

IRAN—SYRIA—HIZBALLAH—HAMAS
A COALITION AGAINST NATURE
WHY DOES IT WORK?

The Proteus Monograph Series

Volume 1, Issue 5
May 2008

Proteus USA

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by

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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 1991.¹

Introduction

In his 2007 annual review of global threats, the Director of National Intelligence, John Negroponte, highlighted an increasingly worrisome assessment of Hizballah—backed by Iran and Syria. He warned that Iran was using terrorist operations abroad as a key element of its national security strategy and that at the center of Iran’s terrorism strategy was Lebanese Hizballah.

To this “old” alliance one must add a newcomer, the Palestinian movement Hamas, an actor who, for years, has been derailing the fragile peace process between Israel and the Palestinians through the use of indiscriminate terrorism; an actor whose success in taking control of the Palestinian Authority could bring an end to any hope of solution to this central conflict.

Strangely, this is an alliance against nature that should hardly function:

- Iran’s Shia theocratic regime allied with Syria’s Ba’athist secular “socialist” regime, a country where some 80% of the population is Sunni
- Syria’s Ba’athist secular regime cooperating with a Shia radical Islamist movement, Hizballah, while the natural ally of Syria in Lebanon is the Shia Amal secular organization
- The Palestinian Hamas, a branch of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood (MB) allied with Iran’s Shia theocratic regime
- The Palestinian Hamas, a branch of the Sunni MB allied with Syria’s Ba’athist secular regime, which killed some 20,000 Syrian MB members in 1982

2 IRAN–SYRIA–HIZBALLAH–HAMAS: A COALITION AGAINST NATURE

- The Sunni Palestinian Hamas cooperating with the Shia Hizballah (in the Palestinian Authority and in Lebanon, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians live) while in Iraq the Sunni and Shia radicals fight each other ferociously

The Middle East finds itself these days in a very complex and dangerous situation, a situation that could lead to a major strategic upheaval of historic dimension if the Western democratic countries are not able to surmount their weaknesses, disunity, and indecision.

If indeed, as it looks for now, Iran's rogue regime will achieve a nuclear umbrella, its regional hegemonic ambitions could aggravate the already volatile situation in the Middle East. It seems that the expectation of Iran's allies that it will soon achieve a nuclear capability is the main source of its present and future power projection in the region, while U.S. military power is offset by the daily media image of the Iraqi insurgency, partly fueled by Iran itself.

Paradoxically, the achievements of the Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas alliance have become more visible and threatening since the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. While the overthrowing of the Taliban regime was intended to destroy an Islamist fanatical regime and the al-Qaeda hardcore leadership and infrastructure it harbored, and the eradication of Saddam Hussein's regime was expected to remove the threat of a rogue nuclear actor, it was also intended to isolate the Tehran regime.

The initial failure of the stabilizing political process in Iraq, after a brilliant U.S. military victory, permitted Iran to turn the tables on the Bush administration.

The government of Iraq, most of its territory, and the majority of its oil resources are controlled by Shia movements with historic and ideological links to the Tehran regime. Iran can also rely on the forces of Moqtada al-Sadr and rogue splinter groups to open new fronts against U.S. and coalition forces in case of need.

Syria has been indeed weakened by the withdrawal of its army from Lebanon and the international pressure after the assassination of Rafik Hariri, but the Damascus regime maintains a strong grip on its Sunni majority population at home, still has strong cards in Lebanon, and continues to arm Hizballah and to host and support all the radical Palestinian groups opposed to the peace process. Syria continues to give some freedom of action

to Ba'athist and Islamist insurgents in Iraq, although in a more covert and discreet manner.

Hizballah, Tehran's closest ally, has become, with Syrian support, a state-within-the-state in Lebanon, potentially able to become the country's arbiter if not actual ruler. It is actively involved in the destabilization of the Palestinian arena and has a growing role in supporting the Shia anti-American forces in Iraq to destabilize that country.

The peace process between Israel and the Palestinians is practically paralyzed, in great part due to the active support given by Iran, Syria, and Hizballah to Hamas and other radical Palestinian factions. Hamas controls the Gaza Strip, threatens the Fatah-controlled West Bank, and is able to derail any negotiating peace process by using terrorist attacks.

The inconclusive results of the Second Lebanon War of July-August 2006, the Hamas military coup in Gaza, and the continual bombing of Israeli cities and villages has diminished Israel's deterrence versus the terrorist organizations, Iran, and Syria.

It should be noted that this Shia dominated coalition has succeeded in attracting important Sunni elements, like Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and thus influence other radical Sunni groups throughout the Middle East.

On the negative side of the axis' balance, it should be mentioned that the threat of the Shia Crescent has hastened the attempts to build a moderate Sunni counter-alliance, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf countries, that could possibly include Israel as a quiet partner. It has also produced the growing opposition of the international community to Iran's nuclear project and its hegemonic ambitions.

The regime sees itself as the spearhead of global transformation, as Ahmadinejad put it: "Thanks to the blood of the martyrs, a new Islamic revolution has arisen....The wave of the Islamic revolution will soon reach the entire world....The Iranian people...[can] quickly become an invincible global power...as soon as it achieves advanced technologies."²

What makes this strange unnatural alliance work is foremost 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 crushing all internal dissension and in spite of the bloody war with Iraq. The apocalyptic overtone of Mahdism in some of the leadership circles makes this ideology even more dangerous.

Hizballah, as proved by its covenant and the open and persistent declarations and deeds of its leaders, follows closely the religious ideology and the strategy of export of the Khomeinist 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.”

Pan-Arabism and the Greater Syria concept continue to play an important role in Syria’s policy, although today they mainly serve the interests of the minority Alawi regime in Damascus.

The alliance has a strong, determined leader: Iran is the engine that drags the three minor members, the conductor of the “quartet.” Iran is a major regional power with a decided leadership, a regional hegemonic vision, huge oil resources, a large army, and an advanced military industry, and it is on the verge of becoming the ninth nuclear power in the world.

The axis has succeeded in obtaining a great part of its objectives because the four players have no moral constraints in using terrorism and subversion against their external adversaries while they maintain their power at home through a ruthless authoritarian regime, in the case of Iran and Syria, or a cohesive and efficient ideological leadership, in the case of Hizballah and Hamas.

At the same time they have developed the skills of tactical pragmatism and covert action at its utmost, manipulating for more than twenty five years leaders of great powers and letting their adversaries tangle in futile political dialogues and expectations of moderation.

A major cohesive element was the fact that they challenged the same major enemies: the United States as a global and regional power but also as the epitome of Western liberal values; Europe as a democratic bloc; Israel and the Jews; and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, until his removal from power.

However, the series of victories of this alliance during the last three decades is not only the result of the robust relationships and durable cooperation

between its four members, but it is, in great measure, the consequence of the U.S., 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 to Iran and its operational arm, Hizballah, for the long series of terrorist attacks against their citizens, soldiers, and interests. Neither has Syria paid a real price for the direct and indirect support to Iranian and Hizballah anti-Western terrorism. Not only has Iran paid no price for twenty years of lying about its nuclear program, but the West is still willing to offer ever-greater incentives, strengthening the Iranian 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.

Since 1982, Israel has permitted Syria to support continual Hizballah attacks from the north and Palestinian proxies' attacks in the heart of its territory. Israeli leaders, who accused Syria during these years as responsible for the terrorist campaigns against the Jewish state, did not have the courage to challenge Damascus. Even during the July-August 2006 war, when Hamas leader Khaled Meshal 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 has no intention to bother Syria.

By giving Hizballah the credit for the disgraceful Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, by permitting its consolidation as a state-within-the-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 last war in Lebanon, Israel has paid a high price not only in human lives and material damage but in its regional standing and its deterrent power versus its enemies.

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

The dangerous destabilizing effect of the Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas alliance on the Middle East and beyond, and the leadership role the Tehran regime plays in influencing the policy of this coalition according to its own strategic interests, places the prevention of the Iranian nuclear military program as first priority for the international community.

The United States, the international community, and Israel face a daunting decision: how to prevent it from happening. After twenty years of futile diplomatic dialogue and a year of mild international sanctions, three options remain: severe economic sanctions, a military operation against the Iranian nuclear facilities, or a *laissez faire* attitude that allows the Iranians to achieve their goal while devising an efficient deterrent strategy for the future.

President Bush said recently that the international community must keep the pressure on Iran to give up its nuclear weapons program. To this end, the United States is working with allies to send a consistent message to the Iranians. At the same time, he did not rule out the possible use of force against Iran, but he believes it is still possible to resolve the dispute diplomatically.

From the British perspective, Iran is the single biggest foreign policy challenge of the next few years. If Iran were to acquire nuclear-weapons capability, a WMD arms race in the Middle East could cause irreparable damage. The newly elected French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, said that Iran represents “the most important problem on the international scene” and that the calls made by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for the destruction of Israel are the most profound threat to international peace.

A recent collective study by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, investigating the challenges posed by deterring a nuclear Iran in the case that diplomacy did not succeed, suggests that deterring Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapons program might prove much more difficult than deterrence 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 even find their way into the hands of terrorists.

The Iranian response to threats of more sanctions and hints of military action are clear and loud. Ahmadinejad said recently that “those who assume that decaying methods such as psychological war, political propaganda and the so-called economic sanctions would work and prevent Iran’s fast drive

toward progress are mistaken.” He issued a tough warning to any country considering an attack on Iran.³

In case real, painful sanctions are used to try to curb the regime’s resolve or in case of a military operation against its nuclear facilities, Iran has indeed a wide range of options for retaliation at its disposal, as openly suggested by its political and military leaders.

One possible scenario includes an immediate Iranian missile counterattack on Israel and on U.S. bases in the Persian Gulf. Iran possesses up to 500 Shihab ballistic missiles of different types, with ranges varying from 300 to 2,000 kilometers and capable of carrying warheads of up to 1,000 kilograms.

One of the strongest cards against the United States is Iran’s capacity for wreaking havoc in Iraq and provoking a confrontation between U.S. troops and the Shia majority in Iraq. This option has been already activated, on low fire for the moment, as has been amply documented by the latest data published by U.S. officials.

The Tehran regime is preparing an army of suicide bombers to be sent mainly to Iraq, on the model of the Basij suicide soldiers used in the Iraq-Iran war. “The World Islamic Organization’s Headquarters for Commemorating the Shahids” claimed that, by March 2006, 53,900 potential suicide fighters had signed up.

Iran can retaliate against energy targets in the Gulf and attack the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz. Ayatollah Khamenei warned the U.S. 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.

The Islamic Revolution’s Guards Corps (IRGC) is relying on an asymmetrical warfare strategy on the model of the tactics employed by Hizballah during the Lebanon war in 2006.

Hizballah will be the main tool to attack Israeli territory with rockets and guerrilla commandos. Iran and Syria have rearmed it with long-range missiles; Nasrallah has 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, Argentina. As for the Palestinians, Khaled Meshal declared that “if Israel attacks Iran, then Hamas will widen and increase its confrontation of Israelis inside Palestine.”

Iran could stage painful covert terrorist attacks by its intelligence agencies, the Quds Force, and IRGC assets against U.S. and Western interests. Revolutionary Guards theoretician Hassan Abassi threatened that Iran would “endanger American interests worldwide” if the U.S. were to impose sanctions on it. Ahmadinejad “advised the Europeans that [they] are the neighbors of the nations in this region...and if a storm begins [they] may get hurt.”

A U.S. or Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear sites could enhance the appeal of extremism in the Muslim world, inside and outside Iran, 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. The Middle East would undoubtedly be more dangerous and unstable, at least in the short term.

But the other crucial question is, in case Iran goes nuclear, how dangerous and unstable would the Middle East be: how much, in any case, would those who potentially are in Tehran’s and its allies’ gun-sights suffer. It is reasonable to consider that the axis would critically enhance its subversion, penetration, and domination of most of the region’s unstable arenas and conflicts.

The potential of radicalization/Islamization of Iraq, at least the Shia Iraq, could quickly materialize and result in a more bloody sectarian war involving the neighboring Sunni countries. This could be a major step in the formation of the dreaded Shia Crescent.

The process of radicalization/Islamization of Lebanon through the good offices of Hizballah would be accelerated.

The process of radicalization/Islamization of Palestine, which began by the takeover of Gaza by Hamas, would also be accelerated, with immediate influence on the strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood and other radical Islamist groups in Egypt and Jordan.

Iran, with Hizballah and Iraqi Shia radicals’ support, could open a new front in the Gulf countries by inciting the Shia majority in Bahrain and the minorities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, Oman, and the UAE, who live mostly in the oil-rich provinces, to fight actively and violently for equal rights, autonomy, or even self-determination.

Tehran would be tempted to spread its revolutionary message towards the Muslim republics in Central Asia.

The Iranians could use al-Qaeda for their own needs in the Middle East or beyond, and some al-Qaeda operatives could be impressed by nuclear Iran and agree to cooperate.

Last but not least, the hope for a change in the Iranian regime from within could wither for a long time, and those who would dare support reforms and internal dissent in Iran would think twice before challenging the long arm of the Iranian intelligence and terrorist proxies.

As it seems for now, 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.

Russia could have a crucial role in convincing the ayatollahs of the seriousness of their situation.

However, in light of the growing tension between the United States and Russia on important strategic issues, like 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 has been less willing to cooperate on the Iranian file.

The prevention of the Iranian nuclear project is a sufficient major concern for U.S. interests in the Middle East and as a global power to induce the Bush administration to find a grand strategic compromise with Russia that would permit a common front against Iran and thus considerably enhance the success of the sanctions.

There is the possibility to isolate Tehran by breaking the alliance with Syria, which is key to 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, and the only way to change the equation in Lebanon is to challenge Syria.

The carrots the European leaders proposed to President Bashar al-Asad have not convinced him to climb onto the moderate Arab bandwagon. The carrots should be perhaps improved, but the stick should be waved higher. The pressure on Syria must mount also on the background of the upcoming presidential elections and the endless series of political assassinations in Lebanon.

Israel should decide on a more forceful strategy versus Syria, on the Turkish example of 1998, and seek U.S. and European support for it. The

September 6, 2007, Israeli air raid on Syria, which was intended to hit a specific—nuclear—target, has challenged the immunity of the Damascus regime without provoking a European or Arab outcry.

The raid also showed Iran and the world that if it does act against a clear and present danger, the Muslim world will not erupt.

On December 3, 2007, a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) was released that judged “with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program.” This NIE, and particularly that key judgment, was quickly highlighted by all major media worldwide without a thorough analysis of the document, which included much contradictory information.

The NIE verified that Iran did in fact have a weapons program and that international sanctions were in fact working. The White House cited this information to show that their suspicions about Tehran’s intentions were warranted and that international sanctions should be enhanced.

Many analysts have dissected and refuted the report’s conclusion. The Director of National Intelligence, Michael McConnell, himself backed away from his agency’s assessment that Iran had halted its nuclear program, saying he wished he had written the unclassified version of the document in a different manner.⁴

Most analysts evaluated that the report would shut off any military option for the Bush administration and would even weaken international support for tougher sanctions against Iran. Yet, it soon became clear that the NIE provoked only momentary confusion; nothing substantial has taken place in order to change the course of Iran’s nuclear crisis.⁵

On March 3, 2008, after nearly eight months of negotiations, the UN Security Council finally adopted Resolution 1803, the third round of sanctions against Iran for refusing to suspend uranium enrichment and heavy-water-related projects.

The U.S. and the European nuclear powers have the duty to protect their citizens, soldiers, and interests and those of their allies in the Middle East, and they must stand firm against the “axis of destabilization” and the apocalyptic plans of the radicals in Tehran.

If the military option will be chosen as the last resort, it is imperative to dissuade the Tehran regime from retaliating as it is planning. 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.”⁶

Historical Background

Iran–Ideology and Strategy

Historically, fears and obsessive preoccupation with foreign interference, blended with impotence in the face of foreign influence, have formed the basis of Iranian nationalism. Geography; the need to secure the country's territorial integrity; competition with other empires (such as the Ottoman Empire); meddling in Iran's internal affairs by Western/Eastern powers such as Russia, Britain, and the United States; geopolitics and "an acute awareness of the weight of history" have a special place in determining Iranian foreign policy. At the same time, the perception among most Iranians that Iran has been able to overcome outside pressures has allowed for the rise of an "arrogance of nonsubmission." Ayatollah Khomeini's celebrated phrase, "America cannot do anything" is a good example of this tendency.⁷

The drive toward regional hegemony has long been a feature of Iran, an old and territorially established civilization. In the 1970s, Mohammad Reza Shah's long reign evidenced this tendency, when Iran tried to become the Gulf region's main power and the pillar of the Western security system in the Middle East.⁸

In the first systematic Islamic denunciation of the West, Ale-Ahmad concluded that the key to progress was the liberation of Iranian culture from Western domination. Another lay leftist intellectual, Ali Shari'ati, claimed that Islam was superior to both liberalism and Communism and that democracy had failed because "it was snared by a crude capitalism, in which democracy proved as much a delusion as theocracy."⁹

As an alternative to the monarchy, Ayatollah Khomeini proposed the establishment of an Islamic government based on the governance of the jurispudent. He claimed that, in order to attain the unity and freedom of the Muslim peoples, they must overthrow the oppressive governments installed by the imperialists and bring into existence an Islamic government of justice that will serve the people.¹⁰

The Khomeinist doctrine views Islam and the Iranian revolution as one; fidelity to the regime is tantamount to duty to Islam; anyone who opposes the principle of *velayat-i faqih* (rule of the religious leader) "will be taken care of by the Revolution"¹¹; an offense against the regime must be punished, whether the offender lives in Iran or abroad.¹² Attacking enemies of the

regime, Muslim or non-Muslim, is a sacred task. All these themes became explicit with Khomeini's 1989 *fatwa* (religious ruling) calling for the death of Salman Rushdie, a British writer living in Great Britain, for writing a book deemed anti-Islamic.

This Iranian outlook leads to a need to struggle against alien ideological and cultural influences, especially those coming from the West. This in turn has led Tehran to adopt *jihad* (sacred war) against what it calls the "imperialist onslaught" of the United States—the "Great Satan"—and its allies. It requires also the destruction of Israel, "the Lesser Satan," an unnatural creature of Britain and the United States implanted on sacred Arab and Muslim soil: "the state of the infidel Jews that humiliates Islam, the Qur'an, the government of Islam, and the nation of Islam."¹³

According to Ehteshami, Iran's post-1979 revolution posture has been affected by what he called "the geopolitics of Islam." Tehran's messianic Shi'ism of the early 1980s and its attempt to "export the revolution" posed a direct challenge to the regional status quo and the political integrity of Iran's Arab neighbors and caused noticeable tensions in the country's relations with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni-dominated, largely secular-led, Arab states.¹⁴

Support for a growing number of Shia and Sunni Islamist movements in the Middle East became a feature of Iranian foreign policy. Tehran has supported the Hizballah in Lebanon, the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) in Algeria, the Turabi regime in Sudan, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine, the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, the al-Nahda Party in Tunisia, and the Jihad group in Egypt. The support given to the Islamic Moro National Liberation Front movement in the Philippines in the 1980s and to the Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s are other good examples of this Iranian strategy.¹⁵

Virtually all governmental factions agree that the main goal of Iranian foreign policy is to spread its Islamic message to Muslims everywhere in the hopes they will carry out their own revolution. In this spirit, Ayatollah Khamenei once declared that "exporting the revolution is like glitter of the sun whose rays...brighten the entire world." In addition, Iranian leaders consider their country an important power with legitimate interests to defend and expand. Although strategic interests are presented as subordinated to Islamic values, these represent the nationalistic facet of the Iranian regime.¹⁶

The government's official position has been that the Iranian Revolution should serve only as a source of inspiration to its neighbors, that Iran has no intention of interfering in another country's internal affairs. But Iran's actions

have belied this claim. A revolutionary guard liberation movement charged to introduce Islamic “culture” to the rest of the world was organized as early as 1979.¹⁷ State-sponsored terrorism, both at home and abroad, has therefore been an integral element of the Islamic regime’s political arsenal from the outset.

Syria – Ideology and Strategy

“Syria’s foreign policy is rooted in both its Arab national identity and the frustration of the ambitions inherent in that identity.”¹⁸ The country is religiously heterogeneous (Sunni Muslim majority, Christian and heterodox Islamic minorities—the Alawis, Druze, and Ismailis) but overwhelmingly Arabic-speaking. Syria saw itself as the “beating heart of Arabism.” Under French rule, parts of historic Syria were detached for the creation of separate “mandates” in Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan. National identity, therefore, tended to focus on “imagined communities”—Greater Syria, Islam, and above all, the “Arab nation.” The legitimacy of the establishment of the state of Israel in Palestine by “imperialism” was not accepted, and Syria became a pivotal element in all the struggles against Israel.

Ba’athism, the movement that saw its mission as unifying the Arab states, was born in Syria and is still the official ideology of the state today; but after several disappointments with unity experiments, Syrian ruling elites came to view pan-Arab unification projects as unrealistic.¹⁹

By the late 1960s, Syrian irredentism was refocused on the struggle for Palestine, and Damascus became “the bastion of a war of liberation in Palestine and a pan-Arab revolution,” which in the end brought on the 1967 defeat and the Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights. Syrian leaders claimed therefore that the Arab national interest coincided with Syria’s particular military-security needs.²⁰

Syria’s relations with Jordan, the Palestinians, and above all, Lebanon were influenced by what it considered its special rights and responsibilities over these territories. As Patrick Seale points out, Syria perceived its struggle with Israel over the Levant as a contest between “Greater Syria” and “Greater Israel.”²¹

The United States has been perceived as the main backer of Israel, yet also conceivably as a broker for a Syrian-Israeli settlement in which Syria would recover the Golan. Damascus traditionally sought to convince Washington that its interest in Middle East stability would be served by such a settlement, as Syria could be a factor for regional stability congruent with U.S. interests;

conversely, if they were ignored, Syria would obstruct U.S. initiatives. Thus, Hafez al-Asad foiled several U.S. attempts to engineer separate peace treaties between Israel and Lebanon and Jordan that excluded Syria.²²

Hizballah – Ideology and Strategy

The foundations of Hizballah were laid before the Iranian revolution, in the ties that bound the Shia *ulama* (religious scholars) of Iran and Lebanon who schooled together in the Shia theological academies in Iraq, especially in the holy city of Najaf. During the late 1950s and 1960s, these academies became active in formulating an Islamic response to Arab nationalism and secularism.²³

Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah was a product of Najaf's mix of scholasticism and radicalism. He went to Lebanon in 1966 and opened a *husayniyah* (a center of Islamic activism) in Beirut. In the 1970s, Iraqi authorities expelled about a hundred Lebanese theology students as part of a crackdown on Shia activism in the shrine cities. They became disciples of Fadlallah and later formed the core of Hizballah.²⁴

Members of Iran's Islamic opposition who found refuge in war-torn Lebanon during the 1970s were "adopted" and provided with training by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Graduates of the Palestinian camps included Muhammad Montazeri, the son of a leading opposition cleric and future founder of the Liberation Movements Department of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards; and Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, future Iranian ambassador to Syria.²⁵

Muhammad Montazeri made the first, failed, attempt in 1979 to send six hundred Iranian volunteers to Lebanon, where they proposed to launch a jihad against Israel. An effective partnership between Lebanon's Shiites and Iran began only in 1982, following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Syria permitted Iran to send about a thousand Revolutionary Guards to the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, where they seized a Lebanese army barracks and turned it into their operational base.²⁶

The Iranian force, consisting of both military and religious instructors, recruited militants of Islamic Amal, a breakaway faction of the Amal movement, which had become more secularized under the leadership of Nabih Berri, and a number of young, militant Lebanese clerics affiliated with the Lebanese branch of al-Da'wa, a radical Iraqi Shiite fundamentalist group.²⁷ The nucleus of Hizballah's leadership embraced Khomeini's concept

of the just jurisconsult (*al-wali al-faqih*), the ideological basis for clerical rule, enshrined in Iran's 1979 constitution.²⁸

Iran's ambassador to Damascus, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, established a council to govern the new movement. The council included the Iranian ambassador, Lebanese *ulama*, and security strongmen responsible for secret operations and the movement's militia.²⁹

Hizballah formulated its doctrine in a programmatic document of February 1985, an "Open Letter" addressed to "the Downtrodden in Lebanon and in the World," which bears a strong "made-in-Tehran" coloration.³⁰ It emphasizes that the 1979 revolution in Iran served as an inspiration to action "capable, with God's help, of breaking the iron and oppression of tyrannical regimes." The leadership of Hizballah pledged loyalty to Khomeini and to the goal of establishing an Islamic state in Lebanon.³¹

The letter set four objectives for the movement: the termination of all American [and French] influence in Lebanon; Israel's complete departure from Lebanon "as a prelude to its final obliteration," submission of the Lebanese Phalangists to "just rule" and trial for their "crimes"; and granting the people "the right to choose their own system of government, keeping in mind that we do not hide our commitment to the rule of Islam."³² But, if the Lebanese choose freely, they will only choose Islam.³³

Hizballah, like Iran, regards the United States as the "Great Satan," in contrast to other Western enemy states, which are considered merely "evil." According to its Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, "the main source of evil in this world, the main source of terrorism in this world, the central threat to international peace and to the economic development of this world, the main threat to the environment of this world, the main source of...killing and turmoil, and civil wars and regional wars in this world is the United States of America."³⁴ The French were also singled out for attack, largely because of their long-standing sympathy for the Maronite community in Lebanon and for their arms sales to Iraq.

According to Sheikh Naim Qassem, Nasrallah's deputy, there is also a "cultural conflict between [Hizballah] and the West."³⁵ In light of these views, Hizballah's mission is to take an active role, both overtly and clandestinely, in a conflict that extends far beyond Lebanon. During the 1980s, the concrete expression of this worldview was a long series of terrorist acts against Western targets inside Lebanon and abroad.³⁶

For Hizballah, Israel stands out as the greatest perpetrator of crimes against the oppressed and the ‘greatest evil’ (*as-shar almutlaq*) to such an extent that they have vowed never to reconcile themselves to Israel’s existence; the ultimate objective is to destroy Israel and to liberate Palestine: “Israel’s final departure from Lebanon is a prelude to its final obliteration from existence and the liberation of venerable Jerusalem from the talons of occupation.” This explains the close operational links between Hizballah and the rejectionist Palestinian groups that have opposed the mainstream PLO’s peacemaking with Israel.³⁷

In Hizballah’s view, military, but also political and social resistance is an everyday mission and a responsibility for every Shiite. Moreover, resistance is a religious duty (*fard shar’i*). According to Hizballah, the power of resistance is that it is a righteous combat, supported by God, that inevitably leads to victory.³⁸

From the outset, Hizballah conducted its struggle on three levels: open, semi-clandestine, and clandestine. Fadlallah and the *ulama* openly preached the message of resistance to Islam’s enemies and fealty to Khomeini in mosques and *husayniyah*. The Revolutionary Guards trained the semi-clandestine Islamic Resistance, a militia-like formation that attacked Israeli forces in south Lebanon. The Organization of the Islamic Jihad, the clandestine branch of the movement, operated against Western targets. It was led by Imad Mughniyya, a shadowy Shiite figure from south Lebanon and a veteran of Palestinian service, who became famous during the 1980s.³⁹

As to the strategic weapon used by Hizballah since its inception, suicide bombings, Qassem described it in religious/philosophical terms:

It is no secret that the materialistic West, and the atheists in general, and all those who see that the power of Islam is on the rise, and that it is gaining...take a negative position and exert pressure, in order to make the believers abandon the culture of martyrdom....They know that if we competed with them according to the rules of this world, they would overcome us, because they are more materialistic than us....But if they compete with us on the issue of faith, we will overcome them, because the competitive power of faith is greater, stronger, and more influential.... They call martyrdom ‘death,’ in order to make us renounce martyrdom.... Martyrdom is valuable, sacred, respectable, and great...it is death for the sake of Allah, and in defense of what is just.⁴⁰

The Building of the Triple Alliance: Iran, Syria, Hizballah (1980–1992)

Four main regional events shaped the building of the Triple Alliance: the Iraq–Iran War (1980–1988); the first Israeli war in Lebanon (1982–1985); the end of the civil war in Lebanon and the Ta'if agreement (1989–1992); and the first Gulf War (1990–1991). Its formation was facilitated by the growing role of ideology, the “export of the Iranian Islamic revolution” viz. the Greater Syria concept, and by the similarity in the “modus operandi” of the three actors, the use of terrorism and subversion.

