THE ARAB UPRISINGS
AND THE UNVEILING OF THE SHIITE CRESCENT

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ABSTRACT

The Arab uprisings which began in December of 2010 in Tunisia are still today making history. These uprisings forever changed the Middle East by deposing longstanding dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. The organization and determination of common individuals, demanding a higher quality of life, and rejecting dictatorships were widespread. Evidence of social movements and protests were seen across the region. Initially events were exclusively affecting Sunni ruled states. As Sunni led regimes were being toppled by the will of the people, Shiite leaders in the region joined the international community in applauding the efforts of activists. This drastically changed in March of 2011 when protests reached Syria. The situation in Syria quickly escalated to one of extreme violence. Today, this conflict has carried the state into a deadly civil war.

Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria form the ‘axis of resistance,’ a group known for its shared Shiite religious affiliation, opposition to Israel and the West, and a commitment to justice. While the international community was in an uproar over the violence being committed against activists in Syria, surprisingly, the few entities supporting Assad were these very “pioneers of justice” and “defenders of the oppressed”: Hezbollah and its
regional ally, Iran. Recent extreme violence in Syria has brought deep hypocrisies within the axis of resistance to the surface. The mass killings and reign of terror which the Assad regime has unleashed on its civilian population call into question the duplicitous loyalties of these actors. Regardless of Bashar al-Assad’s violent and oppressive regime, these parties have defended him and supplied him militarily.

The conflict in Syria has exposed the fraudulent ideology and allegiance of these entities. The following discussion examines the recent Arab uprisings, tracing the growth of the Shiite Crescent from its initial beginnings until its present day involvement in the conflict in Syria. This analysis will establish that while the Shiite Crescent has purported a focus on Islam and ending oppression, its current support for Bashar al-Assad’s murderous regime has revealed this group’s true objective: geopolitical survival and growth.

Today, this hypocrisy is hindering the future of the Shiite Crescent. The impact of Iran and Hezbollah’s decision to stand with Bashar al-Assad, coupled with the threat of Assad losing power over Syria is transforming the region. Syria is remarkable on several levels as the outcome of regime change will shift the regional balance of power radically. The gains which the Shiite pillar of strength made in recent years due to the growth and popularity of Hezbollah, and the removal of Saddam Hussein from Iraq are now being threatened. Without Syria, Iran and Hezbollah will be drastically weakened both regionally and internationally. Furthermore, if Bashar al-Assad is replaced by either a
Sunni or Salafist regime, the Shiite Crescent will likely lose the major conduit which unites the axis of resistance.

The following analysis examines the growth of the Shiite Crescent and the various disingenuous methods which this alliance has used in an attempt to strengthen its regional position. I will discuss the fact that today these advances are being challenged due to the exposure of the group’s fraudulent principles. Speeches from Hassan Nasrallah, Bashar al-Assad, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other key regional political figures will be drawn upon in order to characterize the position of key figures representing the Shiite Crescent. This discussion also uses journalistic accounts from American and Arab newspapers, as well as scholarly writings from historians and analysts such as Hala Jaber and Martin Kramer.

In closing I will discuss how these realities have established that the Shiite Crescent is not exceedingly different from the West, a fact extremely contrary to the propaganda and half-truths which the group disseminates. Regardless of their attempts to demonize and set themselves apart from the West, the Arab uprisings have very much resulted in an unveiling of what truly motivates this alliance.
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CHAPTER 1
THE ARAB UPRISINGS

The uprisings and revolutions which swept through the Middle East in December 2010 began with what was popularly called the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia. The modern Middle East has always been susceptible to military coups prompted or inspired by foreign intervention, but the common individual’s efforts to create change had overwhelmingly had little impact. These movements aroused new hope and fervor throughout the world. Renewed energy and a genuine belief in the ability of the individual to generate change were palpable throughout the Middle East, and beyond. The uprisings were recognized for their large number of participants, as well as their diversity in age, gender, ethnicity, and religion. The protesters overwhelming insistence on peaceful resistance, irrespective of violent oppression, was widely respected.

