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*IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY AND ACTIVITIES OF THE
IRANIAN SPECIAL SERVICES AGAINST THE BACKDROP
OF THE ONGOING WAR IN UKRAINE*

VASIL GLONTI



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Iran's Foreign Policy and Activities of the Iranian Special Services Against the Backdrop of the Ongoing War in Ukraine

Vasil Glonti

Executive Summary

After the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, Iran became very active in the foreign political arena. The political and military elite of this country considered that the mentioned conflict would change the geopolitical configuration of the world, so Iran would need strategic visions and an action plan adapted to the new reality. In its foreign policy, the regime of the Iranian Mullahs identified as the main priorities: activation and expansion of cooperation with Russia, especially in the military-industrial, economic and banking-financial fields; further development of Iran's nuclear program; arranging relations with the countries of the Middle East region and giving priority to the regional security format; strengthening political-economic and military expansion in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon; deepening of confrontation with the USA and Israel in the Middle East and different regions of the world; pursuing an aggressive policy towards Azerbaijan and neutralizing the influence of Israel; expansion of strategic relations with Armenia;

Introduction

On September 16, 2022, the Iranian police killed Mahsa Amini, a young Iranian Kurdish girl, on the pretext of wearing a traditional Islamic headscarf in violation of Islamic norms, and in response, a nationwide protest movement took place. In contrast to the previous demonstrations, the current ones turned out to be much larger, which the Iranian regime could not neutralize. The whole world responded to these events. Among them are: the USA, Canada, Israel and other states that have condemned the criminal actions of the Iranian regime. The imposition of new additional sanctions against the government of the Ayatollahs is again on the agenda¹. Iran did not lack problems before, however, it happened that its ruling regime met the war between Russia and Ukraine with an even more difficult internal and external political background.

Iran-Russia relations in the military field and economy

Due to the low level of management and high corruption in the state system, Russia did not have certain types of modern weapons, including drones. It was probably known to Moscow that the Iranians had created analogues based on the samples of American drones (CNN.com, 2014). Accordingly, shortly after the start of the military aggression against Ukraine, the Kremlin decided to buy them from Iran. Although the Iranian side still denies it, the regime of the Ayatollahs supplied Russia with various modifications of drones through the "Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps". There is information that in exchange for the supply of drones, Russia helps Iran to study and utilize advanced digital-surveillance capabilities (Dov Lieber Benoit Faucon and Michael Amon, 2023). In addition, according to the "Wall Street Journal", Russia and Iran are even planning to build an Iranian factory for the production of drones in the city of Elabuga, Republic of Tatarstan (Dion Nissenbaum and Warren P. Strobel, 2023). Tehran already has such experience, Iran built a drone manufacturing plant in Tajikistan for the first time on the territory of "Commonwealth of Independent States" (CIS) countries (KN Pandita, 2022), which was probably

¹ *The foreign ministers of Canada, France, Italy, Germany, Japan, Great Britain, and the United States, which are part of the G 7, together with the high representative of the European Union, strongly criticized the Iranian authorities for the murder of Mahsa Amin and called for the protection of human rights (Auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom 2022).*

implemented as a result of an agreement with Russia. Strengthening its position in the rich region of Central Asia is a strategic goal of Iran, which is why the Iranians are trying to use the factor of ethnically related Tajiks. At the same time, for Iran, as well as for Russia, strengthening the military capabilities of Tajikistan, which has become a buffer, is quite important in order to exclude the possibility of spreading the instability in Afghanistan to Central Asia.

