MERIA

THE ANTI-IRANIAN FRONT: EGYPT, SAUDI ARABIA, AND JORDAN

Ayellet Yehiav*

The following article was adapted from a lecture presented at a GLORIA Center conference entitled "After Lebanon: A New Middle East?," made possible by the generosity of Mr. Joel Sprayregen.

This article discusses the coalition of the relatively moderate Arab countries--Egypt, Saudi-Arabia, and Jordan--and how they have dealt with the threat of the Shi'a axis.

Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan regard the Syrian-Iranian-Hizballah triangle (as voiced through the press, and not from the regimes themselves) as a sort of axis of radical policy, the *muqawamah*—the "Shi'a storm" as King Abdallah of Jordan dared call it—or as a group that strives for an Islamic Middle East. Such terms were being applied to this axis even before the Lebanon War of the summer of 2006. The Arab countries were aware of Iran, the ambitious giant that rose up from the East, at least since Ahmadinejad's election as president, but they consciously chose to ignore this. In the accord from the March 2006 Arab summit in Khartoum, the only reference to Iran was, as in the past, the demand to return the three islands over which there is dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates.

It appears there was a conscious decision not to deal with the threats of the Shi'a axis and to avoid confrontation with Iran. Following the events of last summer, including the abduction of Gilad Shalit followed by the kidnapping of two more Israeli soldiers in the north of Israel, and then the war in Lebanon, it appears that the leading Sunni Arab countries were dealt a blow. It finally became clear to them that the Arab collective was beginning to fall apart. The Saudi-Egyptian-Syrian axis, which once determined the decisions of the Arab summit by concluding matters ahead of time and thus preventing disagreement, simply broke down and slowly dissipated. It appeared that a vacuum was created, but this was not really the case.

This vacuum was filled by other forces, forces that in the eyes of the leading Arab countries in the world were external: The United States with its invasion of Afghanistan and then the coalition in Iraq is one; Turkey, with its eyes on Europe, but also seeing itself as a mediator in the region clearly has interests in northern Iraq and its border with Syria; Israel succeeded unilaterally to dictate matters in the region, for example, the disengagement plan, which the Arab states did not like at all; and of course Iran—which is also not part of the Arab world—under Ahmadinejad, who since his election has not missed a single chance to voice revolutionary rhetoric, which is perceived by some leading Arab countries as the revival of the export of the Islamic Revolution.

Therefore, every reference to what goes on in the region or in response to the Sunni countries refers first and foremost to Iran's hegemony in the region and its potential power. This creates a sort of dichotomy in

the region that is unifying. The common denominators of all of these countries are:

1. The perception of the threat posed by Iran and its allies, whether the threat is real or whether simply perceived.
2. The importance each country attributes to the Iranian nuclear issue; viewing the Iranian nuclear campaign as a way to achieve hegemony, involvement, and security in the region.
3. Urgently calling together—and the key word here is urgent—the countries defending themselves against the challenge of a new representation of the regional narrative. This does not only refer to events, but also to the perception of the region and its future.

Among these different attitudes toward this group of countries, many different political science definitions can be applied, but unfortunately none of these definitions suit the countries defending themselves against this threat. The first definition is "axis," or *mihwar* in Arabic. We often mention the axis of the radical countries—the Shi'a axis (though Syria is not Shi'a)—but does a moderate axis exist? Egypt and Jordan negate this possibility of a unified axis in the region, as the two countries disapprove of the axis policy. What is interesting is that the Saudis remain quiet, as the Saudis are not big talkers when it comes to policy exposure.

The second definition is "camp" or "front." This definition does not exist in the Arabic press; rather it refers to "saf," or a "line," which of course brings up the perception of "wahdat al-saf"—Abd al-Nasser's unification line. In this case, those trying to find a "wahdat al-saf," a unification line, can forget about it. There is no such unification. This isn't an alliance nor is it a bloc. Once we examine the characteristics of this joining or coalition, matters will be clearer.

A "front," the definition we reach by compromise, better describes the situation. This is an opposition coalition of like-minded countries. One could call it the "moderate coalition." I am purposely emphasizing the terminology, because, in my opinion, it represents the fragility of this joining or coalition versus the Shi'a cohesiveness.

This is not just a definition. There is also ambiguity in determining where this group belongs, because this coalition was created with the consultation between the Saudis, Egyptians, and Jordanians on the eve of the Rome Conference on July 26, 2006, in order to find a solution to the war in Lebanon. Apparently, this was nothing more than a consultation. They became an axis—at least in the eyes of those who wanted this—in response to the Iranian-Syrian-Hizballah axis, but under different circumstances. We also see such a group but with additional players, in the form of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

The GCC is made up of six countries in the Persian Gulf, including Saudi Arabia. One could also talk about an "Arab Quartet" consisting of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This usually appears in the context of the international quartet's refusal to answer Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt's request to first make them observers in the international quartet and eventually to allow them to play a much greater role in the quartet.

