali Abdullah Saleh, after already gaining power in Syria and Lebanon as a result of the Americans handing over Iraq to them after ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’. Suddenly the ‘Shia' Crescent’ was growing from a crescent into a solar eclipse, ultimately threatening Islam everywhere. [...] Their plan is to continue waging war against Islam until the emergence of the ‘Mahdī’ of the [Rāfidah]” (*Ibid*).

Another article of *Dābiq*, which was also translated into French in *Dār al-Islām*, echoes this threat: “The [Rāfidī] regime has overrun major allies of the West in Yemen and Lebanon as it plots similar scenarios for the Arabian Peninsula in Bahrain, Kuwait, and ‘Saudi’ Arabia” (*Dābiq* 12, p. 46; *Dār al-Islām* 7, p. 28).

It concludes: “The [Rāfidah] overall are more barbaric and united than the crusaders themselves, but the [muwahhidīn] of the Khilāfah have sharpened many knives and prepared many car bombs to slaughter the flocks of Rāfidī sheep until the last Rāfidī under the banner of [ad-Dajjāl] dies”. *Ad-Dajjal* is an evil figure in Islamic eschatology.

To conclude, the Islamic State delegitimises the Iranian regime, painting the regional picture with the brush of sectarianism. The group tries to convince its audience that the Iranian regime is illegitimate from both a religious and political perspective. At the regional level, Iran is depicted as the major actor that plays a devil’s game by using Syria, Iraq, and other allies and puppet governments to realize its grand scheme of achieving a

Shi'a domination over the Middle East. This war against the Sunnah legitimizes the brutal actions of the Islamic State and urges the Sunni Muslims to unite under their banner.

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