

THE POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF IRAN

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Introduction

The political geography and geopolitics of Iran are a central tenet in appreciating the political and social profile of the country. Several factors affecting the geography of Iran are inherently historical. Cases of such historical factors include: the cause of existence of the country, the territorial span of the Iranian plateau, the demographic composition, nationalism, geographical location, culture and national and religious subcultures, and even the form of government. The current territorial span of Iran, albeit rather diminutive as opposed to its former status, has consistently been the core territory of the country throughout history. In addition to territory, other underlying factors of political geography, counting on ethnic diversity, and form and type of government, continue to maintain the ancient heritage of the country. The ethnic and racial diversity of the modern (21st century) Iranian population are to a large extent a replica of the premodern Iranian citizen. The form of government also follows suit in that it still takes the form of central authoritarianism. Such cases highlight the salience of historical factors in the formation of political geography in Iran.

Alternative factors affecting the political geography of Iran are structural components originating in the modern era such as energy sources, geographical location, geopolitical and geostrategic elements, modern governments, etc. Energy resources have played a major role in the centralization of the political system, particularly post establishment of the modern government in 1925, when they had emerged as the prime source of

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income for the country. Even now energy resources continue to be the prime motivator behind the amalgamation of the political system. Relying on revenues from the petroleum industry, the government has denied decentralization and gone so far as to resist infirm local governments. The notion of geographical superiority of Iran is also confirmed by modern geopolitical theories put forth by figures such as Mackinder, Spykman, and Cohen. The geopolitics of Iran is also entirely under the influence of modern structural factors. During both the Pahlavi sovereignty and under the governance of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the country has maintained its geopolitical centrality in the Middle East by virtue of said structural factors. The Pahlavi dynasty would centralize energy resources and political alliances with the West, whereas the Islamic Republic clings to modern religious ideologies, both of which succeeded in maintaining the role of Iran as the prime instigator of the geopolitical network of the Middle East.

A scrutinization of the political geography of Iran without any regards to these two factors would be, at best, an incomplete endeavor. With this backdrop, the present chapter seeks to employ such factors as a means to provide a comprehensive definition of political geography and geopolitics of Iran.

Political-social history

Since at least the reign of the Achaemenids in the sixth century B.C., the country or its government has been formally recognized as Iran. The term Iran was first chanced upon in the ancient pre-Achaemenid texts, meaning *Land of the Arians* (Mojtahedzadeh 2013). The cause of existence of highly coherent and powerful empires throughout Iran since 708 B.C. – the Median empires being the original instances of such empires – is most probably attributable to the territorial span of the Arians. Even in the later years when the political-geographical unit of empire was replaced by the state, the factor of *sarzamin*, literally translated as mainland, remained the core cause of the existence of Iran; albeit, other factors were progressively introduced through the course of time.

One of the main pillars of governance in Iranian empires has always been the political organization of space, which incidentally found its way to other empires as well, including the Roman Empire (Pishgahifard and Sonboli 2009). Nevertheless, it is yet a matter of controversy as to whether the type of governments in Iranian empires were federal (in its current sense) or not (Petrushevsky 1987; Noamani 1979; Ashraf 1980; Katoozian 1998; Vali 1993;

Lambton 1969). The opposition in this regard, however, has not disregarded the existence of a semi-federal government, wherein different states would function under the supervision of a central government. States in Iranian empires were often recognized as Satraps, which according to Herodotus, is a form of autonomous state (Jamali et al. 2013). The division of power in each Satrap would be stratified among two prime authorities: *xšaθrapāwn*, the present-day governor or secretary, responsible for supervision over other *xšaθrapāwns*, so as to prevent the amalgamation of power in the hands of a single individual. Similar to present federalist systems, the Satraps were somewhat independent in handling religious, cultural, lingual, and even economic affairs and were only contingent upon the central government in matters relating to taxes, recruitment of soldiers, procurement of military equipment, and other matters of security. The satrap system in Iranian empires gradually evolved into a more complete form until the invasion of the country by Arab Muslims, which revolutionized the social-political system. The salience of the satrap system reached the extent that new territories were formed under the governance of satraps during the Sasanian empire (the last Iranian empire before the Islamization of Iran), with each satrap further divided into a province, Rostaq (rural districts), and Tasuj (a small administrative subdivision in Iran).