In addition to the issue of who belongs to this coalition, there are many built-in problems. As I mentioned previously, there

is first and foremost a negative common denominator—their cohesiveness is low. Moreover, their decisiveness is well-measured, particular, and cautious. They are very hesitant. They lack almost any regional institutional framework. There are many differences among the countries and they lack clear leadership. Sometimes the Saudis lead, and sometimes the Egyptians lead. Though it is often claimed that everything is coordinated, this is not the case; it is simply a role-playing game.

There is also a much more serious problem here, the lack of trust among the countries. Egypt, for example, has a hidden agenda in being part of this coalition; it wants to improve its status and regain influence. Jordan is seeking a substitute for its loss of strategic depth following Iraq's collapse; and Saudi Arabia wants to become a leader of the region once again. The Saudis were in this position for a while during the 2002 Arab summit in Beirut, when the summit adopted a Saudi initiative that then became an Arab initiative.

These countries also have completely conflicting interests, or at least competing interests. The differences are not in the nuances, but rather in their perceptions. For those who want an example, this is displayed in their behavior in regard to Lebanon. For Egypt, for example, Lebanon was never a priority. The most important thing for Egypt was regional stability, not having Syria dragged into the conflict, and maintaining Egyptian mediation on the Palestinian issue. Saudi Arabia on the other hand, sees Lebanon as a very high priority; it has ties with the Hariri family, financial investments in the country, and the religious conflict certainly bothers the Saudis more than it does Egypt.

In light of the aforementioned facts, we must seriously question whether this coalition, this joining, this front for a specific and very objective goal is ad hoc or whether it will prove durable, will overcome its shortcomings, and will survive in the long-term. The more important question is whether this coalition will succeed in demonstrating new energies, which are lacking in the conduct of each of the countries that make up this coalition. Yet another problem that should be taken into account is if this decisiveness is adopted and they display the required energy and cohesiveness, whether or not the leaders of these three countries—Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—or the countries that join them under the various guidelines that I mentioned have the courage to stand up against their publics. One of the main problems they are up against is the Arab public, which the leaders view as an obstacle.

Aside from naming babies after him, I will mention another indication of Nasrallah's popularity. During Ramadan, it is very common to eat dried fruit, and there are many different kinds of dates. The best type of date in the Egyptian market was called "Nasrallah" and the slightly less superior type of date was called "Ahmadinejad." An additional, more scientific indication was a survey conducted in mid-August 2006 by the Ibn Khaldoun Center headed by Dr. Sa'ad Eddin Ibrahim. Approximately 2,000 people were asked to rate the popularity of 80 Arab figures (This doesn't reflect the beliefs of everybody in Egypt, but this is certainly gives some indication.). Nasrallah was voted the most popular, receiving 82 percent; Ahmadinejad received 73 percent; Khalid Mashal received 60 percent; bin Ladin 52 percent; and Muhammad Mahdi Akef, head of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, received only 45 percent. Where do all those who do not have an Islamist agenda place? Far, far behind.

There is an opening or opportunity, but it is unclear to what degree the leaders of the moderate countries will be wise enough to take advantage of this. This opportunity was clearly revealed following the Iranian fervor in the wake of Saddam Hussein's execution. There is great anger in the Arab world toward Iran, even among the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and Egypt, because they felt the Iranians pushed for and inspired Saddam's hasty execution, particularly on the first day of the Id al-Fitr.

Finally, it is impossible not to note the central U.S. role in this coalition of moderate countries. According to the leaders, Iran doesn't just pose a threat to their stability and the stability of the region, but also sabotages the image of moderate Islam that those countries have attempted to project to the outside since September 11.

The moderate leaders were busy for too long trying to prevent the "al-Qa'idaization" of Islam. Suddenly, they are now finding themselves in a situation in which they must prevent their own "Hizballahization." The six plus two coalition: the GCC countries, plus Egypt and Jordan is a coalition that would not have been created without American backing. The Americans pushed for some sort of bloc that could be relied upon.

The moderate countries would be very interested in being not only the United States' stick toward Iran and toward Iran's allies in the region, but also to present a positive agenda, to be a carrot for a certain purpose, if you will; and they do not hide this. This was already expressed in the second meeting of the six plus two countries with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Cairo in October 2006. Their goal is to encourage as much contact as possible between Israel and the Palestinians and to urge the peace process on the Palestinian side and press them to reach solutions—the sooner the better, and not necessarily according to the Road Map.

They feel this urging will not only serve to prove their abilities to produce something positive, but will also signal to Syria that "you played the wrong game, and now you are out of the game." Meaning, if Syria wants to be integrated in the peace process, it had better think twice about its connections with Iran. How successful will this process be? Egypt, at least, thinks that it can influence and draw in Syria more than Iran, but under no circumstances does Egypt think Syria can be cut off from Iran, only that Syria's world perspective might become more balanced.

**Ayellet Yehiav is a Middle East expert and is a director at the Center for Political Research in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*