In addition, Iran generally observes with interest the activities of the "Collective Security Treaty Organization" (CSTO), whose meetings have been attended by Iranian representatives in recent years. According to the Chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission of the Iranian Parliament, Vahid Jalalzadeh, "Iran supports developing friendly relations with the members of the CSTO" (Paodkb.org, 2022). The prospect of joining the Russian-led military bloc contains certain risk factors for Iran because the development of events in such a scenario will further worsen relations with Western countries. Therefore, it is likely that Iran will continue its policy of balancing in relation to Russia, and at this stage, it will remain just an observer in "CSTO". Although Iran is unofficially helping Russia in the ongoing war in Ukraine, Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran, said in an interview given to the Turkish TV channel, TRT World, that Iran opposes the conflict in Ukraine and does not recognize the secession of Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk regions from Ukraine (TRT World 2023). Such a pragmatic position of the head of the Foreign Ministry of Iran is partially due to the fact that Iran itself has the problem of separatist regions. Accordingly, Iran approaches this vulnerable and problematic issue with caution. It is highly probable that Iran will try to distance itself from the sensitive topic in the future as well. At the same time, Iran and Russia decided to combine interbank transfer systems in order to avoid international sanctions. According to the Iranian side, 700 Russian and 106 foreign banks from 13 countries will join the new banking system (Reuters, 2023). The representatives of the central banks of these two countries have already signed an agreement on the simplification of banking operations. The financial messaging system of the Central Bank of Russia was merged with the Iranian "Sepam" (System for Electronic Payments Messaging) (Finam.ru, 2023). Apparently, Iran and Russia are trying to replace SWIFT. It seems that the Iranian government is trying to get out of the economic crisis by strengthening relations with Russia, because it is afraid of internal destabilization. There is a probability that the population, dissatisfied with the weak economic policy of the Ayatollahs' regime, will join the protests.

Iran's nuclear program

Iran is trying to some extent that the so-called nuclear agreement, or "Joint Comprehensive Action Plan", should be restored and updated. But at the same time, having nuclear weapons is important for Iran because it would give it much more political weight in the Middle East region and beyond. Russia's support for Iran in the development of its nuclear program is very important.

At the same time, it should be taken into account that at this stage the lifting of sanctions against Iran is not in Russia's interests, because it is afraid of damaging its partnership relations with Iran. Accordingly, the Kremlin is trying to make Iran a strategic ally in exchange for assistance in the development of the nuclear program. In January of this year, the International Atomic Energy Agency found 83.7% enriched uranium during sampling at Iran's Fordo plant (BBC.com, 2023). It is likely that Iran will continue the process of uranium enrichment in a secret mode, and it is possible that in the future, Iran will accumulate enough enriched uranium for the production of nuclear weapons. It is highly likely that it will take at least several years for Iran to develop a nuclear warhead, although this time may be shortened based on the Islamic Republic's recent advances in missile production. The abovementioned circumstances cause serious concerns in Washington, London, and Tel Aviv, which increases the possibility of Iran's nuclear facilities being bombed by them as an act of prevention.

Iran's policy in the South Caucasus

Georgia

After the collapse of the USSR, Iran carefully observed the ongoing processes in the South Caucasus and tried to strengthen its position in the region, although international sanctions and the Russian factor prevented it. In recent years, Iran has not been very active in Georgia, however, in November 2022, the Security Service of Georgia arrested Pakistani citizens on charges of trying to kill Israeli businessman Itzik Moshe. The mentioned persons were in Georgia under the joint task of "Al-Quds" and "Al-Qaeda" special forces unit of Iran's "Guardians Corps". According to the information of the Israeli mass media, they were supervised by the operatives of the "Al-Quds" Mohammad Reza Ebadi Arablu and his boss Ali Faizifuri, who have been leading the terrorist networks of Iran since 2011 (LAZAR BERMAN and TOBIAS SIEGAL, 2022). Georgian special services have identified and arrested persons with dual Georgian-Iranian citizenship who were responsible for supplying arms to Pakistanis. According to the information of the Israeli special services, after the arrest of the suspects, the Georgian and Israeli special services discussed the issue jointly. According to the information disseminated by the "Washington Post" based on the official authorities of the USA, Shahram Fursavi, an officer of the "Guardians Corps" of Iran, also worked on the issue of the liquidation of Itzik Moshe, who later planned to liquidate Michael Bolton, the adviser of the former American president, Donald Trump (Shane Harris, Souad Mekhennet and Yeganeh Torbati, 2022). Before this terrorist attack, it seemed that Iran was only interested in the local Shiite Azerbaijani community in Georgia, but now it seems that the areas of interest of Iranians have expanded. Iran and Israel, who are mutually opposed at the global level, are also trying to strengthen their positions in the Caucasus region, which leads to conflict situations between them. The mentioned incident did not have a significant impact on Iran-Georgia relations, however, the growing trend of cooperation between Iran and Russia and confrontation between Iran-West-Israel will undoubtedly increase the challenges and threats in the South Caucasus region.