The Iran – Syria Alliance

Is the Middle East haunted by the spectre of an alliance “between the Lion and the Turban?” asked Ehteshami and Hinnebusch at the end of the 1990s. They claimed Syria and Iran may be the remaining centers of power challenging the U.S. “New World Order in the Middle East in the aftermath of Iraq’s defeat in the first Gulf War...insistent on maintaining their autonomy and on pursuing agendas not necessarily to the liking of the dominant Western world powers.”⁴¹

The origins of the Iran–Syria alliance have also an Iraqi Shia aspect. In the 1970s, Musa Sadr, a scion of the renowned Sadr family of Shia Iraq and the charismatic leader of the oppressed Shi’ites of southern Lebanon, backed by the Shi’ite hierarchy in Najaf and Karbala, proclaimed Syria’s Alawites to be Muslims (the Sunni majority did consider the Alawites, who split from Shia Islam a thousand years ago, to be Muslims). He thus conferred “Muslim” status on Syrian Alawite President Hafez al-Asad and in so doing laid the groundwork for an alliance. After Khomeini took power in Iran in 1979, the alliance became more formal and was directed against Saddam’s Iraq and toward support for Hizballah in Lebanon.⁴² The new axis enabled the Ba’ath regime to enhance its Muslim profile.⁴³

Faced with the relentless rise of Israel’s military and political strength, the Soviet Union’s unreliability as a strategic patron, and the loss of Egypt from the Arab camp as a result of the 1978 Camp David Accords, the Syrian regime made an effort to mitigate the imbalance of power by putting greater emphasis on asymmetric warfare.⁴⁴

At face value, the Iranian and Syrian regimes’ ideologies seem to be irreconcilable: Iran’s is the revolution of the Islamic nation (*umma*); Syria’s

is secular, socialist-oriented, and pan-Arabic. Nonetheless, the two regimes found common ground with regard to a variety of regional issues while addressing their contradictory ideological visions.⁴⁵

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there was constant hostility between the Ba'ath regimes in Syria and the Shah's regime in Iran: Iran was pro-West, Syria pro-Soviet; Iran had friendly relationships with Israel, Syria was Israel's arch-enemy. It was natural therefore that the Syrian Ba'ath supported the emerging movement of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini while his movement badly needed the support of an important Arab state such as Syria.⁴⁶

In the regional context, the Syrian regime was at low ebb in the late 1970s because of the Israeli-Egyptian peace process, particularly detrimental to Syria's regional position, and Syria's tense relations with the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Al-Asad's attempt at reconciliation with the rival Ba'ath regime in Baghdad did not succeed, and by June 1979 the two countries were again at loggerheads.

The Islamic Republic in Iran became anti-West, anti-Egypt, anti-Iraq, and anti-Israel. An alliance with it, therefore, presented Syria with a realistic chance to tilt the regional balance of power in its favor. Besides, Iran was bound to exercise considerable influence over Lebanon's Shiites. Good relations between Syria and Iran, could, therefore, ensure Damascus the ongoing support of Lebanon's Shiites.⁴⁷

Ironically, while the Syrian regime extended diplomatic support to the Islamic Republic, Syrian Muslim Brethren greeted the Islamic Revolution as the "revolution of all Islamic movements in the world," emphasizing the total Islamic solidarity between themselves and Iran. However, as the Islamic Republic was in bad need of allies, the alliance with secular Syria became indispensable. The Iranian regime praised Syria's firm stand against the "enemies" of Islam, Egypt, the United States, and Israel, and condemned the Muslim Brethren as "gangs carrying out the Camp David conspiracy."⁴⁸

The first Gulf war gave the Syrian-Iranian relationship a strong boost. Despite their Ba'athist roots, the mutual enmity between the two presidents, Hafez al-Asad of Syria and Saddam Hussein of Iraq, led Syria to be the only Arab state to side with Iran during the eight-year war.⁴⁹ Iran encouraged Syria to apply military pressure against Iraq, and the Syrians responded positively, mainly indirectly. On 15 December 1981, the Iraqi embassy in Beirut was completely demolished by an attack orchestrated by the Syrian and Iranian intelligence services.⁵⁰

It is of note that the Iranian regime did refrain from any official criticism of the massacre of 20,000 Syrian Muslim Brethren in February 1982. Moreover, economic cooperation of far-reaching importance began in March 1982 when Iran agreed to supply Syria with 174,000 barrels per day of crude oil for one year and Syria decided to close its border with Iraq and cut off the passage of Iraqi oil via Syria, causing considerable economic damage to Iraq. The agreement signaled the widening of bi-lateral relations into a full-fledged strategic alliance against Iraq.⁵¹

Syria's ideological argument for its anti-Iraq policy was that the Gulf war, launched by Iraq, detracted attention from the Arab-Israeli conflict and turned Iraq's military potential away from being used against Israel. Therefore, Syrian support for Iran against Iraq was in the best interests of the Arab struggle against Israel.

Iran, Syria, and the Lebanese Shia

From the Syrian standpoint, its presence in Lebanon is a fulfillment of an historical right crucial to its own political stability, its ability to determine Palestinian politics, and its overall standing in the Arab world. Iran needs the cooperation of Syria in order to maintain an effective presence in Lebanon and fight against common local enemies. The Iranian policy of "exporting the revolution" to the Muslim world has been particularly successful in the case of Lebanon, a country with a large Shia population.⁵²

By establishing Hizballah as an armed vanguard in Lebanon, Khomeini sought to open a new Islamist front against Israel, independent of the weak Arab states and the ineffective PLO. Hizballah, from the moment of its creation, sent out exactly one message: Israel should be met only with resistance, which would ultimately be victorious.⁵³

Actually, "Iran and Syria share credit for sponsoring the creation of Hizballah. Iran provided the impetus, while Syria was a willing accomplice." However, Syria had no interest in seeing Amal or Hizballah (or any other political force) triumph in Lebanon.⁵⁴

The Middle East scholar Olmert differentiated between three stages in the Iranian-Syrian relations in Lebanon: 1979-1982 (years of cooperation on a small scale); 1982-1985 (years of joint struggle against Israel and the United States); and 1985 to 1990 (years of growing friction).⁵⁵

1979–1982

The pro-Iranian elements in the Shia community were outnumbered by the mainstream Amal pro-Syrian movement. Iran entered into the Lebanese arena in force after the June 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

1982–1985

A high-ranking Iranian military, political, and religious delegation led by the commander of the Islamic Army's Ground Forces, Colonel Sayyad Shirazi, arrived in Damascus on the second day of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon to plan "jihad against Israel." The Iranian Pasdaran cooperated with local pro-Iranian Shia factions: *al-Amal al-Islami* (Islamic Amal), led by Husayn al-Musawi; and Hizballah (the "Party of God"), led by Abbas al-Musawi and Shaykh Subhi al-Tufayli.

Iranian funds and training led to the rapid growth of Hizballah's military wing, which devoted itself primarily to the expulsion of the American and European Multi-National Force (MNF) in Beirut and the defeat of occupying Israeli forces. In the early months of 1983, pro-Iranian elements infiltrated Beirut with active Syrian support.

On 18 April 1983, a bomb blast at the U.S. Embassy in Beirut killed at least sixty-three people. A Shia organization calling itself *al-Jihad al-Islami* (apparently the code name of Musawi's group) claimed responsibility. On 23 October 1983, bomb attacks on the U.S. and French contingents in Beirut claimed the lives of nearly 300 people, including 241 American servicemen.⁵⁶ After these deadly Hizballah operations, MNF forces withdrew in 1984.⁵⁷

It is of significance that Husayn Shaykh al-Islam, Iran's deputy foreign minister, chief of the Revolutionary Guards, and supervisor of secret cells outside Iran, visited Damascus a few days before the April bombing and, again, a few days before the October attacks. It was apparently he who, in close coordination with the Syrian government, gave Musawi the final order for the bombings to be carried out.

In 1998, Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass boasted to the Gulf *al-Bayan* newspaper that he was the one who gave the green light to the "resistance" to murder American marines and French soldiers, but that he prevented attacks on the Italian soldiers of the MNF "because he was in love with the Italian actress Gina Lollobrigida."⁵⁸

Under the influence of Shia extremists and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Amal, the dominant Shia force in southern Lebanon, moved from its initial passive support of Israel's presence in the south to one of active hostility. From the spring of 1984 until mid-1985, the Shiites, backed by Syria and Iran, launched persistent attacks against Israel. In May-June 1985, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) pulled out of most of southern Lebanon, confining itself to a small area known as the Security Zone.

1985–1989

During this period Syria made vigorous efforts to establish a *pax Syriana* in Lebanon.

Meanwhile Iran, in its competition with Amal for the hearts and minds of the Shia community, increased its financial support of Hizballah. Consequently, both Hizballah's political and military strength grew considerably, with their forces estimated at 4,000 fighters, of which 2,500 were in the Bija, 1,000 were in Beirut, and 500 were in the south. There had been a gradual shift from small clandestine units to large, semi-regular military formations.

In parallel, Iran and Hizballah intensified their campaign against Western individuals and institutions in Lebanon by kidnapping as many as eighty-seven French, German, Italian, American, and other nationals. Some were held hostage for many years, and some were killed during their captivity.⁵⁹ Among the kidnapped were eighteen Americans, of whom three were killed, including William Buckley (the CIA's bureau chief in Beirut) and Marine Colonel William Richard Higgins (who served as head of a UN peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon). Most of the Western hostages were not liberated until 1991, after U.S. pressure intensified following the Gulf War.

Strained Relations

Relations between Damascus and Hizballah began to deteriorate after the MNF and Israeli withdrawals, which greatly strengthened Syria's position in Lebanon. The presence of a Lebanese revolutionary religious movement pledging allegiance to another government (Iran) and advocating the overthrow of the entire Lebanese political system was increasingly seen as a potential threat.

According to Gambill and Abdelnour in an article in the *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, while Syria was happy to see Hizballah attack Israeli forces

in south Lebanon, the group's campaign of kidnappings against Westerners in Lebanon served the aims of Iran—which used the hostages to negotiate concessions from their respective governments—but not Syria, which wished to demonstrate to the West that “it could tame the Lebanese jungle.” Shiite fundamentalists were beginning to attack leftist pro-Syrian allies such as the Lebanese Communist Party and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). By the mid-1980s, Hizballah's military and socio-economic presence expanded to south Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut, directly threatening the rival Shia Amal militia, Syria's closest and strongest proxy.⁶⁰

The chaotic situation in West Beirut convinced the Damascus regime to take control of the city. In early 1987, Syrian units clashed with Hizballah fighters and killed twenty-three members of the organization who had allegedly attacked them. Hizballah's Voice of Islam radio station called the killings a “massacre in cold blood.” The killings left their mark on Iranian-Syrian-Lebanese Shiite relations.

A number of factors promoted accommodation between Syria and Hizballah: the Lebanese civil war drew to a close; Iran's ideological domination of the movement was weakened by the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989; and Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, Hizballah's spiritual leader, felt no subservience to Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Khomeini, who lacked the former's religious credentials.

The “Loveless Marriage” (1990–2000)

The relationship between Hizballah and the Syrian regime during this decade was described by one Beirut commentator as a “loveless marriage that endures because their common interests demand it.”⁶¹ Hizballah had initially rejected the Ta'if Accord, negotiated under American, Saudi, and Syrian auspices in 1989. However, after Syria invaded east Beirut and ousted interim Prime Minister Michel Aoun in October 1990, thus eliminating the last remnants of opposition to Syrian authority, Hizballah agreed to abide by the new rules of the game.

Syria permitted Hizballah alone to remain armed and to carry out attacks against Israel. Between 1984 and 1993, Hizballah was responsible for around 90% of all armed attacks against Israeli forces in Lebanon. Hizballah was required to closely coordinate its operations with Syrian and (Syrian-appointed) Lebanese military and intelligence personnel. Syria also strictly monitored arms shipments to Hizballah from Iran, which always transited through Damascus.

The Syrians also established clear constraints on Hizballah's political influence. The group's representation in parliament was explicitly set by Damascus, roughly on a par with Amal, but hardly commensurate with its support among Lebanese Shiites. This discrepancy has been a source of considerable tension between Syria and Hizballah.

The Iranians were also forced to recognize the new political realities in Lebanon and, by 1992, the number of Pasdaran stationed in Lebanon had been scaled down from 2,500 to around 200 to 300.

Olmert evaluated that the end of the Iraq-Iran war removed an important reason for the Iranian-Syrian alliance, in itself quite an exploit in the volatile Middle East, and would create growing cracks in the relations between the two countries.⁶²

However, when the war came to a halt in 1988, their strategic partnership continued, with both countries' opposition to Israel being the uniting factor.⁶³

Various developments, in particular the 1992 Lebanese parliamentary elections, led analysts to predict that Hizballah would transform itself from an international terrorist organization into a Lebanese mainstream political party.

Nevertheless, Hizballah continued to use international terrorism as a strategic tool for advancing its goals. Nasrallah has argued that, in order "to earn victory, we have to fight on all fronts. We have to be global and integral."⁶⁴ During the 1980s and 1990s, the concrete expression of this strategy took the form of intensive terrorist activity within numerous countries worldwide, resulting in hundreds of deaths and injuries.

In the Middle East, Hizballah operatives and affiliated cells targeted several Arab countries, mainly in the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain), often in the service of Iranian interests. In the 1980s, roughly half of the terrorist activity dedicated to exporting the Iranian revolution was aimed at Arab states. Such activity also served to hinder Arab support to Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq War. Many of these operations—particularly those targeting Gulf states—were perpetrated by Hizballah cells or by local Shiite groups that had received Hizballah training or support. Such activities were carried out both inside these countries and against their interests abroad.⁶⁵

On October 20, 1987, eighteen Arab terrorists, seventeen of whom were members of Hizballah, were arrested in Spain for plotting to assassinate the

Saudi ambassador and diplomats from Kuwait and Iraq. Hizballah engaged in particularly intense terrorist activity against Kuwaiti targets during the 1980s. Much of this activity served as retaliation for Kuwait's imprisonment of Hizballah members convicted of perpetrating a series of bombings in cooperation with local pro-Iranian Shiite groups.⁶⁶ Some of the perpetrators had close family ties with Hussein Musawi and Imad Mughniyeh, leaders of the operational branches of Hizballah.

Hizballah continued its terrorist and subversive activity in the region during the 1990s. The 1996 bombing of the U.S. military complex at the Khobar Towers in Dahrán, Saudi Arabia, demonstrated the ongoing cooperation between Hizballah and its Saudi sister organization. Similarly, Hizballah and Iranian elements based in Lebanon and Syria were involved in terrorist activities in Bahrain in 1996 and 1998, even after repeated Bahraini complaints to the Lebanese authorities.⁶⁷

Hizballah's reach extended to other regions as well. In Europe, for example, the Hizballah was involved in an April 1985 bomb attack on a restaurant near the U.S. Air Force base in Torrejón, Spain, killing eighteen Spaniards and injuring twenty-seven people, including fifteen Americans. In 1985-87, Hizballah was linked to a wave of thirteen bombings in Paris against shopping centers, rail stations, and trains that killed a total of thirteen people and wounded more than 250. The attacks were perpetrated by a network of a dozen operatives connected with Hizballah and led by Fuad Ali Saleh, a Tunisian citizen finally arrested in March 1987.

Hizballah was behind the two deadliest terrorist attacks in the history of South America: a car bomb that demolished the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires on March 17, 1992, killing twenty-nine people and injuring 250; and the bombing of the Argentine Jewish Mutual Association (AMIA) community center in Buenos Aires on July 18, 1994, which killed approximately one hundred people and injured dozens. Hizballah also established a significant presence in the "tri-border area" (where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay converge) using local businesses, drug trafficking, and contraband networks to launder funds for terrorist operations worldwide.

In Thailand, Hizballah unsuccessfully attempted to carry out a suicide bombing attack against the Israeli embassy in Bangkok in March 1994. Elsewhere in Asia, Hizballah unsuccessfully attempted to attack U.S. and Israeli ships docked in Singapore.⁶⁸

During the 1990s, Hizballah was less active against U.S. interests due to a series of changes in the international arena: the crumbling of the Communist block; the strengthened position of the United States after the 1991 Gulf War; and the beginning of the Arab-Israeli peace process, with direct Syrian involvement. Moreover, following the election of reformist president Muhammad Khatami, the clerical regime in Iran began to concentrate on its internal problems and seemed to decrease its focus on international terrorism.⁶⁹

According to the American scholar Norton, the reduction of the Pasdaran presence in Lebanon by about two-thirds in the 1990s was confirmation of a shift in Iran's stance vis-à-vis Lebanon. By 1998, the remainder of the Iranian contingent had withdrawn, which for many Iranians, Norton believes, signified the definitive end to any serious effort to export the "Islamic Revolution."⁷⁰ As often, Norton's optimistic evaluations proved mistaken, and a Pasdaran presence in Lebanon, albeit limited, continued for many years, and the "export of the revolution" returned to be a major feature of the Iranian foreign policy.

The Building of the “Axis of Destabilization” (1992–2001)

Hamas – Ideology and Strategy

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) movement, founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, became involved in Palestine during the Palestinian revolt of 1936-39. At that time, Abd al-Rahman al-Banna, Hassan’s brother, channeled funds to the revolt. This subsequently developed into an extensive network of the MB’s presence in Palestine. Soon after its establishment, the Muslim Brotherhood of Palestine gained the support of certain nationalist leaders, such as al-Haj Amin al-Husseini. Nearly two decades after its formation in Egypt, the MB founded its first group in Jerusalem in 1946 to resist the Zionist project for Palestine. Within two years, Hassan al-Banna was able to launch three brigades of volunteers to fight in the 1948 war for Palestine.⁷¹

In the aftermath of the 1948 war, the Brotherhood had become the strongest political force in the Gaza Strip. In the West Bank, the MB was officially recognized by the Jordanian government, which helped widen its popular base; and, until 1967, despite occasional friction, cordial relations were maintained with the Jordanian regime.⁷²

Following the 1967 war, the MB, unlike the nationalist groups, decided to remain on the sidelines as far as violent resistance activities were concerned and used open mass mobilization to develop a strong Islamic movement in Palestinian society. The “liberation of Palestine” in the mind of the Brotherhood was to be considered only after liberating the people socially, or only after returning them to the “right path” of Islam.⁷³

The outbreak of the Palestinian uprising—the Intifada—in the occupied territories in December 1987, presented the MB with a chance to connect itself to the Palestinian cause by rallying the violent struggle against Israel. The Brotherhood’s leadership thought that the creation of a new organization, Hamas, would conceal the link between it and the unrest.

Hamas is the Arabic acronym for *harakat al-muqawama al-islamiyya* (Islamic Resistance Movement); it also means “zeal.” Its leader in the Gaza Strip was Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, a man paralyzed by illness. Within a short period of time following its inception, Hamas acquired a leading position among those Palestinian organizations that oppose efforts to advance a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁷⁴

In place of the Palestinian nationalism proposed by Fatah, Hamas proposed, in its first communiqué on 14 December 1987, “Islam as the solution and the alternative.” Founded and developed inside Palestine, Hamas from the outset has been programmatically dominated by the concept of resistance instead of the nationalist and leftist concept of liberation.⁷⁵

In its Covenant, Hamas views itself as a Palestinian movement that aspires to impose Islam “on every piece of land in Palestine.” Thus Hamas sees a bond between the Palestinian people and the soil of Palestine through the lens of a patriotic Palestinian movement, and not merely in universal religious terms.⁷⁶

Joining the armed struggle against Israel, the MB was forced to reconsider its attitude toward the PLO. It claimed that it esteemed the PLO’s activity in the Palestinian national cause but did not recognize its supremacy and authority. The Hamas Covenant spelled out ideological and practical objections to negotiations: “There is no other solution for the Palestinian problem other than jihad. All the initiatives and international conferences are a waste of time and a futile game.”⁷⁷

The Covenant places the duty of jihad both on the individual and on the entire Arab world: “Palestine is Islamic land.... Therefore its liberation is a personal obligation of all Muslims everywhere.” Hamas views its role as being that of leadership in the struggle “against world Zionism,” with the Arab and Muslim peoples following on the same road. The Covenant uses extreme and markedly anti-Semitic terminology. The Jews are described as an evil force spinning a powerful web, moving and manipulating at will vast forces in order to achieve Zionism’s evil goals. Judaism, according to the Covenant, is a force with world-embracing tentacles.⁷⁸

Hamas, in a manner similar to that of Hizballah, has gained considerable popularity through its network of social service providers in the occupied territories. It has built, sponsored, and operated schools, hospitals, orphanages, mosques, health clinics, soup kitchens, and sports leagues. In contrast to Fatah’s reputation for inefficiency and corruption, Palestinians generally view Hamas as efficient, undefiled, and sincere.

The first Hamas suicide bombing took place on 16 April 1993. Hamas views suicide bombing as a legitimate means of its asymmetric warfare against Israel.⁷⁹

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is a minor member of the alliance between Iran, Syria, Hizballah and Hamas. However, because it has potentially a major role in the derailing of the political peace process between the Palestinians and Israel through its terrorist activity, and because it is the real proxy of Iran in the Palestinian arena—both ideologically and operationally—its involvement in the framework of strategic events will be mentioned from time to time.

The strengthening of the organizational infrastructure of Islamic groups in colleges and universities in Gaza and the West Bank (hereafter referred to as the Territories) in the 1980s gave impetus to the growth of the revolutionary faction of Islamic Jihad in the Territories. In contrast to the MB's leadership, which consisted of older, religious establishment figures, Islamic Jihad's leadership came from students and academics who had spent time in Egyptian universities in the 1970s and absorbed the revolutionary militancy of local groups.⁸⁰

In 1985, PIJ succeeded in forming a party in several universities in the Territories under the name The Islamic Group (*Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyyah*)—a name borrowed from Egyptian student groups. The group became the student faction of the Jihad movement.

PIJ enthusiastically supported Iran's revolution and criticized the MB's passive stance. It favored military action against Israel, a common denominator with the nationalist groups, especially Fatah. Influenced by Shi'a Iran, the PIJ professed the unity of Islamic groups not only in the Territories, but throughout the Arab world.⁸¹

Iran – Hamas

In the late 1980s, Iran-Hamas relations were only marginal, principally because Iran's interests were in mobilizing Shiites in the Gulf. These actions annoyed Hamas—a radical Sunni movement. Hamas also viewed Iranian support for the PIJ as a threat to its standing in the domestic Palestinian arena.⁸²

In the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War, with the commencement of the Madrid peace process in the Middle East in October 1991, and after Syria agreed to hold bilateral talks with Israel, Tehran appointed itself head of the

rejectionist camp. In October 1991, Iran convened a parallel conference in Tehran to unite radical organizations hostile to PLO negotiations with Israel.⁸³

The Tehran conference participants, including Hamas and the PIJ, all of which professed the destruction of Israel, decided to make every possible effort to sabotage the new-born peace process, which was seen as a direct threat to their strategic goals. The Tehran regime decided to support the “Palestinian resistance” and establish a high-level committee to unite radical organizations hostile to negotiations with Israel in an Islamic front under Iranian leadership.⁸⁴

Iran-Hamas relations were put on a more formal basis in October 1992, when a Hamas delegation, led by the then Secretary General Mousa Abu-Marzuq and spokesman Ibrahim Ghawshah, visited Tehran for talks. Iran permitted Hamas to open an office in Tehran and pledged \$30 million a year to the organization, and they agreed to have the Revolutionary Guards train thousands of Hamas activists in Iran and in Hizballah camps in Lebanon.⁸⁵

In December 1992, Israel’s expulsion of 415 members of Hamas and PIJ activists to Marj al-Zuhur in southern Lebanon permitted Hizballah to train some of them in the art of terrorism. Late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, based on a ruling of the Israeli High Justice Court, made the mistake of allowing the repatriation of these terrorists, which ushered in a new era of terrorism. New heights of lethality arose with the advent of the first Palestinian suicide bombings.⁸⁶

The signing of the Declaration of Principles (DoP, known as Oslo I) by Israel and the PLO on the White House lawn on September 13, 1993, presented the leadership of Hamas with its most difficult strategic challenge: the choice between faithfulness to ideology, and the need to take pragmatic measures aimed at preventing loss of its hold on Palestinian society. The dilemma was further aggravated by the establishment of the autonomous Palestinian National Authority (PA) and the elections for the Autonomy’s Legislative Council on January 20, 1996. Thus, while leaders residing in the Territories have sought an understanding with the PA, ideological dogmatism has characterized positions taken by leaders residing abroad.⁸⁷

Recognition of the formal status of the PA, in fact, implies recognition, however limited and temporary, of Israel, threatening to undermine the movement’s ideological *raison d’être* and popular appeal. At the same time, alienating itself from the Oslo process could marginalize Hamas as well. In signing the accord, Hamas contended, the PLO forfeited the right to represent

the Palestinian people. Hamas rejected “the plot to recognize the occupying Zionist entity. Arafat’s signature and his recognition of the enemy constitute treason against the Palestinian people and the Islamic nation.”⁸⁸

Hamas’ response to the Oslo process has been manifest in three spheres: the attempted establishment of a broad rejectionist front together with other Palestinian groups, the intensification of the armed struggle against Israel, and the concurrent efforts to reach accommodation with the PA. Terrorism or violent struggle or—in Hamas terminology—jihad has been the immediate response to the Oslo process.⁸⁹

The attacks that were carried out by Hamas inside Israel in April 1994 coincided with the talks that preceded the signing by Israel and the PLO of the Cairo agreement. They also were claimed to revenge for the massacre of 29 and the wounding of 125 Muslim worshippers in a Hebron Mosque by a Jewish settler on February 25th of that year. Attacks that were perpetrated in July and August of 1995 coincided with the discussions concerning the conduct of elections in the Territories. In February and March of 1996, three extremely lethal suicide attacks in Jerusalem (by Hamas) and in Tel Aviv (by the PIJ) were claimed to be in revenge of the January 25th killing of the Izz a-din al-Qassam major operative, the “engineer” Yihya Ayyash, who had been implicated in the planning and execution of spectacular terrorist attacks.⁹⁰

Hamas militants engaged in suicide attacks first and foremost because of the heavy price in casualties they exacted from the Israeli public. And while terrorism by suicide has cost Hamas some public support, not a single Muslim cleric in the Territories publicly denounced it.⁹¹

Outside of a temporary agreement with the Hamas leadership to play down the terrorist activity, Arafat did practically nothing serious to stop this series of bloody bombings. Hamas’ spokesman Ibrahim Ghawshah declared in March 2001:

*In 1995 a senior PA envoy came to meet Hamas leadership and asked it to stop armed operations so as not to affect the negotiations process and the expected results of restoring lands. We told him: We were not on a collision course with the Oslo march and we will not stand in your way but will focus our operations against the Zionist enemy. Hence you do your own work, if you think that Oslo would restore the lands, and let the resistance do its own.*⁹²

Violent attacks perpetrated by Islamist activists proved crucial in determining the pace and direction of the Israeli-Palestinian political process. The attacks cultivated doubts among Israelis concerning Palestinians' genuine intentions as well as concerning the PA's ability to control elements opposing the implementation of the agreement, and thus the very ability to advance a solution to the historical conflict. Concurrently, the counter-measures conducted by Israel also nourished suspicion among Palestinians concerning the advantages of coming to terms with Israel.

