



The Iranian Fortress

by Emil Avdaliani

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 572, August 28, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: There are many questions about Tehran's long-term foreign policy following the lifting of western sanctions in 2016. To answer these questions, it is helpful to consider Iran's geography and the way it affects the country's behavior in terms of international relations. Iran's geopolitical imperatives to defend its core land, project power where necessary, and limit foreign encroachments have remained largely unchanged throughout many centuries of its history.

Empires and nations have risen and fallen throughout recorded history. Great leaders are followed by lesser ones, and economic development varies. What is constant throughout is geography.

Geography consists of rarely changing features, such as rivers, mountains, deserts, large forests, and seas. Geography conditions human behavior and thus the behavior of entire states.

A simple look at the map of a country or a region can give some perspective on what those state's interests are. Take, for example, a map of the Middle East, which reveals three prominent features: Anatolia, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Iranian Plateau.

These geographical areas are virtually synonymous with the states located on those territories: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Each of the three has great regional ambitions, and the behavior of each is more or less conditioned and moderated by its geographical location, features, and neighbors – none more so than modern Iran.

Iran's major population centers are surrounded by almost impregnable mountains and deserts as well as water barriers. In the west and northwest are the Zagros Mountains, which bar Iran from Iraq. In the north, the Elburz Mountains as well as Armenia's mountainous lands serve as a defensive shield. The Caspian Sea to the north and the Arabian Sea to the south are yet more impregnable barriers. To the east and northeast lie the harsh climate of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Turkmenistan's semi-barren steppe-lands keep Iran's provinces more or less safe (barring occasional attacks by nomadic peoples).

The fact of being both geographically contained and geographically defended has defined Iranian grand strategy from the ancient Persian empires to modern Iran. The country's mountains and deserts have made it almost impossible to conquer and then keep under control. Consider, for example, several of history's greatest conquerors. The Mongols and, later, Tamerlane successfully invaded the Iranian plateau, but to keep it, they either had to deploy tens of thousands of troops (which they were unable to do) or co-opt the local population (which they did) by allowing them to participate in the country's governance. The same goes for Alexander the Great, Iran's most successful conqueror. Following his conquest of the land, he co-opted the local elites to hold onto the state – and after he died, Iran quickly reobtained its independence.

However advantageous this mountainous and desert geography can be, it also limits Iran's projection of power abroad. The geographic conditions have precluded Tehran's attempting to project power into Central Asia or Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although Iranians were active in Georgian, Armenian, and modern-day Azerbaijani territory until the coming of the Russians in the late 18th century, the South Caucasus mountains, rivers, and gorges have limited Iran's potential.

Strategically speaking, the most advantageous territory through which Iran can navigate its power has historically been the western frontier, or modern-day Iraq (Mesopotamia). This region has always been rich in population and natural resources and is therefore worth controlling.

Indeed, history shows how crucial Iraq has long been to Iran's calculus. Take, for instance, the Achaemenid Empire, followed by Parthia and the Sasanian state. All these dynasties hung onto Mesopotamia and even placed their capital, Ctesiphon, along the Euphrates River near modern-day Baghdad.

This is what is paradoxical about Iran. Although the land has been always protected by powerful geography, Iranians nevertheless have worked hard to prevent any foreign presence in the territories surrounding the Iranian plateau. Any foreign influence that might penetrate to the heart of Iran would be tantamount to a strategic weakening of the Iranian state.

This explains why Tehran is politically involved in Iraq, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. The US presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Russians in Central Asia, and a potential EU/NATO presence in the South Caucasus are worst-case scenarios Iran has always striven to avoid.

The Iranian state's strategic outlook was consistent throughout the country's ancient and as well as medieval history. The Achaemenid, Parthian, Sasanian, Safavid, and subsequent dynasties were all trying to dominate Iraq, the South Caucasus, south Central Asia, and parts of Afghanistan. Only the Achaemenid Empire extended its borders in all directions, reaching the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

That latter precedent explains Tehran's involvement in modern-day Syria and Lebanon and the race to extend its footprint to the Mediterranean coast. Even the Iranian involvement in Yemen, which might seem to lie outside logic, has a precedent: in the late 570s CE, the Iranian Shah Khusro Anushirwan invaded southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula.

Geopolitical imperatives rarely change, and this is well reflected in Tehran's foreign policy. Modern-day Iran is pursuing the same external policy goals as were its distant predecessors. Geography would also largely explain Iran's current involvement in several war theaters around the Middle East and the country's potential behavior as circumstances change.

Emil Avdaliani teaches history and international relations at Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University. He has worked for various international consulting companies and currently publishes articles focused on military and political developments across the former Soviet space.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family