

4 The Long-Term Objectives of Iranian and Syrian Support for PVMs: Tangled Skein or Gordian Knot?

There can be little doubt that Iranian and Syrian state support for political violence movements, which regularly engage in terrorist tactics, act in the capacity of a fulcrum for much of the political violence and low-intensity warfare taking place in Lebanon, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Aside from other states, such as Sudan and Saudi Arabia, Iran and Syria today constitute the mainstay of state supported political violence in the Middle East and Gulf regions. In fact, this perspective applies to such an extent that, if their financing of proxy warfare in the service of their respective foreign policy were rendered unfeasible, both states would arguably lose their only viable means of power projection.

Support by Iran and Syria for Lebanese and Palestinian militants comes in different guises and the two states, acting in the framework of a strategic partnership since the early 1980s, have in the interim established a sophisticated *modus operandi*, at the heart of which stands their division of labor. The nature of cooperation between Iran and Syria is made manifest in the example of the Lebanese Hezbollah. To use Gal Luft's terminology, the Syrian "landlord" provides for the logistics, training and base of operations in Lebanon and Damascus, as well as a staging area for attacks against Israel; and the Iranian "sugar daddy" provides the financial resources, and also maintains a permanent base in Lebanon to uphold its stake in the joint venture, and in order to take a direct hand in the training, recruitment and deployment on site. The question of whether Hezbollah could have left its mark on the Lebanese civil war and waged its guerilla war against the IDF and its Lebanese allies to the extent, and with the sustained intensity, that it did between 1982–2000, if the Party of God had not been actively supported by the Iranian-Syrian axis, must be deemed rhetorical only.

Iran's principal contribution to the perpetuation of political violence in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories is the massive outflow of petrodollars and Bonyad profits to Hezbollah via the Damas-

cus road, and to the Palestinian rejectionist camp either through Syrian intermediaries, such as the PFLP-GC (cf. the “Santorini”), or only slightly less vicariously, through its Hezbollah emissaries in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It appears that now that the conflict in Lebanon has wound down to quasi-peacetime conditions (with the notable exception of the prevailing situation in the Shi’ite south and the Sheba Farms area), Tehran’s theocratic rulers have not been content with having to witness first the “Syrianization” of Hezbollah, and more recently, to stand idly by while Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Nasrallah is leading the Party of God into Lebanon’s halls of parliament. Hezbollah’s arrival in constitutional politics will eventually lead to its departure from militancy; or, failing its full cession of political violence, Lebanon’s premier Shi’ite militia will gradually diminish with, or without, making a racket. However, for the time being, and not unlike the Provisional Irish Republican Army in Ulster after 1972, Hezbollah will continue to campaign with both the Kalashnikov and the ballot box. At the end of the day, it may well be the politicization of Hezbollah and the implications of “Lebanonization” for its utility as Iran’s executioner, which has alerted Tehran to an incrementally closing window of opportunity on its interests in the Levant.

Arguably, Hezbollah’s transformation into a political party willing to throw in its lot with a Syrian-controlled, multi-confessional Lebanese state is exerting pressure on its Iranian handlers to use its oldest proxy one last time in order to galvanize Palestinian rejectionism of the religious brand. Indeed, the inception by Iran’s proxy of a new generation in the Palestinian territories is underway through the good offices of Hezbollah’s agents in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This development also dovetails with Iran’s reallocation of funding to established Palestinian rejectionist groups, especially the PIJ and Mounir al-Muqdadh’s renegade Fatah faction in Ain al-Hilweh; the Islamic Republic does not appear to be quite as successful in the case of Hamas, which strongly emphasizes its Sunni confessional heritage and politico-military autonomy. The underlying motive for Iran’s heavy investment – financial, logistical and military – in the Palestinian terror infrastructure (cf. “Karine-A”) must be sought in the application of the Islamic Republic’s ideology to regional politics: Israel, or, as the Iranian government prefers to call the Jewish state, the “Zionist entity,” will likely remain Iran’s public enemy No. 1. This perspective holds true for at least as long, as Iran remains bent

on exporting its Revolutionary principles, and continues to see its path barred by an Israeli state acting in the capacity of a diminutive version and catspaw of the “Great Satan,” that is, the U.S. Absent a strike with strategic arms, such as a “Shihab-3” armed with an unconventional warhead, Iran’s likeliest weapon against its regional rival in the future will be the instrumentalization of Palestinian militancy. In the light of Israel’s opaque, but nevertheless aggressively propagated, deterrent nuclear capability, Iran (provided it follows a rational course of action) will have little choice but to play the Palestinian, and to a progressively lesser extent, the Lebanese cards.