These struggles, which the international community witnessed, were a reflection of the civilian populace’s ambitions for a new political order based on: respect for human rights, religious freedom, justice, and the organization and management of the people’s welfare. The uprisings took place in several states, from the bottom up, and with rapidity. They were sudden and unprecedented, at least since the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979. Fouad al-Sanioroa, the former Lebanese prime minister framed the changes sweeping the Arab world vividly by stating:

We consider the Arab change a period of maturity, It places the Arab world, including us, at the gateway of a new future filled with the ambitions of our youth, to establish political regimes on the basis of the respect of rights and public freedoms, especially religious freedoms, of the
safeguard of human dignity, and of justice and good management of the public affairs.¹

For some time, the Middle East has exhibited alarming symptoms pointing to a necessary and unavoidable need for political and social change. Stark population explosions had much to do with the hardships being experienced across the region, and leading up to the revolutions. For example, the Egypt that Gamal Abdel Nasser came to rule over in 1952 had a population of 18 million. The Egypt of former president Mubarak, and now Mursi, encompasses an alarming 85 million inhabitants, and continues to grow.² In just over 60 years the population of Egypt has increased six fold. This dramatic level of increase can be found repeatedly throughout the region. In modern history, urban areas have swelled and experienced an explosion in population density. This is in stark contrast to a historically more apportioned balance between rural and urban dwellings. Today, a Middle Eastern nation’s majority population resides in its cities. Egypt offers a prime example with its densely overpopulated Cairo slums.

Such magnitude of population increase would be extremely difficult for any country to weather; though, this has especially been true for the third world states of the Arab uprisings. Governments, administrators, and the system of rule in place did not meet growing demands. The necessary adjustments and advancements proved an


overwhelming challenge. States were not equipped for and could not accommodate such blunt population explosions.

Overwhelmingly, the youth population has felt the brunt of this difficulty. The exponential increase in birth rates throughout the Middle East over the last thirty plus years has resulted in the majority of the region’s population being under the age of thirty. A pyramid is often used to provide a visual description of the immense age differences which exist amongst these populations. The base, by far being the widest part to this pyramid, is represented by the youth populace which accounts for the majority of the population. For example, in Yemen and Iran over 60% of the population has less than thirty years of age. This trend can be seen throughout the region and has had much to do with the Arab uprisings being described as a “youth revolution”.

The Arab Human Development Report (AHDR), published in 2009, raised the red flag of unemployment. The tensions which youth alienation invokes were also addressed. According to the AHDR, unemployment rates in the Arab world, especially among the ranks of youth, are “nearly double that in the world at large.”

The political and social structures in place were not equipped to absorb such rapid population growth. The systems of education, health, and social welfare suffered greatly. Unemployment and poor general welfare were a direct result. A 2003 Arab Human


Development Report cautioned that systems of education within the Middle East are chronically mismanaged and producing severely undernourished minds. At the opposite end, those with sufficient education had limited job opportunities. The corruption of those in power, lack of opportunity, and helplessness of many, including the educated youth, created a pressure cooker effect.

Politicians and statesmen within the Middle East offered insufficient change and unsatisfactory solutions; the root of these problems was not addressed. Regardless of warning, the mounting issues of unemployment, poor economic welfare, and population explosion came to a head. Almost no one could have anticipated such a fast paced and dramatic reaction from the Arab youth and masses.

The Arab uprisings have forever transformed the political landscape of the Middle East. Leaders who were once thought of as unmoving came up against the very public that historically had shaken before them in fear. Each deposed leader had been in power for generations: “Muammar Gaddafi in Libya since 1969, Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen since 1978, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt since 1981, and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia since 1987.” These societies would no longer accept the failure of the state or their leaders to deliver on demands. Nor were they willing to allow these aging dictators to transfer power to their younger less experienced descendants.

