



## THE HIZBALLAH-SYRIA-IRAN TRIANGLE

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*This article examines the Hizballah-Syria-Iran triangle--or the Shi'a axis--its nature, and the relationships between those who make it up. It explains that this relationship was not created during the 2006 Lebanon War, but rather existed long before then. The article also points to Israel's missed opportunity to deal a blow to this axis, and thus to cause this group to reconsider its actions.*

We are paying the price for the illusions of those years during which it appeared to some that the international politics of the Middle East would become something like the Britain-France relationship in the worst-case or the France-Monaco relationship in the best-case scenario. Today, we are facing the results of this great illusion. It is necessary to look back and to ask those who thought there would be a new Middle East whether their policies haven't contributed, to some degree, to the Middle East we live in today. The Middle East today could not be further from the future of peace, moderation, the end of ideology, and a focus on economic prosperity that was so often predicted in the early 1990s.

The Shi'a-Iran-Syria-Hizballah axis has two connotations. The first is an ideological one, as an active radical force trying to change the Middle East and hoping for change beyond the region as well. This axis succeeds at exporting these ideas even without any physical connection to other places. I understand, for example, that recently the most popular baby name in some big Sunni cities has been Nasrallah, after the Hizballah leader. The reason for this is because the ideas of this axis as embodied in Hizballah's leader are

expressed throughout the Arab world and throughout the greater Muslim world.

Second, this axis is also an actual physical one, which creates an arc starting in Tehran, passing through Baghdad (and when the United States leaves Baghdad, this axis will hold onto Baghdad with great power), and continuing through from Syria to Lebanon. The actual physical effort of the ties between the Iranians and the Syrians are directed towards these areas, but it is important to remember that this axis does not intend to stop at the border of the Shi'a ethnicity. At least from what we see in Palestinian society, it is attempting to export itself in the most active way into Sunni societies as well.

Despite the differences from the past in today's politics, an old rule is at play here: "My brother and I against his cousin, and my cousin against my neighbor." When there is a struggle over hegemony in Iraq, the Shi'a do not hesitate to murder Sunnis, nor do Sunnis hesitate to murder Shi'a. Yet when confronted with a mutual enemy, whether it is the United States or Israel, the Shi'a of Lebanon or Iran have no qualms about providing direct assistance to the Sunnis of Gaza or Jenin. This is because they have a common enemy—Israel.

The significance of this axis, however, is not only against the State of Israel—something that the Sunni countries, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf countries understand. These countries wish to preserve stability in the Middle East. They understand that this Shi'a axis does not intend to stop at hurting Israel or even at ending American influence in the Middle East. Its true purpose is not only to exist within Shi'a society but also to gain power in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and finally—as the Egyptians and Jordanians fear—in Cairo and in Amman.

King Abdallah of Amman expresses this more clearly; it has also become apparent in the Egyptian press, where there has been a sudden rather incredible interest—one I don't remember ever seeing before—in the number of Shi'as inside Egypt. This shows that this is a matter even Egypt is bothered by. The numbers are anywhere between 0.5 percent and one percent. The Egyptian interest in the enemy at home—in other words, the Shi'as in Egypt—comes from the understanding of the countries of the region that this alliance poses a threat to them.

Moreover, the situation is about to undergo a drastic change if the country leading this axis obtains a nuclear weapon. The Iranian effort to obtain a nuclear weapon is double in purpose. First, as a regional power, the Iranians have always wanted a nuclear bomb. This was also the case for the Shah's regime. Second, today, the nuclear umbrella is intended to serve as the Shi'a axis's ultimate shield against anybody who opposes it or attempts to curtail its progress. The Iranians understand that without nuclear arms they would encounter far more international opposition, and it would be very difficult for them to stand against such pressure.

The countries of the region understand that if there is an Iranian nuclear umbrella, they are the ones who will be subject to pressure and blackmail difficult for them to resist. The clear result of this situation is that the United States and Israel would fear responding in order to avoid a nuclear threat against their interests or existence. Hizballah, Hamas, and other clients of Iran—which could also include the Fatah, as the past has shown—will have much more courage to act knowing that Israel is limited in its ability to respond. This is due to the fact that there would be an immediate warning from Iran, and Jerusalem would need to take into account Iranian missiles when taking actions that the Iranians may view as harmful to their interests. Only the Iranians would be the judge of what is harmful to their interests.

The Gulf countries also might not be able to withstand the internal pressure generated by Iran having nuclear weapons. Aside from external Iranian pressure would be that from Shi'a residents or pro-Iran radicals. One issue provoking tension is the conflicting interests between Iran and Saudi Arabia's oil industries regarding pricing. In addition, there is disagreement over who will control the region, which contains a significant part of the oil reserves and in which there is a very large Shi'a population. It is difficult to predict how these countries will stand up to such internal and external pressures, in particular when the external pressure is accompanied by such statements as: "It is impossible to take any action against us, because we have a nuclear weapon."

In this context, Middle Eastern people would view the Iranians as the leaders, and many would believe that under a nuclear weapon the Iranians could make much bigger demands and take far more daring actions, even if it meant opposing the whole

external world. The popularity of radical and terrorist forces under these conditions would be far more powerful.