Following the Arabian conquests and the Islamization of Iran in 651 D.C., the social-political government of the country was remodeled. The once dominant federal government put in place by the Sasanian Empire had declined and Iran had fallen under the subjugation of the Arabian empire, whose capital was in Baghdad. Despite the fact that various stratified political states of Iran remained subjects to the central empire, political and social ceremonies induced by the Arabian empire were entirely different than those of the previous Iranian empires. From a social perspective, the prior feudal order, which in consonance with the opinion of most historians and experts was comparable to Western feudalism, had become obscure and substituted by the system of Iqta rooted in Islamic culture (Anderson 1974; Mann 1988; Lambton 1976, 1968, 1988). This system was an equivalent to Western feudalism and particularly focused on the public ownership of lands in the Arabian empire and the Islamic world, as opposed to the private ownership in roman feudalism. Iqta referred to large divisions of land, which the Baghdadian caliphate, as the successor and delegate of divine providence on earth, would assign as its own territorial units, receiving annual taxes and ransoms while stripping the inhabitants of the lands of virtually any form of freedom and independence. The Iqta system of order in Iran entailed further subjugation of independent states by the central government (Loscaya et al.

1975; Ashraf 1974; Fray 1984). The political organization of space during this period was also influenced by the Iqta system, which in turn was accompanied by changes in social establishments and relations. The satraps, or rather autonomous states, gradually lost their independence in handling local affairs, while the remainder of states had no right of ownership of their lands. The *xšaθrapāwns* (the state governors) had solely become representatives of the central government in charge of collecting taxes and ransoms.

The rise of the Safavid dynasty in 1501 liberated the country from Arabian sovereignty, but failed to restore the political-social system prior to the Islamization of Iran. Conversely, the country was reestablished in the form of a new Shia-centered government, which is itself considered an existential cause for a newfangled Iran with new territorial borders. The Iqta system remained the determinant factor behind social and political formalities and the governing system had further delved into the realm of celestial governance. Despite its egress from the Arabian dominion and its somewhat modern features—as stated by certain experts (Savory 2008; Heintz 1967)—the country had, under the influence of the Shia political jurisprudence, become the vanguard for the establishment of an Islamic Ommah rather than a modern government. The political organization of space in Iran during the reign of Shia jurisprudence was not unlike the previous governance of the Arabs, with the exception that political centralization had intensified.

The advent of the Qajar dynasty in 1794 put an end to the premodern political-social system in Iran, transpiring a transition from premodern to modern, a period primarily characterized by associations with Western worlds and undertones of changes in the political governance and organization of space for later periods.

The rise to power of Reza Shah in 1925 is recognized as the onset of modernism in Iran. Throughout the modern era—from the rise of the Pahlavi Dynasty to its fall, followed by the Islamic Revolution—Iran has undergone fundamental changes in terms of its political-social system as well as the political organization of space. As maintained by the majority of connoisseurs, these changes were the subsequent outcomes of relations with the west and the penetration and influence of Western political thought over the Iranian population (Halliday 1979; Abrahamian 1983). Perhaps the most significant political-social change of the modern era was the emergence of a modern territorial government substantiated at the hands of Reza Shah by dint of political centralization, ethnic integration, establishment of a modern army, administrative bureaucracy, and a modern legal rights system. The appearance of a modern government in Iran entailed many other episodes counting on the abolishment of the *Molokottavaayefi* system (Semi-Feudal),

the consolidation of previously transitional territorial borders of the country, the substitution of industrial capitalist production for agricultural production, and the construction of major road networks, all of which enabled the government total control over its territorial span. This was then followed by the replacement of the traditional legal system (Islamic) by more modern arrangements for legal systems in conjunction with the advent of modern bureaucracy, which facilitated administration, and the establishment of a modern education system and rapid escalations in public literacy.