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Among many things, these revolutions are the result of a population’s yearning for political participation. While numbers pertaining to mass protest are often inflated, moderates estimate that several million people participated in protests throughout the Middle East during the Arab uprisings.\(^7\)

The uprisings are the product of the coming of age of an Arab generation, which until now was unknown. The social movements of this generation do not depend on the leadership of charismatic or irreplaceable leaders. Social media has played a pivotal role by allowing activists to organize without forgoing their identities. Unlike other historical uprisings, these movements were not dependent on financial sponsorship or foreign patronage; instead their impetus was generated and encouraged by one another.

Today’s activists are representative of a society full of people: young, old, male, and female. These individuals desire change and are wary of the older and seated generation’s corruption, undemocratic systems, and autocratic rule. The rulers of the Middle East who today remain in power will continue to experience increasing pressure from a populace which is unsatisfied and disproportionately young.

The social media explosion across the Arab world and the penetration of cellular phones, Twitter, and Facebook made the mass mobilization of the youth segment both possible and effective. In the same fashion that the cassette tape allowed Khomeini’s voice to reach his supporters across Iran in 1979, social media allowed Wael Ghonim: the

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young Egyptian blogger/activist, and Asma Mahfouz: a founder of the April 6 movement, to suddenly become iconic to millions of young activists who were undeterred by Mubarak’s police regime.⁸

Prior to their demise, each regime launched an attempt to crush its respective resistance movement. The violent repression activists endured matched perfectly with Hezbollah and Iran's message of combating oppression and resisting injustice everywhere. As a result, the uprisings seemed to be working in favor of the anti-Western alliance uniting: Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, and working against Washington’s allies in Sunni ruled states such as Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. This was true, until protests reached Syria, and the anti-Western alliance came under attack.

When emphasizing their religious identity the anti-Western alliance is often referred to as the Shiite Crescent; at other times, the axis of resistance. Though, regardless of under what pseudonym, the intentions of this group (Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria) have remained consistent. Since its alliance, this group has emphasized a commitment to religion, justice, and enmity for the West. The recent uprisings in Syria invalidated these principals, and endangered the substantial progress which the Crescent accomplished in recent years.

The Arab uprisings have threatened the stability of the Shiite Crescent on multiple fronts. Not only is the Shiite Crescent at risk of losing its bridgehead in the region

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(Syria), but Hezbollah and Iran’s support for the brutal Assad regime begs that this alliance’s commitment to its purported ideals of “justice” and “protection of the oppressed” be questioned. Furthermore, chapter 3 of this analysis will argue that even the religious bond between these entities is fraudulent in nature, and only further indication of the disingenuous character of this alliance. As will be shown, this partnership has elected to defend its strategic position in a region with increasing instability and threats, rather than uphold its principals.

The true nature of this calculated alliance first revealed itself when Syria responded to internal protests by suppressing activists through violent and inhumane methods. Massive blood shedding of innocents within the state of Syria, a major ally of the Shiite anti-Western alliance, brought the hypocritical and fraudulent ideology of the Shiite aligned states to the surface. The following discussion will demonstrate that the alliance between Shiite states is taken strategically by the axis of resistance in order to counter the regional security threats presented by the West and their allies in the region. Religion and ideology are often used to strengthen their base of followers and instill a sense of moral righteousness, but these ideologies are second to surviving political realities. I argue, that the ideological insincerity brought to light by the brutal conditions in Syria establishes that the decisions of these actors are far less about religion or resistance ideology, than they are about surviving geopolitical realities.

Due to the critical alliance between Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah the leaders of the axis of resistance have not wavered in their support for one another. Though, their actions
have not gone unnoticed. The brutality in Syria has had a direct impact on the image and popularity of the Shiite aligned states and their once beloved leaders. As stated by Paul Salem of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Three years ago, regional opinion polls showed that the Middle East’s most popular leaders were Hezbollah leader: Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Syrian President: Bashar al-Assad, and Iran’s President: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.”9 Today the popularity of these leaders has been severely damaged. In record fashion, these iconic leaders have fallen from grace. Although initially seen as strengthening the axis of resistance, today the Arab uprisings are recognized for having weakened this alliance.10

The loss in popularity of these leaders can be traced to their policies, more specifically their double standards vis-à-vis the Arab uprisings. Ahmadinejad and Nasrallah’s direct involvement in and apathy to human rights abuses in Syria have severely tarnished their image and standing both internationally and within their respective communities. Repeatedly, each of these leaders has made the decision to cater to politics over the civilian population, and even, it seems, over the religious ideals which they purport to hold in such high regard.

