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The Mideast Axis of Destabilization

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“[T]he only vital and effective axis in the region is that between Tehran and Damascus. They are the two capitals which enjoy a degree of strength and a measure of independence that allows them to remain unaffected by direct political pressure.” *Hizballah Voice of the Oppressed (radio station), 27 April 1991.*

The “Axis of Destabilization” in the Middle East

The Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas alliance has acted during the last 15 years as an “axis of destabilization” in the Middle East, achieving major strategic victories at the expense of moderate Arab states, and US, European, and Israeli interests.

The Damascus regime, weakened by the withdrawal of its army from Lebanon and international pressure after the assassination of Rafik Hariri, still maintains a firm grip on the Sunni majority population at home, plays a strong hand in Lebanon, and supports radical Palestinian groups.

With Syrian support, Hizballah (Tehran’s closest ally) has become a state-within-a-state potentially able to become Lebanon’s arbiter if not actual ruler. Syria is actively involved in the destabilization of the Palestinian arena and has a growing role in supporting the Shi’a anti-American forces in Iraq. Iran also flexes its muscle in the Iraq arena, as most of Iraq’s territory and major oil resources are controlled by Shi’a movements with historic and ideological links to the Tehran regime.

The "Axis" significantly influences Israel's relations with its neighbors. The inconclusive results of the Second Lebanon War of July-August 2006 and the continuous bombing of Israeli cities and villages from Gaza have diminished Israel’s deterrence versus Hizballah, Hamas, Iran and Syria. Similarly, the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, despite the Annapolis gathering, is essentially paralyzed. Hamas is in control of the Gaza Strip, threatens the Fatah-controlled West Bank, and is able to derail any negotiation in the peace process by terrorist attacks.

An Unnatural Alliance: What Makes it Work?

The alliance should hardly function due to Sunni-Shi'a historical rivalries:

1. Iran's Shi'a theocratic regime allied with Syria's Baathist secular "socialist" regime, a country where some 80 percent of the population is Sunni.
2. Syria's Baathist secular regime cooperated with a Shi'a radical Islamist movement, Hizballah, while the natural ally of Syria in Lebanon is the Shi'a Amal secular organization.
3. The Palestinian Hamas, a branch of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is allied with Iran's Shi'a theocratic regime.
4. The Palestinian Hamas is allied with Syria's Baathist secular regime, which killed some 20,000 Syrian MB members in 1982.
5. The Sunni Palestinian Hamas cooperated with the Shi'a Hizballah (in the Palestinian Authority and in Lebanon, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians live) while in Iraq the Sunni and Shi'a radicals fight each other ferociously.

This alliance works because of the strong religious ideologies that shape the strategy of three of the actors: Iran, Hizballah and Hamas. The Tehran regime, based on the revolutionary doctrine of Ayatollah Khomeini, has implemented its creed through an aggressive strategy after silencing all internal dissent. The apocalyptic overtone of Mahdism in its leadership circles makes this ideology even more dangerous. Hizballah, as proven by its covenant and the open declarations and deeds of its leaders, closely follows the religious ideology and the strategy of export of the Khomeini revolution. Hamas, as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest Sunni Islamist movement, sees *jihad* as a general duty of all Muslims and is the only MB group involved in systematic warfare against Israel and "world Zionism." Different from the other three, Syria is still driven by Pan-Arabism and the concept of Greater Syria.

The alliance has a strong determined leader: Iran. The country serves as the conductor of the "quartet." Iran, a major regional power, has a leadership with a regional hegemonic vision, a huge oil resource, a large army, and an advanced military industry. Most importantly, Iran is to acquire a nuclear arsenal.

The alliance has succeeded in obtaining most of its objectives because its members have no moral constraints in using terrorism and subversion against their adversaries, challenging the same major enemies: the United States as a global and regional power but also as epitome of Western liberal values; Europe as a democratic bloc; Israel; and Iraq until Saddam Hussein's removal from power. At the same time they have displayed tactical pragmatism and skills of manipulating leaders of great powers and heads of international organizations.

The US, Europe and Israel Didn't Challenge the Alliance

However, the victories of this alliance are not only the result of the robust and durable cooperation between its four members, but also in great measure the consequence of the US, European and Israeli leaderships' lack of strategic vision and political courage.