Armenia

A rather unfavorable geopolitical situation for Armenia was formed in the South Caucasus region, the strategic alliance between Turkey and Azerbaijan bore fruit, and Armenia suffered a serious defeat in the last Karabakh war. Israel also showed interest in the region, which emphasized close cooperation with Azerbaijan and supplied it with modern weapons. Having serious problems due to the war with Ukraine, Russia and the "CSTO" did not support Armenia during the last Karabakh war. Georgia was already the only exit connecting Armenia to Russia and the Black Sea region. Consequently, Iran became the most important destination for Armenia, which was caught in a geopolitical deadlock, and the situation of which worsened even more. On the other hand, for Iran, Armenia is the gateway to the Caucasus region, which can connect it to the Black Sea through Georgia. It is likely that the cooperation between Iran and Armenia will expand even more in the future, including perhaps in the field of military industry, because Armenia had great problems due to the lack of modern weapons during the Karabakh war. According to Azerbaijani media, some signs of the mentioned became already visible, during the hostilities between the armed forces of Armenia and Azerbaijan on April 11, 2023, as Armenia used Iranian drones - Shaheds (Haqqin.az, 2023). This allegation is denied by Armenian side accusing Azerbaijan of spreading disinformation. Despite the fact that Iran is one of the priority areas for Armenia, the foreign vector of Nikola Pashinyan's government still leans towards the West, therefore, Armenia will probably try to pursue a balanced policy. For Armenia at this stage, choosing any specific side contains certain risk factors and is generally unprofitable.

Therefore, along with the expansion of cooperation with Iran, Nikola Pashinyan will continue the process of establishing close relations with the European Union and the USA. Moreover, the European Union has been very actively involved in the process of solving the Karabakh problem, and this is mostly grist for Armenia's mill. At the same time, in the near term, it is unlikely that Armenia will completely free itself from Russia's influence. On the other hand, Iran may try to use Armenia to improve relations with the European Union, because Armenians have a rich and influential diaspora in European countries.

Azerbaijan

Russia's position in the South Caucasus has somewhat weakened due to the ongoing hostilities in Ukraine, while Azerbaijan, strengthened with the help of Turkey and Israel, has claimed the leadership of the region after its success with Armenia in the last Karabakh war. The "Zangezuri Corridor" project initiated by Ilham Aliyev, through which Azerbaijan will be connected to The Nakhichevan Autonomous Region through The Syunik District of Armenia, has worried Tehran. Iranians fear that if this project is implemented, the influence of Azerbaijan and Turkey in the region will increase even more, and Iran's road to the South Caucasus and the Black Sea will be blocked. The Azerbaijan factor clearly hindered Iran's expansionist plans in the South Caucasus. These circumstances increased Iran's contradiction to Azerbaijan. Iranians claim that Israel is actively using Azerbaijan in intelligence activities against Iran. The attack on the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Iran on January 27, 2023, which was allegedly carried out by the Iranian special services, is an echo of this tension.² The aforementioned terrorist attack was preceded by a special operation conducted by the Iranian special services in the regions inhabited by ethnic Azerbaijanis of Iran, after which the Iranians released information about the destruction of the "12-person Israeli spy network" (Tasnimnews.com., 2023). Iranians suspect that Azerbaijan, with the support of Israel, is promoting ethnic separatism in the northern regions of Iran populated by Azerbaijanis and Kurds. On the other hand, Iran's special services are actively working on the recruitment of the local population on the territory of Azerbaijan and the propagation of the ideas of the Islamic revolution. Despite the fact that Azerbaijan's special services have neutralized several Iranian spies' networks since the beginning of 2023, on March 28, Fazil Mustafa, a deputy of the parliament of Azerbaijan known for his anti-Iranian views, was shot near his home (Iranintl.com 2023). According to the information of Azerbaijan's special services, Iranian special services are behind this terrorist attack (Caliber.az, 2023). In a joint statement issued by the State Security Service of Azerbaijan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the General Prosecutor's Office, it is stated that as a result of complex measures, Azerbaijani citizens recruited by the special services of the Islamic Republic of Iran were arrested (Trend.az, 2023). Despite the difficult situation, it is likely that Iran and Azerbaijan will try to remove the background of tension and sit down at the negotiating table, because continuing to confront each other in the context of many internal and external problems to be solved is against the interests of both countries.