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Hezbollah, a strict adherer to the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini: the supreme leader of the Iranian Revolution, declared in its founding charter: “openly and loudly . . . we are an Umma which fears God only and is by no means ready to tolerate injustice, aggression and humiliation.”\textsuperscript{11} However, this pillar is being challenged by Iran and Hezbollah’s ally in the Levant, Bashar al-Assad: who today heads an oppressive regime.

Hassan Nasrallah confirmed Hezbollah’s staunch and endearing support for the Syrian regime when he, bearing no uncertainty, justified ongoing support of the violent and oppressive Assad regime. In an October 24, 2011 interview on al-Manar TV, Nasrallah dismissed any doubt as to where he and his party stand with regard to the conflict across the border in Syria by stating:

Some try to directly accuse us of having a double standard . . . We declare that in Syria we oppose the toppling of a resistant regime which is willing and which has started reform and we do this in benefit of the Syrian people because the alternative for Syria is to turn it into a submissive or more accurately a moderate Arab regime, or even worse to take Syria into the realm of civil war, and towards partition.\textsuperscript{12}

Nasrallah has made statements like the one above repeatedly, regardless of mounting reports of mass graves, indiscriminate killings, rape and extreme violence which have led to Assad being described as a “killing machine”. Nasrallah’s hypocritical response to the uprisings in Sunni led states vis-à-vis the violence in Syria has placed him in an uncompromising position. It is largely due

\textsuperscript{11} Hezbollah, “An Open Letter the Hizbollah Program,” 1.

to the violence in Syria and Egypt that by the spring of 2011 many of the affirmative and hopeful emotions which the revolutions had generated were dispelled.

Although hundreds, if not thousands, of his cabinet and forces have to date defected, Assad has managed to cling to power and shows no intention of willingly stepping aside. Notably, the same methods which were successful in toppling various leaders during the Arab uprisings have not been effective in Syria. The Syrian uprisings have evolved into a full blown civil war in which thousands of civilians are being killed based on religious sectarian divisions.

Within Islam, there are two sects which are most prominent and which represent the majority of Muslims: Sunni and Shiite. These two sects account for over 99% of Muslims throughout the world. The divide between Sunni and Shiite occurred following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in the year 632 AD. Following the Prophet’s death, a dispute arose regarding the appointment of the Prophet’s rightful successor. Those who were in favor of a descendent of the Prophet being the rightful successor are Shiite, and subsequently became known as the supporters of Ali or Shīāt Ali.13

As the larger of the two major sects, Sunnis have dominated the region for more than a millennium. Religiously, politically, and socially they enjoy a prominent position in the region. Maintaining a standing of regional superiority is crucial to regional

politics. In an effort to retain the current power distribution there is an emphasis on bilateral state alliances throughout the region. Religiously and politically aligned states often work together, striving to maintain an aligned front.

Political alliances are central to understanding the changes taking place within the Middle East. The alliances between Sunni states and Shiite states are a reflection of power politics which have been taking place within this region for generations. The superiority of Sunni states throughout the Middle East has engendered an age old battle in which Shiites, the largest religious minority, pose the greatest threat to the current balance of power. The alliance formed by the axis of resistance in many ways functions as a counterweight to the Sunni majority and their friendly relations with the West. Shiites have long been underdogs in a Sunni dominated Middle East. Syria appears to be the only nation in which the situation is quite the opposite.