The United States and France (the major European country challenged by the axis) did not inflict any serious damage on Iran and its operational arm Hizballah, for the long series of terrorist attacks against their citizens, soldiers and interests. Nor has Syria paid a real price for the direct and indirect support to Iranian and Hizballah anti-Western terrorism. Not only has Iran not suffered any consequences for 20 years of lying about its nuclear program, but the West is still willing to offer ever-greater incentives, strengthening Iran's leaders' sense of self-confidence that they can achieve nuclear military capability.

The West has forced Bashar al-Asad to withdraw the Syrian army from Lebanon, but it has stopped short of endangering his regime at home or curtailing his influence in Lebanon. The continuous political killings there are designed to intimidate those working courageously to end Syria's interference in Lebanon's internal affairs.

Since 1982, Israel has permitted Syria to support Hizballah attacks and Palestinian proxy against its territory. Israeli leaders did not have the courage to challenge Damascus. Even during the July-August 2006 War, when Hamas leader Khaled Mashal was running the kidnapping of the Israeli soldier from Damascus and Syria continued to provide heavy military hardware and ammunition to Hizballah, the Israeli government sent the message that it had no intention to bother Syria.

By giving Hizballah the credit for the Israeli disgraceful withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, by permitting its consolidation as a state-within-a-state and the building of a small modern guerrilla-army, the various Israeli governments have preferred tactical political gains at home to real strategic long-term interests. In the 2006 war in Lebanon, Israel paid a high price not only in human lives and material damage, but also in its regional standing and its deterrent power versus its enemies.

The Israeli leadership also failed to recognize the real long-term goals of Yasser Arafat when signing the Oslo agreements and did not challenge his double game, which led to the violent Second Intifada.

Moreover, the United States and the West permitted Hamas, a terrorist organization committed to the destruction of the Jewish state, to take over the government in the Palestinian Authority through democratic elections.

The Threat of a Nuclear Iran

The dangerous destabilizing effect of the Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas alliance on the Middle East and beyond and the leadership role of the Tehran regime in this coalition place the prevention of the Iranian nuclear military program as first priority for the international community.

The US, the international community and Israel face a daunting challenge: how to prevent a nuclear Iran. After 20 years of futile diplomatic dialogue and a year of mild international sanctions, three options remain: severe economic sanctions, military operation against the Iranian nuclear facilities, or *laissez faire* tactics that allow the Iranians to achieve their goal and devise a deterrent strategy for the future.

As a global power, the Bush Administration needs to find a grand strategic compromise with Russia to display a common front against Iran and thus considerably enhance the success of the sanctions. Russia could have a crucial role in convincing the ayatollahs of the seriousness of their situation. Russia has redefined the limits of its nuclear cooperation with Iran: it has halted Russian work on the construction of the Bushehr nuclear reactor and is procrastinating in transferring the nuclear fuel required for its activation. However, in light of the growing tension between the US and Russia on important strategic issues, such as the building of the missile defense system in Poland and the radar station in the Czech Republic or the expansion of NATO into the old Eastern Bloc on Russia's western border, President Putin is less willing to cooperate on the Iranian file.

There is the possibility to isolate Tehran by breaking the alliance with Syria, which is key in isolating and disarming Hizballah and reducing the influence of radical Palestinians on the peace process with Israel. Israel cannot defeat Hizballah if it does not occupy most of Lebanon, which it is reluctant to do. Therefore, the best way to change the equation in Lebanon is to challenge Syria. The carrots the European leaders proposed President Bashar al-Asad have not convinced him to join the moderate Arab camp. These incentives should perhaps be improved, but the stick should be waved higher. Currently, there is no reasonable hope that negotiations or economic sanctions can turn Tehran's rulers away from the dream of great-power status and Islamic revolution.

Iran and the Alliances' Retaliation Capabilities

In the case of a US or Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities, Iran and the alliance can retaliate in force. Iran could stage an immediate missile counterattack on Israel and on US bases in the Persian Gulf with its 500 Shihab ballistic missiles, with ranges varying from 300 to 2,000 kilometers and capable of carrying warheads of up to 1,000 kg.