Iran's foreign policy towards Arab countries and Israel-Palestine

On March 10, 2023, through the mediation of China, Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to restore diplomatic relations (Stephen Kalin and Summer Said, 2023). This circumstance may have a serious impact on the geopolitical picture of the Middle East. It is obvious that Iran is trying to somehow escape international sanctions and isolation and resolve the conflicts with the Persian Gulf countries. The warming of relations between the Iranian regime and Saudi Arabia is a direct message to the US, Israel and their allies that the

² *The main target of the attack on the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Iran were Azerbaijani diplomats, who were saved only by the professionalism of the head of the embassy's security (Mostafa Salem and Allegra Goodwin 2023).*

Muslim countries of the Persian Gulf intend to strengthen their integration processes in the future. This one of the most important regions of the world has been considered a sphere of US influence until now, and an attempt to change the existing geopolitical configuration through the mediation of China is perceived as a serious threat in Washington. On April 6 of the current year, the head of the US Central Intelligence Agency, William Barnes, paid an unplanned visit to Saudi Arabia³, and confirmed to Prince Mohammad bin Salman, the displeasure of the American side caused by the recent intensification of contacts with Iran and Syria (Stephen Kalin and Summer Said, 2023). The Iran-Saudi Arabia agreement was met with a negative reaction in Israel as well, where opposition leader Yair Lapid accused the incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of pursuing an incorrect and ineffective foreign policy course (Alarabiya.net, 2023). It is likely that Israel will try to intensify contacts with Saudi Arabia, because the warming of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia will cause serious problems for Israel in the Middle East region, especially in Syria. Iran plays a big role in the ongoing processes in Syria. Representatives of its Ministry of Defense and special services train and subsequently use in military operations both local fighters and Shiite groups from Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan. Pro-Iranian units operate throughout Syria, including near the Israeli border. Allegedly, Iran is planning to create a Shiite line of Syria-Iraq-Lebanon-Iran, which causes serious concern to Israel. According to the information of the Ministry of Defense of Israel, under the patronage of the "Iranian Islamic Revolution Guards Corps", mini-factories are operating in the Iranian military cities in Syria, which manufacture various types of weapons, including drones, missiles and ammunition (Timesofisrael.com, 2022). Iran and its ally "Hezbollah" also have intelligence centers in Syria. On March 30-31, as a result of aerial bombardment carried out by Israel, the officers of the Iranian "Guard Corps", military instructors Milad Heydar and Mehdan Mehdan were killed (Iran International Newsroom, 2023a). With a high probability, the confrontation between Israel and Iran will continue and take on a wider scale.

