

Iran: A sorry state

February 2023

Failed states are those unable to maintain economic or political credibility and in a virtual state of collapse, incapable to fulfil the functions of a national executive. Rogue states are those openly funding and supporting action with extreme prejudice that goes against the social contract of the supposedly peaceful world order and which thus choose global ostracism. By these metrics, Iran would seem to fit both definitions. But Tehran would claim that it has both the political and religious right to govern the way it sees fit, and that foreign action is necessary in order to ensure Iran's safety and survival against the 'Satan' of the West. The issue therefore becomes not whether Iran is a failed, or a terrorist, state – but whether it has a problem being so.



Since the 1979 revolution that overthrew the US-backed Pahlavi dynasty and the emergence of the Islamic Republic, Iran has been viewed predominantly as either a somewhat eccentric hermit regime, complete with faintly absurd rhetoric of the USA and UK as the Great and Little Satans respectively, or a regional threat that deepens instability in the Middle East but with no capability to cause global ructions. Both are misleading. While the level of global sanctions applied to Iran (mainly due to its ongoing efforts to make a nuclear bomb), and its pariah status among most of the other Muslim countries, certainly make it an outlier, this has simply reinforced the inner conviction of the political and religious elite that the journey which started in 1979 must be continued.

And although Israel might have the most to fear from any immediate aggressive action, Iran is able to extend its influence worldwide through both the passive consequences of matters such as its vying with Saudi Arabia for regional prominence and the uncertainty that ensues, and its global program of disruption and harassment that is the natural recourse of any autocratic, or theocratic, state. Moreover, shared ideals of repression and subjugation always bring dictators closer together, and even Iran still has friends. Ignore it and its networks at one's peril.

The IRGC control every business and economic mechanism of worth in Iran, while the religious elite, from the Ayatollah downwards, sets the political tone. This is a symbiotic relationship and, in truth, neither would likely command enough support to flourish independently.

Together, however, they maintain a grip on Iran's political, economic, and social norms that until recently, seemed ironclad. The rising discontent, fuelled by the economic crisis directly resulting from the sanctions (which were themselves a response to political decisions) and the increasing brutality of crackdowns against any dissent, mean that Iran is now facing a domestic battle to maintain order on two fronts. More than one commentator has averred that this may be the end of the Iranian regime; that the economic collapse is too far gone, and the crackdowns too much of a line in the sand, to recover from. Only time will tell whether this is true.

Nothing will fundamentally change: to change is to admit error or defeat, and each is unconscionable to the Ayatollah and the IRGC elite who have built their empire on always being right. While a slightly more conciliatory approach may be adopted at home (witness the mass pardoning of arrested protestors in February, compared to the summary executions of January) in an effort to cool the immediate temperature, it is globally that Iran's attentions are likely to turn in order to buttress its position. It is true that some of this action is defensive in nature, targeting foreign dissidents or critics to silence those outside Tehran with the freedom to speak, or by actively arresting foreign citizens and encouraging others home under false pretences – whether as victims on their own account or to use as political pawns. The IRGC has acted in this manner for years, with the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe being only the tip of the iceberg.

But Iran is also becoming increasingly aggressive in its actions, with the failed state morphing into a terrorist one. The head of MI5, Ken McCallum, asserted recently that Iran was 'the state actor which most frequently crosses into terrorism' and confirming that it posed a direct risk to the security of the UK. Other countries are facing Iranian ire also. In France, which has been hugely supportive of the protests, the editors of satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo have been warned they face 'the same fate as Salman Rushdie' following the publications of cartoons lampooning the Ayatollah – with memories of the 2015 atrocity at that magazine's offices still fresh.

Meanwhile in America, quite apart from the attack on Rushdie himself, the FBI has stated bluntly that Iran 'puts US national security at risk' through the attempted creation of domestic terror cells, and the ongoing perpetration of cyberattacks against government and corporate targets alike, or indeed threats to use ICBMs to pulverise Washington. On the other side of the coin, Russia continues to deepen its relations with Iran through linking of banking systems, co-producing military drones and mutual sanctions-busting through the use of ghost ships – rogue states sticking together. And even apart from the issues of outright terrorism, the IRGC has a long and global history of utilising front companies and shells to launder money or otherwise control key industries, which will only be exacerbated as the regime enacts a desperation policy of equating international aggression with domestic defence.

Back to the question posed at the start – not whether Iran is a failed or rogue state, but whether it cares – and one must conclude that it does not. Failed states and rogue states alike already rule themselves by fear: they should not be allowed to extend this to others too.

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