Within Syria, a majority Sunni population is governed by a minority Alawite sect, the head of which is an autocrat, Bashar al-Assad.\textsuperscript{14} Alawites are a religious sect which makes up just around 12\% of the population in Syria.\textsuperscript{15} Today they are often considered Muslim coreligionists, though this was not always the case. Chapter 3 will explain this religion’s unique characteristics as well as the dynamic evolution of relations between Alawites and Muslims. This is relative as a religious bond has been used to strengthen the


alliance between the axis of resistance. Today, this bond is used as a legitimizer; a legitimizer which I argue is fictitious. 

The uprisings in Syria have awakened religious sectarian tensions which since the 1982 Hama massacre had remained tame. Following the uprising’s onset, the Assad regime opted to violently crush the peaceful demonstrations which originated in Diraa, a city in the east of Syria. The tactic of humanizing civilian protestors, which was effective in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, was not successful in Syria. In Syria, the regime is at war with a population which it views as having fundamental differences from itself, going so far as to denounce those fighting against the regime as tools of the West. While the notion of Syrian rebels being American agents may seem outrageous and unrealistic to many, within the Arab world Bashar al-Assad's argument has some context. 

In addition to American intervention and regime change in states such as Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan, Americans often openly advocate the toppling of both the Syrian and Iranian regimes. During the Fall of 2010 the Stanford Journal of International Relations published an article entitled, "The Iran-Syria Axis, a Critical Investigation" in which author Jonathan Gelbart states: "Regime change in Damascus and/or Tehran is the only alternative."16 Statements such as this are extremely common from the West and the axis of resistance uses them to strengthen their narrative.

Bashar al-Assad has remained committed to rejecting the uprisings as a legitimate protest movement; instead he has branded all movements as a way for the United States and Israel to destroy his country. In a recent speech Assad underscored the following by declaring:

So, is this a conflict for power and office or is it a conflict between the homeland and its enemies? Is it a struggle for power, or is it revenge against the Syrian people who did not give those terrorist killers the key word for dismembering Syria and its society. They are the enemies of the people; and the enemies of the people are the enemies of God; and the enemies of God will be burnt by hellfire on the Day of Judgment … They call it a revolution, but in fact it has nothing to do with revolutions. A revolution needs thinkers. A revolution is built on thought. Where are their thinkers? A revolution needs leaders. Who is its leader? Revolutions are built on science and thought not on ignorance, on pushing the country ahead not taking it centuries back, on spreading light not cutting power lines. A revolution is usually done by the people not by importing foreigners to rebel against the people. A revolution is in the interest of people not against the interests of people. Is this a revolution? Are those revolutionaries? They are a bunch of criminals.17

With responses such as this, Assad continues to ignore and attempts to disguise the true religio-political nature of the genocide and civil war which is taking place in Syria. Up until now, he has ignored the Syrian population’s call for an end to the minority dictatorship which has ruled over them for more than forty years. Assad’s refusal to acknowledge the validity of the movement within Syria has enabled him and his regime to demonize their own civilians. The Syrian uprisings have resulted in heightened levels of sectarian tension which seem to be only increasing.

Often exploited, confessionalism is used to strengthen political will and coalesce forces, thereby facilitating the accomplishment of similar goals. Today, this struggle has intensified due to the revolutions and uprisings throughout the Middle East. As revolution spread, it quickly became apparent that confessionalism and a struggle between the powers that be and a new and largely youth based generation, were linked and at odds with one another.

Throughout the Middle East, sectarian divisions are used by both Sunni and Shiite statesmen and politicians in order to gain political allegiances and power. This has resulted in a fundamentally bilateral regional conflict which, regardless of its complexities, is broken down over sectarian religious lines. On one side of the conflict, stands the so-called Sunni ‘Moderate’ state coalition (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, and Turkey), supported by the West. While in the opposite corner, stands the axis of resistance (Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria). These groups and the states which belong to them have strong relationships with the United States, Russia or China, encouraging this conflict’s escalation into a proxy war.