A 1994 report indicated that Iran provided \$3 million a year to both Hamas and the PIJ, and one thousand families of Palestinian suicide bombers or detainees from both organizations received regular monthly payments from Iran.⁹³

Hamas was forced to reduce terrorism significantly in the latter half of the 1990s, culminating in its expulsion from Jordan in December 1999. During this period (1993 to 2000), Hamas also suffered from limited public support. Palestinian pollsters consistently found that a mere 14-18 percent of the respondents supported Hamas, while double the percentage of respondents supported Fatah. For this reason, Hamas refrained from participating in the Palestinian elections of 1996.⁹⁴

Syria – Hamas

During the two years, 1980 and 1981, the Syrian city of Hama witnessed several attacks that took the lives of hundreds of Muslim Brothers religious scholars, prominent people as well as ordinary citizens. Then, in February 1982, over 25,000 people were massacred by the Syrian authorities, which called upon the Special Forces, with their heavy arms, supported by the Syrian Air Force. Aircraft, cannons, and rocket launchers bombed the city haphazardly for four weeks, during which time the city was sealed off and the citizens were not permitted to leave.⁹⁵

The brutal suppression of the MB in the early 1980s sparked angry denunciations in Palestinian mosques. In 1983, the chairman of the Higher Islamic Council, Saad al-Din al-Alami, held mass rallies at Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and declared that killing Syrian president Hafez al-Asad was a duty of all Muslims.⁹⁶

Even in 2001 there were signs of Hamas's hostility towards the Damascus regime. Hamas's weekly newspaper called for the indictment of the "real culprits" in the September 1982 Sabra and Shatila refugee camp massacres

of Palestinians by a Lebanese Forces militia group.⁹⁷ An editorial in the Hamas newspaper *al-Risalah* (The Mission), named Phalange security chief Eli Hobeika and his Syrian masters as the ones who ought to be indicted for the massacre:

*A regime that has lost its sensitivity for the lives of its own people, which has murdered tens of thousands in Hama, is incapable of finding any fault in Hobeika for murdering two thousand Palestinians.*⁹⁸

In 1990, the center of Hamas's political activity shifted to Amman. Jordan which offered clear advantages as the seat for the Hamas leadership core, its proximity to Israel facilitating communications with the West Bank and Gaza. However, Hamas' position in Jordan was dependent on relations between the regime and the Islamic camp, which have been marked by mutual suspicions, although each as a rule refrained from provoking the other.⁹⁹

After the Hashemite kingdom signed the peace treaty with Israel in October 1994 and began forging closer ties with the PA, the Hamas presence in the kingdom became an increasing liability, particularly after the 1994 suicide bombings. In June 1995, Jordan cracked down on Hamas activities in the kingdom; and in 1997, they expelled Mousa Abu Marzouk, the head of its political committee, and Imad al-Alami, the head of the group's interior committee, prompting the latter to relocate the committee to Damascus.¹⁰⁰

The first clear indication of a bilateral alliance between Syria and Hamas came in the summer of 1994, as preparations for the establishment of a Palestinian Authority were underway. A Hamas delegation arrived in Damascus and met with top Syrian officials. The meeting inaugurated "a new era of relations" between Hamas and Syria, "marked by mutual consideration and understanding." In October, the Syrians permitted a Hamas delegation to travel to Lebanon and meet with Hizballah Secretary-General Nasrallah.¹⁰¹

From 1992 until 1999, Khaled Meshal led the Hamas political bureau from Amman, Jordan. He and three other Hamas representatives, Ibrahim Al-Ghawshah, Sami Khater, and `Izzat Rashaq, were expelled from Jordan to Qatar on August 31, 1999. Since 2001, Meshal has directed the organization's activities from Hamas offices located in Damascus. He has maintained the movement's strong ties to Iran by meeting regularly with Iranian leaders.¹⁰²

Since the mid-1990s, Damascus has been the operational headquarters of the Hamas military wing and a nexus for the transfer of external funds to Hamas operatives in the territories. Syria and Syrian-occupied Lebanon have

become major conduits for funneling weapons and explosives to Hamas and have provided safe havens for training hundreds of its operatives. Therefore, Syrian sponsorship of Hamas has had a major impact on the group's operational capacities.¹⁰³

PA officials also complained about Syria's role in sponsoring Hamas terrorist attacks against Israel. "We have come to realize that the orders being issued by the military branches of the Islamic groups are coming from the outside," said PA Planning Minister Nabil Shaath in a March 1996 interview. Shaath specifically pointed the finger at Lebanon and Syria, "where the most hard-core military wing is based."¹⁰⁴

The Asad regime granted unrestricted access to Syrian-occupied Lebanon for contacts and cooperation with the Hizballah. The Beirut office of Hamas was allowed to openly recruit Palestinian refugees in Lebanon to undergo training at Hizballah and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) camps in the Beqaa Valley in military tactics, explosives manufacturing, hostage-taking, communications, and intelligence gathering.¹⁰⁵

Syrian sponsorship strengthened Hamas' external leadership vis-à-vis the inside leadership, a power shift that helped fuel waves of terrorism during the mid-to-late 1990s. Hamas leaders on the outside adopted a much more uncompromising position than their internal counterparts regarding terror attacks against Israel and relations with the PA. In the spring of 1998, a power struggle erupted between the rival leadership wings over control of Qassam Brigade cells, and tensions peaked in 1999, when Sheikh Yassin and other internal Hamas leaders began to openly advocate a temporary cease-fire for the first time, largely as a result of unprecedented security measures taken by Palestinian security forces and Israel's security agency.¹⁰⁶

The Israeli Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon (May 2000–September 2001)

As the end of the Cold War removed the option to balance between the superpowers, Syria began to "bandwagon" with the U.S. hegemon; it joined the 1990 anti-Iraq coalition and thereafter the Madrid peace process in the expectation that in return the United States would broker an acceptable settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict that would enable Syria to recover the Golan in return for peace with Israel. Syria made a "strategic decision" for peace, entered direct negotiations with Israel for the first time, and made

several concessions to Israel over demilitarized zones and normalization of relations; at the same time, however, it used Hizballah to keep military pressure on Israel in southern Lebanon, conveying the message that Israel could not have peaceful borders while occupying Arab (southern Lebanon but also the Golan) territory.¹⁰⁷

Despite Hizballah's dependence on Iran—and the fact that Nasrallah accepts Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as his spiritual guide—Tehran has never overseen Hizballah's operational planning. That task long fell to Damascus, the priority of whose interests in Lebanon and the Arab-Israeli conflict Tehran accepted after the Lebanese civil war ended in 1991.¹⁰⁸

Two events undermined this arrangement. The first was the death of Hafez al-Asad and the ascension of Bashar al-Asad in 2000, which came just a month after Israel's unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon, a triumph that Hizballah claimed as its own. Whereas the father never left any doubt about who had the upper hand in the regime's relationship with Hizballah, the son allowed it to move closer to an equal partnership. Nasrallah has become a frequent distinguished guest at the presidential palace. Militia fighters have been allowed to parade in Syrian cities, and photos of Nasrallah are now often posted alongside those of the Syrian president.¹⁰⁹

Some analysts have claimed that Hizballah's focus lies primarily on the liberation of occupied Lebanese lands and secondarily on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. According to the U.S. Army War College's Sami Hajjar, Hizballah “has no operational interests, other than diplomatic, beyond these spheres. The party may indeed have a global reach, but for almost two decades that reach has not produced credible threats outside the Lebanon-Israel theater.”¹¹⁰

The Israeli government led by Ehud Barak seemed to be on a good path for a final peace agreement with the PA as it withdrew unilaterally from South Lebanon in May 2000 and made a generous proposal to the PA at Camp David in July 2000. Arafat did not accept the compromise on two essential issues, the status of Jerusalem and “the right of return” of the Palestinian refugees, and in September 2000, he chose to return to the old days of the armed struggle, back to terrorism and a debut of guerrilla warfare renamed with a new religious flavor “the al-Aqsa Intifada.”¹¹¹

Hizballah was quick to lend its support to the Palestinian Intifada. In October 2000, Hizballah leaders and various Palestinian factions opposed to the peace process held a series of meetings in Beirut, Damascus, and Tehran.

Hizballah announced the formation of a central committee composed of Lebanese and Palestinian nationalist and Islamic elements that rejected any settlement with Israel. Since that time, Hizballah has increased its level of cooperation with Palestinian rejectionists through direct training as well as logistical and operational support.¹¹²

Hizballah sees its active involvement in the Palestinian al-Aqsa Intifada as part of the inevitable struggle against the imperialist threat represented by the United States. According to Nasrallah, Hizballah must therefore “assume [its] responsibilities...and never [allow] the Palestinians to fight alone.”¹¹³

This strategy is consistent with Hizballah’s strategic vision regarding the Islamization of Lebanon, impossible to achieve as long as Syria has a clear interest in maintaining its grip on Lebanon and as long as a balance of power exists between Lebanon’s various religious communities.¹¹⁴ As far back as the late 1980s, Hizballah leader Hussein Musawi stated that “Hizballah’s victory in Lebanon depends upon more struggles and confrontations with American imperialism and Zionism...[and] a prerequisite for establishing an Islamic government in Beirut is victory over the Zionist regime.”¹¹⁵

Hizballah views the continuation of the violent conflict between Israel and the Palestinians as crucial to achieving its overall goals. Hizballah’s spiritual leader, Sheikh Fadlallah, has posted his views under titles such as “The Palestinian Cause Is Where We Stand or Fall”¹¹⁶ and “Palestine is the Battlefield on which the Future of the Region Will Be Decided.”¹¹⁷ Similarly, Nasrallah declared that Hizballah would remain engaged in the Palestinian issue because “it is also an Arab cause and an Islamic cause. The holy shrines in Palestine are not the Palestinians’ alone. They concern all the Muslims.”¹¹⁸

Just at the beginning of the Palestinian Intifada in October 2000, Hizballah abducted three Israeli soldiers in the Har Dov sector and an Israeli citizen abroad. Hizballah’s attempts to hamper Israel’s massive operations against the Palestinian terrorist infrastructure peaked from March 30 through April 13, 2002, when it conducted a campaign of katyusha and mortar attacks on IDF positions in the Sheba’a Farms, an area that Syrian and Lebanese officials claim is Lebanese. The campaign began the day after a meeting between Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah and Syrian president Bashar al-Asad. According to analysts, “this escalation was Syria’s way of demonstrating its continued influence over Middle East stability.”¹¹⁹ The timing of the campaign “was also connected to the peace initiative proposed by Crown Prince Abdallah of Saudi Arabia, adopted at the Arab summit in Beirut at the end of March.”¹²⁰

According to data provided by the Israeli Security Service, there was a steep rise in Hizballah involvement in Palestinian terrorism during this period. In 2002, seven Palestinian groups were operated by the Hizballah, in 2003, there were fourteen, and in 2004, there were fifty-one such groups. Most of Hizballah-connected armed cells (thirty-eight) were affiliated with Fatah, mostly in the West Bank. Six cells were associated with PIJ, three with Hamas and at least four with the PFLP. In 2004 sixty eight attacks were initiated by Hizballah, some 20 percent of the attacks over the Green Line.¹²¹

In parallel with its open military activity, Hizballah has put forth significant effort toward establishing an independent terrorist and intelligence infrastructure inside both the PA and Israel. In the Territories, the organization has recruited Palestinian operatives for training at Hizballah camps in Lebanon. It has also worked with Lebanon-based operatives from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in recruiting a network of rogue Fatah Tanzim elements. Members of this network, called the "Shiva Brigades," serve as Hizballah's West Bank cadres, significantly expanding the organization's targeting capabilities and political reach.¹²²

The Syrianization of Hizballah? According to Gambill and Abdelnour, while Hizballah may have been motivated to renew hostilities by the Palestinian intifada against Israel, the decision to attack Israel in October 2000 was rather related to the growth of Lebanese opposition to the Syrian occupation, beginning with the release of a September 20 statement by the Council of Maronite Archbishops calling upon Syria to "completely withdraw" its military forces from Lebanon. Hizballah operations over the next six months closely followed major outbursts of Lebanese opposition to the Syrian occupation.¹²³

Syria's role in determining the timing of Hizballah attacks had become so blatant that, in retaliation for a major attack on April 14, 2001, the Israeli air force bombed a Syrian radar station in the Dahr al-Baidar region. On July 1, Israel launched a second air strike against another Syrian radar position in Lebanon, wounding two Syrian soldiers, two days after a Hizballah missile attack injured an Israeli soldier.¹²⁴

The Israeli unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000 has in a certain measure weakened Hizballah's legitimacy after it achieved its "resistance" objective, but on the other hand, it has strengthened the Iran-Syria-Lebanon alliance. The subsequent Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon has enhanced the weight of the Iranian influence on Hizballah.

After the PA left the moderate camp during the September 2000 Intifada, the Iran-Hizballah axis was able to play on the Palestinian arena and Hizballah became a strategic element for Iranian subversion directed against Israel and in other arenas.

Iran's and Syria's support for Palestinian radical groups are a result of their policy of preventing an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement that would end the "Palestinian question, the sacred cow of Islamic grievances and Arab nationalism."¹²⁵ For Syria, it would mean a weakened position in its future negotiations with Israel on the return of the Golan Heights. For Iran, an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement leading toward a pacification of relations between Israel and the Arab states would increase Iran's geostrategic isolation. Moreover, Iran wants to retain Hizballah as a potential instrument against other Arab regimes and to use their friendship with the radical Palestinians as they seek to play a more prominent role in the Middle East.

The “Axis of Destabilization” after 9/11 and the War in Iraq

The Tehran-Damascus strategic alliance continued to develop under Bashar al-Asad, and the two countries were prepared for even greater coordination as they held common views on a wide range of regional and international issues, including their hostility to the U.S. occupation of Iraq and to Israel.¹²⁶

Even as Iran, Syria, and Hizballah accepted the inevitability of U.S. intervention in Iraq, they planned for the emergence of a post-Saddam era in which the United States would sink in the region’s figurative sands; they would exploit their historical and religious ties to Iraqi Shiites while at the same time calling for Sunni/Shia unity in the face of Western aggression. They seemed to believe that, given the difficulties U.S. forces would inevitably encounter in postwar Iraq, the Bush administration would be neither willing nor able to take forceful responsive action against them in the short term.¹²⁷

Iran

The new strategic context in the region has posed important challenges for Iran. Although Iran has welcomed the fall of two of its historical enemies—the Sunni Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the Ba’athist one in Iraq—the presence of U.S. troops in two of its immediate neighbors is seen as a major threat. Nevertheless, Tehran has options at its disposal: Iran is one of the largest oil exporting countries in the world; it controls the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial shipping lane; it has an extensive nuclear research program; and due to its geographic location it is able to exercise its power in different regional theaters, such as in Central Asia.¹²⁸

In February 2004, Iran concluded a five-year defense pact with Syria that commits Iran to Syria’s defense against “the Zionist entity.” Iran’s defense minister, Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani, declared that its “arrangements” also extend to Lebanon. “In the existing strategic configuration in our region, Syria represents Iran’s first line of defense,” Shamkhani said. “Iran, in turn, must be regarded as Syria’s geo-strategic depth.”¹²⁹

The idea of a pact was first raised by Bashar al-Asad in the immediate aftermath of the liberation of Iraq in April 2003. The Syrian leader decided that the only way to deal with the perceived threat from America was to raise the cost of any attempt by Washington to implement further “regime changes” in the Middle East. According to Taheri, Iran’s decision to strengthen its commitment to Syria was one of several factors behind al-Asad’s decision to

adopt a tougher stance against both the United States and Israel. Iranian and Syrian analysts believed that Washington planned a new regional military alliance to include Israel, Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Iran and Syria feared, therefore, that their isolation could render them vulnerable to attack by either Israel or the United States.¹³⁰

The pact has three sections: a strategic partnership on military and intelligence issues, including a framework for joint staff conversations, exchange of information, joint planning and exercises, and reciprocal access to each nation's weapons systems; mechanisms whereby Iran and Syria will assist one another against aggression by a third party; technical and scientific cooperation that commits Iran to build a national defense industry for Syria. Iran also commits to supply Syria fighter-bombers and theater-range missiles and to train Syrian officers and military technicians.¹³¹

The Iranian Nuclear Program

For the past two decades, the United States has sought to contain the strategic threat posed by Iran's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) programs. Iran may see the acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability as a means of ending its perceived historic vulnerability to foreign domination, or as a symbol of a major nation. Some observers see Iran's WMD programs as an instrument for Iran to dominate the Persian Gulf region.¹³²

U.S. and European concerns about the scope of Iran's nuclear program have grown over the past few years, and U.S. and European policies have largely converged on the issue. The Bush Administration asserts that Iran is working toward a nuclear weapons capability, that it has violated its obligations under the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and that Iran's assertions that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only are not credible.

U.S. and European suspicions were heightened considerably in December 2002 when Iran confirmed that it was building two additional facilities, at Arak and Natanz, which could be used to produce fissile material that could be used for a nuclear weapon. These revelations, coupled with other information that has been produced from recent International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) visits to Iran, has caused some observers to estimate that Iran's nuclear program may have advanced to the point at which it cannot be curbed.

On June 18, 2003, President Bush stated that the United States would "not tolerate construction" of a nuclear weapon by Iran, and he told journalists

on April 21, 2004, that Iran “will be dealt with, starting through the United Nations,” if it does not fully cooperate with IAEA inspections.¹³³

Throughout most of 2003, Iran refused to sign the “Additional Protocol” to the NPT, which would allow for enhanced inspections. In its 2003 and 2004 reports, the IAEA said that Iran had committed violations of its agreements, including unreported uranium enrichment, and that Iran did not declare designs of advanced uranium enrichment centrifuges, parts of which Iran made itself.

In July 2004, Tehran announced it would resume work on centrifuge equipment, although Iran stopped short of threatening to enrich uranium. The announcement amounted to a rebuff of further European Union (EU) diplomatic overtures. In spring 2006, the Iranians defiantly revealed that they had enriched uranium. The IAEA documented that Iran had produced uranium hexafluoride sufficient for twenty nuclear weapons and that it had moved from ten- and twenty-machine cascades up to a 164-machine cascade. Despite these and other accomplishments, experts point out that Iran cut corners in its research and development process and therefore would require more time for development and testing.¹³⁴

Syria

Syrian president Hafez al-Asad died in June 2000 after nearly thirty years in power. He left a legacy of strict adherence to the principles of the pan-Arab cause.¹³⁵ His death brought expectations for radical change in Syria, especially since his son, Bashar al-Asad, was seen as representative of a new generation with a vision of “modernization.” The centerpiece of Bashar’s foreign policy was initially a strategic opening to Western Europe. Bashar however had to share power with his fathers’ lieutenants, the so-called “old guard” of Arab nationalists.¹³⁶

Since Bashar assumed power, regional changes have reinforced Syria’s perception that a negotiated settlement with Israel is neither possible nor desirable under current circumstances. Syrian decision-makers see that the conflict has provoked a second Palestinian Intifada that has endured intermittently since 2000, and they may be planning for many more years of low-grade tension with Israel, including a continuation of the proxy war through terrorism.¹³⁷

According to the Middle East scholar Hinnebusch, in the 1990s, as Syria came close to reaching a settlement with Israel brokered by Washington’s

mediation, U.S.-Syrian relations were excellent. However, “the external environment” for Syrian reform was dramatically soured by the failure of the Syrian-Israeli peace process, “largely owing to the unwillingness of Israeli Prime Minister Barak to follow through on Israel’s commitments to total withdrawal from the Golan Heights,” and symbolized by the failure of the Clinton–al-Asad summit of March 2000.

Bashar therefore, opted to pursue an opening to Iraq, which had hitherto been a bitter rival but which was now seeking Syrian cooperation in evading sanctions imposed by the United Nations (UN). Syria’s deepening ties with Baghdad became a bone of contention with the Bush administration. When the Saddamist regime fell, Syria gave refuge to some Iraqi officials fleeing Iraq. Syria also has allowed the movement of thousands of volunteers from all over the Arab world, many from northern Syria, to join the resistance in Iraq.¹³⁸

Syria’s strategy for coping with Washington was an attempt to balance between “unrealistic defiance of U.S. power and surrender to its dictates.” Syrian analysts believed the United States could not use military force against Syria because of Washington’s difficulties in Iraq and Syria’s diverse alliances at the regional and international levels. Syria had enough “cards” to make its cooperation important to Washington: its centrality to an Arab-Israeli peace settlement and its readiness for peace with Israel, its “pacification of Lebanon” and “its unique ability to restrain Hizballah” from hurting Israel, and “its successful elimination of violent Islamic fundamentalism at home and its intelligence cooperation against terrorism.”¹³⁹

Hinnebusch puts all the onus of Syria’s support to terrorism in the Palestinian conflict and elsewhere in the Middle East on the American “neo-cons,” although Syria “tried to take a middle ground” by supporting “with valuable intelligence assistance” the U.S. war on al-Qaeda. Syria had used Hizballah’s operations in southern Lebanon to send Israel the message that it could not have peace there and retain the Golan. Syria resisted U.S. pressure to expel Hamas and PIJ Damascus “press offices,” in spite of these organizations being responsible for suicide bombings in Israel. Syria, regarded the groups as “cards” in the struggle with Israel over the Golan, a struggle from which it derived some Arab “nationalist legitimacy.”¹⁴⁰

According to Flynt Leverett, former senior director for Middle East affairs in the U.S. National Security Council, the only U.S. policy option was simply to increase pressure by threats and sanctions against Syria. Syria’s main leverage over Washington derived from America’s difficulties in pacifying Iraq,

which meant that it had a certain interest in facilitating the escalation of the insurgency.¹⁴¹

It was, however, the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005, that energized a convergence of forces against Syria's position in Lebanon.¹⁴² A cross-sectarian alliance in Lebanon, bringing together the Sunnis (Hariri's constituency) with the Maronites and Druze against Syria put Lebanese Shiites, Syria's closest allies, on the defensive. When Saudi Arabia, another of Hariri's patrons but a long-time Syrian ally, demanded Syrian withdrawal, Europe and Washington were in accord. Faced with this coalition of forces, "Damascus apparently lost its nerve and withdrew its troops." Al-Asad also misjudged the international and Lebanese reactions to his decision to have the mandate of the Damascus-backed Lebanese president, Emile Lahoud, extended in 2004, and he failed to anticipate the storm that would ensue after the assassination.¹⁴³

Its alliance with Hizballah and other Lebanese actors remains intact, but Lebanon can no longer be said to be in Syria's uncontested sphere of influence; indeed, the struggle for Lebanon appears to have re-opened.¹⁴⁴

Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon increased Damascus' weakness and reduced its strategic options in the area. The rising international pressure also strengthened the country's religious, tribal, and generational divisions, and Bashar faces new, difficult challenges to his regime's stability. The new alliance formed by former Syrian Vice President Abdel-Halim Khaddam and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is a clear example of this.¹⁴⁵

Damascus has feverishly attempted to depict itself as a victim of radical Islamic militancy to counter charges that it promotes such activity, and they have more or less staged clashes between Syrian security forces and militants to prove the point.¹⁴⁶

Indeed, the fear of an Islamist take-over has been the main factor deterring Washington from an energetic push against the regime.¹⁴⁷ The U.S., French, and Israeli establishments have all expressed growing concerns that a change of regime in Syria could bring the Muslim Brothers to power, and even Israeli leaders have claimed publicly that they would prefer a weak Bashar in power.¹⁴⁸

The new Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, began January 2005 with a visit to Damascus as both countries faced mounting U.S. pressure and the threat of international sanctions over Iran's nuclear program and Syria's

UN investigation that implicated it in the assassination of Lebanon's former prime minister.¹⁴⁹ During the visit of the Syrian prime minister, Naji al-Otari, to Tehran on February 15, 2005—one day after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri—he proposed a Syrian-Iranian front in an attempt to counter the new pressures on Syria.¹⁵⁰

The complications of the assassination of Hariri and the Syrian withdrawal, along with the complexities of the Iranian nuclear issue, have created a tense situation in Lebanon and in the region. The Iran-Syria alliance was particularly relevant at that moment because it could tell something about the prospects and workings of a future alliance between Iran and a Shiite-dominated regime in Iraq. If Shiite Iran could find common cause for the past twenty-five years with a Shiite/Alawi minority regime in Syria, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that it could do so with the only majority Shiite Arab regime in the Middle East, in Baghdad.¹⁵¹

Though the two partners feel threatened by the U.S. presence in Iraq, they are working there at cross-purposes: Iran's strategy is to allow the United States to develop a Shiite-dominated regime, while Syria provides support to the Sunni remnants of Saddam's Ba'ath regime. On the other hand, both countries (along with Turkey) share a fear of the spillover effect of possible Kurdish independence in northern Iraq, and both undoubtedly wish to ensure a dominant role for Hizballah in Lebanon and a minimization of American influence there.¹⁵²

Hizballah

The instability in the Middle East triggered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq and "heightened Israeli repression of Palestinian rights" only confirmed Hizballah's conviction that its two main enemies—Israel and the United States—are preparing for a showdown against the Muslims of the region. The "American-Zionist project" threatens to usurp the entire region, impose its hegemony, and complete the destruction of Palestine. Hizballah's leaders insist that this conspiracy calls for a maximum effort of resistance and jihad.¹⁵³

Since May 2000, Hizballah has practically taken control over southern Lebanon, where the Lebanese army had no foothold, and with Syrian backing, has transformed it into an "extraterritorial" base for guerrilla and terrorist activity against Israel.

The main area of direct military confrontation between Hizballah and the IDF became the Sheba'a Farms, a 15-square-mile mountainside along

Lebanon's southeast border with the Golan Heights claimed by Lebanon, but belonging to Syria according to the UN. Hizballah periodically attacked mountaintop IDF outposts with anti-tank missiles, katyusha rockets, and mortar rounds. The organization leadership pretended that its military activity was intended to liberate the Sheba'a Farms and to defend Lebanese territory against Israeli aggression and claimed it was coordinated with the Lebanese government.¹⁵⁴

Hizballah has expanded its arsenal of weaponry, acquiring armaments capable of reaching a greater number of Israeli targets. By mid-2005, the organization was estimated to have some 13,000 rockets and missiles, including the SA-7 surface-to-air missile and the Fajr-5 surface-to-surface rocket, with a range of forty-five miles, capable of reaching the Israeli cities of Haifa and Hedera.¹⁵⁵

Until the beginning of 2002, Hizballah's artillery and bombing activity has been sporadic and low key. However, during much of 2002, Hizballah appeared to consider opening a "second front" against Israel from southern Lebanon, either before or parallel to impending U.S. action against Iraq. The organization's leaders no doubt hoped that Arabs and Muslims would support such a strategy and put pressure on their governments to do the same.¹⁵⁶

On August 29, 2002, after four months of tense calm, Hizballah launched a new attack on Israeli outposts in the Sheba'a Farms. Its objective was to send a "swift and hot message to the U.S. administration and the international community from the Lebanese-Syrian-Iranian axis,"¹⁵⁷ as well as a "reminder and warning to Israel that it cannot go far in its aggression against the Palestinians while Washington is preparing for an attack against Iraq."¹⁵⁸

Several researchers have argued that Hizballah is becoming "lebanonised"—a reference to the process of "normalization" of its political activities and its gradual transformation into "a purely civilian political party accommodated by the Lebanese political system." Authors claim that Hizballah has given up its radical agenda and is integrating into national politics with a pragmatic strategy.¹⁵⁹ The gradual transformation of Hizballah is explained by a host of factors, including political changes occurring in Iran and the victory over the conservatives of the Iranian reformers, who encouraged Hizballah to "demilitarize its identity and build a broader base in society."¹⁶⁰

Middle East scholars Harb and Leenders are critical of authors like Harik, Alagha, and Saad-Ghorayeb, who fail to acknowledge or explain

the interactions between the social and military activity of the organization. Strikingly, observe Harb and Leenders, Hizballah's own answers are clearly at odds with the "lebanonisation" thesis. Hizballah views its military activities as an integral part of its *raison d'être*. Even if the party is not actually engaged in combat, it still reserves the right to use armed force for "prevention and defense," a right that is constantly reiterated and disseminated through the party's social and political activities.¹⁶¹

The Second Lebanon War has possibly dissipated the optimistic evaluations about Hizballah's "lebanonisation" and moderation.