The failure of Syria’s terror patronage system and the concomitant loss of its Lebanese and Palestinian clients would rob Bashir al-Asad of the most critical asset in the negotiations concerned with the return of the Golan Heights. The late Hafez al-Asad vividly demonstrated what a cunning mind could achieve with the calibrated and carefully timed use of proxies, ever balancing the scourge of terror with the tranquility of its absence. Thus the price for peace has always been made palpable for Syria’s enemies, never permitting them to forget that it was Asad’s to give or deny. And with the progressing decline of the praetorian Alawi state’s arsenal, and Washington’s eye fixed upon itself (cf. SALSA), Syria’s durable and proven program of vicarious, deniable warfare continues to have a bright future. Hemmed in by the Israeli-Turkish defensive relationship, militarily hamstrung by the delayed, cascading effects of the collapse of its Soviet ally and, more recently, constrained by a threatening Coalition military presence along its border with Iraq, the Syrian regime’s options in the pursuit of its hegemonical aspirations for the region are dwindling. In that sense, Syria’s ability to retain its hold over Lebanon in the longer term also is becoming ever more doubtful. By extension, with the future of Lebanon as a Syrian satrapy becoming an increasingly uncertain prospect, Syria potentially also stands to lose its only remaining battleground in the long war of attrition with Israel; its occupation of Lebanon has allowed it to eschew the consequences of a direct military confrontation with the IDF since 1982. In the current constellation, the elimination of Lebanon as Syria’s “terrarium” of political violence movements would reduce the key attribute of deniability inherent in Syria’s Lebanon-based proxies (as opposed to its Damascus-based clients), critically curtail Asad’s reach, and therefore constitute a crippling blow to Syria’s influence in the region.

With the exception of the threat along the Israeli-Lebanese border upheld by a massively armed Hezbollah, the only relevant outlet for Syria's terror weapon in the near future lies in the Palestinian territories. Even so, Syria's stake in the Palestinian cause is not without difficulties. The younger Asad's active engagement in funneling Syrian aid to Palestinian rejectionist organizations, in many ways signifies a departure from his father's reluctance to support Palestinian proxies not utterly under his thumb. Even though Bashir al-Asad encourages the PIJ's and Hamas' dependence on Damascus' aid in much the same way that has allowed his father to bring Fatah apostates and Syrian-Palestinian militants (cf. al-Saiqa and Ahmed Jibril's PFLP-GC) into the Syrian Ba'athi fold, the new generation of religious Palestinian rejectionist militancy is loath to part with its autonomy. The upshot of this development is that the PIJ and Hamas now have to contend with a divided leadership, one "outside," and backed by the Iranian-Syrian strategic partnership, and the other, fiercely independent, "inside" the Palestinian territories. Moreover, in contrast to the Palestinian socialist and nationalist clientele, the Palestinian Islamist rejectionist organizations, like Hezbollah before them, have become the subject of an internecine, Iranian-Syrian tug-of-war. Whether Bashir's investment in the Palestinian rejectionist camp will pay a dividend in the long-term, for example in the context of the Golan Heights dispute, is among the more interesting questions awaiting a response in the near future; the current state of the Middle East peace process, the imminent obsolescence of its current manifestation – the "Road Map" – and the unabated, sustained level of terrorist acts perpetrated by the PIJ and Hamas, alongside Fatah offshoots like the Tanzim/Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, suggests that Syria has successfully maximized its resources in the short-term.

Finally, for the U.S., and for Israel as its principal ally in the Middle East, the quest for an effective response to the continued Iranian-Syrian propensity to use the terror-weapon in the face of Western diplomatic and economic sanctions will inevitably lead to the posing of one central question: Are they confronted by a tangled skein, or a Gordian Knot? If the former is the case, which is to be hoped, then a denouement does remain an option, albeit one whose feasibility decreases with each passing month. On the other hand, if the U.S. and/or Israel determine that they face an implacable enemy in Iran and Syria, whose protracted use of the terror weapon will continue to

destabilize the Middle East and further corroborate the intractability of the Arab-Israeli impasse, an alternative course of action perforce opens up. To remain consistent with the classical analogy in the title of this study, the stroke of a sword will likely be at the heart of this alternative policy. As a corollary to the “War on Terror,” the Coalition’s invasion of Iraq of March 2003 has not only demonstrated the costs of cutting another Gordian Knot, and the ex post facto burden it imposes upon the authors of such a course of action; but in a time when brutal dictatorships are only a fading memory in the West, it indubitably also revealed the benefits of intervention by removing a long-standing source of conflict in the region and by improving the lot of a much tried people.