Iran can also retaliate against energy targets in the Gulf and the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz. Ayatollah Khamenei warned the US that "if the Americans make a wrong move toward Iran, the shipment of energy will definitely be in danger, and the

Americans will not be able to protect energy supplies in the region.” Consequently, oil prices would increase dramatically.

One of the strongest cards against the United States is Iran’s capacity for wreaking havoc in Iraq and provoking a confrontation between US troops and the Shi’a majority. Tehran has already activated this option; currently it is on a low burner. The regime is also preparing an army of suicide bombers to be sent to Iraq, on the model of the Basij suicide soldiers used in the Iraq-Iran war.

Hizballah will be the main tool to attack Israeli territory with rockets and guerrilla commandos. Iran and Syria have rearmed the organization and Nasrallah boasted that Hizballah has 20,000 rockets. Iran can target Israeli and Jewish targets abroad, as it did in 1992 and 1994 in Buenos Aires. As for the Palestinians, Khaled Mashal declared that "if Israel attacks Iran, then Hamas will widen and increase its confrontation of Israelis inside Palestine."

A US or Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear sites could enhance the appeal of extremism in the Muslim world, at the expense of the moderates. It would be perceived by Muslims worldwide as another assault on Islam, as was the case in Iraq and in Lebanon. The promised retaliation by Iran must be taken very seriously.

A Nuclear Iran?

There is also no doubt that a nuclear Iran would provoke nuclear proliferation throughout the Middle East, as already hinted at by Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

A recent collective study by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy investigating the challenges posed by deterring a nuclear Iran in the case diplomacy might not succeed suggests that deterring Iran might prove much more difficult than deterring Russia during the Cold War, because of the nature of the regime in Tehran, the regional security environment, and the challenges of coalition formation. Moreover, Iran’s nuclear weapons could be controlled by some of the most radical elements in the regime and some of these weapons might find their way into the hands of terrorists.

A nuclear Iran will strengthen the radicalization/Islamization process. In Iraq, at least in Shi’a-controlled areas, the potential for radicalization/Islamization could quickly materialize and result in a more bloody sectarian war involving neighboring Sunni countries. This could be a major step in the formation of the dreaded Shi’a Crescent. In Lebanon, Hizballah would have an influence on accelerating a more radical population. The process of radicalization/Islamization in Palestine, which begun by the takeover of Gaza by Hamas, would also be accelerated, with immediate influence on the Muslim Brotherhood and other radical Islamist groups in Egypt and Jordan and even the Islamist movement in Israel.

A nuclear Iran, with Hizballah and Iraqi Shi'a radicals' support, could open a new front in the Gulf countries by inciting the Shi'as who live in the oil rich provinces in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, the UAE and Yemen, to revolt against their governments.

Similarly, a nuclear Tehran would be tempted to spread its revolutionary message towards the Muslim republics in Central Asia and in Turkey.

There is No Happy End in Sight!

President Bush said that the international community must keep pressuring Iran to give up its nuclear weapons program. To this end, the US is working with allies to send a consistent message to the Iranians. Bush has not ruled out the possible use of force against Iran, but believes it is still possible to resolve the dispute diplomatically. This is true even after the release of the recent US National Intelligence Estimate.

Israel's air raid on Syria on September 6, 2007 has broken the immunity of the Damascus regime without provoking a European or Arab outcry. Israel should decide on a more forceful Syrian strategy, based on the Turkish example of 1998 (and 2007), and seek US and European support for it. Israel's air raid also proved that if a country does act against a clear and present danger, the Muslim world will not erupt. Moreover, Iranian aspirations should be viewed in proper proportion. Iran is not an international superpower and it has its own domestic, economic and military vulnerabilities.

If the military option is the last resort, it is imperative to dissuade the Tehran regime from retaliation. Ex-French President Jacques Chirac gave the example when he said that France was prepared to launch a nuclear strike against any country that sponsors a terrorist attack against French interests. "The leaders of states who would use terrorist means against us, as well as those who would envision using . . . weapons of mass destruction, must understand that they would lay themselves open to a firm and fitting response on our part."

The US, the European Union and Israel have the duty to protect their citizens and interests, as well as those of their allies in the Middle East. They must stand firm against the "axis of destabilization" and the apocalyptic plans of the radicals in Tehran.

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