Hamas

Since the outbreak of the "Al-Aqsa Intifada" in September 2000, the Hamas "military" wing has played a major role in perpetuating the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Syrian sponsorship clearly boosted its operational capabilities. A report by Arafat's security services addressed "the rush of forces from the ranks of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Lebanon to carry out martyrdom operations." Most of the deadliest Hamas suicide attacks have been linked to Damascus.¹⁶²

The al-Asad regime has spoken out publicly in defense of Hamas "martyrdom operations" and has even pressed state-appointed religious leaders to justify the attacks.¹⁶³ Syria has also been instrumental in supplying the needed weapons and explosives. In November 2001, Jordan arrested three members of Hizballah who attempted to smuggle Katyusha rockets from Syria to the West Bank, an audacious operation proudly acknowledged by Nasrallah.¹⁶⁴

During 2002, Hamas was forced to seek closer ties with Iran in order to compensate for a loss in funding from other sources. Since the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States, there has been increasing pressure on traditional pools of funds in the United States and Arab countries. The pressure exercised by Washington on Saudi Arabia, a major source of funding for Hamas, has not brought about the desired results, and the flow of money has continued. However, a serious blow has been dealt to the money trail from Palestinian charities based in the United States.¹⁶⁵

Following Yasser Arafat's death in November 2004 and the election of Mahmoud Abbas as Chairman of the PA in January 2005, Israel embarked, in the summer of 2005, on a process of disengagement from the Gaza Strip. After thirty-eight years of military occupation, the Sharon government

ordered the settlers and soldiers to withdraw. Hamas criticized the PA for a decade of negotiation with Israel that had reaped nothing in terms of ending occupation or achieving Palestinian statehood. Hamas presented the Israeli disengagement as an affirmation that its strategies for resistance had paid off and had led the Palestinian people to victory and that this could be converted into political power through participation in the legislative elections.¹⁶⁶

The January 2006 Palestinian elections were expected to stabilize highly negative domestic dynamics and bring Israelis and Palestinians back to the negotiating table. Instead, Hamas won 44% of the national vote and 56% of the seats of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). Hamas's electoral victory was immediately followed by a Quartet statement conditioning recognition of a Hamas government and continued financial support to the PA government on Hamas's meeting three requirements: recognition of Israel, acceptance of previous agreements signed by the PA and the PLO, and renunciation of violence.¹⁶⁷ Hamas was quick to reject all three. Once a Hamas government was in place, Israel stopped all revenue transfers to the PA.¹⁶⁸

One of the immediate consequences of the elections has been further deterioration in internal Palestinian conditions and the collapse of any hopes for immediate resumption of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. The year 2006 witnessed a significant increase in Israeli-Palestinian violence, despite the agreement in December on a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip. Similarly, intra-Palestinian violence threatened to escalate into civil war in the Gaza Strip, despite the continued efforts of Fatah and Hamas to put together a national unity government.¹⁶⁹

The new Hamas-led government increasingly gravitated towards Iran, as Iran increasingly cooperated with Hamas.¹⁷⁰ The 18-year struggle by Hizballah in Lebanon provided a model for what Tehran would like to recreate on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. "The strategy is to make the West Bank another Lebanon."¹⁷¹

Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh stated during a visit to Iran that Palestinians would never bow to pressure to recognize Israel and would keep fighting, thanks in part to support from Iran. Iran sent over \$120 million in 2006 to the PA to offset the shortfall caused by the Western financial blockade on the Hamas-led government.¹⁷²

In April 2006, Hojatoleslam Ali-Akbar Mohtashemipur, the Secretary General of the Iranian Conference in Support of Palestine's Intifada, told

participants that the creation of a Palestinian state would contribute to Iran's security.

What about Fatah/PA?

Despite the early friendship between Yasser Arafat and the Iranian ayatollahs, because of Arafat's long-term alignment with Saddam Hussein, mutual antagonism has long been a feature of their relations. Arafat's contacts with the Iranians increased after the Second Intifada was launched in September 2000.

After the capture of the merchant ship *Karine-A* in January 2002, carrying 50 tons of Iranian-supplied arms, including antitank weapons that could neutralize one of Israel's main military advantages and rockets that could reach most cities in Israel, American and Israeli intelligence officials concluded that Arafat had forged a new alliance with Iran, facilitated through the good offices of the Lebanese Hizballah.

The *Karine-A* affair may have resulted from a strategic decision by Arafat to collude with Iran because he concluded that the "peace strategy," used since the 1991 Madrid conference, had outlived its usefulness and run its course. Arafat may have concluded that the Arab states would never be enlisted in any operational sense in support of the Palestinians. In that light, the option of a sharply escalated military conflict with Israel made sense.¹⁷³

The “Axis” Involvement in Iraq

In November 2002, congressional elections in the United States demonstrated clear popular support for the Bush administration’s policy toward Iraq. This policy was further reinforced when the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1441 on November 8, essentially making an invasion of Iraq inevitable. In the wake of these developments, Iran, Hizballah, and Syria seemed to settle on yet another strategy. Although they accepted the inevitability of a U.S. war in Iraq, they predicted the emergence of a post-Saddam era allowing them to exploit their historical and religious ties to Iraqi Shiites.¹⁷⁴

Overall, Iran, Hizballah, and Syria seemed to believe that, given the difficulties U.S. forces would encounter in postwar Iraq, the Bush administration would be neither willing nor able to take forceful action against any of them in the short term. Therefore, they had a great deal of space in which to maneuver, provided they behaved cautiously.

Iran

Iran has a special relationship with the Iraqi Shia opposition. The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), led by Mohammad Baqer Hakim, was formed in Iran in 1982 in order to foster Iraqi opposition to Ba’ath aggression against Iran. Eventually, the organization’s aim became toppling Saddam’s regime.

Of great concern to U.S. officials is Iranian material support to Shia militias responsible for the ongoing sectarian violence, much of it in retaliation for Sunni violence against Shiites. Among these, the Badr Corps, (now renamed the Badr Organization)—the armed wing of The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—numbers about twenty thousand members formed, trained, and equipped by Iran’s Revolutionary Guard.¹⁷⁵

According to captured Iraqi intelligence reports (2001-2002), before the war there were several meetings between the command of the Badr Corps and Iraqi Shia tribes. The Badr Corps also met with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leadership in preparation for the U.S. invasion of Iraq.¹⁷⁶

On December 10, 2001, the Badr Corps organized a meeting in which the majority of its commanders and representatives from the Iraqi province

of Karbala were present. They discussed the probable U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Corps' preparations to reap the benefits from this opportunity. They decided that they must collect information about military units and government officials and carry out attacks on political parties' offices and other government offices. These forces were under the supervision of a senior Iranian intelligence officer, General Mhamde, who secretly traveled in and out of Iraq and had a business office in Sulaymania.¹⁷⁷

On March 11, 2004, Iranian intelligence opened an office in Najaf called "The Office to Help Poor Iraqi Shia." Through that office, they were able to recruit over 70,000 Iraqis from the south to join one of the militias loyal to Iran. According to a defecting Iranian Republican Guard Council (IRGC) officer, "the scale and breadth of Qods Force operations in Iraq are far beyond what we did even during the war with Saddam."¹⁷⁸

In the past two years, Iran has sent more than 2,000 students and religious scholars to Najaf and Karbala. About one-third of them belong to Iranian intelligence. It has also assigned representatives in major Shia cities to provide financial support to Shia students and school instructors. Iran has sent several Iraqi political figures who were living in Iran back to Iraq to infiltrate and obtain sensitive political positions in the new Iraqi government.¹⁷⁹

Prior to the 2005 Iraqi national election, Iran sent a large number of its agents as visitors to Shia shrines in order to influence and secure the necessary votes for the Shia party running in that election. The Shia United Iraqi Alliance consisted of eighteen conservative Shia Islamist groups, such as the Da'wa party, led by ex-Prime Minister Ibrahim al-aafari, the pro-Iranian Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, led by Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, the Iraqi Nationalist Sadr Movement, loyal to populist Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, and others.¹⁸⁰

Iraq's elected government is dangerously weak. If federalism in the Iraqi context were to lead to a Shia provincial grouping, as SCIRI's leadership had proposed, then the specter of a *de facto* Islamic Republic of Iraq might be more than fantasy.¹⁸¹

SCIRI and its competitors, Moqtada al-Sadr's followers, and the Fadhila Party are all political actors who contrast with the *hawza*, the religious establishment in Najaf, where there is an expectation that the clerics will remain outside of politics. In post-invasion Iraq, that ideal has not always been possible, even for Ayatollah Sistani, who urged his followers and community to cooperate with the Americans.

Sistani does not favor the Iranian state model, nor does he promote Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of *vilayet-e faqih* (rule of the jurist). The question is, then, whether the newly structured forms of democratic representation will irrevocably heighten the political aspects of Iraqi Shia Islamism.¹⁸²

SCIRI and its militias are just one worry. The Jaysh al-Mahdi, the militia forces of Moqtada al-Sadr, are culpable in the violence, and their pursuit of "Wahhabis" and other Sunnis is a definite concern. Moqtada is a populist figure who has attracted those elements that want a *qa'id* (leader) rather than a spiritual guide and prefer a less Iranian influenced figure. The leader of his father's devotees is Ayatollah Kadhim al-Ha'iri, who is in Iran and has now separated himself from Moqtada, at least, in part, because he cannot control him.¹⁸³

The Mahdi Army, formed by Sadr in mid-2003, might now number about sixty thousand fighters. The Mahdi Army's ties to Iran are less well-developed than are those of the Badr Brigades. U.S. military operations put down Mahdi Army uprisings in April 2004 and August 2004 in Sadr City, with compromises under which Mahdi forces stopped fighting in exchange for amnesty for Sadr himself.¹⁸⁴

Iran's security agencies are highly familiar with Iraq's physical and political terrain and are able to sustain an active intelligence presence in southern Iraq, Baghdad, and Kurdistan. Iranian levers of influence include a widespread network of paid informers, the increasingly assertive IRGC and petro-dollar funded religious propaganda, and social welfare campaigns. The International Crisis Group (ICG) claims that, while the record of the past two years suggests a solid Iranian motive to interfere in Iraq and indicates plenty of Iranian activity, it also indicates that this interference has produced little resonance among the Iraqis—because of their deep suspicion and resentment of their neighbor—and therefore, has had a negligible impact on Iraqi society.¹⁸⁵

Tehran's priority is to prevent Iraq from re-emerging as a threat, whether of a military, political, or ideological nature, and whether deriving from its failure (its collapse into civil war or the emergence of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan with huge implications for Iran's disaffected Kurdish minority) or its success (its consolidation as an alternative democratic or religious model appealing to Iran's disaffected citizens). Iran consequently is intent on preserving Iraq's territorial integrity, avoiding all-out instability, encouraging

a Shiite-dominated, friendly government, and, importantly, keeping the United States preoccupied and at bay.¹⁸⁶

The significance of the issue of Iranian influence in Iraq derives not only from the U.S. interest in stabilizing Iraq but also from tensions between the United States and Iran over Iran's nuclear and regional ambitions. Iran might be seeking to develop a broad range of options in Iraq that includes sponsoring violence to pressure U.S. and British forces to leave Iraq, or to bog down the United States militarily and thereby deter it from military or diplomatic action against Iran's nuclear program. On the other hand, Iran might not necessarily want attacks on U.S. forces because a U.S. departure from Iraq, if that were the result, might leave the pro-Iranian government in Baghdad vulnerable to collapse.¹⁸⁷

In December 2006, U.S. forces arrested two Qods Forces senior officers in the compound of SCIRI leader Hakim, where they were allegedly meeting with Badr Brigade leaders; the two were later released under Iraqi government pressure. In January 2007, another five Iranian agents were arrested in a liaison office in the Kurdish city of Irbil. They remain under arrest, and some speculate that the March 23, 2007, Iranian seizure of fifteen British sailors patrolling off Iraq's coast might have been an attempt to compel Britain to persuade the United States to release the five Iranian agents. The British sailors were released from Iran on April 5, 2007, two days after an Iranian diplomat, Jalal Sharafi, arrested in Iraq by Iraqi gunmen under unclear circumstances on February 4, 2007, was released.¹⁸⁸

U.S. officials, eager to try to stabilize Iraq, had tried to engage Iran. In December 2005, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad stated that he had received President Bush's approval to undertake negotiations with Iranian counterparts in an effort to enlist Iranian cooperation in Iraq.

Despite the burgeoning U.S.-Iran diplomacy on Iraq, the American administration has continued to pressure Iran on Iraq issues. On March 24, 2007, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1747 on the Iran nuclear issue. The Resolution has a provision banning arms exports by Iran, a provision clearly directed at Iran's arms supplies to Iraq's Shiite militias.

According to a comprehensive study by military historian Kimberley Kagan, Iran and its proxy Lebanese Hezbollah, have actively supported Shia and even Sunni resistance groups since 2003, providing arms and training so as to target Coalition and Iraqi forces and foment sectarian violence. Iranian influence has increased since 2003, spanning from Kurdistan to Basra; by

August 2006, roughly half of all attacks on Coalition forces were being attributed to Shia insurgent groups.¹⁸⁹

Beginning in 2003, Iran has worked to create a vast network to transport and distribute Iranian arms to insurgents across Iraq. Iranian and Hezbollah agents in Iraq began to recruit and train Shia militia members, including the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) of Moqtada al-Sadr, in 2003. These groups of twenty to sixty Iraqis, trained, armed, and funded by Hezbollah and Iran, are known as “Special Groups” or “secret cells.” Since the creation of militia training facilities in Iran in 2005, the number of secret cells in Iraq has grown, and they have become much more deadly. Many of these Special Groups have broken away from JAM militias and do not respond to Moqtada al-Sadr.¹⁹⁰

In May 2006, the Qods Force and Hezbollah reorganized the Special Groups in Iraq along a Hezbollah-like model. By June 2006, Qais Khazali, an Iraqi and former Sadrist, became the head of Special Groups in Iraq. This organization can operate within the umbrella of government institutions to undermine or replace the elected government of Iraq. They have targeted important government figures, Coalition forces, and Iraqi Security Forces. Special Groups have kidnapped or assassinated Iraqi government officials, individuals working for the government (including the November 15, 2006 mass kidnapping of employees from the Ministry of Education), and U.S. soldiers at the Karbala Provincial Joint Coordination Center. Iranian funded and made explosively formed projectiles (EFPs), rockets, and mortars have been provided to Iraqi insurgents.

Syria

Since the start of the Iraq war in March 2003, U.S. officials have repeatedly accused the Syrian government of tacitly permitting Syrian and other foreign fighters to cross into Iraq. Some speculate that even if the government is not actively encouraging militants to cross into Iraq, Syria stands to gain by exporting its own extremists to Iraq, where they are free to conduct terrorist operations.¹⁹¹

Syria has walked a fine line between constructive and obstructionist policies in Iraq since the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime. U.S. officials have charged that Syria is providing a sanctuary for former Iraqi Ba’athists coordinating insurgent activities in Iraq and that Syria is allowing pro-Saddam volunteer fighters from Arab countries to transit the Syrian-Iraqi border and augment the ranks of the Iraqi resistance.

According to U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad, Syria is the “number one offender” in the Middle East region working to impede the success of Iraq. The ambassador has said that Syrian interference in Iraq “will be dealt with” and “all options are on the table” for addressing the problem if Damascus does not change its approach toward Iraq.¹⁹²

At the same time, Syria has cautiously engaged with the interim Iraqi government, and the two parties restored full diplomatic ties in November 2004, after a break of nearly a quarter century.¹⁹³ During President Talabani’s January 2006 visit to Damascus, the two sides issued a statement emphasizing their mutual security interests and committing themselves to the goal of “ending the foreign military presence in the country.” Moreover, Talabani met the Ba’ath regional leadership in Damascus, and announced his readiness to cooperate with Iraqi Ba’athists who worked against Saddam Hussein’s regime.¹⁹⁴

Syrian interior minister Bassam Abdulmajid and Iraqi interior minister Jawad al-Bulani signed a five-year defense cooperation agreement that includes the exchange of information relevant to the fight against terrorism and organized crime, including smuggling and document counterfeiting, tighter monitoring of the shared border, and the training of Iraqi special forces units.¹⁹⁵

Hizballah

Hizballah began to direct its exhortations at the Iraqi Shia opposition once momentum toward war accelerated in late 2002. On October 14, Nasrallah deputy Naim Qassem urged them to avoid falling into “a state of fear or psychological collapse” in the face of “U.S. plans to attack the region.”¹⁹⁶ He claimed that such a war would bring about the end of America’s global “dominance.”¹⁹⁷

During the first days of Operation Iraqi Freedom, launched in March 2003, Qassem asserted that if the opposition showed sufficient motivation, “the U.S. invasion will face difficulties and suffer great losses...and international protests will disrupt the enemy’s plan.”¹⁹⁸ He also revealed that Hizballah leaders had held discussions with some Iraqi opposition factions regarding “possible options,” but that they had been “careful not to interfere and keep differences over certain details from going public.” Soon thereafter, Fadlallah became the first widely known Islamic figure to issue a fatwa prohibiting Muslims from helping the United States in its war on Iraq.¹⁹⁹ Nasrallah exhorted Iraqi factions and Arabs throughout the region to ensure that

the United States paid a high price for its invasion, whether through direct resistance or by pressuring Arab regimes to support the opposition.²⁰⁰

Since the U.S. military occupied Iraq, Hizballah has been in the background as a possible troublemaker, in line with its anti-American, anti-Western ideology and strategy and based on its historical ties to radical Shia movements in Iraq. One little-known fact regarding Hizballah is that members of the Lebanese branch of the Iraqi Islamic Da'wa Party were among the Hizballah's founders in 1982. Many of the terrorist operations against Gulf states during the 1980s were perpetrated by Hizballah cells or by local Shia groups that had received Hizballah training or support. The Iraqi Islamic Da'wa Party was involved in several of these operations.²⁰¹

Hizballah's actual connections to the Iraqi opposition have been evident since early in the war. In late March 2003, the Oman daily *al-Watan* claimed that the Shia opposition in Iraq included "the newly formed Iraqi Hizballah, whose emergence has raised questions about its links with its Lebanese counterpart," which itself "has become increasingly involved in the Iraqi issue." In June 2003, the London-based *al-Quds al-Arabi* reported that Hizballah had initiated secret contacts with supporters in Iraq to form a group that would serve as the organization's arm in Iraq.

By November 2003, Hizballah had reportedly "established a significant presence in Iraq," including a security team of up to 90 members. Because Hizballah members did not immediately participate in attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq, U.S. officials speculated that the organization's goal could be "to help the Iraqis politically" or to act as a deterrent in case Washington attempted to unleash the Mujahedin-e Khalq, an Iraq-based Iranian opposition group, against the regime in Tehran.

In November 2006, American intelligence sources stated that the Hizballah had been training in Lebanon 1,000 to 2,000 fighters from the Mahdi Army and other Shiite militias. A small number of Hizballah operatives had also visited Iraq to help with training. The militia members had learned weapons, bomb-making, intelligence, and assassination techniques. Iran has facilitated the link between Hizballah and the Shiite militias in Iraq. Syrian officials have also cooperated.

U.S. Brigadier General Kevin Bergner said, in July 2007, that a senior Hizballah operative, Ali Mussa Dakduk, was captured on March 20, 2007, in southern Iraq. He said Dakduk served for years in Hizballah and was working in Iraq as a "surrogate" for Iran's Qods Force.²⁰² This was the first time U.S.

military authorities in Iraq presented concrete evidence of Hizballah's direct involvement in the Shia violent activity against the U.S. coalition forces in connivance with Iran.

Hamas

Already, before the U.S. war against Iraq, the Hamas leadership expressed solidarity with the Saddam Hussein regime and gave him "operational" advice. In an article titled "Iraq Will Triumph, by Allah's Will," Hamas leader Abd al-Aziz al-Rantissi called on Iraq to establish a suicide army that would accept all jihad warriors, so as to halt the impending attack on the country.²⁰³

Hamas members see their battle against Israel as part of the same pan-Islamic struggle as the war being waged by former Ba'athists and Islamists against the United States in Iraq. Despite Hamas' emotive and inflammatory rhetoric on the situation in Iraq, there is no indication that its members have participated in the ongoing terrorist attacks there.²⁰⁴

It is of note that, after the war, Hamas showed more solidarity with the ruling Shiites than with the Sunni minority. On 12 August 2004, Hamas published through its official website a statement in support of the anti-American struggle in Najaf, and for solidarity with the Iraqi people. A week later, the movement published another statement with specific support for the Shia rebel leader Moqtada al-Sadr. The second one looked like "someone" put pressure on Hamas to correct its position and issue a specific statement of solidarity with Moqtada al-Sadr, the result of the growing operational and political connection of Hamas with Hizballah and Iran.²⁰⁵

According to an eye-witness report of January 2004, Hamas had an active office in the Shia town of Nasariah.²⁰⁶ Interestingly, in 2004, militants of Hamas were purchasing weapons and ammunition in Iraq and smuggling them to Jordan at the orders of Hamas leaders in Syria as part of a plot against vital installations and officials in Jordan. In April 2006, the Jordanian General Intelligence agency exposed the plot, intercepted some of the weapons, and arrested Hamas members involved in the planning.²⁰⁷

The Second Lebanon War (July–August 2006)

According to Pakistani scholar Sayyed, the summer 2006 crisis in Palestine and Lebanon is the direct result of the Iran-Hizballah-Hamas-Syrian alliance. The crisis began on June 16, 2006, when Iran and Syria signed an agreement to expand military cooperation against what they called the “common threats” posed by Israel and the United States.²⁰⁸

The Syrian defense minister stated that the two countries examined “ways of countering” American threats against Iran and Syria and “establishing a joint front against Israel’s threats...[since] Iran regards Syria’s security as its own.” Iran agreed to finance Syrian military deals with Russia, China, and Ukraine, to equip the Syrian army with cannon, warheads, army vehicles, and missiles manufactured by the Iranian Defense Industries, and to enable Syrian navy drills. On July 14, 2006, the Iranian president Ahmedinajad declared that any attack on Syria would be considered an attack on Iran and would be responded to with utmost force.²⁰⁹

Hamas fired the first salvo in the war against Israel by launching rockets at civilians and by abducting Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit on the morning of June 25, 2006. It is significant that this operation, orchestrated by the external Hamas leadership from Damascus, occurred one day before the signing of the relatively moderate “prisoners’ document” by the chairman of the PA, Mahmoud Abbas, and the internal Hamas leadership. The Hamas external leadership and its allies were afraid that the organization would be divested of its electoral victory or even constrained to soften its ideological doctrine and recognize Israel and the Oslo agreements.²¹⁰

The reaction by both Israel and the Palestinians to the abduction of the Israeli soldier was tragic. In a fortnight, Palestinians had killed three Israelis, and the Israelis, forty-two Palestinians. When Israel arrested eight Palestinian government ministers and sixty other officials, the crisis deepened further. Despite some two hundred air strikes, thousands of artillery shells, and 175 killed and 620 injured in Gaza, the iron-fist policy did not secure Shalit’s liberation.²¹¹

Hizballah followed by launching a cross-border raid into Israel on July 12, 2006, killing two Israeli soldiers and abducting another two. It is safe to assume that the Hizballah action was carried out under the obligations of an agreement reached between Meshal and Nasrallah that “resistance and steadfastness” is the only option.²¹²

Some, like Perthes, have argued that, as Hizballah had become more independent of Damascus since the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005, most likely high-level Syrian officials did not know about the 12 July raid. Nonetheless, Damascus quickly realized that the ensuing regional crisis could work to its advantage. By doing nothing and letting the conflict continue, Damascus could prove that its help would be necessary to bring stability and avert a larger conflagration.²¹³

It can be argued that the escalation on Israel's borders, set off by Hamas and Hizballah, was meant to take the pressure off Iran by triggering a major military clash in the Middle East, which would divert international attention from Iran's nuclear program. Specifically, the Hizballah intervention in the conflict, prepared strategically by Iran during the last six years by arming it with long range artillery and rockets, was meant to give a clear signal to the United States, the West, and Israel of what would happen if serious international sanctions would be imposed on Iran or if Iran's nuclear facilities would be destroyed by a U.S. or Israeli attack.²¹⁴

Lately, Sheikh Naim Qassem has candidly indicated Iran's role in Hizballah's strategy on all major issues, including the war with Israel:

*Hizballah, when it comes to matters of jurisprudence pertaining to its general direction, as well as to its jihad direction, based itself on the decisions of the Jurisprudent. It is the Jurisprudent who permits, and it is the Jurisprudent who forbids. Therefore, we covered our jihad position with regard to fighting Israel with the decision of the Jurisprudent... Even with regard to the firing of missiles on Israeli citizens, when they were bombing citizens on our side... This was done in order to put pressure on them. Even that required general permission based on Islamic law.*²¹⁵

And more recently, Nasrallah himself stated:

*I recommended Hizballah forces that they recite the "armored shield prayer" [during the fight against the Israelis]—the prayer about the divine connection with God... I was just the mediator who conveyed this recommendation. It was one of the instructions of Imam Khamenei. In the course of the war and Jihad in Lebanon, we visited the leader several times. At those meetings, he emphasized time and again the spiritual connection with God, the reliance on God, the connection with the Koran, and prayer.*²¹⁶

During a visit to Tehran in December 2005, Hamas leader Meshal said that his group would step up attacks against Israel if the Jewish state took military

action against Iran over its disputed nuclear program. “Just as Islamic Iran defends the rights of the Palestinians, we defend the rights of Islamic Iran. We are part of a united front against the enemies of Islam,” Meshal said. On January 20, 2006, Ahmadinejad visited Damascus and met with the leaders of ten radical Palestinian movements, including Islamic Jihad and Hamas. He stated that Iran “strongly supports the Palestinian people’s struggle.”²¹⁷

The Aftershock of the Second Lebanon War

Since the 2006 Hizballah-Israel war, the Middle East has clearly entered a new era. The possibility of a negotiated Arab-Israeli peace and of Arab progress toward democracy is dead; radical Islamism, whether or not it achieves political power, sets the agenda.²¹⁸

To a large extent, Israel, fighting on two fronts, was perceived by its moderate Sunni neighbors to be countering the spread of Islamist radicals, especially the pro-Iranian Shiites. First came the official Saudi Arabian, Egyptian, and Jordanian condemnation of Hizballah, and then came Salafi Sheikh Abdullah bin Jabreen’s *fatwa*: it is illegal for Muslims to join, support, or pray for the terrorist group Hizballah. The objective of the condemnation and the rulings are connected with the fact that Hizballah is a proxy of the only Shia state in the Muslim world, Iran, a country that, under the leadership of president Ahmadinejad, has rededicated itself to the export of Khomeini’s revolution and strives to be the regional superpower.²¹⁹

Sunni Arab leaders had felt threatened before the crisis by what King Abdullah of Jordan called “The Shiite Crescent,” stretching from Iran, across Iraq—where the Shia government is now in control—to Alawite-ruled Syria and to Hizballah in Lebanon.

Sunni Arab states are afraid that Iran’s successes in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine will directly benefit the Shiites in Iraq and will consequently embolden and empower the Shiites in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and other Middle Eastern states. They are hoping that by reinvigorating the Sunni-Shia conflict, they will be able to prevent the Sunnis from rallying around Iran.²²⁰

The fact that Israel has not succeeded in decisively defeating Hizballah, thus allowing its sponsors, Iran and Syria, to emerge as the winners of this confrontation, has persuaded the Sunni Arab moderate states—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Gulf emirates—that they share a common enemy with Israel and that they should find a way to challenge together the radical Shiite coalition.²²¹

In a noteworthy interview on January 28, 2007, Saudi King ‘Abdullah Bin ‘Abd Al-’Aziz clearly described the threat: “We see internal discord in Palestine, destructive discord in Lebanon and lethal discord in Iraq.” The Arab world needs “a coordinated position, a unified decision, and unified action...with respect to the major issues. We should not let other countries interfere in our affairs.”²²² The Saudi leaders decided to invest their efforts in two major conflicts that are vital to Israeli strategic interests—the Lebanese and Palestinian arenas—besides their active involvement in the Iraqi arena.

The Lebanese Arena

On December 26, 2006 a meeting took place between Saudi King Abdullah and a Hizballah delegation led by Sheikh Naim Qassem, the first such contact with the Shiite party. Following Saudi pressure, a draft agreement was drawn up between the anti-Syrian March 14 Forces and Hizballah, reflecting partial concessions by both sides.²²³ However, Nasrallah rejected the draft agreed upon in contacts between Iranian Supreme National Security Council Chairman Ali Larijani and the Saudi leadership because it did not include acceptance of early parliamentary elections.²²⁴

Larijani met with Syrian officials and a Hizballah delegation in Damascus and was heavily criticized for accepting the inclusion in the draft agreement of the International Court for the trial for Hariri’s assassination. The talks ended with Syria’s rejection of the draft agreement, and the Hizballah-led opposition escalated its violent protest, threatening to “paralyze life in Lebanon” and open the “second phase of the intifada.”²²⁵

By mid-April, after weeks of violent confrontations between the Siniora government’s law enforcement forces and the Hizballah-led opposition forces, they were still at a stalemate, probably because Tehran advised Hizballah leaders not to escalate the situation as long as they hoped to achieve some understanding with the Saudis. The two opposed Lebanese camps are apprehensive of a renewed civil war; they are trying to avoid it, but at the same time, they are preparing and arming for the possibility in the near future.