The modern government propounded by Reza Shah engendered a variety of critical changes to the political organization of space (Naghibzadeh 2000). Pursuant to modern administrative divisions, Iran was first stratified into 10 provinces, with subsequent divisions including townships, cities, counties, rural districts, villages, and settlements. Pertinent to such divisions were regulatory bodies including provincial governments, governates, municipality, precepts, Dehdari (sheriffdom), which formed the prime political-administrative units of the country responsible for managing administrative affairs in a modern and unitary fashion, all under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior. The corresponding legislations for administrative divisions as well as municipal and land ownership laws were also codified and approved during this period. The formation of a modern government by Reza Shah, which according to theories set forth by Barrington Moore had been implemented with total authoritarianism (as opposed to democratic approaches undertaken in European countries) (Moore 1993), embedded the notion of political centralization as a major principle in the management and monitoring of the nation's territories.

The government of the second monarch of the House of Pahlavi (Mohammad Reza Shah) was to some extent a reconstruction of a modern absolutist government. Unlike his predecessor and father (Reza Shah), Mohammad Reza Shah, who was seen as a more modern individual educated in the West, sought to separate himself from physical violence in political centralization, abstaining from suppression of ethnicities and forceful urbanization of tribes and focusing on the institutionalization and modernization of political centralization in the administrative divisions of the country. Alterations in the laws of administrative division, modernization of the bureaucratic system, and development of administrative infrastructures, particularly those relating to road networks and military affairs, led to a modernized political centralization of Iran. The most notable attempt by Mohammad Reza Shah in the modernization of administrative divisions was the land reform program, implemented at the behest of the American government, aiming to disarm the feudal regimes, which were considered the

main obstacle to a modernized Iran (Foran 2019).

Overall, the both Pahlavi administrations played a major role in revolutionizing the political organization of the space in Iran. Reza Shah proceeded to establish a modern and politically unitary government, while Mohammad Reza Shah institutionalized and modernized this political centralization. This modernization of the political organization of space was further intensified by the subsequent 1979 revolution, which in effect was opposed to extreme modernization. From the revolution onwards, with the exception of the first decade from 1978-1989, which was highly influenced by the post-revolutionary idea of *Ommahism* (the governance of collective community of Islamic people) against modernism, the Islamic Republic of Iran succeeded in only further enhancing the notion of centralization in a more modern and institutionalized manner. Exclusive of the Shia political jurisprudence — considered the main ideology underlying the Islamic Republic of Iran and a motivator of political centralization — other factors were also effective in this transition towards increased centralization. Energy resources, particularly those relating to petroleum, were pivotal in the intensification of political centralization in Iran from the kingship of the second Pahlavi monarch onwards. Petroleum provided a major source of income for the country, alleviating it from civilian taxes, subjugating the population, and preventing the formation of local governments. Among other factors encouraging political centralization and prioritization of matters of security include threats, whether implicit or explicit, from transboundary ethnic trails in neighboring countries, strategic position of Iran as the communicational cross-way between the Eastern and Western worlds, and its sensitive and vulnerable situation.

Ethnic diversity

From a demographic standpoint, the spatial structure of Iran is comprised of two continual regions; the central region and the peripheral area. The peripheral regions, unlike the dense and homogenous central regions, are highly disconnected and encompass various ethnic, lingual, and religious groups scattered among numerous geomorphological and topographic units. From the perspective of geomorphology, the marginal regions of Iran consist of mountain ranges (Alborz and Zagros) and aqueous zones (Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf, and Gulf of Oman), as well as several rivers, which alone are considered among historical factors ensuing the infeasibility of a central government for controlling the diverse body of ethnic and racial groups residing in these regions.