It is here that the war of the summer of 2006 in Lebanon comes in. One should be courageous and tell the truth: We did not win points. We missed out on a historical opportunity that was within our reach and range of capability. We could have dealt a blow to a critical connection point of that Shi'a axis. We could have found the weak point of that axis and dealt it a serious military blow, which might have prevented the fall of Lebanon into this axis's lap. We could have caused Damascus to think twice about being a part of that axis. We could have proven that Iran's abilities are limited, and that this limitation should be taken into consideration in regards to other matters as well. This small war, which seems nothing more than a war with a guerrilla group, was a big missed opportunity in the history of the Middle East.

In order to understand this, I would like to make a few comments regarding the Syria-Iran-Hizballah triangle. Iran and Syria have few connecting points. What do a very secular regime such as the Alawite regime in Syria and a regime in Tehran that is perceived as the "religious activist" have in common? The common ground is that a great fear of internal and external delegitimization brings the two together. They are connected by a great fear of external forces that will attempt to interfere with them achieving their interests. It is also the understanding that together they can achieve more than each alone that brings them together.

This connection is most apparent in two different places.

First, it is apparent in the Hizballah organization. The organization itself was built by the Iranians, something which the

Iranians could not have done without Syria's help. If Syria hadn't agree to serve as the go-between, Hizballah wouldn't be what it is now or what it was the eve of the war, as it is through Syria that all weapons are transferred to Hizballah. It is possible to transfer money through banks but not weapons, and fighters who go for training en masse and come back en masse are impossible to infiltrate any other way than through Syria.

Syria is the bridge through which Iran created Hizballah. In practice, Syria was the logistical backing of Hizballah. It is true that from the time that Bashar Asad became ruler of Syria in 2000 he came to admire Nasrallah, and the Syrians themselves began providing weapons to Hizballah. Hizballah became the focal point of the connection between Syria and Iran.

Second, they cooperate regarding the Palestinian groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Their sponsor is located in Damascus, where the offices and heads of the organizations are. Hamas has not lost its independence; rather it has become more independent due to Iran's assistance. Islamic Jihad was never independent and actually serves as the long arm of Iran, even though it is a completely Sunni organization. There were periods when the Iranians said: "If you don't commit terror attacks, we will not pay your salaries." Islamic Jihad committed terror attacks solely in order to impress Iran.

In this regard, Iran and Syria are coming together with the mutual desire to build up their terror capabilities. Each of them views these abilities differently, and each has its own interests but make use of the same assets.

On the other hand, there is no Iranian dependence on Syria in relation to the nuclear threat. The nuclear threat in Iran will exist even if Syria completely cuts its

ties with the country. Therefore, there is no real basis for those among us who say that the political process with Syria will help us against the Iranians. This is an illusion. The nuclear threat must be dealt with directly with the Iranians. There is no way to get around this by dealing with the Syrians.

In spite of this, the Syrians need help building up their strength for war. Syria is a poor country, and the Iranians can help them a great deal by building up Syria's military capability. They do not need the Iranians to go to war, but they need the Iranians in order to build up their military strength for the future. If tomorrow the Syrians want to go to war, they don't need the Iranians, but if they want to build a different army for the long-term, they need the Iranians and their money.

Thus, we understand how much Hizballah is a connecting point in this triangle, because it allows these two countries to regain control of Lebanon, which is what both countries wish to achieve. This is the way to spread their influence not only in Lebanon, but from Lebanon and beyond, to Israel.

In this war, we could have struck a blow to the connecting point—and not only to have soundly defeated a force that could strike Israel but also to cause those two sides to reconsider if their way is the right way. In my opinion, it appears that this wouldn't work with the Iranians due to their world perception. It appears, however, that a serious strike on Hizballah would have had a great impact on Damascus.

It is also important to note that because Israel did not prepare a serious, sharp, and clear enough strike on Hizballah, this created further motivation elsewhere in places where people may feel threatened by the Shi'a axis but were unable to ignore their claims of success in the war against Israel. This is the case for the Palestinians,

this is the case for the Sunni countries, and this is even the case—to some degree—for the Lebanese government, which would have had a much easier time dealing with Hizballah if Hizballah had come out of the war more clearly beaten. It didn't suffer a great enough blow, and it was within our ability to have delivered such a blow.

It is no surprise that Saudi Arabia, which did not condemn Israel during the war, is now holding negotiations with Hizballah, something one wouldn't have thought possible before. This is because the Saudis immediately assess who is strong and who is weak, and they always go with the strong party. This has been the Saudi policy ever since the kingdom's establishment. They sense weakness on the part of their side up against the Shi'a axis and therefore seek contact with the stronger Shi'a forces.

In conclusion, the Shi'a axis was not established following the 2006 Lebanon War, nor was the relationship between Iran and Syria created during the war. The war presented what was perhaps a one-time opportunity to deal a blow to that connecting point and to make the countries of the region aware of the Shi'a axis's weaknesses, to make them realize that it is possible to stop the momentum, and that it is not so worth being on their side so long as Israel decides to take action. These are all things that were not achieved in this war, and I dare to say that we will pay for this in the future, and we, in this case, only have ourselves to blame. We could have done it, and it was only poor decisionmaking that caused us not to use our power to our best abilities and that such accomplishments were not achieved.

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