While the July-August 2006 Israeli campaign was sufficiently destructive to render future cross-border raids politically unthinkable for Hizballah and provided a reason for the deployment of 13,000 UNIFIL peacekeepers in south Lebanon, it nevertheless bolstered public support for Hizballah among Shiites and, to some extent, non-Shiites. Moreover, the war undermined public confidence in the March 14 coalition. Because of the Bush administration’s staunch public support for the Israeli campaign, the war led to an upsurge in

public hostility to the United States. By sealing off Hizballah's access to the battlefield, the war provided an incentive for Hizballah "to fight injustices closer to home."²²⁶

The Palestinian Arena

Following the January 2006 PA elections, Hamas reportedly asked Iran for guidance, instructions, and financial assistance as it prepared to take over the Palestinian government. Iran has promised to give assistance to the security forces of the Hamas-led, new Palestinian government. The promise came during a visit to Teheran by Palestinian Interior Minister Said Siyam, who met with President Ahmadinejad and supreme leader Khamenei. Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh told Iranians that Palestinians would never bow to pressure to recognize Israel and would keep fighting, thanks in part to support from Iran. "We have a strategic depth here in the Islamic Republic of Iran and throughout the Islamic-Arabic world," he said.²²⁷

Yuval Diskin, the head of Israel's domestic intelligence agency, said that Iran was giving advanced military training to members of Hamas, a move he called a "strategic danger" to the Jewish state. Hamas had dispatched "tens" of fighters from the Gaza Strip to Iran for "months, maybe years" of instruction, and Iran had promised to train hundreds more.²²⁸

The Saudis acted therefore on two levels: to pacify the escalating fighting between Fatah and Hamas, which threatened to degenerate into a civil war and spill over to Egypt and Jordan, and to press on Israel the "old" Saudi plan for a comprehensive Arab-Israel peace.

The Mecca Agreement

The Saudi diplomatic activism occurred at a time when Egypt's ability to be a broker in Israel-Palestinian relations had deteriorated significantly in Israeli eyes: Egypt had continued to allow large quantities of arms to be smuggled from Sinai into Gaza; Cairo failed in the mediation between the warring Fatah and Hamas factions; and it had also failed in achieving an agreement on the issue of the Israeli soldier kidnapped in June 2006.

On February 8, 2007, Saudi leaders brought warring Fatah and Hamas leaders together in Mecca to hammer out an agreement on a unity government that would end the internecine violence and the chaos in the Palestinian territories. The Mecca Agreement reflected basic conclusions reached by Hamas and Fatah that neither can defeat the other, and it represented a

chance to arrest the slide toward civil war. Actually, the Mecca agreement focused only on establishing Palestinian unity and ignored the peace process because, for the Saudis, the most important issue was to prevent the PA from succumbing to Iranian influence.²²⁹ The agreement was a victory at points by Hamas leaders, who did not compromise on any of their ideological and strategic goals in exchange for a unity government that gave them the opportunity to obtain international legitimacy and financial support.

Even after the agreement, Hamas forces continued to expand quickly and to get more sophisticated weapons and training from Iran.²³⁰ IDF Southern Commander, General Yoav Galant, confirmed previously unverified Palestinian reports that Iranian experts are training Palestinian terror organizations in the Gaza Strip. The Iranians are also the source of most of the know-how coming to the West Bank.²³¹

The PA, for its part, with the assistance of the U.S. security coordinator to the PA, implemented a plan of reinforcement of the Presidential Guard with weapons, ammunition, equipment, training, and funds. Egypt and Jordan, with Persian Gulf countries' funding, have agreed to train the 1,500 soldiers of the Presidential Guard to be deployed in Gaza.²³²

Hamas itself seems to have split into three groups: the faction led by Khaled Meshal, the secretary general, based in Damascus, who “made a strategic decision to ‘lower his profile’ as part of an effort to disguise himself as a moderate”; the “rejectionists,” led by former interior minister Said Siam and former foreign minister Mahmoud Zahar, who accuse Haniyeh and Meshal of betraying Hamas voters by agreeing to form a coalition with Fatah and claim that the Mecca agreement is nothing but a plot designed to remove Hamas from power; and the most radical faction, based in Gaza, which is led by Ahmed Jaabri, the head of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam brigades.²³³

As predicted, the unity government arrangement was flawed from the outset, leaving the cardinal issue of who would exert control over the Palestinian security forces unresolved, and thus planting the seeds for the latest surge of violence. In mid-May 2007, three months after the signing of the Mecca agreement, the Hamas-Fatah bloodletting erupted again, with street battles claiming close to fifty lives, the better-armed Hamas militants holding the upper hand, with Fatah forces suffering most of the casualties.

Hamas finally took over Gaza in June 2007 by military coup. Fatah's armed forces collapsed in the face of a long-planned, well-executed campaign targeting the headquarters and leadership of the PA's security organizations.

Fatah's collapse was largely due to the weakness of their leadership, which failed to mobilize the faction's superior numbers to thwart the assaults. The coup and the horrid violence that accompanied it reveal much about Hamas' politics and long-term objectives. The extent of the planning required for Hamas' operations indicate that the group was preparing even before it became clear that the Mecca accord would not succeed. In a 15 June press conference in Damascus, Khaled Meshal presented Hamas' objectives: force Abbas to implement the terms of the Mecca accord concerning Hamas' integration into the security forces and into the official organs of the PLO; defeat Fatah's forces in Gaza before they could be strengthened from the outside; and reestablish internal security within Gaza.²³⁴

Hamas has made undeniable strides in restoring order, and Gazans testify to feeling more secure, but the Islamists' takeover of all PA institutions, the curtailment of basic freedoms, and the harassment of Fatah members bode ill. Hamas is now accountable to the people of Gaza, and they must figure out a way to feed the 1.4 million residents while faced with the closing of vital crossing points, the sharp drop in trade, and the accelerating humanitarian crisis.

Hamas's victory and President Abbas's dismissal of the national unity government with Hamas and appointment of one led by Salam Fayyad represent a watershed in the Palestinian national movement's history. The question is whether it is possible to ensure security and move toward a two-state settlement with a politically and geographically divided Palestinian polity. Paradoxically, the more successful the strategy of strengthening Abbas and advancing the peace negotiations between the Palestinians and Israel, the greater Hamas' motivation to sabotage it.²³⁵

The United States and Western Strategies in Challenging the “Axis of Destabilization”

U.S. – Iranian Crises of the 1980s

On November 1, 1979, revolutionary Iran’s new prime minister, foreign minister, and minister of defense met Carter’s national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in Algiers. The Iranians demanded that the terminally ill Shah, brought to the United States the week before, be turned over to them for trial. Brzezinski refused.

Three days later, the U.S. embassy in Tehran was seized. Carter responded with attempts at conciliation, yet his letter to Khomeini, “from one believer to a man of God,” seemed only to reinforce the supreme leader’s conviction that “America cannot do a damn thing.”²³⁶ In April 1980, Carter aborted Operation Eagle Claw, a Delta Force mission that left a transport plane, seven helicopters, and eight dead servicemen behind in the Iranian desert. The 444 days of the Tehran hostage ordeal of forty-four diplomats representing the most powerful state in the world can be considered as the first “military” victory of the modern Islamist wave. President Carter himself considered the hostage crisis to be the foremost of three issues leading to his failure to be re-elected.

The United States eventually negotiated the release of the hostages by promising not to intervene in Iranian affairs, unfreezing \$11 billion in frozen assets, and freezing the Shah’s family’s property. The successful negotiations ending the hostage crisis coincided with President Ronald Reagan’s inauguration on January 20, 1981.²³⁷

In order to understand current U.S.-Iranian relations, it is essential to understand the situation in 1983. As one scholar has put it, “The United States, by leading the multinational force in Lebanon, providing aid to Iraq, and attempting to broker an Arab-Israeli peace” continued to stand in the way of Iran’s leadership and its strategy of exporting the Islamic Revolution.²³⁸

The April 18, 1983, bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut was the first large-scale attack against a U.S. embassy anywhere in the world. The Shia group, al-Jihad al-Islami, that claimed responsibility for the attack also claimed responsibility for a number of Americans kidnapped in Lebanon at that time. Several of the abducted, including the CIA’s Beirut station chief, William Buckley, were held by the IRGC in eastern Lebanon.

The embassy bombing had little impact on U.S. foreign policy, which remained focused on its primary regional objective of achieving an Israeli-Lebanese agreement that could serve as a foundation for a broader Arab-Israeli peace. Reagan declared that the “criminal attack on a diplomatic establishment will not deter [the United States] from [its] goals of peace in the region.”²³⁹

But by the end of August 1983, the United States appeared unlikely to remain in Lebanon. Congress invoked the War Powers Resolution, which requires the president to either withdraw troops within 60 to 90 days or gain Congressional approval for their use in combat. Secretary of State George Shultz helped to turn the tide, arguing that a withdrawal from Lebanon would have disastrous consequences. On October 12, 1983, Congress approved the extension of the Marine deployment for an additional eighteen months.

Two weeks later, an Iranian named Ismalal Ascari detonated a truck in the center of the Marine barracks in Beirut, “the largest conventional blast ever seen by the FBI’s forensic explosive experts.” Three developments had incited Iran to drastically escalate its actions in Lebanon: the congressionally approved extension of the Marine deployment; America’s inaction in the face of the attack on the embassy in April 1983; and the aid provided to Iraq by France, another member of MNF in Lebanon.²⁴⁰

Yet, as with the embassy bombing, the American response “was rhetorically firm but substantively hollow.” The day after the attacks, Shultz declared that “President Reagan is determined that we will not be driven out of Lebanon by the enemies of peace.... We will stay, and we will carry out our mission.” The Reagan Administration let the French strike alone at a Hizballah camp. Robert Gates, then with the CIA, wrote in his memoir that “the downside of an attack on Iran, to everyone’s regret, outweighed how much Iran deserved punishment... a limited attack would make things worse.”²⁴¹

If we are driven out of Lebanon, Shultz said on the day after the barracks bombings, “it will be a major blow to the American position in the Middle East and radical and rejectionist elements will have scored a major victory. If we want the role and influence of a great power, then we have to accept the responsibilities of a great power.”²⁴²

At the end of February 1984, the last Marines departed Lebanon. The two attacks on the MNF had eroded Western support of Iraq and forced the expulsion from Lebanon of the Western powers that had been keeping the country from complete disintegration.

Bin Laden has spoken admiringly about the attack: “We have seen in the last decade,” he said in a 1998 interview, “the decline of the American government and the weakness of the American soldier who is ready to wage Cold Wars and unprepared to fight long wars. This was proven in Beirut when the Marines fled after two explosions.”²⁴³ Similarly, in 2005, Nasrallah boasted: “Are you Lebanese afraid of the American naval fleets? These naval fleets have come in the past, and were defeated, and if they come again, they will be defeated again.”²⁴⁴

For many, 9/11 added credibility to Shultz’s notion that perceptions of America’s resolve had more consequence than what Caspar Weinberger (at the time the Secretary of Defense and opponent of any retaliation against the perpetrators) dismissed as a concern with demonstrating “manhood.” After 9/11, even Weinberger stated that America’s displays of weakness during the Clinton administration had invited attack.²⁴⁵

In December 1983, two vehicles exploded in short succession at the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait and four car bombs exploded at separate locations throughout the country, resulting in six deaths and more than eighty injuries. Once again, responsibility was claimed by Islamic Jihad.

The Kuwaiti authorities apprehended the organizer of the attacks, Mustafa Yusuf Badreddin.²⁴⁶ The majority of those arrested and tried for the Kuwait bombings belonged to the al-Da’wa Iraqi opposition party trained in Iran. Kuwait sentenced several of the apprehended to death. The remaining group, although it included Lebanese members of Hizballah, was primarily Iraqi. The group became known as the Da’wa 17 prisoners. Seeking the release of the Da’wa 17 would be central over the coming years to the anti-American violence initiated by Iran and Hizballah.

After a long series of suicide attacks, hijackings of planes, and hostage taking, on June 14, 1985, Hizballah hijacked TWA 847, a daily flight from Athens to Rome, and shot a U.S. Navy diver passenger in the head and threw his body on the tarmac. They demanded the release of the Da’wa prisoners and of 766 Lebanese Shiite detainees, most of them captured in attacks against Israeli forces in Southern Lebanon. The half-month-long crisis finally ended when Israel released all 766 by mid-September. Neither the Da’wa prisoners nor the seven previously abducted Americans were released.

The TWA crisis formed the moral and strategic foundation for the series of arms-for-hostages deals known as Irangate. The slippery slope that started with the exchange of American TWA hostages for prisoners held by Israel, at a

ratio of nearly one to twenty, descended into American hostages exchanged for Israeli-owned, American-replenished arms, and, finally, the direct exchange of American hostages for American arms.²⁴⁷

The Reagan administration's fear of confronting Iran did not prevent it from choosing an alternative, relatively defenseless target on which to display American strength. "The process of elimination brought CIA to Libya," Gates wrote, referring to the bombing raids on that country in April 1986, "Ironically, Libya had been reluctant to attack the United States directly out of fear of retaliation. But because it was in the poorest position to sustain itself against U.S. actions—military or economic—it became the target for U.S. retaliation against all state-supported terrorism."²⁴⁸

In spite of President George H.W. Bush's repeated conciliatory gestures, it was only after America's overwhelming success in the Persian Gulf War (during which the Da'wa prisoners had escaped from Kuwait) that Iran released the final handful of American hostages in Lebanon.

The Iranian leaders continued with attacks well into the 1990s. The 1996 bombing that killed nineteen U.S. airmen and wounded 372 people at the Khobar Towers housing complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, was approved by Ayatollah Khamenei. Louis Freeh, FBI Director during President Clinton's administration, wrote on the tenth anniversary of the attack "that Mr. Clinton and his national security adviser, Sandy Berger, had no interest in confronting the fact that Iran had blown up the towers."²⁴⁹

"Critical Dialogue" viz. "Dual Containment"

The policies of the leading European countries and the United States toward Iran appear to be the key determinant in Iranian actions. The record shows that a tough policy leads to reduced terror, while a more accommodating approach leads to more terror.²⁵⁰

In July 1992, at the Group of Seven leading industrial states (G-7) summit in Munich, the United States proposed a strong condemnation of Iranian policies concerning terrorism, human rights, and nuclear armament. The Europeans opposed the American initiative, leading to its withdrawal. In December 1992, at their summit meeting in Edinburgh, the EU countries, led by France and Germany, opened what they called a "critical dialogue" with Iran, a combination of quiet diplomatic pressures and generous economic advantages. They did this in the conviction it would strengthen Iranian

president Rafsanjani's position in internal struggles against "the radicals" who they thought forced an aggressive foreign policy on him.

Soon after, the Clinton administration responded with the "dual containment" policy, which sought to neutralize Iraq and induce Iran to improve its behavior. Washington limited American investments in Iran and banned the sale of advanced technology to it, hoping that this pressure would induce Tehran to reduce its support for terrorism, its opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process, and its quest for non-conventional weapons.

The EU and Japan continued their "critical dialogue" and increased economic assistance and investments in Iran, keeping Iran from becoming internationally isolated and thus implicitly supporting the continuation of Iran's aggressive policies. A sign of possible European change in approach came at the G-7 summit in Halifax, Canada, in June 1995, (attended by Russia), when, for the first time, the final resolution urged Iran to abandon terrorism.

The Europeans criticized Iran's opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process and called for an end to its support for the terrorist organizations assaulting Israel. Also in 1995, a French judge successfully pursued investigations concerning Iranian terrorist attacks on French soil; meanwhile, French police cracked down on Iranian diplomats suspected of involvement in Algerian terrorist activity. In Germany, two Iranian intelligence agents were expelled in connection with a plan to assassinate Iranian opposition leaders in that country.

For the first time, the Iranian regime sensed European and American resolve, with possible Russian support, and it feared isolation, with all its political, economic, and internal consequences. The West's tough approach explains Iran's sudden and dramatic drop in support for international terrorism from June 1995 to spring 1996—excepting their support to Palestinian terrorism against Israel.

But this policy of confrontation proved to be short-lived. Subsequent G-8 summits did not mention Iranian involvement in international terrorism. The Sharm-el-Sheikh conference of March 1996—called by President Clinton after a wave of deadly suicide attacks carried out by Islamic organizations in Israel—did not allude to the Iranian part in devising and glorifying these acts of terror; the EU and Arabs leaders feared that this would reinforce "radical elements" in Tehran.

Europe viz. Iran

Unlike the United States, the EU has never totally withdrawn its presence from Iran, and even at times of political problems, trade between the EU member states and Iran continued. Two major issues tested the relations between Tehran and the Europeans.²⁵¹

The first was the *fatwa* issued by the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in February 1989, to kill the British novelist Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses*, ostensibly as an insult to the Muslim prophet Muhammad. Khomeini died shortly after issuing the *fatwa*, and the authorities in Iran have been unable to override it, since such an act would be regarded as an insult to the founder of the Islamic Republic. The death sentence on Rushdie, while still technically in effect, was removed as an impediment in Iran-EU relations in 1998 when the reformist President Mohammad Khatami said that the Rushdie Affair should be considered to be completely finished.²⁵²

British conduct during this period underscores this point. One of the promoters of critical dialogue with Iran in 1992, London became increasingly suspicious of this approach, firmly demanding the revocation of the Rushdie *fatwa* and taking all measures to prevent any Iranian act of terror. Significantly, no Iranian terrorist activity took place on British soil.

The second issue was the 1992 assassination of four Kurdish dissidents in Berlin's Mykonos restaurant. In April 1997, a German court in Berlin found members of the Iranian government, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, guilty of this crime. The verdict asserted that the government of Iran had followed a deliberate policy of liquidating the regime's opponents who lived outside Iran. The court stated that Tehran chose Berlin as the venue for the attack because of "good relations" with the Federal Republic of Germany, which gave the mullahs reason to believe that terrorism "would not be followed by any serious reactions by the German state."

The European reaction to the Berlin verdict was to recall all EU ambassadors to Tehran and stop the "critical dialogue" that had marked EU policy towards Iran. The "Mykonos Affair" was resolved by Khatami's dismissal of intelligence chief Hojatoleslam 'Ali Fallahiyan, the person identified as ordering the assassination. Amid some political face-saving stratagems, the Europeans decided to return their ambassadors to Tehran.²⁵³

In January 1998, the EU lifted the ban on contacts with Iran imposed because of the Mykonos Affair, and six months later, European diplomats in Brussels decided to resume the policy of critical dialogue with Iran that had been the basis of EU relations with Iran since December 1992. In 1999, the EU moved from its policy of “critical dialogue” to a more conciliatory policy of “constructive dialogue.” At this stage, the United Kingdom followed its European partners by sending then Foreign Secretary Robin Cook to Tehran.

The Rushdie and Mykonos cases are illustrative of the nature of Iranian relations with the EU in general. When political problems arise, diplomatic efforts and time have been utilized to keep the relations from deteriorating further. Trade, however, has always played a major factor. For example, in the case of the Mykonos Affair, the Iranians indicated that what had allowed the European envoys’ return was the September 1997 agreement between the National Iranian Oil Company and an international consortium led by the French oil giant Total SA to explore natural gas in Iran’s offshore South Pars field.

The French Case

In the negotiations concerning the end of the 1985-87 wave of Hizballah/Iranian attacks in France, Iran’s main demands included the release of a number of Iranians detained in France on charges of terrorism; the renegotiation of a \$1Billion loan from Iran to France, which Paris had stopped repaying when French assets were seized by Iran during the 1979 revolution; and the cancellation of French weapons sales to Iraq. France surrendered on all fronts. In late 1987 some hostages were released. Others were freed in early 1988. In 1987, the French authorities allowed Iranian diplomat Wahid Gordji, who was wanted in connection with a wave of terror attacks in France in 1986, to leave the country. In 1990, five Iranians led by Anis Naccache, convicted ten years earlier of trying to kill former Iranian Prime Minister Chapur Bakhtiar, were pardoned. The French government admitted discussing the loan dispute, which was mostly settled in 1991. In August 1991, in spite of its promise to stop terrorism on French soil, Tehran organized the successful assassination—in Paris—of the same Chapur Bakhtiar.

The Nuclear File

Organizationally, the EU had been reluctant to challenge Iran on reports that the country had a clandestine nuclear weapons program or was in violation of its safeguards agreements with the IAEA. As late as May 2003,

the EU failed to discuss officially the case of Iran in international forums on nuclear weapons proliferation, despite information about undeclared sites in Iran being allegedly used for nuclear activities.²⁵⁴

The European attitude shifted dramatically with the issuance of the IAEA report of 6 June, 2003, which confirmed allegations that Iran was involved in illicit nuclear activities and had failed “to meet its obligations under its Safeguards Agreement with the respect of reporting of nuclear material, the subsequent processing and use of that material and the declaration of facilities where the material was stored and processed.”²⁵⁵

The EU followed up on June 16 with a strong statement directly linking trade and other bilateral relations with Tehran to the WMD program of Iran, for the first time since the inception of the “critical dialogue” policy in 1992. The “critical dialogue” had failed to change Iran’s behavior in key areas of concern, including Tehran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles.

Following the issuance of the IAEA report and a show of strong international—including European—concern regarding Iran’s nuclear intentions, Tehran took steps to rectify some safeguard questions addressed by the IAEA. Nevertheless, and typical of its attempts to gain more bargaining chips and time in its dealing with the IAEA, Iran introduced nuclear material into its Natanz plant.

European efforts to extend incentives to Iran so that it would cease uranium enrichment contrasted with the American administration’s initial approach to the dilemma. The United States offer to join multi-state negotiations with Iran in June 2006, breaking with twenty-seven years of official silence, was conditional on Iran’s promise to give up uranium enrichment.²⁵⁶

Syria

The United States had also applied pressure on Syria to stop terrorist groups from operating on its soil. In July 1999, Syrian Vice President Khaddam convened a meeting of Palestinian extremist groups in Damascus and told them that they must adopt peaceful means of expressing their opposition to the peace process (this speech may have been a precondition for the start of Israeli-Syrian negotiations in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, five months later). Following the breakdown of talks in early 2000, however, Hamas was back in business. The al-Asad regime even allowed the Hamas leaders who had been kicked out of Jordan to resume their political activities in Syria.

Bashar al-Asad withdrew from Lebanon but kept the security and economic assets in place. Almost twenty major bombings and assassinations have shown the Lebanese that Syrian interests had better be attended to; and although Bashar apparently got into some trouble by killing Rafik Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister, he eliminated the only man who could unite the country and stand up to Hizballah. On the Iraqi front, starting in 2003, he has been waging war against America at almost no cost to himself.²⁵⁷

Some U.S. officials have advocated stern policy measures toward Syria in order to demonstrate U.S. dissatisfaction with its perceived interference in Iraq, its support for Palestinian terrorist groups, and its violations of Lebanese sovereignty. On November 20, 2003, Congress passed the Syria Accountability Act (P.L. 108-175), which authorized the President to impose economic sanctions on Syria. The President chose the ban on exports to Syria other than food and medicine and the ban on Syrian aircraft landing in or overflying the United States. Some have proposed funding groups inside Syria to promote political reform and to condemn human rights violations against reformists in Syria. Others have cautioned against isolating Syria and have advocated offering incentives to secure cooperation in stabilizing Iraq and fighting international terrorism.²⁵⁸

In general, unilateral U.S. sanctions have not modified the regime's behavior or destabilized Asad's hold on power.²⁵⁹

Some analysts assert that the United States should work with the EU to exert pressure on Syria due to the EU's more extensive relationship with Syria. The EU, through its near-decade-old Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, has sought to improve its ties to Syria, and European officials have defined their policy toward Syria as one of "critical and constructive engagement." Some observers believe that EU concerns about human rights and reform in Syria could provide an opportunity for U.S. policymakers to push for conditions to be placed on EU aid to Syria.²⁶⁰

The West in general, and America in particular, are perceived by Syria "not only as too craven to fight, but so stupid as to be easily outmaneuvered." Experience gives them reasons for thinking this way.²⁶¹

Israel's Counter-terrorism Strategy

The Palestinians

Contrary to ex-prime minister Itzhak Shamir's perception of the facts, at the end of the 1980s the IDF was unable to properly handle the Palestinian Intifada (the popular uprising) and had scored only limited success in the fight against Hizballah in Lebanon. Other cabinet members in his government, such as Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin, maintained that, concurrently with military action against the Palestinian organizations, Israel must push forward political initiatives that would bring an end to the conflict; and these members gained more clout over time.²⁶²

Peres and Rabin as prime ministers continued the policies of their predecessors in hostage situations: when a military solution was not viable, they were ready to make the needed concessions to the terrorists. In the "Jibril deal" of May 1985, concluded by Prime Minister Peres, three Israeli soldiers held by the PFLP-GC since the Lebanon war were exchanged for 1,150 prisoners held in Israel. The number of terrorists who were released from prison, the severity of the crimes they had committed, and the government's willingness to allow them to return to territories controlled by Israel, were all unparalleled.

However, Shamir's governments and the unity governments upheld and even radicalized their predecessors' formal hard line: no negotiating with terrorist organizations. This policy materialized in a law that forbade any contact with PLO representatives.

The Counter-terrorism Policy of the Rabin Government (1992–1996)

The Oslo Accords and the establishment of the autonomous PA made it necessary for Israel to formulate a new counter-terrorism strategy. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's declared policy dissociated the peace process from reactions to terrorist attacks against Israel: "we will fight terror as if there is no negotiation and we will negotiate as if there is no terror." In other words, the peace process continued even after mass-casualty attacks in Israel, and counter-terrorist activity persisted regardless of the formal and informal restrictions imposed by the peace process. As a result, the PA had no incentive to destroy the Hamas infrastructure or even to pressure the organization to refrain from carrying out attacks on Israeli soil.

Rabin, as the first Israeli leader to declare that terrorism is a strategic threat, referred to it only as a threat to the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, and he never backed up his declaration by action.

The policy followed by Israel during this period failed spectacularly. Counter-terrorist warfare was subjected to a long list of restrictions, some of which were imposed by the Oslo agreements, while others were the result of self-restraint, so as not to jeopardize the peace process. Moreover, even the attempt to move ahead with the peace process, regardless of terrorism, proved a failure because public opinion demanded that the Palestinians meet expectations, comply with their undertakings, and thwart terrorism.

It was during this period that Jewish settler violence reached its climax, with the first political assassination of an Israeli Prime Minister, Rabin, by a Jewish religious extremist. It was also during this period that terrorism's effect on public morale in Israel was at its peak and influenced political views and processes in Israel both directly and indirectly. The clearest expression of this public sentiment was the defeat of the Labor party in the June 1996 elections, which led to the return to power of the Likud party, primarily because of the sense that personal safety had been seriously compromised.

The Counter-terrorism Policy of Netanyahu's Government (1996–1999)

Compared to twenty-one suicide bombings under the previous government, only three such attacks took place during Benjamin Netanyahu's term; the number of shooting incidents, hand grenades, and bombs, dropped from around 1,000 during Rabin and Peres' governments to 250 under Netanyahu; the number of Israelis who were killed in terrorist attacks fell from 245 to 70. The improvement has been attributed to pressure applied by Israel that heightened motivation on the part of the PA to curb terrorism. Unlike his predecessors Rabin and Peres, Netanyahu tried to use the political channel as an operative lever to prevent terrorism in Israel. However, at times the complexities of real life compelled Netanyahu to behave in a manner contrary to the policies he professed in his books on terrorism.

Thus, Netanyahu preferred to let the then Hamas Secretary General Mousa Abu Marzuk, who had been extradited from the United States to Israel, be sent to Jordan. In 1997 he liberated from jail Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the leader of Hamas in Gaza, as a "gesture" to King Hussein of Jordan after a botched assassination attempt in Amman on the life of Khaled Meshal, another Hamas leader.