Respectively, ethnic, lingual, and religious groups have the highest contribution in the disconnectedness of the population of Iran. The country is inclusive of 5 ethnicities counting on Turkish, Kurdish, Arab, Baloch, and Turkmen. The major demographic fraction of the country are Persians, following which are Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Baloch, and Turkmen. The ethnic groups in Iran are primarily characterized by their transboundary trails in neighboring countries, which has always tormented the government.

Turks

The Turkish inhabitants of Iran form the largest ethnic minority and primarily reside in Ardabil, Eastern and Western Azerbaijan, and Zanjan. Nevertheless, many Turkish citizens are residents of Tehran, Hamedan, Qazvin, North Khorasan, Markazi, Fars, and Gilan provinces. The Turkish folk people are extreme nationalists and consider themselves patriots of the country, which as history narrates, is a rather genuine perception, particularly evident in their sense of belonging to the national and religious code put forth by the constitutional revolution or throughout the Iran-Iraq war. Nonetheless, there have been cases of divergence among the Turkish ethnicities such as instances in the independence movement of the Azerbaijani Democratic Party in 1945, which was primarily under the influence of the soviet union, or the operation of the Muslim People Republic Party in the early years following the Islamic Revolution (Abedi Ardakani 2010).

Kurds

The Kurdish folks are native to the provinces of Western Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, Hamedan, Kurdistan, and Northern Khorasan and are more scarce compared to the Turkish ethnic group. The urging factors behind the divergence of Kurds were broader than the Turks and include the following: concentration of the Kurdish population within a small and specific region; inferior economic, hygienic, and educational facilities; triangular geographical span located between three countries of Iraq, Turkey, and Syria and the accompanied transboundary ethnicities, political seclusion and absence of social-political talents of Kurdish ethnicity in administrative affairs; religious considerations (Sunni religion); and current regional and international changes in Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurdish divergent movements were rather frequent throughout the political history of Iran, the most notable of which include the Simko Shikak Revolt led by Ismail Agha Simitquh in 1918,

the establishment of the Kurdish Resurgence Society (komola) in 1941, which was changed to the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan under the mandate of soviet authorities, the Independence of Kurdistan movement act and the establishment of Mahabad Republic in 1945, attempts by Kurdish civilians led by Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou for the pluralism of power in Iran in 1979, and the 8-Article Declaration of the Kurdish Opposition for the Independence of Kurdistan after the Islamic Revolution (Van Bruinessen 2000).

Arabs

The Arabian minority in Iran are primarily inhabitants of the Khuzestan Province and the cities of Khorramshahr, Abadan, Shadgan, Mahshahr, Ahvaz, Hoveyzeh, Susangerd, Bostan, Shooshtar, and Southern Dezful. Arabian minorities can also be found more or less in the provinces of Fars, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Khorasan, Bushehr and Hormozgan, and the Iranian Islands of the Persian Gulf. Divergent attempts of the Arabian ethnicity are also quite evident in the history of Iran, the most noteworthy of which include the independence movement by Sheikh Khaz'al during the reign of Reza Shah, which was ultimately suppressed. Certain divergent attempts by Arabian minorities were also undertaken following the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran.

Baloch

The Baloch minority predominantly reside in the Sistan and Baluchestan Province and are primarily Sunni Muslims. The chief factors effectuating political divergence among the Baloch minority include religious gaps, economic recessions in Balochi regions, and geographical adjacency with Baloch populations in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Several divergent movements were led by the Baloch minority in Iran, the most conspicuous of which were: local rebellions by different Baloch tribes from 1931 to 1934; rise of the Baluchestan Democratic Party in 1975; establishment of the Democratic Organization of the People of Baluchestan at the order of Rahmat Hosseinpour in 1979; establishment of the Political-Cultural Center of the People of Baluchestan among the academic society of the city of Zahedan in 1989; the Rigi insurgency in 2005; and attempts by the Sunni militant organization Harkat Ansar Iran from 2007-2008 (Akhbari et al. 2019).