Iran is also actively involved in the ongoing civil war in Yemen. Ansarullah (Houthis), an organization funded and trained by Iran's Guard Corps, fights against pro-Saudi forces. The Yemeni government accuses Iran of trying to destabilize the country. US warships, together with the Yemeni military, have many times detained in the Gulf of Oman the Iranian ships, transporting weapons and ammunition to the rebel Houthis. Presumably, by enhancing relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran is trying to weaken the positions of the US and its allies in Yemen and Syria. Iranians also have serious positions in Iraq, however, after the Americans killed General Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi politician Abu Mahdi Muhandes, it will be very difficult for them to maintain their old influence. Iran also plays an active role in the Palestinian conflict. Iranian instructors teach military and terrorist activities to Palestinian Arabs at the military bases on the territory of Iran, Palestinian students are being recruited and ideologically trained in Iranian universities. On March 28, 2023, the spokesman of the "Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps", General Ramezan Sharif, advised the Palestinians to take advantage of the ongoing large-scale anti-government protest movement in Israel and publicly called for the destabilization of Israel (Iranintl.com, 2023b). Most likely, Iran is trying to further complicate and worsen the already difficult domestic political situation in Israel using the Palestinians. The goal of the Iranians is to limit Israel's time and opportunities for activity abroad. This will make it significantly easier for Iran to protect its interests in Syria, Saudi Arabia and other countries.

³ *The US government considered the process of deepening Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran and Syria as damaging to its own interests, which is confirmed by the purpose of the visit of the head of the Central Security Service, William Barnes (Stephen Kalin and Summer Said 2023).*

Iran-US relations

In recent years, Iran's special services and their related financial entities have been operating in different regions of the world, involved in promoting terrorism, illegal activities, money laundering and financial machinations, due to which the regime of the Ayatollahs has turned into a global threat to the US and its allies. On the other hand, one of the main strategic tasks of Iran's foreign policy is the expulsion of the US and its allies from the Middle East region. Consequently, relations between the two countries remain tense. After the involvement of Iran in the current processes in Ukraine, the USA is actively helping Ukraine against Iran. In 2022-2023, the US State Department imposed sanctions on Iranian military companies, the Guard Corps, the Ministry of Security and Information, and other state bodies due to the supply of military drones to Russia and political persecution of Iranian citizens. Despite this, the Iranian special services operate even on the territory of the USA and are even trying to eliminate high-ranking officials of the Trump administration, including Michael Pompeo and Michael Bolton. The activity of Iranians on such a global scale indicates their rather high training and good financing.

Conclusion

In 2022 and the beginning of 2023, Iran is active in the international political arena, which is confirmed by the further strengthening/expansion of its foreign-political, military, economic ties and special services activities on a global scale. The high degree of Iran's involvement in the Ukraine-Russia war and the high rates of cooperation with Russia in the economic, financial and military spheres indicate that Iran's goal is to transform from a regional player to a global player, escape from international isolation and neutralize international sanctions. It is likely that the process of expanding cooperation between Russia and Iran will continue in the near future, if the regime of the Ayatollahs is not hindered by the complex internal political processes taking place inside the country. Russian-Iranian relations in the field of defense and security will further deepen. It is not excluded that in the future, Iran will hand over short, medium and long-range missiles to Russia for hostilities in Ukraine. On the other hand, Russia will help Iran in those areas of the military industry, in which Russia has more knowledge and experience. Russia-Iran relations in economy and financial-banking sector will expand in the future. Both countries will try to weaken the impact of international sanctions on their economic and financial spheres and improve their own economic indicators through mutual assistance. Iran will continue to enrich uranium and develop its nuclear program. The Ayatollahs' government's claim that Iran's goal is to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes is baseless. Iran is secretly trying to create nuclear weapons, which is confirmed by the information about the enrichment of uranium up to 83.7%, obtained by the "International Atomic Energy Agency". Iran will continue its political-economic and military expansion in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. For Iran, the creation of a "Shiite zone" on the territory of these three countries is of strategic interest. At the same time, Iran will try to continue the process of normalizing relations with Sunni Saudi Arabia and offer its participation in the control and management of the above-mentioned countries. By offering its own model of regional security to the countries of the Middle East, Iran will try to expel the US from the region and weaken Israel's position. Iran will try to activate in the Caucasus region with the help of Armenia. Its goal is to weaken the Azerbaijan-Israel tandem, which threatens the territorial integrity of Iran by affecting its separatist, ethnic Azerbaijani and Kurdish territories in the northwest.

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