Syria

The Turkish Lesson

Until 1995-96, Turkey's foreign policy had been dominated by caution, passivity, and adherence to the status quo.²⁶³ For years, Ankara tried, to no avail, to coerce Syria through political and economic pressure to cease supporting the Kurdish separatist organization *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK). It signed agreement after agreement but found that the Syrian regime violated every one of them.

Changes on the Turkish side first occurred in September 1998 when Ankara began a series of political and military maneuvers, including an ultimatum from Turkey's President Süleyman Demirel that if Damascus did not cease supporting the PKK, the military option would be used. The Turks backed up their demands with high-profile military moves of an unprecedented nature: pilots flying reconnaissance sorties along the Syrian border received advance permission to open fire in the event of any Syrian harassment; mechanized units took over border patrols; the army canceled leaves and recalled personnel to bases of the Second Army; and plans were made to evacuate the families of Turkish diplomats from Damascus.

This tough stance won support from virtually every other quarter, including the military, the media, and the public at large, all of whom had grown increasingly disillusioned with Ankara's inconclusive peace overtures to Syria since 1985.

To the surprise of most observers, Hafez al-Asad meekly accepted the Turkish ultimatum. On October 20, 1998, the governments of Turkey and Syria signed the Adana agreement, a remarkable document. In it, Damascus pledged to cease all aid to the PKK and to deport its leader Abdullah Öcalan from Syria, a total Syrian surrender to Turkish demands.²⁶⁴ Reasons for this might include: the evident resolve of a country of 65 million inhabitants, with the second-largest army in the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO), to use military force; the fear of a Turkish-Israeli alliance that would find Syria in a two-front war; and the perception that the PKK had become a liability.

The stunning success of this muscle-flexing raised an obvious question: could Israel, which had many similar problems with Asad as the Turks, also impose its will on the Syrian dictator by threatening him? Could Damascus thereby be compelled to cease its support for Hizballah terrorist and guerrilla

activities in Lebanon against Israel, or give up its sponsorship of extremist Palestinian groups?

Since 1973, Israeli governments have seen in Hafez al-Asad the guarantor of a quiet Golan frontier, so they have done little to prevent his aggressive policy in Lebanon or his sabotage of negotiations with the Palestinians.

Jerusalem has relied on a policy of reaching understandings with Damascus about “red lines” for the Syrian presence in Lebanon and its support for the Hizballah activity in southern Lebanon—only to find that these, too, were constantly broken. Jerusalem responded to the Syrian support for Hizballah and Hamas terrorism campaigns during the delicate negotiations at Wye Plantation in early 1996 by doing nothing more than canceling the talks.

Israeli politicians and top military brass agreed that Damascus was responsible for the provisioning and sponsorship of Hizballah, but few of them were ready to take on the Syrians. Three main schools of thought existed: continue the status quo in the hopes of a comprehensive agreement with Damascus; unilateral withdrawal, either at one time or in stages; or a punitive policy directed mainly against the Lebanese economic infrastructure and possibly Syrian targets in Lebanon.

The military establishment generally endorsed the status quo approach. It saw unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon as too risky, even in stages. Nor did it support waging war against the Lebanese economy, on the grounds that this would not change the strategic situation.

The unilateral withdrawal approach had made major gains in the public opinion, thanks in good part to the activism of the Four Mothers movement that had developed spontaneously in the aftermath of a helicopter accident killing seventy-three soldiers en route to southern Lebanon in February 1997. Politicians favoring unilateral withdrawal argued that Israel can deter attacks from Lebanon just as well from its own side of the international border as it can from the “security zone” it maintains in southern Lebanon. A growing number of voices in the military supported a unilateral withdrawal.

Proponents of this approach claimed that Hizballah had no real interest in continuing its guerrilla war once it got Israeli troops out of southern Lebanon, as it has never intended to liberate Palestine but only to advance the domestic social and political goals of its Shia constituency. Advocates of this approach pointed out that, should Hizballah misbehave, the withdrawal of troops

did not preclude forceful Israeli action against Lebanon's infrastructure, the Syrian-Iranian supply network, or other steps.

Few politicians or analysts supported military action against Lebanese targets. It is very difficult to hit Hizballah targets, for these are often schools, clinics, and mosques. And what good would that do?

The one approach the government did not try is the one that conformed with its own argument that Syria and Lebanon are inextricably linked—tell the Syrians to stop the violence coming out of Lebanon, or else. Opponents to “muscled diplomacy” mainly feared that the military option in Lebanon would lead to a full-scale war with Syria, which would not be acceptable to the majority of public opinion in Israel, eager to achieve a peace agreement with Syria.

At the height of the Turkish-Syrian crisis in October 1998, the Netanyahu government decided to keep the status quo and assure Damascus through open televised messages that Israel had nothing to do with the Turkish move (which, according to the highest Turkish military authorities, was made possible only after the signing of a strategic agreement with Israel) or that it intended to imitate it. During the crisis, it bears noting, Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai even canceled some military exercises on the Golan.

By analyzing Israel's actions, Asad probably concluded that Syria had little to fear from the Jewish state.

Two years later, in May 2000, the Barak government decided on a unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon, without any agreement with Lebanon or the Syrians, without any guarantees besides the United Nations recognition of the international border between Israel and southern Lebanon. Prime Minister Barak and his minister of foreign affairs made inflammatory public declarations, threatening “to burn Lebanon if one bullet was fired by Hizballah.”

The results are well known: in October 2000, Hizballah kidnapped Israeli soldiers and bombed Israeli territory, and the cycle of violence continued until the Second Lebanon War and beyond. Meanwhile, Israel's deterrence suffered a major blow once Damascus and Nasrallah understood that the Israeli leaders are not made of the same wood as the Turkish ones.

Achievements of the “Axis of Destabilization”

Paradoxically, the achievements of the Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas alliance have become more visible and threatening since the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. While the overthrowing of the Taliban regime was intended to destroy an Islamist fanatical regime and the al-Qaeda hardcore leadership and infrastructure it harbored, and while the eradication of Saddam Hussein’s regime was expected to remove the threat of a rogue nuclear actor, they were also clearly intended to isolate and weaken the Tehran regime, the second—major—member of “the axis of evil.” The failure of the stabilizing political process in Iraq, after a brilliant U.S. military victory, has permitted Iran to turn the tables on the Bush administration.

The alliance has achieved during these years a series of major strategic victories and breakthroughs in the Middle East.

Iraq's government, most of its territory and the majority of its oil resources are controlled by Shia movements that have historic and ideological links to the Tehran regime and have strengthened their official and clandestine relations with Iran. Moreover, Iran can rely on Moqtada al-Sadr's forces and the rogue split groups to open new fronts against U.S. and coalition forces as needed.

Syria has been indeed weakened by the withdrawal of its army from Lebanon and the international pressure connected with the investigation of the assassination of Rafik Hariri, but the Damascus regime maintains a strong grip on its Sunni majority population at home, still has strong cards in Lebanon in the wake of the presidential elections, and continues to arm Hizballah and to host and support all the radical Palestinian movements and groups opposed to the peace process. Syria continues to give some freedom of action to Ba’athist and Islamist insurgents in Iraq, although in a more covert and discreet manner.

Hizballah, Tehran’s closest ally, has become, with Syrian support, a state-within-the-state in Lebanon, potentially able to become in the nearest future the country’s arbiter if not actual ruler. Hizballah is actively involved in the destabilization of the Palestinian arena, has supported Hamas and PIJ operationally and financially, and has a growing role in supporting the Shia anti-American forces in Iraq that are working to destabilize that country. The organization has kept quite intact its dormant, worldwide terrorist infrastructure, which could be revived in case of a Middle East major crisis.

The peace process between Israel and the Palestinians is practically paralyzed, in great part by the active support given by Iran, Syria, and Hizballah to Hamas and all the radical Palestinian factions inside and outside the Palestinian Authority. Hamas controls the Gaza Strip, threatens the Fatah-controlled West Bank, and is able to sabotage any serious negotiations within the peace process through terrorist attacks.

The inconclusive results of the Second Lebanon War of July-August 2006, the Hamas military coup in Gaza, and the continuous bombing of Israeli cities and villages from Gaza have undoubtedly diminished Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis the terrorist organizations but more significantly versus Iran and Syria.

Although the Shia Crescent is still more of a potential project as long as Iraq is occupied by coalition troops, a U.S. withdrawal in the future would produce a vacuum in which the pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia will surely have the upper hand. It should be also stressed that this Shia dominated coalition has succeeded in attracting important Sunni elements, like Hamas and PIJ, and thus can influence other radical Sunni groups throughout the Middle East.

Some think that the chasm between Iranians and Arabs, and between Shiites and Sunnis is not an impediment to Iranian leadership in the Muslim world because the passionate support for Hizballah across the Middle East during the 2007 summer war in Lebanon proved that Islam can readily unify against a common infidel foe.²⁶⁵ Tehran's special relations with Hamas are also a sign that this is indeed possible.

On the negative side of the axis' balance, it should be mentioned that the threat of the Shia Crescent has hastened the attempts to build a moderate Sunni counter-alliance, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf countries, which could possibly include Israel as a quiet partner.

The Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and Hizballah's enhanced political status after the war have created some problems in Iran's relations with Syria, as Tehran has tried to negotiate with Saudi Arabia the upgrading of its proxy's status in Lebanon. However, it seems that the need of the two regimes, in Tehran and Damascus, to challenge U.S., European, and Israeli pressures have compelled them to mend fences and even enhance their strategic and military cooperation.

More importantly, in spite of the growing opposition of the international community to the nuclear project and its hegemonic ambitions, the Iranian nuclear option is still viable and achievable in the short term.

The regime sees itself as the spearhead of global transformation, as Ahmadinejad puts it: “Thanks to the blood of the martyrs, a new Islamic revolution has arisen.... The era of oppression, hegemonic regimes and tyranny and injustice has reached its end.... The wave of the Islamic revolution will soon reach the entire world.”²⁶⁶ In a televised speech in September 2006, Ahmadinejad proudly boasted that “The Iranian people...[can] quickly become an invincible global power...as soon as it achieves advanced technologies.”²⁶⁷

From the establishment of the Islamic regime in 1979 to Ahmadinejad’s rise to power in August 2005, Mahdism (the messianic belief in the return of the Mahdi) had been a religious doctrine and a tradition that had no political manifestation. During Ahmadinejad’s presidency, this religious doctrine has become a central political philosophy. Ahmadinejad has frequently stated that his coming is near and that the crisis in Iran “presaged the coming of the Hidden Imam, who would appear within the next two years.”²⁶⁸

The messianic doctrine of Mahdism is also manifest in Iranian foreign policy, especially in its attitude towards the Western superpowers and towards the nuclear program. Ayatollah Mesbah-e Yazdi, mentor to Ahmadinejad, expressed this approach in an October 11, 2006, speech: “The greatest obligation of those awaiting the appearance of the Mahdi is fighting heresy and global arrogance [i.e. the West, primarily the United States].” Ahmadinejad sees his confrontation of the West as one of the ways to prepare the ground for the return of the Mahdi.²⁶⁹

Why Does the Alliance Work?

What makes this strange unnatural alliance work, in spite of the optimistic predictions that it will wither away after the first Gulf War, after the Oslo agreement and the Israeli peace negotiations with Syria, or after the successful wars in Afghanistan and Iraq? Actually, with the cooption of Hamas in 1992 the alliance got stronger, more aggressive and expansionist.

Strong religious ideologies 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 *à la lettre* its creed through an aggressive strategy, in spite of the bloody war with Iraq and after crushing all internal dissention. If the short intermezzo of Khatami’s presidency has taught us something, it is that change from within is extremely difficult and that the hardcore of the regime are determined to keep their grip on the state

and revive its ideological basis. The apocalyptic overtone of Mahdism in some of the leadership circles makes this ideology even more dangerous.

Hizballah, as proven by its covenant and the open and persistent declarations of its leaders, follows closely the religious ideology and the strategy of export of the Khomeinist 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 also the only MB group involved in systematic warfare, against Israel and “world Zionism.” The “military coup” of June 2007 in Gaza, the violence it employed against the internal enemy (Fatah), and the slow Islamization of the Strip, show the road the movement will take in the near future.

Pan-Arabism and the Greater Syria concept continue to play an important role in Syria’s policy, although today they mainly serve the interests of the minority Alawi regime in Damascus.

The alliance has a strong determined leader; Iran is the engine that drags the three minor members, the conductor of the “quartet.” Iran is a major regional power with a decided leadership, a regional hegemonic vision, huge oil resources, a large army, and an advanced military industry; and it is on the verge of becoming the ninth nuclear power in the world, as proclaimed by President Ahmedinajad.

Satloff, a known expert on the Middle East, stresses the fact that the four actors are “not marginal fringe groups:” Iran and Syria are sovereign states, Hamas formed the elected government of the PA (until it decided to take control of Gaza), and Hizballah holds 25 of the 128 seats in the Lebanese parliament and two ministerial portfolios. They are “linked ideologically and operationally in a much more organic way than the members of the ‘axis of evil’ ever were.” Radical Islamism “certainly inspires some of these actors, but what drives them together is politics.”²⁷⁰ However, while these politics, or rather strategies, serve their larger national interests, they also serve their broader ideological needs.

The axis has succeeded in obtaining a great part of its objectives because the four players have no moral constraints in using terrorism and subversion against their external adversaries while maintaining their power at home through ruthless authoritarian regimes, in the case of Iran and Syria, or through cohesive and efficient ideological leadership, in the case of Hizballah and Hamas.

At the same time, they have developed the skills of tactical pragmatism and covert action to the utmost, manipulating for more than twenty-five years leaders of great powers and neighbor states, allowing their adversaries to mire themselves in futile political dialogues and expectations of moderation.

A major cohesive glue was the fact that they challenged 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 but also some of its member states individually (France, the UK, and Germany); Israel and the Jews as evidence to Islam's and Arabs' weakness; and Saddam Hussein's Iraq, until his removal from power.

However, the series of victories of this alliance during the last three decades is not only the result of the robust relationships and durable cooperation between its four members, but in great measure it is the consequence of the U.S., European, and Israeli leaderships' lack of strategic vision and/or political courage and their resultant botched counter-terrorism strategies.

The United States and France (the major European country challenged by the axis) did not inflict any serious damage to Iran or its operational arm, Hizballah, for their long series of terrorist attacks against U.S. and French citizens, soldiers, and interests. Nor has Syria paid a real price for the direct and indirect support to Iranian and Hizballah anti-Western terrorism. The same leaders and operatives who were behind these acts of terror continue to inflict havoc on U.S. and European interests.

Not only has Iran paid no price for twenty years of lying about its nuclear program, but the West is still willing to offer ever-greater incentives, strengthening the Iranian leadership's sense of self-confidence that they can achieve a nuclear military capability. The United States and other Western diplomats have failed to recognize that Iran did indeed respond to these incentives—via Hizballah's provocative attack on northern Israel in July 2007.²⁷¹

The West has indeed 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 political and intelligence influence in Lebanon. As a result, an ex-prime minister, Hariri, six prominent anti-Syrian politicians, a newspaper editor, and a high-ranking Christian Lebanese army general were assassinated in Lebanon in just over two years. The political killings and other attempted assassinations are designed to intimidate those working courageously to end Syria's interference in Lebanon's internal affairs.

Since 1976, when it agreed to Syria's military intervention in Lebanon, Israel has permitted Syria to attack it continuously from the north, through Hizballah, and in the heart of its territory, through Palestinian proxies. Israeli leaders, who accused Syria during these years of being responsible for the terrorist campaigns against the Jewish state, did not have the courage to give the right answer to this challenge; they did not learn the Turkish lesson!

Even during the July-August 2006 war, when it was obvious that the Hamas leader Khaled Meshal was running the kidnapping of the Israeli soldier from Damascus and Syria was continuing to provide heavy military hardware and ammunition to Hizballah, the Israeli government made every effort to send the message that it has no intention of bothering Syria.

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

The failure of the international community to implement U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559, which demanded Hizballah's full disarmament, and to only partially implement the 1701 resolution, thus not stopping Syria and Iran from heavily rearming the organization, permits the Islamist movement to concentrate its efforts to overthrow the sensitive sectarian and political balance of power in Lebanon in its favor.

The Israeli leadership also failed to recognize the real long-term goals of Arafat when signing the Oslo agreements and failed to challenge in time his double game of negotiating peace while permitting Hamas and the PIJ to develop the strategy of suicide bombings. After the eruption of the al-Aqsa Intifada, Israeli governments preferred the easier task of striking at PA targets instead of quickly and decisively wiping out the Hamas infrastructure and leadership.

Finally, Israel, the United States, and the West permitted Hamas, a terrorist organization committed to the destruction of the Jewish state, to take over the government of the Palestinian Authority through democratic elections.²⁷²

The Alliance: Future Scenarios

The future of the Middle East will be shaped by a series of crucial events that are already in process but not yet decided:

- Will diplomacy, incentives, and sanctions make Tehran renounce the nuclear option?
- Will the U.S. attack the Iranian nuclear facilities?
- When and how will the U.S. coalition leave Iraq and Afghanistan?
- Is Hizballah on the point of taking control of Lebanon's government or will a civil war erupt in that country?
- Is Hamas able to entrench its control of Gaza and continue its thrust to the West Bank?
- Will Israel take military initiatives in the Palestinian or Lebanese arenas if there are major changes detrimental to its strategic interests?
- Are there real chances for a successful peace process between Israel and the Palestinians under Mahmoud Abbas and/or Bashar al-Asad's Syria?
- Is there any chance for the building of an effective Sunni moderate counter-alliance, with Israel as an open or covert partner?

It should be stressed that outcomes in one arena will have immediate direct and indirect consequences for the other arenas.

Moreover, as every state or sub-state actor could potentially decide on a change of strategy, we should try to determine what conditions might cause one or more of the members of the axis of destabilization to depart the alliance.

Iran

Few strategic alliances in the modern Middle East have stood the test of time as long as that between Iran's Islamic regime and Syria's Ba'athist regime. However, some analysts claim that upon further examination the alliance's durability looks increasingly uncertain.

The assassination of Hariri and the fact that a majority of Lebanese—including Lebanese Shiites—disapprove of the Syrian role in their country, has put an even greater strain on the Iran-Syria alliance. From Tehran's

perspective, the anti-Syria feelings in Lebanon may force the Iranian regime to make a particularly difficult decision, as siding with Syria would be the equivalent of going against the popular will in Lebanon.

Given that the Tehran-Damascus pact was partially born of a mutual opposition toward Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the removal of the Iraqi dictator and the post-war emergence of a Shiite friendly government in Baghdad strips the alliance of its initial *raison d'être*. According to the Iran analyst Sadjadpour, the eventuality of a decreased U.S. presence in Iraq, coupled with increased Iraqi autonomy would ironically require greater U.S. cooperation with both Iran and Syria in an effort to help bring about stability and security in Iraq.²⁷³

The prospect of a U.S.-Iran rapprochement—though it seems highly unlikely at the moment—could further compel Tehran to cease its strategic partnership with Damascus. According to one senior Iranian diplomat, in the context of an accommodation between Iran and the United States, Tehran would—in return for U.S. security and economic assurances—be willing to alter its approach toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as redefine its relationship with Hizballah. Maintaining a strategic alliance with Damascus would make little sense to Iran in this context.²⁷⁴

A more nuanced approach from Washington, one that couples the threat of sticks with the offer of carrots, would likely lead one or both sides to reconsider the efficacy of the relationship. This may not take place immediately or abruptly, but just as the Iraqi invasion of Iran led to the commencement of the Syria-Iran alliance, the emergence of a friendly Shiite-led government in post-Saddam Iraq and the assassination of Hariri may lead to the alliance's eventual dissolution.²⁷⁵

The Iraq Study Group (ISG) report proposes a gradual U.S. retreat facilitated by the cooperation of Iran and Syria in stabilizing Iraq. James Baker and Lee Hamilton, the co-chairs of the ISG, claimed that Syria and, especially, Iran want to help the United States because they “share an interest in avoiding the horrific consequences that would flow from a chaotic Iraq.”²⁷⁶ The report's authors may hope that the United States could strike a deal with Iran. But what would have been the price to pay? Are Baker and Hamilton prepared to pay the price of accepting Tehran's nuclear bomb development program?

Others evaluate that, in spite of the changing strategic environment, Syria and Iran still share a strategic alliance. Moreover, they wish to minimize the

regional role of Sunni powers, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, because a rising regional role for these countries could pose a serious threat to Iranian and Syrian interests. In the long term, however, the strategic interests of both states could change. For example, Tehran sees an agreement between Syria and Israel as a threat; Damascus does not want to see an agreement forged between the United States and Iran over the latter's controversial nuclear program, especially one that could result in Iran's more assertive role in the region and could make it difficult for Syria to play a more effective political role.²⁷⁷

To understand the real mood of the Iranian leaders and their evaluation of Iran's standing as a regional power and in its confrontation with the United States one can rely on their own declarations.

In April 2004, on the first "anniversary of the defeat of the Ba'ath Party in Iraq and the so-called victory of the Americans," Expediency Council Chairman Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani spoke on the subject of "the gains of the Islamic revolution" and "focused on what the Americans have done, what they have achieved so far, what will happen in the future, what are their problems, and what are their strengths."²⁷⁸

According to Rafsanjani's analysis, the American aims consisted of thirteen parts. Besides the first seven objectives (relating to the control of oil and occupation of Iraq), the eighth objective is to strengthen Israel; the ninth is to weaken Syria and Lebanese Hizballah; the tenth objective, at the top of the American agenda, is to encircle Iran and weaken and destroy Iran's Islamic revolution; the eleventh objective is to curb terrorism and channel it; the twelfth objective is to impose their hegemony on the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea; the thirteenth point is resolving the Palestinian issue in a way that would serve Israeli interests.²⁷⁹

Rafsanjani identified no less than "37 problems that the Americans are facing" after the occupation of Iraq. The United States dissolved the police, the army, the secret police, and anything else that had something to do with security and the ruling system, which Rafsanjani contends proves that the Americans had no plan and "behaved very amateurishly." According to his analysis, the Americans lack the resources to restore security and to rebuild the country. They would be very pleased if they just managed to control their own military bases. The control of the numerous borders with Iran, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait is a real catastrophe, and the opposition groups can smuggle in whatever they need. Terrorists from all over the world have found a paradise in Iraq.

The Americans entered the region in order to weaken Iran, but now deep relations have been established between Iran and the Iraqi people, claims Rafsanjani:

*America's dilemma is taking the final decision: to stay in Iraq or to leave. If it stays, it will have to finance its stay daily, suffer casualties, take more wounded, endure disrepute and finally escape... And now if it leaves, what will be left behind? And what will its answer be if a civil war starts in Iraq? What will its answer be if Iraq is disintegrated? This will be recorded as an abysmal case for the Americans.*²⁸⁰

For Rafsanjani it is obvious “that this situation is an opportunity as well as a threat.” If the Iraqi problem “is handled competently and the Americans... accept defeat, the world would be rid of the Americans for a while and others will not be tempted to do this either.” America has become vulnerable, which means Iran is becoming stronger. Iran has “small accounts with the Americans which it must settle one day and bring the issue to a close.”

This evaluation by the “pragmatic” former president of Iran, only one year after the occupation of Iraq, explains the policies of the Tehran regime concerning the nuclear issue and regional conflicts and its defiant attitude in its confrontation with the United States, Europe, and the UN.

Quo Vadis Syria?

Fouad Ajami, the well-known Lebanese-American Middle Eastern expert stated that “Syria’s main asset is its capacity for mischief.”²⁸¹ Syria, a small and not particularly wealthy country, remains a source of instability and radicalism in the region.²⁸²

However, Spain’s foreign minister, Miguel Moratinos, believes that Syria “wants to be part of the solution...not of the problem.”²⁸³ Since the Second Lebanon War, some of the leading European countries—Italy, Spain, and Germany—have actively engaged in an attempt to extract Syria from the Iranian embrace.

In late 2006, senior European officials began paying visits to Damascus, offering al-Asad normalization of relations with the EU in return for his “cooperation” in ending the Lebanon crisis. The Bush administration shares the belief that “the road to solving Lebanon’s problems passes through Damascus.”²⁸⁴

Perthes argues that Syria wants to be part of the Middle East peace process while Iran does not. He claims that Bashar al-Asad wants the United States to stop ostracizing it and to stop threatening regime change. He asserts that Syria most wants a return of the Israeli-occupied territories. Western leaders should take this opportunity to reengage Damascus, recognizing that Syria is a major player that cannot be ignored. By taking into account legitimate Syrian interests, they could persuade Asad to work constructively with the Lebanese government and with international efforts to stabilize Lebanon, to withdraw support from forces trying to undermine an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, and to prepare Syria for eventual peace with Israel.²⁸⁵

However, according to a high-ranking Syrian official, cited by Perthes himself, reengaging Syria would not break up the political relationship between Damascus and Tehran. Most likely, it would lead to an agreement to disagree on certain goals, particularly those related to the Middle East peace process, along with an acceptance of the preponderance of each country's national influence in its immediate neighborhood.²⁸⁶

The obvious way to neutralize the Iran-Syria alliance, according to the Israeli analyst Alpher, is to target the weaker link: Syria. The United States did precisely this by organizing international pressure on Syria to leave Lebanon. If Syria can also be persuaded to cease supporting the insurgents in Iraq and the radical Palestinians, then Israel could enter into renewed peace talks with Syria, with one objective being to isolate Hizballah and break the alliance. This would have the effect of isolating Iran, whose nuclear program would then remain the only serious strategic threat from within to the Middle East.²⁸⁷

Does Syria (the Alawi Regime) Really Want Peace?

This author has always considered Syria the key to a stable and pacific Lebanon and a disarmed “political” Hizballah. Syria—not Iran—has been the most important support for Hizballah’s terrorist and guerrilla activity against Israel from the north. Without Syria’s overall strategic umbrella, specific military and political coordination, and pressure on Beirut to give the organization free rein in southern Lebanon, Hizballah could not have achieved its current status. Syrian aid in heavy weaponry, in addition to Iranian aid, has transformed Hizballah into a strategic partner and an operational arm of the Syrian army. Syria is also heavily involved in the support to all the radical Palestinian organizations and factions and actively participates in the derailing of the peace process between Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arabs.²⁸⁸

Syria is also Iran's only ally in the Arab world and their direct operational link to the Palestinian radical organizations acting from Damascus. Separating Damascus from Tehran would significantly diminish Iran's negative influence on the Palestinian arena and on the peace process.

It is possible that the combined efforts of EU leaders, the Bush administration, and the Israeli leadership will convince the Syrian leaders of their sincere wish to strike a deal and propose to Damascus the return of the Golan Heights and generous economic incentives. Still, the Bashar regime has other priorities that would outweigh any potential Western and Israeli incentives.

Fear of the Fall of the Regime

One could posit that success in the peace process would be profoundly destabilizing for Damascus. It is therefore important to imagine how any changes in the peace process would affect the calculations of its decision makers.²⁸⁹ Syria lacks internal coherence due to its diverse population and minority-dominated regime. To survive, the regime needs transcendent slogans like Arabism.²⁹⁰ The regime requires conflict and radicalism as tools for maintaining internal control. Damascus correctly assumes that any strengthening of U.S. influence in the region will run counter to Syrian interests, so it is no accident that the regime has become the most systematically anti-American in the Arab world.²⁹¹ Defiance and resistance to American pressure will win Bashar the support of the Syrian public, and even Arab support at large, and ensure the survival of his regime for many years to come.²⁹²

For Syria, Lebanon is Much More Important than the Golan Heights

While the Bush I administration saw the Syrian occupation of Lebanon as a temporary necessity to be gradually rolled back, the Clinton administration saw it as a longer term palliative to draw Syria into peace with Israel and a means of preventing Lebanon's 350,000 plus Palestinian refugees from obstructing any comprehensive peace settlement that failed to recognize their "right of return." Although U.S. policymakers publicly hinted that the United States would help bring about a "Lebanon free of foreign forces" once a peace treaty was concluded, they sent Damascus unmistakable signals to the contrary.²⁹³ American officials failed to recognize that al-Asad would be prepared to sign a peace treaty only if the expected benefits outweighed the guaranteed political, strategic, and economic returns of the occupation of Lebanon.²⁹⁴

Lebanon is of course important to Syria for political and military reasons, but this tends to overshadow the economic aspect of Syrian-Lebanese relations. The direct and indirect income derived from Syria's presence in Lebanon has over time become an almost indispensable factor in the Syrian economy.²⁹⁵

The ISG report proposed cooperation with Syria in stabilizing Iraq. But what Bashar wants is a cancellation of the investigation into the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the corollary international tribunal approved by the UN Security Council, a free hand in Lebanon, and possession of the Golan without conditions.²⁹⁶ Are these acceptable conditions?