Turkmen

The Iranian Turkmen live mainly in the Eastern regions of the Caspian sea known as the Turkmen Sahra as well as in the vicinity of the Atrek and Gorganrud rivers. The Turkmen population is primarily distributed in the northern regions of Golestan Province as well as small sectors of Razavi and Northern Khorasan provinces. Major Turkmen cities in Iran include Bandar Torkaman, Gonbad Kavus, Kalaleh, Aq Qala, Gomishan, Maraveh Tappeh, Simin Shahr, and Incheboron. Divergent activities by the Turkmen occurred between 1979 to 1980, following the Islamic Revolution (AmirAhmadi 1998).

In addition to different ethnic groups, Iran also enjoys a variety of languages including Gilaki, Luri, Talysh, Laki, etc. as well as a broad range of religions including Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and the accompanied sects. The most significant demographic gap in Iran is observed among different ethnicities, with linguistic and religious diversities considered less salient. From a linguistic viewpoint, despite the presence of numerous languages and dialects in the geographical regions of Iran, the Persian language, without any attempts at political interventions, has maintained its role as the official language of the Iranians throughout history. A similar condition is also observed in terms of religions, wherein the Shia comprise the majority (more than 98%) of the Iranian population, thereby preventing religious divergence.

The Political organization of space

With a territorial span of 1,648,195 km² and an overall population of approximately 83 million, Iran is considered a relatively large country according to global standards. The country currently comprises 31 provinces, with administrative subdivisions including cities, districts, rural districts, villages, and small settlements. The extensive spatial stretch of the country in conjunction with other natural and man-made features including climatic diversity, demographic variations, and a myriad of ethnic groups and their accompanying cultures and religions, are all contrary to a unitary political system. And so, the question of precisely what type of government is most suitable for the political organization of space in Iran based on the given conditions continues to pose as a matter of great controversy among experts of this field (Ahmadi et al. 2015). Nevertheless, the majority of experts believe

that a modified version of the current unitary-extensive political system would be more acceptable. The geopolitical and strategic position of Iran as well as its historic outlook on independence of ethnic groups and the unbalanced distribution of energy sources throughout the country are among the prime reasons why the current government has abnegated the substitution of the current system with a less unitary feudalistic political system.

The unitary-extensive political system in Iran is based on two fundamental factors of history and structure. The underlying historical components stem from both domestic (ethnic diversity and underdeveloped culture and politics) and foreign (influence of major world powers in the Middle East and foreign stimulus from ethnic groups in neighboring countries towards independence) ingredients of the newfangled modern government following the constitutional revolution, as the result of which both Pahlavi administrations were compelled to establish an unitary political system. The structural components behind the formation of a unitary-extensive political system in Iran are two-fold: authoritarianism and rentier states (governments). The authoritarian political culture, primarily found in Eastern countries, refers to the political subjugation of civilians, which thereby prevents political decentralization. Moreover, the rise of a rentier state in Iran, as an outcome of the sale of petroleum and gas, is among other major contributors to the sustainability of a unitary-extensive political system in Iran.

This being said, the unitary political system in the Islamic Republic of Iran has not always remained stable, but has rather undergone 5 separate periods of different policies:

Ideological (1977-1987)

The political organization of space during this period was highly influenced by ideological policies introduced in the first years following the Islamic Revolution, the basis of which relied first and foremost on Ommahism. The disavowal of geographic borders and an emphasis on an Islamic Ommah (the collective community of Islamic people), albeit in appearance contradictory to the unitary-extensive political system, was employed by the Islamic Republic of Iran as an approach to foreign politics, expressly pertinent to Middle Eastern countries including Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq as well as debilitated countries of Africa. On the domestic side, however, virtually no attempts were made in pursuit of combining policies of administrative divisions with notions of Ommahism. As a matter of fact, spatial centralization was further intensified through the charismatic persona

of Ayatollah Khomeini in the midst of the populism atmosphere following the Islamic revolution. Political centralization in this period was primarily justified in terms of ideological considerations, thus classified as the period of ideological policies.

Urban Welfare (1987-1997)

The end of the 8-year Iran-Iraq war in tandem with the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1987 commenced a new age of policies in the political organization of space. This decade was above all characterized by the prevalence of policies for social and economic welfare as opposed to the policies of global seclusion in the previous decade. One of the leading figures of this decade was Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani who rose to power with the slogan of Compromise and Economic Welfare and succeeded in not only restoring the majority of damages caused by the Iran-Iraq war, but also introduced new policies for the political organization of space. The clientelist policies of this period promoted the central regions of the country to a superior standing compared to the marginal regions. The aftermath of this central-marginal gap was quite deleterious to the administrative divisions of the country. The irregular emigration of inhabitants from underdeveloped regions to more industrialized areas, particularly larger cities, led to an increase in the vulnerability of the underdeveloped sectors of the country, most notably in the Sistan and Baluchestan and South Khorasan provinces. Conditions were further intensified by the erratic growth of major cities such as Tehran and Esfahan, which caused a state of indifference towards smaller locations, even discarding them from the administrative division system. The most conspicuous impact of the clientelist policy employed by the Hashemi Rafsanjani administration in terms of administrative divisions was the escalation of political centralization and the emergence of new spatial units known as metropolitans (Hosseini 2013).

Decentralization (1997-2005)

The administration of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami for political development and reform was the first instance of decentralized policies in modern Iran (Bashiriyeh 2018). Disavowing the clientelist and centralized policies of Hashemi Rafsanjani, the Khatami administration proceeded to implement serious reforms in the administrative divisions of the country. The most notable, yet short-term consequences of this period include

the approval and implementation of the law of councils, the proliferation of larger provinces with the aim of engaging the public in policy-making and negating the clientelist policies, and changes to the rules and regulations of municipalities with the objective of granting them a status of independence against governments. Existing structural barriers, however, such as authoritarianism and reticent states evolving from the sale of petroleum rendered the outcomes of this period temporary.

Justice (2005-2013)

The Ahmadi Nezhad administration, inaugurated in 2005, also took to Khatami's slogans against clientelism of the Rafsanjani administration apropos administrative divisions (in the 90s). However, unlike Khatami's approach to substitute political centralization with decentralization, the Ahmadi Nezhad administration had ulterior economic motives for propounding political centralization, particularly in order to relieve those fractions of society, which due to the Rafsanjani clientalist policies, were marginalized. Put differently, the slogan of justice set forth by the Ahmadi Nezhad administration were not in fact directed towards political development but rather to the alleviation of the gap between the affluent and the impoverished (Ghanbari 2014).

The core principles of political organization of space in this period were primarily directed towards promoting smaller regions as opposed to major cities and metropolitans. Governmental proceedings in this period engendered significant changes in the status of smaller administrative divisions, bringing vivacity to these regions for the first time as parts of the administrative divisions of the country.

Moderation (2013 onwards)

The Rouhani administration was inaugurated in 2013, with reformist stances quite similar to those of the Khatami administration. Albeit, 6 years have thus far passed and the government does not appear to have any specific policies as regards the political organization of space. The government, with its lack of a defined political discourse, has worked towards implementing a cross-cut between both reformist and principlist (conservatives) ideologies as concerns administrative divisions. By this token, the government has not only maintained the fundamental and legal changes proposed by the Ahmadi Nezhad administration regarding political organization of space

but has, in practicality, also focused on political and cultural objectives involving metropolitans. Currently faced with a financial crisis, the Rouhani administration also seems to lack a specific plan in other regards, most notably the political organization of space.

Overall, policies of the Islamic Republic apropos of the political organization of space have somewhat varied throughout different periods. The common denominator, however, for all periods (with the exception of the third period) has been the intensification of political centralization. Nevertheless, a new era of political organization of space appears to be emerging in the virtual world, especially by the dint of social media. Presently, a large portion of civil resistance against the government is taking place in the virtual space. One can conclude that given recent changes brought on by the expansion of the virtual world, spatial centralization is metamorphosing into spatial congestion. The virtual world has compressed the space while users of social media are constantly discussing and refuting political centralization.