A Syrian peace agreement with Israel foretells a peace agreement between Israel and Lebanon—which means the Cedar country will be lost forever as a Syrian protectorate.

Palestine, Part of Greater Syria?

Some believe that the failure to resolve the Palestinian problem is viewed in Damascus more as “a useful excuse” that permits the Syrian leaders to postpone any compromises they might be willing to make to reduce the threat from Israel. Syrian leaders are known to hold the Palestinian leadership in low esteem.²⁹⁷ This is a euphemism, considering the late Hafez al-Asad's known enmity for PLO leader Yasser Arafat.

The legitimacy of the establishment of the state of Israel in Palestine by “imperialism” was not accepted by Syria, which developed a pivotal role in defense of all-Arab causes, above all the struggle against Israel.²⁹⁸ Syria's relations with the former components of the Levant (*bilad al-sham*)—Jordan, the Palestinians, and above all, Lebanon—were influenced by what it considered its special rights and responsibilities over these territories. As Patrick Seale points out, Syria under Hafez al-Asad perceived itself to be in what amounted to a contest between “Greater Syria” and “Greater Israel” over the Levant.²⁹⁹

Judging by the historically thorny relations between Syria and the PLO, the cynical use of Palestinian terrorism in the war against Israel before 1967, the expulsion by the Syrian army of the PLO/Fatah forces from Lebanon in 1983, the twenty-five years of ostracism vis-à-vis Arafat, the non-recognition of the Palestinian Authority and the cold shoulder to chairman Mahmoud Abbas, the constant support of the most radical Palestinian factions even when they are ideologically dangerous for the Damascus regime, one can recognize

the pattern of behavior in Lebanon. This Syrian regime probably still dreams of seeing the national Palestinian movement as it was in the 1920s and 30s, as part of a Greater Syria.

Waiting for the Iranian Nuclear Umbrella

Should Iran succeed in completing its nuclear project and declare a nuclear weapons capability, Syria would face a conflicting situation. On the one hand, its devotion to the Arab cause would compel it to share a sense of anxiety. On the other hand, more than other Arab states, it would be untroubled by an Iranian nuclear capability because of the strategic partnership between the two states. Syria would see an Iranian bomb as a useful deterrent against Israel and a newly assertive Iraq and as an important constraint on U.S. freedom of action in the region.³⁰⁰

As the Iranian newspaper *Kayhan*, close to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, editorialized, “Nuclear Iran is eradicating the nuclear prestige of Israel.” That’s the sort of rising star to which Syria would like to be hitched.³⁰¹

Moreover, some perceive a creeping “Iranianization” of Syria. Iran’s growing influence in Syria reportedly includes a concerted proselytism campaign, including Iranian financing for the construction of Shiite mosques in Sunni strongholds, such as Homs and Hama, and the provision of financial incentives to Syrians for conversion to Shiism. Iran currently operates at least two cultural centers (in Damascus and Latakia). Private Iranian money is also funding a number of *hawzas*, Shiite seminaries, across Syria.³⁰²

Hizballah

As in the past, some delude themselves that Hizballah is on its way to “lebanonize” itself. The American professor and Iranian native, Mokhtari, sees the possibility of Hizballah’s return to political activity, “while it enjoys its greatest popularity” after the war. The possibility that the United States may have to deal with Hizballah as a political party, and that the political party may in fact be in a position to help the United States, is not entirely far-fetched, claims Mokhtari.³⁰³ He cites Mati Steinberg, an Israeli Middle East scholar and former special advisor to heads of the Israeli Security Service, who claims “that an Israeli withdrawal from Shaba Farms would enable Hezbollah to move from being a problem to being a solution.”³⁰⁴

David Hammerstein, a Spanish representative to the European Parliament, claimed that Hizballah “would be ready to transform its armed resistance

into a political movement, if all occupied Lebanese territories were freed,” meaning the Sheba’a Farms. In a meeting with Hezbollah, the EU delegation was told “that they would like to become a political movement.”³⁰⁵

Secretary-General Nasrallah has clearly expressed the self-assurance of the Hizballah leadership that it will continue as a combatant movement:

*This year marks the 25th, since the start of Hizballah and the Islamic resistance in Lebanon... In 25 years, we have not experienced a single defeat ever... Even in the year 2000, when talk of a withdrawal began, numerous articles were written on the subject of the withdrawal being the end of Hizballah; ‘because the party would lose its raison d’être’, as if the reason for our existence is the existence of occupied land here or there. Based on this past and for the future I say in the face of all the challenges and the local, regional and international transformations and stakes, I assure you that God willing we will not be defeated at any of these days. Not a year or two go by without them announcing ‘Hizballah will end this year’. However, in the face of each and every challenge, plight and difficulty, Hizballah, with God’s help, emerged stronger, tougher, ‘swords sharper,’ mightier than any time before.*³⁰⁶

Abdallah Safialdeen, Hizballah’s representative in Iran put it in a precise regional context: “the day that Hizballah won the [July-August 2006] war shaped the future of the region. It led to what we are witnessing today: America’s actions, the domestic problems of the Zionist regime, the confusion of Europe.” An American withdrawal from Iraq will mean that Israel will lose its support, that the Hizballah will not need a large-scale war in order to enter Palestine. “Hizballah will be able to simply walk into Palestine... The day the American forces leave Iraq, the Israelis will leave the region along with them.” The Americans will be also “kicked out of the region, without accomplishing anything... in disgrace, humiliation, and defeat. Therefore, this [Hizballah] victory was very important. It was a landmark in the history of the Islamic world and the entire region.”³⁰⁷

The Palestinian Arena

The former PA Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh was quoted in *The New York Times*: “We have no problem with a sovereign Palestinian state over all our lands within the 1967 borders, living in calm. But we need the West as a partner to help us through.” While some Hamas leaders have claimed that Islam allows only a long-term truce with Israel, sources close to Haniyeh believe a formal peace agreement is indeed possible.³⁰⁸

Hamas leaders have stated both publicly and through back-door channels that they are willing to negotiate with Israel. Although the leadership is not in a position to alter the religious interpretation that Palestine is a *waqf* (trust), it will yield to the reality of Israel's statehood and accept a long-term *hudna* (ceasefire), even a gradual formal peace, to end all violence. For Hamas a cease-fire would be consistent with its position that it is not prepared at this time to offer Israel much more than a long-term truce.³⁰⁹

There are conflicting views in the Hamas leadership: Secretary General Khaled Meshal views Hamas in the Iranian-Syrian orbit, while Haniyeh of Gaza identifies his government as part of the global Muslim Brotherhood movement. However, both view Hamas as affiliated with outside power centers. Haniyeh is also limiting his horizons to the PA, while Meshal has a broader vision of the global spread of Islam. While Meshal declared that the Hamas electoral victory was the beginning of a Muslim takeover of Europe, Haniyeh restricted his narrative to the borders of Palestine.³¹⁰

The forceful takeover of Gaza has changed the situation completely. Hamas, in a more vulnerable position, is playing a more cautious game. They appreciate the importance of Egypt as a lifeline to Gaza, and they are being careful not to overtly antagonize Cairo. Hamas is wisely keeping open the exit option from the Iranian-Syrian alliance by avoiding the harming of U.S. citizens and interests in Gaza, by refraining from international terror, and by refraining from openly identifying with al Qaeda.³¹¹

Hamas might decide it is better to join the West in negotiating peace rather than to suffer defeat. Achieving that peace requires a change in Hamas mindset, from a pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism of conquest, to a pan-Arabism of creative opportunity, which might result in some form of Jordanian-Palestinian federation that will allow the Palestinians access to the opportunities it could provide.³¹²

Actually, Hamas is building a military and security force on the example of Hizballah: a hierarchy, a clear division of roles, a training system, groups responsible for smuggling weapons, groups in charge of preparing explosive devices and planning sophisticated terror attacks in an effort to take advantage of the IDF's weak points.³¹³ After the takeover, Hamas seized an arsenal of arms and munitions captured from the security forces loyal to Fatah. In a few days it gained roughly the same number of weapons that it would have taken the group a year to amass through smuggling. Hamas claims it is using

the armaments to build a popular army in Gaza. Israeli intelligence officials estimate the group has some 13,000 armed men in Gaza.³¹⁴

In this context it should be noted, therefore, that even before the takeover of Gaza, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak expressed great concern over the increasing strength of Hamas, declaring that the organization will never sign a peace agreement with Israel. He said that the Egyptian government is at a loss regarding the future of the Gaza Strip. Mubarak also said that Egypt did not accept Hamas in power, especially in light of its growing ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, which leads the opposition in Egypt.³¹⁵

The Predicament of the Iranian Nuclear Project

Sanctions, Military Attack, or Future Deterrence?

The dangerous destabilizing effect of the Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas alliance on the Middle East and beyond and the leadership role the Tehran regime plays in devising the policy of this coalition according to its own strategic interests clearly place the prevention of the Iranian nuclear program as the first priority for the international community.

A year before the end of the Bush administration's term, the United States, the international community, and Israel face a daunting decision: what is the best approach to prevent the rogue Tehran regime from attaining a nuclear military capability? After twenty years of futile diplomatic dialogue and a year of mild international sanctions, three options remain on the table: severe economic sanctions; a military operation against the Iranian nuclear facilities; or *laissez faire*, allow the Iranians to achieve their goal and begin devising a deterrent strategy for the future.

President Bush has said that the international community must keep the pressure on Iran to give up its nuclear weapons program. The objective is to solve the issue peacefully, but Tehran must understand that the world will not allow it to gain the knowledge of how to build a nuclear weapon. To this end, the United States is working with allies to send a consistent message to the Iranians. At the same time, he did not rule out the possible use of force against Iran, but indicates that he believes it is still possible to resolve the dispute diplomatically. President Bush has said it is important to take the threats from Iran seriously, including remarks about using force against Israel.³¹⁶

From the British perspective, Iran is the single biggest foreign policy challenge of the next few years. If Iran were to acquire nuclear-weapons capability, a WMD arms race in the Middle East could cause irreparable damage to the NPT and the idea of a rules-based nonproliferation system, and it would also cause significant damage to the authority and credibility of the UN Security Council.³¹⁷

French President Nicolas Sarkozy has said that Iran represents "the most important problem on the international scene." He has also said that the calls made by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for the destruction of Israel are the most profound threat to international peace.³¹⁸ In his opinion, the

international community should convince Iran to renounce the project “through discussion, through dialogue, through sanctions...[and] if sanctions are not enough...stronger sanctions.” The Iranian nuclear question “is an extremely difficult affair, but France does not want a war,” he said, distancing himself from remarks by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who said “we have to prepare for the worst, and the worst is war.”³¹⁹

A recent collective study by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy investigated the challenges posed by deterring a nuclear Iran in case diplomacy might not succeed and “preventive military action might provide only a temporary fix.” It suggests that deterring Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapons program is going to be extremely difficult because the external and internal value of nuclear weapons are high for the leadership, seen to be one way for Iran to have more leverage abroad, to be immune from U.S. pressure, and to score nationalist points internally.³²⁰

Moreover, deterring a nuclear Iran is likely to prove much more difficult than deterrence during the Cold War because of the nature of the regime in Tehran, the regional security environment, and the challenges of coalition formation. Iran’s nuclear weapons could be controlled by some of the most radical elements in the regime, and some of these weapons might even find their way into the hands of terrorists. Europe may not be willing to make a sustained commitment of military forces to deter a nuclear Iran, and Arab countries and Turkey may also decide to go nuclear or acquiesce to Iranian demands. Considering what is at stake if diplomacy fails, the study concludes that it is vitally important to achieve a diplomatic solution to the problem of Iran’s nuclear program, including using pressure such as sanctions to back up that diplomacy.³²¹

The Potential for Iranian Retaliation

The Iranian response to threats of more sanctions and hints of military action are clear and loud. The Secretary of the Iranian Guardian Council, Ahmad Jannati, expressed the deep hostility toward the United States: “At the end of the day, we are an anti-American regime. America is our enemy, and we are the enemies of America. The hostility between us is not a personal matter. It is a matter of principle. We are in disagreement over the very principles that underlie our revolution and our Islam.”³²²

Speaking recently at a huge military parade marking the anniversary of the Iran-Iraq War, Ahmadinejad said that “those who assume that decaying methods such as psychological war, political propaganda and the so-called economic sanctions would work and prevent Iran’s fast drive toward

progress are mistaken.” Ahmadinejad issued a tough warning to any country considering an attack on Iran.³²³

In the case of real, painful sanctions to curb the regime’s resolve or in case of a military operation against its nuclear facilities, Iran has indeed a wide range of options for retaliation at its disposal, as openly suggested by its political and military leaders.

One possible scenario includes an immediate Iranian missile counterattack on Israel and on U.S. bases in the Persian Gulf. Iran possesses up to 500 Shihab ballistic missiles of different types, with ranges varying from 300 to 2,000 kilometers and capable of carrying warheads of up to 1,000 kg. With these it could attack targets, possibly with chemical, biological, radiological (CBR) warheads, in Israel as well as U.S. targets in the Gulf, and U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain.³²⁴ The RAF Akrotiri base in Cyprus is also in range. A senior commander of the IRGC, General Koussechi, declared his forces “have reached capacities that allow us to hit the enemy at a range of 2,000 kilometers.”³²⁵

One of the strongest cards against the United States is Iran’s capacity for wreaking havoc in Iraq and provoking a confrontation between U.S. troops and the Shia majority in Iraq that would result in many more casualties among the Multinational Force in Iraq.³²⁶ This option has already been activated, on simmer for the moment, as it has been amply documented by Kagan in her Iraq Report VI.³²⁷

The Tehran regime is preparing an army of suicide bombers to be sent mainly to Iraq, on the model of the Basij suicide soldiers used in the Iraq-Iran war. “The World Islamic Organization’s Headquarters for Commemorating the Shahids” claimed that the martyrdom-seekers website enjoyed the support and aid of prominent figures amongst “[Iran’s] conservatives” and that the call to join Iranian martyrdom units indicate that organized and planned activity is afoot. Headquarters spokesman Muhammad ‘Ali Samedī claimed that, as of March 2006, 53,900 potential suicide fighters had signed up.³²⁸

Iran’s negative input could also be influential on the other front of the war on terror, Afghanistan. Iran is ready to cooperate and support any group, regardless of its religion and language, who can fight the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, and there are reports Tehran is financing these insurgent groups and providing them with weaponry. The escalation in fighting in the bordering provinces with Iran and in the Shiite populated central Afghan provinces is a direct result of this Iranian strategy.³²⁹

Iran can retaliate against energy targets in the Gulf and attack the flow of oil in the Gulf and through the Strait of Hormuz. It can also attack U.S. naval forces stationed in the Gulf with anti-ship missiles. General Hosein Salami, Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Air has declared that Iran controls the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, the strategic artery of the world, both geo-politically and geo-strategically, and has the ability to disrupt the naval traffic and the passage of energy in this strategic region whenever it likes.³³⁰ Ayatollah Khamenei warned the United States 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.” In that event, oil prices would increase dramatically.³³¹

The new IRGC commander, Mohammad Ali Aziz Jafari, stated that the Pasdaran is relying on an “asymmetrical warfare strategy for dealing with the considerable capabilities of the enemy. A prominent example of this kind of warfare was [the tactics employed by Hizbullah during] the Lebanon war in 2006.”³³²

The European allies are also targets for Iranian retaliation. Ahmadinejad declared in October 2006, “We have advised the Europeans that the Americans are far away, but you are the neighbors of the nations in this region....We inform you that the nations are like an ocean that is welling up, and if a storm begins, the dimensions will not stay limited to Palestine, and you may get hurt.”³³³

Iran could stage painful covert terrorist attacks by its intelligence agencies, the Quds Force, and IRGC assets against U.S., Western, or Israeli interests. In a January 2005 speech to intelligence commanders from the Basij and IRGC Jafari—then commander of the ground forces—stated, “In addition to its own capabilities, Iran also has excellent deterrence capabilities outside its [own borders], and if necessary it will utilize them.”³³⁴ Revolutionary Guards theoretician Hassan Abassi threatened that Iran would “endanger American interests worldwide” if the United States were to impose sanctions on it.³³⁵

In spite of the bland denials of its leaders, it is obvious that Hizballah will be the main tool to attack Israeli territory with rockets and guerrilla commandos. Naim Qassem warned that any “military adventure” by the United States and Israel against Iran would have dangerous consequences across the Middle East. He suggested that Hizballah would not get involved if the United States attacks Iran, but he raised the possibility that Israel might attack Lebanon as part of such an assault, in which case, he said, Hizballah

would “definitely” respond.³³⁶ Iran and Syria have rearmed Hizballah with long-range missiles, and Nasrallah boasted in September 2006 that Hizballah still has twenty thousand rockets. Moreover, Iran can target Israeli and Jewish targets abroad, as it did in 1992 and 1994 in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

As for Palestinian support, Khaled Meshal has declared that, “if Israel attacks Iran, then Hamas will widen and increase its confrontation of Israelis inside Palestine.”³³⁷

Many analysts consider that a U.S. or Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear sites would enhance the appeal of extremism in the Muslim world, inside and outside Iran, 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 United States has lost much credibility and legitimacy as a result of going to war in Iraq without a second UN Security Council resolution and as a consequence of the instability it has created in that country. A similar performance in Iran would further damage its interests and image in the world.³³⁸

Nuclear Iran – the Nightmare

Iran’s promises of retaliation in case of stronger sanctions or a military attack against its facilities must be taken very seriously, and the Tehran regime has multiple options, indeed painful options, against the United States, its forces in Iraq, its allies in the Gulf and in Europe, Israel, and any other country or entity considered to be responsible for such actions. The Middle East would undoubtedly be more dangerous and unstable, at least in the short term.

But the other crucial question is, in case Iran goes nuclear, how dangerous and unstable would the Middle East be? How much suffering would result for those who are or may potentially be in Tehran’s and its allies’ crosshairs? In light of the situation described in this paper, and without entering into detailed descriptions of the scenarios, it would be reasonable to consider that the axis would critically enhance its subversion, penetration, and domination of most of the region’s unstable arenas and conflicts.

First and foremost, the potential of radicalization/Islamization of Iraq, at least the Shia Iraq, could quickly materialize and would result in a more bloody sectarian war involving, without doubt, the neighboring Sunni countries. This could be a major step in the formation of the dreaded Shia Crescent.

The process of radicalization/Islamization of Lebanon through the good offices of Hizballah would be accelerated. There is also the possibility of a return of Syrian forces to Lebanon in the framework of an agreement with Iran under its deterrent nuclear umbrella and a division of territorial influence between Syria and Hizballah.

The process of radicalization/Islamization of Palestine, which was already begun by the takeover of Gaza by Hamas, would also be accelerated, with immediate influence on the strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood and other more radical Islamist groups in Egypt and Jordan.³³⁹

Iran, with Hizballah and Iraqi Shiite radicals' support, could open a new front in the Gulf countries by inciting the Shia majority in Bahrain and the minorities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, Oman, and the UAE to fight actively and violently for equal rights, autonomy, or even self-determination. It should be remembered that in many of the Gulf States, the Shiites live mostly in the oil rich provinces.

Iran has refrained from subversive activities in Central Asia because of Russia's support for its nuclear project. The nuclear capability and a possible change in Russia's sanction policy could free Tehran to attempt to spread its revolutionary message towards the Muslim republics of the region and to lend support to the Shia in Afghanistan

Little is known about the Iran-Hizballah-al-Qaeda connections, but there is no doubt that several dozens or possibly hundreds of Sunni jihadi operatives are in Iran, and Ayman al-Zawahiri has hinted in the past of a possible cooperation with Tehran. In his famous letter sent to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in July 2005, Zawahiri noted that "more than one hundred prisoners—many of whom are from the leadership who are wanted in their countries—[are] in the custody of the Iranians." The attacks against the Shiites in Iraq could compel "the Iranians to take counter measures," and therefore, al-Qaeda "and the Iranians need to refrain from harming each other at this time in which the Americans are targeting" them.³⁴⁰ The Iranians could use al-Qaeda for their own needs in the Middle East or beyond, and some al-Qaeda operatives could be impressed by a nuclear Iran and agree to cooperate.

Last but not least, the hope for a change in the Iranian regime from within could wither for a long time, and those who would dare support reforms and internal dissent in Iran would think twice before challenging the long arms of Iranian intelligence and its terrorist proxies.

What Could Be Done?

Martin Kramer, a leading scholar in Islamist studies, believes that the only way to reverse the tide is for the United States to do what it failed to do in 1979—face down Iran’s radicals. Someone in the White House must promise Iran and the world that there will be “no nuclear weapons in the hands of an Islamist coalition led by millenarian visionaries in Iran.” That leader must take practical steps to ensure that this promise is in fact honored.³⁴¹ President Bush has in fact made this promise and is working for stronger sanctions without discarding the military option.

Unfortunately, the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) released December 3, 2007, which judged “with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program,” was immediately highlighted by all major media worldwide without a thorough analysis of the contradictory information it contained.

The White House claimed the estimate showed that suspicions about Tehran’s intentions were warranted, given that Iran had a weapons program in the first place, and that international sanctions worked and therefore should be enhanced.

Many analysts have dissected and refuted the report’s conclusion. At a hearing of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the Director of National Intelligence, Michael McConnell, himself backed away from his organization’s assessment that Iran had halted its nuclear program, saying he wished he had written the unclassified version of the document in a different manner. McConnell noted that two other components of the nuclear program were moving ahead—the enrichment of uranium, which he said was the most difficult part of making a bomb, and the development of long-range missiles.³⁴²

Most analysts argued that the report had shut off any military option for the Bush administration and even weaken international support for tougher sanctions against Iran. Worse, many felt that the NIE had sent a signal to the Tehran leadership that the danger of external sanctions was ended, that it could go about its nuclear project undisturbed.

Yet it became soon clear that, as even an Iranian professor of International Relations in Tehran sustained, all in all, “the NIE provoked only momentary confusion... [and] nothing substantial has taken place in order to change the course of Iran’s nuclear crisis.”³⁴³

On March 3, 2008, after nearly eight months of negotiations, the UN Security Council finally adopted Resolution 1803, the third round of sanctions against Iran for refusing to suspend uranium enrichment and heavy-water-related projects. Those voting in favor included Russia, China, and South Africa, all countries with longstanding economic ties to Iran.

The former State Department expert and long time negotiator in the Middle East, Dennis Ross, evaluates that nothing “the Bush Administration or the international community is doing now is likely to alter Iran’s behavior over the coming year,” because the sanctions do not directly affect the Iranian economy. As long as Iranian leaders do not have to make a choice between their economic well-being and their nuclear development, they will proceed on the path to completing the nuclear fuel cycle.³⁴⁴

There is one country—Russia—that could play a crucial role in convincing the ayatollahs of the seriousness of their situation. As illustrated above, Russia’s clear support of the West’s united tough approach at the first G-8 summit in June 1995 caused a sudden and dramatic, albeit temporary, drop in Iran’s support for international terrorism.

However, in light of the growing tension between the United States and Russia on important strategic issues, like 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 was clearly less willing to cooperate on the Iranian file.

The prevention of the Iranian nuclear project is a sufficiently major concern for U.S. interests in the Middle East and as a global power to induce the Bush administration to find a grand strategic compromise with Russia that would permit a common front against Iran and thus considerably enhance the success of the sanctions.

Another strategy, already proposed by Western politicians and analysts, would be to completely isolate Tehran by breaking the alliance with Syria. Syria is the key to isolate and disarm Hizballah in Lebanon and to reduce considerably the influence of the radical Palestinians on the peace process with Israel.

Israel cannot defeat Hizballah if it does not occupy most of Lebanon, as vividly described by one expert on the Middle East: “Israel can go all the way to Beirut and push back Hizballah, and Hizballah will fall back and fall back and end up in the Christian areas with nobody being able to stop them. But

ultimately, Israel has to withdraw. And ultimately, Hizballah will come back. The only way to change the equation in Lebanon is to change the equation in Syria.”³⁴⁵

The carrots the European leaders offered to President Bashar al-Asad have not convinced him to join the moderate Arab camp. The carrots are important and should perhaps be enhanced, but the stick should be waved higher. The United States and Europe should be more assertive and not give the impression that they are defending the current Syrian regime for the sake of stability. The pressure on Syria must also mount with the background of the upcoming presidential elections and the endless series of political assassinations in Lebanon.

Israel’s air raid on Syria on September 6, 2007, even if it was intended to hit a specific major target, nuclear or not nuclear, has broken the immunity of the Damascus regime without provoking a European or Arab outcry. Israel should decide on a more forceful strategy versus Syria, *à la Turquie*, and seek U.S. and European support for it.

Israel’s air raid on Syria also showed Iran and the world that if it does act against a clear and present danger, the Muslim world will not erupt.³⁴⁶

Asher Susser, a respected Israeli Middle East expert, noticed the Iranian sense of self-assuredness and belief that it is now “Shi’ite time.” However, Iranian aspirations should be viewed in proper proportion. “Iran is not the Soviet Union, nor is it about to become an international superpower. Tehran has its own serious vulnerabilities, domestic, economic and military. The Iranians, and others too, would be wise not to overstate the real impact of Shi’ite time.”³⁴⁷

The United States and the European nuclear powers have the duty to protect their citizens, soldiers, and interests, as well as those of their allies in the Middle East and to stand firm against the “axis of destabilization” and the apocalyptic plans of the radicals in Tehran.

Finally, if the military option will be chosen as the last resort, it is imperative to dissuade the Tehran regime to retaliate as it is planning. In January 2006, then French President Jacques Chirac set the example when he condemned “the temptation by certain countries to obtain nuclear capabilities in contravention of treaties.” He also stated 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.*³⁴⁸

ENDNOTES

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27. See Norton, Augustus Richard, "Hizballah of Lebanon: Extremist Ideals vs. Mundane Politics," *Council on Foreign Relations*, New York, 1999, pp. 8-9. Amal had been founded by the Iran-born cleric Imam Musa al-Sadr in the early 1970s as a militia adjunct to the Harakat al-Mahrumin (the Movement of the Deprived), a Shia populist reform movement. Amal enjoyed an impressive resurgence following Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1978, the enigmatic disappearance of al-Sadr during a trip to Libya in the same year, and the historic Iranian revolution of 1978–79, which provided an example for action. Amal challenged the oppressive and often brutal domination of the Palestinian guerrillas, who brought southern Lebanon into the crossfire with Israel.
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30. See the document at *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT)* website, at <http://www.ict.org.il/apage/printv/8013.php>. The letter was issued in a moment of real exaltation. Hizballah had inflicted a chain of humiliations upon

the United States: the departure of the American marines from Lebanon, the foiling of the U.S.-brokered May 17, 1983 agreement between Lebanon and Israel, the kidnapping of dozens of western hostages. Equally impressive was the success of the Islamic Resistance (al-muqawamah al-islamiyya) in forcing an Israeli withdrawal from most of Lebanese territory to a self-declared “security zone.” See Norton, “Hizballah of Lebanon: Extremist Ideals vs. Mundane Politics,” p.12.