Geo-economical and geopolitical status

Iran, from the standpoint of geo-economics and geopolitics, stands out as a relatively powerful country in Asia. The geographical superiority of the country, i.e. its strategic position at the communication pathways between Europe, Asia, and Africa, as well as at the global North-South energy resources communication line and its placement amidst three highly sensitive regions of Western Asia (Middle East), Central Asia, and the Caucasus; access to international waters due to possession of half of the rights to the Persian Gulf; authority over the Strait of Hormuz, as a main energy transport line from the Persian Gulf; the sphere of influence in matters of cultures in the Islamic world, particularly in Shia regions, and ownership of large-scale gas and petroleum resources are among the factors contributing to the geopolitical superiority of Iran among other regions of Western Asia (the Middle East) (Coskun 2009).

Iran is recognized as the geopolitical focal point of Western Asia (the Middle East), which in turn grants it a certain influential role in the region. Up until the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the geopolitical centrality of Iran was predominantly directed towards matters of economics and security. The Pahlavi dynasty, through collaborations with Western governments, had arisen as the economic hub of the region with trans-regional influence. Security-wise, Iran was also acknowledged as the prime gendarme and authoritative figure of the region in terms of politics (Cronin 1997). With

the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the egress of the Islamic Republic from the Western geopolitical network, Saudi Arabia rose as the new geopolitical center of the region in terms of economics and security, while Iran focused on extending its geopolitical centrality under the guidance of culture and ideological tendencies. Stated differently, the religious role played by Saudi Arabia prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution had thenceforth been delegated to Iran. One of the most salient geopolitical networks, in which Iran now holds centrality, is the Shia Resistance network. Within this Shia geopolitical network comprising Iran, Iraq, Bahrein, Lebanon, and Syria, Iran has emerged as the moral and political leader of the Shia, which has been, not in the least, due to the strategic position of the country. By virtue of Shia teachings such as the disavowal of secularism and arrogance, Iran has afforded itself a certain Shia political identity as opposed to the Sunni geopolitical network led by Saudi Arabia. Shia geopolitics is the nomenclature used in recent years by certain authors to refer to the status of the Shia network (Nasr 2006).

The superior centrality of Iran within the resistance geopolitical network, comprising Iran, Syria, Iraq, and the Hezbollah (party of god) of Lebanon, Hamas and Ansarollah of Yemen, has further added to its significance within the region. Pursuant to this centrality, Iran has been able to pilot and control the political crisis in Iraq subsequent to the downfall of the Ba's party and manage domestic tensions within Syria and Yemen quite effectively (Zweiri 2016).

Iran also plays a major role so far as geo-economics are concerned. With an allotment of over 10% of the world's oil resources, the country is amongst the major producers of petroleum in the greater Persian Gulf area as well as the holder of the second largest gas resource in the world after Russia (Sarmadi-Rad 2005; Mohammadi 2010). Being located in the Rimland region and Strategic Energy Ellipse, considered the connecting loop between major global energy resources, i.e. the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, has transformed Iran into the main focal point of energy for both Eastern and Western countries. Eastern countries, particularly China, comprising the largest energy market for Iran, consider Iran as not only a major source of petroleum and gas, but also as one of the most salient trajectories of energy sources in Central Asia. This transient state has also granted the country the opportunity to transfer energy resources from the Persian Gulf zone to countries in Southern and Central Asia. The Iran-Pakistan pipeline, also known as the Peace pipeline, is a case in point regarding the transfer of energy between Iran and South Asian countries (Cohen et al. 2008).