31. See Mokhtari, Fariborz, “Countering Terrorism: Could Hezbollah and Hamas Show the Way?” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 27, No. 3, December 2006, pp. 376–396. During the Iranian Revolution of 1978, Hizballah first appeared as a pro-Khomeini slogan that rhymed with the ayatollah’s first name (which means spirit of God): ‘Hezb faqat Hezbollah, Rahbar faqat Rohollah—Party, only God’s party—leader, only God’s spirit.’
32. Ibid. Also see Norton, “Hizballah of Lebanon: Extremist Ideals vs. Mundane Politics,” p. 16. The Phalange is not Hizballah’s only Lebanese opponent. Hizballah proved to be especially intolerant of competitors for Shi’ite recruits, singling out the Lebanese Communist Party for attacks, given its alien and atheist ideology. Dozens, if not hundreds, of party members were killed in a brutal, bloody campaign of suppression and assassination in 1984 and 1985.
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 53. Kramer, Martin, "Israel vs. the New Islamist Axis," *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, March 2007, at <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2007/issue1/jv11no1a4.html>.
 54. Norton, "Hizballah of Lebanon: Extremist Ideals vs. Mundane Politics," p. 10.
 55. This sub-chapter is mainly based on Olmert, *Iranian-Syrian Relations*, pp. 179-184.
 56. See Russell J. Parkinson, "Foreign Command of U.S. Forces," February 25, 1993, at http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/research_pubs/p176.pdf. In April 1982, the United States joined with the UK, France and Italy to establish a Multinational Force (MNF) in Beirut to oversee the evacuation of PLO guerrillas from Lebanon. The MNF was withdrawn in August, only to be reintroduced as MNF II the following month when internal instability led the Lebanese government to seek its return. The U.S. Marines of MNF II remained in Beirut until February 1984. The last MNF II (French) contingent left Lebanon in March 1984.
 57. See Gambill, Gary, "Hezbollah and the Political Ecology of Postwar Lebanon," *Mideast Monitor*, October 31, 2006, at <http://www.cggl.org/scripts/opinion.asp?id=165>. Many Shi'ites felt victimized by the entry of an American and European force into Beirut at the end of 1982, perceived as pro-Israeli and

supportive of the right-wing Christian Phalange Party and Sunni Beirut notables.

58. AFP from Rome, January 1, 1998.
59. For example, on March 8, 1986, Hizballah gunmen kidnapped a four-man French television crew in Beirut. The kidnapping coincided with the string of Hizballah-linked bombings in Paris. Ironically, the television crew had traveled to Lebanon in order to do a story on four other Frenchmen who were being held hostage there.
60. The following paragraphs are based on Gambill and Abdelnour, "Hezbollah: Between Tehran and Damascus."
61. Ibid. Cited from *Al-Nabhar* (Beirut), 5 April 2001.
62. Olmert, "Iranian-Syrian Relations: Between Islam and Realpolitik," p. 184.
63. Sadjadpour, "An alliance of doubtful utility."
64. Hassan Nasrallah, interview, *El Mundo* (Madrid), December 18, 2001.
65. Karmon, Ely, "‘Fight on All Fronts’: Hizballah, the War on Terror, and the War in Iraq," *Policy Focus*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, No. 46, December 2003, p. 4.
66. On December 11, 1983, Hizballah operatives set off eight car bombs against various targets in Kuwait: the U.S. and French embassies; the local offices of Raytheon, a U.S. firm contracted to install a Hawk missile system in the country; an apartment housing Raytheon employees; the air traffic control tower at Kuwait's main airport; the Kuwaiti Ministry of Electricity and Water; the Kuwaiti Passport Control Office; and a petrochemical and refining complex. A more infamous incident took place on April 5, 1988, when Hizballah terrorists hijacked a Kuwait Airlines flight, forced it to land in Iran, and demanded the release of seventeen of the convicted terrorists held in Kuwaiti jails. Although two hostages were killed during the ordeal, Kuwait refused to release any of the convicts. The hijackers eventually escaped.
67. See U.S. Department of State, "Middle East Overview," in *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1998* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 1999). In June 1996, Manama "publicly announced the discovery of an active Bahraini Hizballah cell that was recruited, trained, and supported by Iran." See U.S. Department of State, "Middle East Overview," in *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1996* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 1997). Moreover, minor security incidents continued to plague Bahrain in 1998.
68. See "Hizballah Planned to Attack U.S. and Israeli Ships in Singapore," *ICT website*, June 9, 2002, at www.ict.org.il/spotlight/det.cfm?id=790. Hizballah operatives had recruited five Singaporean Muslims in the 1990s, reportedly selected from a group attending Muslim religious classes. The Hizballah cell led

by Ustaz Bandei, a radical Islamic preacher wanted by Indonesian authorities for the 1985 bombing of the Borobudur temple in Indonesia, was still active as late as 1998, conducting surveillance of possible targets.

69. See Karmon, “Fight on All Fronts” p. 11. However, Hizballah has continued its efforts to establish an infrastructure on U.S. soil. For example, in July 2000, federal agents arrested eighteen alleged Hizballah supporters in Charlotte, North Carolina, on charges of participating in a ring that sent funds and dual-use military equipment (e.g., global positioning devices, night-vision technology, mine-detection gear, cellular phones, and blasting equipment) to the organization in Lebanon. In June 2002, a federal court convicted two of the ring’s Hizballah operatives, Mohamad and Chawki Hamoud, of “providing material support to a terrorist group.”
70. Norton, “Hizballah of Lebanon: Extremist Ideals vs. Mundane Politics,” p. 11.
71. Hisham, H. Ahmed, “From Religious Salvation to Political Transformation: The Rise of Hamas in Palestinian Society,” *Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of international Affairs (PASSIA) Research Studies*, No. 73, May 1994, http://www.passia.org/index_projects.htm.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. Baumgarten, Helga, “The Three Faces/Phases of Palestinian Nationalism, 1948–2005,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 34 (4), p. 37.
76. Kurz, Anat & Tal, Nahman, “Hamas: Radical Islam in a National Struggle,” *Jaffee Center for Strategic Center Memorandum*, No. 48, July 1997, <http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/memoranda/memo48su.html>.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. Mokhtari, “Countering Terrorism: Could Hezbollah and Hamas Show the Way?”
80. Paz, Reuven, “Higher Education and The Development of Palestinian Islamic Groups,” *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2, June 2000, at <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2000/issue2/jv4n2a6.html>.
81. Ibid.
82. Frisch, Hillel, “The Iran-Hamas Alliance: Threat and Folly,” *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies Perspectives Paper No. 28*, May 2, 2007, p. 1.
83. Rekhess, Elie, “The Terrorist Connection—Iran, the Islamic Jihad and Hamas,” *Justice* (Tel Aviv), May 1995, p. 4.

84. Karmon, Ely, "Counterterrorism Policy: Why Tehran Starts and Stops Terrorism?" *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. V, No. 4, December 1998.
85. Kurz & Tal, " Hamas: Radical Islam in a National Struggle."
86. Frisch, "The Iran-Hamas Alliance: Threat and Folly."
87. Kurz & Tal, " Hamas: Radical Islam in a National Struggle."
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid.
91. Ibid. The first suicide attack prior to the signing of the Oslo Agreement occurred on April 16, 1993, when a Hamas car bomb blew up outside a roadside near Mehola, a farming settlement in the Jordan Valley. Two people were killed, one of them the suicide bomber. Between 13 September 1993 (the signing of the Oslo Agreement) and 31 December 1996, 202 Israeli citizens were killed in terrorist attacks—132 of them civilians and 70 from the security forces. A total of 979 Israelis were wounded, 614 of them civilians and 365 from the security forces. Of the fatalities, 128 were victims of suicide attacks. Overall, 80 of the fatalities and 395 of the injured resulted from Hamas operations, while 48 fatalities and 243 were the result of Islamic Jihad operations.
92. Interview with Lebanese newspaper *Al-Mostakbal*, March 14, 2001, published on the Hamas website <http://www.palestine-info.co.uk>.
93. An intelligence report dated December 10, 2000, by Amin al-Hindi, head of the PA's General Intelligence, noted the transfer of funds by Iran to Hamas and other organizations opposed to the Palestinian Authority. The sum of \$400,000 was transferred by Iran to the 'Iz Al-Din Al-Qassam Brigades and another \$700,000 to other Islamist organizations opposed to the PA. The money was meant to encourage suicide bombings. Barsky, Yehudit, "The New Leadership of Hamas. A Profile of Khalid Al-Mish'al," *AJC Series on Terrorism*, The American Jewish Committee, June 2004, p. 6.
94. Frisch, "The Iran-Hamas Alliance: Threat and Folly," p. 2.
95. See *Massacre of Hama* (February 1982); and Genocide and a crime against Humanity, Syrian Human Rights Committee, February 2, 2006, at <http://www.shrc.org.uk/data/asp/d5/2535.aspx>. The regime forced religious scholars out of their homes and killed them: the Grand Mufti of Hama, Sheikh Bashier Almurad, and nine members of that family who also were religious scholars; Sheikh Muneer Horaany with his two sons; and Sheikh Abdalrahman Alkhaleel, a blind scholar over 80 years old.
96. Gambill, C. Gary, "Sponsoring Terrorism: Syria and Hamas," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 4, No. 10, October 2002, at http://www.meib.org/articles/0210_s1.htm.

97. The number of victims of the massacre is estimated between 700 and 3500. The Lebanese Forces group stood under the direct command of Elie Hobeika, who later became a long-serving Lebanese Member of Parliament, and, in the 1990s, a cabinet minister. The camps were externally surrounded by Israeli Defence Forces throughout the incident; the degree to which the Israeli military was involved in the incident is a matter of controversy.
98. Al-Risala (PA), June 21, 2001 cited in Ely Karmon, *Terrorism Pays: Ask Asad, Khamane'i, and Arafat*, July 4, 2001, <http://www.ict.org.il/apage/5357.php/>.
99. Kurz & Tal, *Hamas: Radical Islam in a National Struggle*.
100. Gambill, "Sponsoring Terrorism: Syria and Hamas."
101. *Ibid.*
102. Barsky, "The New Leadership of Hamas. A Profile of Khalid Al-Mish'al," p. 5.
103. Gambill, "Sponsoring Terrorism: Syria and Hamas."
104. *Ibid.*
105. *Ibid.*
106. Karmon, Ely, "Hamas's Terrorism Strategy: Operational Limitations and Political Constraints," *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 2000), at <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2000/issue1/jv4n1a7.html>.
107. Hinnebusch, "Defying the Hegemon: Syria and the Iraq War," p. 3.
108. See Perthes, Volker, "The Syrian Solution," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85 Issue 6, Nov/Dec2006, pp. 33-40, at http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/common/get_document.php?asset_id=3406. Volker Perthes is director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin. Syria ensured that the militia accepted the U.S.-brokered "April understanding" that ended a two-month war between Hizballah and Israel in 1996. It was understood by all that Syria—rather than the Lebanese government—would both represent Hizballah's interests and discipline the group when necessary. The arrangement worked, more or less, for many years.
109. *Ibid.* See also on this subject Karmon, "Fight on All Fronts"
110. Hajjar, Sami, *Hizballah: Terrorism, National Liberation, or Menace?* (Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 2002), p. 35.
111. Karmon, Ely, "The Role of Terrorism in the Breakdown of the Israel-Palestinian Peace Process," in Sergio Germani and D.R. Kaarthikeyan (eds.), *Pathways out of Terrorism and Insurgency. The Dynamics of Terrorist Violence and Peace Processes* (New Dawn Press Inc.: UK, USA, India, 2005), pp. 116-130 & 119.
112. Karmon, "Fight on All Fronts" p. 2.
113. Hassan Nasrallah interview, *Madrid El Mundo*, December 18, 2001.

114. Karmon, Ely, "Hizbullah as Strategic Threat to Israel," in *The Power of Israel, Heartland* (Eurasian Review of Geopolitics), June, 2-2005, pp. 22-48 & 27.
115. Quoted in Martin Kramer, *Hezbollah's Vision of the West* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1989), p. 30.
116. From the "Our Stand This Week" section of Fadlallah's website, April 8, 2003, at www.bayynat.org.lb/www/english/standthisweek/stand08042003.htm.
117. *Ibid.*, April 22, 2003, at www.bayynat.org.lb/www/english/standthisweek/stand22042003.htm.
118. "Egyptian Magazine Interviews Hizballah Chief on Lebanese, Regional Issues," translation of an article that originally appeared in *al-Musawwar* (Cairo), June 13, 2003.
119. Blanford, Nicholas, "Fears of a Second Front: The Lebanese-Israeli Border," *Middle East Report Online*, April 23, 2002, at www.merip.org/mero/mero042302.html.
120. *Ibid.* Also see Hasan Nasrallah, interview by Hiyam Shahud, *London al-Majallah*, March 24, 2002; and Jubran Tuwayni, "Lebanon's Role," *Beirut al-Nahar*, March 21, 2002. Syria did not want to give up "its bargaining card in future negotiations" by promising normalization before Israel withdrew from the Golan Heights. Hence, although Syria joined twenty-one other Arab League states in endorsing the proposal, Hizballah "rockets began flying over the border two days later." Moreover, Hizballah's leadership was quick to denounce the very notion of a compromise solution soon after the Saudi proposal surfaced. Then, three days before the Arab Summit opened, Nasrallah called for the continuation of the Palestinian armed struggle, declaring that the "conflict must end with the liberation of Palestine from the river to the sea."
121. See the interview with Ala'a Sanakreh, the 27-year-old leader of the group, in Marie Colvin, "Iran offers cash for bombs to break Palestinian truce," *Times Online*, April 3, 2005.
122. For a detailed account of this expansion, see Matthew Levitt, "Hizballah's West Bank Foothold," *PeaceWatch no. 429*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 20, 2003.
123. Gambill and Abdelnour, "Hezbollah: Between Tehran and Damascus."
124. *Ibid.*
125. Cristiani, Dario, "The Role of Iran and Syria in the Israel-Lebanon Crisis," *The Power and Interest News Report (PINR)*, July 20, 2006, at http://www.pnr.com/report.php?ac=view_printable&report_id=528&language_id=1.
126. Abdel-Kader, Nizar, "The last option," *The Iran-Syria alliance*, bitterlemons-international.org, Middle East Roundtable, Ed. 13, Vol. 3, April 7, 2005, at <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/previous.php?opt=1&id=79>.

127. Karmon, “Fight on All Fronts.”
128. Cristiani, Dario, “The Role of Iran and Syria in the Israel-Lebanon Crisis.”
129. Taheri, Amir, “An Axis Resurgent. Regimes in Iran, Syria Forge New Ties,” *New York Post*, February 28, 2004.
130. Ibid.
131. Ibid.
132. Katzman, Kenneth, “Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses,” *CRS Report for Congress*, RL32048, May 15, 2007, p. 16.
133. Ibid.
134. Zuhur, Sherifa D., *Iran, Iraq, and the United States: The New Triangle’s Impact on Sectarianism and the Nuclear Threat*, Monograph, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, November 2006, p. 56.
135. Laipson, “Syria: Can the Myth Be Maintained without Nukes?” p. 88.
136. Hinnebusch, “Defying the Hegemon: Syria and the Iraq War,” p. 3.
137. Laipson, “Syria: Can the Myth Be Maintained without Nukes?” p. 89.
138. Hinnebusch, “Defying the Hegemon: Syria and the Iraq War,” p. 3-4.
139. Ibid., p.5.
140. Ibid., p.10.
141. Ibid., p. 10.
142. Ibid. Hinnebusch bizarrely claims that “it seems inconceivable that any Syrian leader would not have anticipated the way the Hariri killing would be used, as it has been, against Syria; if one invokes the traditional legal principle *quo bono* (who [sic] benefits);” he continues, “the killing was tailor-made to serve the interest of the U.S. neo-cons,” hinting that the United States was behind the assassination.
143. Ibid., p. 14. Hinnebusch seems to regret that Syria is no longer occupying Lebanon, as if this were a natural thing for a state to occupy the territory of an independent state whose population wants, in its majority, to be liberated.
144. Perthes, “The Syrian Solution.”
145. Cristiani, “The Role of Iran and Syria in the Israel-Lebanon Crisis.”
146. Maher, Brian, “Syrian and Iranian Interests Converge in Lebanon,” *PINR*, February 27, 2006, at http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_printable&report_id=447&language_id=1.
147. Hinnebusch, “Defying the Hegemon: Syria and the Iraq War,” p. 14. The U.S. was also wary, after being burned in the Iraq case by exile-led advocacy groups, to put much confidence in the likes of the Washington-based “Syria Reform Party,” which in fact is of far less significance than were its Iraqi counterparts.

148. Karmon, Ely, "The Axis of Destabilization of the Middle East," *ICT* website, July 18, 2006 at <http://www.ictconference.org/s119/apage/2803.ph>.
149. Albert Aji, "Iranian President Cements Syrian Alliance," *Associated Press*, January 19, 2005.
150. Abdel-Kader, Nizar "The last option."
151. Alpher. "The only remaining anti-Israel front."
152. *Ibid.*
153. Harb & Leenders, "Know thy enemy: Hizbullah, 'terrorism' and the politics of Perception," p. 181.
154. See Augustus Richard Norton, "Addendum," in Martha Neff Kessler, George Emile Irani, Peter Gubser, Augustus Richard Norton, *Lebanon and Syria: Internal and Regional Dimensions, edited transcript of the twenty-fifth in a series of Capitol Hill conferences convened by the Middle East Policy Council*, May 23, 2001. Referring to Hizballah's pretext of the Israeli occupation of the Sheba'a farms, Norton acknowledges that "[w]hen the issue first arose in the spring of 2000, few Lebanese had even heard of the Sheba'a farms, and even senior Hizballah officials were ignorant of the case." But again, he refused to recognize the aggressiveness of Hizballah and its active interference in the Palestinian intifada: "I am not aware of any credible evidence to support Israel's claims that Hizballah is active on the ground in Gaza or the West Bank."
155. Gambill, Gary, "Hezbollah's Strategic Rocket Arsenal," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, 4, no. 11 (November–December 2002) at www.meib.org/articles/0211_12.htm.
156. See Karmon, "Hizballah as Strategic Threat to Israel," p. 24. It is against this background that one should view the escalation in Hizballah's military activity in March–April 2002. On March 12, Hizballah-backed Palestinian infiltrators crossed the Lebanon-Israel border, killing five civilians and one member of the IDF. This attack occurred two weeks before Hamas's deadly Passover suicide bombing in Netanya sparked the IDF's Operation Defensive Shield, Israel's first major ground operation inside the PA. In other words, Hizballah had already decided to escalate well before Israel launched its harsh response to increasing Palestinian violence.
157. George Alam, "Lebanese Writer Discusses 'Message' of Hizballah's Attack 29 Aug," *al-Safir* (Beirut), August 31, 2002, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Near East and South Asia (FBIS-NES-2002-0901)*, August 31, 2002.
158. "Lebanon: Hizballah Attack 29 Aug Linked to Iraqi, Palestinian Developments," summary of reports appearing in *al-Safir* (Beirut) and *al-Mustaqbal* (Beirut), n.d., *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Near East and South Asia (FBIS-NES-2002-0830)*, August 30, 2002.

159. Harb & Leenders, “Know thy enemy: Hizbullah, ‘terrorism’ and the politics of Perception,” p. 183.
160. Ibid. They cite among others in this category A.R. Norton’s “Hizballah of Lebanon: Extremist Ideals vs. Mundane Politics.”
161. Ibid., p. 186.
162. See Gambill, “Sponsoring Terrorism: Syria and Hamas.” On September 30, 2001, Israel’s Shin Bet security agency announced the capture of over twenty members of a Hamas cell who had received training in Syria and Lebanon, some of whom were involved in planning two suicide bombings in Netanya in April and May that killed eight Israelis. In December 2001, Israel’s security agency announced that fifteen members of a Hamas cell arrested in Jerusalem had received training in Syria. A Hamas cell involved in the bombings of a Jerusalem cafe in March 2002, a Rishon Lezion pool hall in May, and a Hebrew University cafeteria in July, resulting in a total of thirty-five deaths, allegedly received its orders from the Hamas office in Damascus. The bombing at the Park Hotel in Netanya in March 2002, which killed a total of thirty people, was masterminded by Qassam Brigades commander Abbas al-Sayyad, who received tens of thousands of dollars from Hamas leaders in Damascus.
163. In December 2001, one of the most prominent Islamic leaders in Syria, Mahmoud Akkam of Aleppo, issued a fatwa saying that the killing of Israeli civilians was permissible and “even a duty” under Islamic law.
164. Gambill, “Sponsoring Terrorism: Syria and Hamas.”
165. Sobelman, Daniel, “Hamas Seeks Closer Ties and Funding with Iran,” *Haaretz*, February 2003.
166. Milton-Edwards, Beverley, “Prepared for Power: Hamas, Governance and Conflict,” *Civil Wars*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Winter 2005), pp. 311–329.
167. The Quartet on the Middle East (or simply The Quartet) is a foursome of nations and international entities involved in mediating the peace process in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Quartet includes the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations. The group was established in Madrid (Spain) in 2002, as a result of the escalating conflict in the Middle East by the Spanish Prime Minister Aznar.
168. Shikaki, Khalil, “With Hamas in Power: Impact of Palestinian Domestic Developments on Options for the Peace Process,” *Crown Center for Middle East Studies*, Brandeis University, Working Paper 1, February 2007, p. 3.
169. Ibid.
170. Frisch, “The Iran-Hamas Alliance: Threat and Folly,” p. 2.
171. Douglas Frantz and James Risen, “A Secret Iran-Arafat Connection is Seen Fueling the Mideast Fire,” *New York Times*, March 24, 2002.

172. "Palestinian PM in Tehran nods to Iranian support," *Reuters*, December 8, 2006.
173. Satloff, Robert, "The Peace Process at Sea: The Karine-A Affair and the War on Terrorism," *National Interest*, Spring 2002.
174. Karmon, "Fight on All Fronts," p. 33.
175. Katzman, Kenneth, "Iran's Influence in Iraq," *CRS Report for Congress, RS22323*, May 22, 2007, p. 2.
176. Elkhamri, Mounir, "Iran and Iraq: Iran's Contribution to the Civil War in Iraq," *The Jamestown Foundation Occasional Paper*, January 2007, at <http://www.jamestown.org/docs/Jamestown-IranContributionIraq.pdf>.
177. *Ibid.*
178. *Ibid.*
179. *Ibid.*
180. *Ibid.*
181. Zuhur, "Iran, Iraq, And the United States: The New Triangle's Impact on Sectarianism and the Nuclear Threat," p. 9.
182. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
183. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
184. Katzman, "Iran's Influence in Iraq," p. 2. However, Mahdi attacks on a British base near Amara in southern Iraq in July 2006 contributed to a British decision to abandon the base and possibly to a February 2007 British decision to draw down its forces by 1,600 (out of 7,100) by July 2007. Twelve British soldiers were killed just in April 2007 in the British sector of southern Iraq, presumably by Mahdi elements.
185. See Zuhur, "Iran, Iraq, And the United States: The New Triangle's Impact On Sectarianism And The Nuclear Threat," p. 9; see also, "Iran In Iraq: How Much Influence?" *International Crisis Group Middle East Report, N°38*, 21 March 2005, p. 3.
186. *Ibid.*
187. Katzman, "Iran's Influence in Iraq," p. 3.
188. *Ibid.*
189. Kagan, Kimberly, "The Iran Dossier. Iraq Report VI: Iran's proxy war against the U.S. in Iraq. Executive Summary," *The Weekly Standard*, August 29, 2007.
190. *Ibid.*
191. In April 2004, four people were killed in the diplomatic quarter of Damascus during a clash between a Syrian Islamic fundamentalist group and Syrian authorities. The group had reportedly detonated a car bomb outside a former

- United Nations building. The bombing was the first widely reported act of domestic Syrian-Islamist terrorism in several years.
192. David Shelby, "U.S. Envoy Warns Syria To Change Pro-Terrorist Policies on Iraq," *USINFO*, September 12, 2005.
 193. Prados, Alfred, and Sharp, Jeremy, "Syria: Political Conditions and Relations with the United States after the Iraq War," *CRS Report for Congress*, January 10, 2005, p. 18.
 194. Wikas, Seth, "Syrian-Iraqi Relations: A New Chapter?" *PolicyWatch*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, No. 1193, February 8, 2007.
 195. *Ibid.*
 196. "Hizballah Deputy Leader Says Israel's Threats over Water Project 'Worthless,'" *al-Anwar* (Beirut), October 14, 2002, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Near East and South Asia (FBIS-NES-2002-1014)*, October 14, 2002.
 197. Hassan Nasrallah, "The Secretary General of Hizbullah His Eminence Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah Addresses the People on the Birthday of the Redeemer Imam al Mahdi, Lord of the Epoch," October 22, 2002 (quotes taken from the website www.nasrallah.net).
 198. Imad Marmal, "Hizballah Deputy Leader: Iraqi Army 'Motivation' to Decide Course of War in Iraq," *al-Safir* (Beirut), March 27, 2003, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Near East and South Asia (FBIS-NES-2003-0327)*, March 27, 2003.
 199. "Lebanese Cleric Fadlallah: Muslims Will Not Recognize U.S.-Installed Govt. in Iraq," *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, April 6, 2003, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Near East and South Asia (FBIS-NES-2003-0406)*, April 6, 2003.
 200. Despite its rhetorical support for the opposition, Hizballah was subject to criticism from certain Iraqi Shi'ite factions during the war. For example, the group Atba Ahl al-Bayt (Followers of the family of the Prophet) asked Nasrallah to stop interfering in Iraqi Shia affairs and accused Hizballah of doing "its best to protect the former Iraqi regime." *Report on Plans for Iraqi 'War Crimes Tribunal,' Hizballah Interference in Iraq*, al-Watan (Kuwait), April 16, 2003, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Near East and South Asia (FBIS-NES-2003-0416)*, April 16, 2003. Similarly, SCIRI chairman Mohammad Baqer Hakim criticized Hizballah's al-Manar television network for giving insufficient airtime to the Iraqi Shia opposition and devoting significantly more coverage to members of Saddam's regime. Mohammad Baqer Hakim, interview, *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* (Tehran), April 29, 2003.
 201. Ely Karmon, "Hizbullah's History in Iraq," *Jerusalem Post*, July 3, 2007.

202. "U.S. Alleges Iran Using Hizballah As 'Proxy' In Iraq," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* website, July 2, 2007, at <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticleprint/007/07/0f42111a-73b5-43fc-8a84-bdcbace67d9d.html>.
203. " Hamas Spokesman: Iraq Must Establish a Suicide Army," *MEMRI Special Dispatch—Jihad and Terrorism Studies/Iraq/Palestinian*, No. 457, January 9, 2003, at http://www.memri.org/bin/opener_latest.cgi?ID=SD45703.
204. Sadick, Jess, "The Globalization of Hamas Terrorism," *A White Paper of The Foundation for the Defense of Democracies*, January 30, 2004, p. 4.
205. Paz, Reuven, "Hamas' Solidarity with Muqtada al-Sadr: Does the Movement Fall under the Control of Hizballah and Iran?" *The Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM) Special Dispatches*, Vol. 2, No. 4, August 23, 2004, at http://www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM_Special_dispatch_no_4-2.pdf.
206. "Iraqi: Hamas, Hezbollah operating in Iraq," *UPI*, January 15, 2004.
207. "Interrogated Hamas Operatives Say They Smuggled Weapons From Iraq Into Jordan at the Order of Hamas Leaders in Syria," *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series*, No. 1173, May 25, 2006, at <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP117306>.
208. Sayyed, Tashbih, "Who is Afraid of Hezbollah?" *The Muslim World Today*, July 27, 2006, at <http://www.paktoday.com/mwtoday/afraid28.htm>.
209. Karmon, "The Axis of Destabilization of the Middle East."
210. *Ibid.*
211. Mokhtari, "Countering Terrorism: Could Hezbollah and Hamas Show the Way?"
212. Sayyed, "Who is Afraid of Hezbollah?"
213. Perthes, "The Syrian Solution."
214. Karmon, "The Axis of Destabilization of the Middle East."
215. Excerpts from an interview with Hizballah Deputy Secretary-General Sheikh Naim Qassem aired on Al-Kawthar TV on April 16, 2007 cited in *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series*, No. 1549, April 19, 2007, at <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP154907>.
216. Nasrallah interview aired on Channel 1, Iranian TV, August 11, 2007, *MEMRI TV Monitor*, Clip No. 1541, August 11, 2007, at http://www.memritv.org/clip_transcript/en/1541.htm.
217. Sayyed, "Who is Afraid of Hezbollah?"
218. Rubin, Barry, "Why Syria Matters," *MEMRI Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 4, December 2006, at <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2006/issue4/jv10no4a2.html>.
219. Sayyed, "Who is Afraid of Hezbollah?"
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