Nevertheless, the geopolitical and geo-economic superiority of Iran has also brought with it certain threats. The impact of major countries on the

Middle East during the colonialist era, primarily justified through the theories of Mackinder and Spykman, had transformed Iran into a crisis nexus. In addition, the competitive nature of major countries over rich sources of oil and gas in the Persian Gulf region ensued further obstacles to the development of countries within this region, especially Iran. Following the colonialist era and alongside spread and broadening of threats, the authority of Iran over the region was further intensified, to the extent that the country, through distinct policies towards other neighboring countries, had become a major competitor to other power figures, particularly the United States of America (Pletka 2014). The USA, quite aware of the geopolitical and geo-economical superiority of Iran within the region, sought and still seeks to subjugate Iran to its own policies regarding the Middle East, through the deployment of sanctions and embargos. Economic sanctions of the US against Iran have entailed irreparable damages to the economy of Iran, albeit the resistive approach employed by Iran continues.

Conclusion

Premodern Iran was predominantly characterized by spatial dispersion apropos of political geography. The political span of Iran tended to expand during both the pre-Islamization phase (ancient empires) and post-Islamization, when the country had become part of the Arabian Caliphate. The political organization of the space during that era was not that of a centralized and unitary government but more of a semi-federal system. With the advent of the modern age, the political geography of the country underwent tremendous changes, the result of which was the substitution of the previous spatially dispersed states for a unitary government. The requirements of an advanced government during the modern age in establishing national integrity and government's attempts to rely on oil resources in order to separate itself from the population, in conjunction with the continuance of political authoritarianism were among the prime motivators behind the institutionalization of political centrality. Policies regarding the administrative divisions of the country during different periods were also primarily directed towards solidifying the already present unitary government. The existence of different ethnic groups and the accompanying threats of independence and separation, the strategic location of Iran, the threats posed by major world powers, and the unjustified distribution of wealth in different geographical regions were all among the reasons why the government continued to play along with the idea of a unitary government. Nevertheless, the advent and

expansion of the virtual world, particularly social media, hints at the potential emergence of a new age of political organization of space in Iran—a post-modern age, wherein civil groups are enabled to challenge the policies of a unitary government through tools provided by social media and in a way form a new type of bottom-up resistance against extreme political centralization, all within the safe realms of the virtual world.

On a regional scale, the geopolitical and geo-economical capacities of the country have granted Iran a state of superiority and increased its overall influence in the world. The geopolitical codes implemented in Iran are presently of an ideological nature, which contra to the economic atmosphere prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, have in a certain way generated a sense of authority. By virtue of a new geopolitical network in the region, Iran has emerged as the prime political figure in the area, to the extent that it now calls into question the authority of even major world powers.

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ABSTRACT

With a territorial span of nearly 1,648,195 km² and a population circa 87 million, Iran, also called Persia, has long chanced upon the ebbs and flows of political history and is within the ranks of countries fit for scrutinization and studies apropos of political geography and geopolitics. From the premodern era up to the modern age, Iran has been the subject of revolutionary changes in the inception and genesis of social-political systems and political organization of space. The geographical placement of Iran and the manner of its lodgment on earth has granted it a somewhat peculiar quality in terms of geopolitical and geostrategic significance: Iran is located within the Middle East, but is historically rooted to Central Asia and Caucasus, with shared past narratives with Southern Asia and India. On the other hand, Iran is connected to Europe through Turkey and with a share of more than 50% of the strategic water reserves of the Persian Gulf has access to international waters. In this light, it is quite conspicuous how Iran is located in a very fragile and sensitive location as concerns political geography and geopolitics. Iran is also quite unique in terms of domestic geography in that it possesses both a considerable number of geomorphological and topographic units as well as a myriad of cultural and social geographies, each of which are, in a certain way, connected to histories and regions beyond its political borders. The political geography of Iran has also been highly influenced, both negatively and positively, by the continuance of abundant sources of petroleum and gas energy in conjunction with certain underground mines. These rather exceptional features within and outside the borders of the country have engendered a multitude of phenomena relating to political geography as well as the numerous supplemented geopolitical occurrences. Such issues lend weight to the study of the political geography and geopolitics of Iran so as to better comprehend the nation and the country.

KEYWORDS

Iran, Political geography, Geopolitics, Geo-economics, Political organization of the space

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