While regional powers compete, the fighting in Syria has resulted in a humanitarian crisis which has forced refugees to flee to the neighboring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 1 million registered refugees have fled Syria.¹⁸ The influx of these refugees into already strained economies has increased sectarian divisions

between Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians in the region.\footnote{Ibid.} What began as a revolution in Syria is now increasingly evolving into a regional civil war playing on religious divisions. One indication of the spill-over taking place is the recent violence during December 2012 in which the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli witnessed the killing of 6 individuals during violence between opponents and supporters of Bashar al-Assad.\footnote{BBC, “Deadly Clashes in Lebanese City of Tripoli,” BBC, December 10, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20663630 (accessed January 5, 2013).}

Today followers of Shi’ism represent a considerable portion of society within various nations throughout the Middle East, primarily in Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Lebanon. However, in several instances they are politically and socially marginalized in an effort to ensure the status quo of the Sunni ruling establishments. Recently, Shiite uprisings in the Sunni ruled states of Yemen, Bahrain, and Kuwait were fought back violently by their respective governments, who were in turn backed by the Saudi regime.

The phrase “Shiite Crescent” is a fairly recent term within the Middle Eastern political lexicon. Even with the ascendancy of the Iranian revolution and its looming shadow, reference to the Shiite aspect of this event was limited to the fact that Ayatollah Khomeini, was himself a Shiite cleric. The phrase “Shiite Crescent” is used to describe the imaginary arch representing the Shiite populace and their growing reach throughout the Middle East.
It is estimated that 38.6% of the regional Muslim population are Shiites.\textsuperscript{21} The Shiite Crescent extends through and touches on the nations of: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Yemen, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. The crescent strategically passes through Damascus and Baghdad, and is used to visually communicate the major role which sectarian politics plays in the region and beyond.

The first public reference to the term “Shiite Crescent” is said to have been made by Abdullah II, the King of Jordan. The Hashemite monarch used this term during a 2004 interview with American reporter Robin Wright in describing the religious and ideological similarities which were being used to coalesce and strengthen Shiites throughout the Middle East, from Tehran to Beirut. The interview focused mainly on the upcoming elections in the newly ‘liberated Iraq.’ However, Abdullah went beyond the conventional parameters to which Arab politicians seldom abide by warning about the growing Iranian influence sweeping the region. Abdullah, perceived by many to be a lackey to Western powers, declared:

A new "crescent" of dominant Shiite movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon could emerge, alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects and pose new challenges to U.S. interests and allies … If Iraq goes Islamic republic, then, yes, we've opened ourselves to a whole set of new problems that will not be limited to the borders of Iraq. I'm looking at the glass half-full, and let's hope that's not the case. But strategic planners around the world have got to be aware that is a possibility.\textsuperscript{22}


The concerns which Abdullah expresses above are in many ways the same concerns which Saddam Hussein had in 1979.

Following the Iranian Revolution, during 1978-1979, Shiite Muslims gained international notoriety around the world. Although the Iranian Revolution involved many different groups and ideologies, ultimately it came to be driven largely by one of its loudest voices, Shiite Islam. Even thirty years ago, the demonstrated ability of the Iranian Islamic Revolution to form alliances and overcome territorial boundaries was seen as a threat to Iraq; a threat which did not go unnoticed by Iraq's merciless despotic ruler, Saddam Hussein.

During the late 1970s, many Iraqi Shiites were receptive to the Iranian Revolution. Shiites who were unwilling to acquiesce to the rule of Saddam moved to Iranian Shiite religious cities such as Qom; much of Iraq’s clerical community found a new home in Iran. Following the revolutions success, Saddam Hussein became increasingly concerned that the strengthening of marginalized Shiites throughout the region would make its way to Iraq, empowering the Iraqi Shiite population. This was a serious concern for Saddam, who had exerted considerable political will and violence in suppressing Iraq’s Shiite majority. Hussein would not allow the regional developments taking place to impact Iraq. This reality, combined with the fragility of Iran during and immediately following the Revolution, made it an opportune time to strike. Iran and Iraq

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had a history of soured relations and disputes over territory. All these considerations contributed to Hussein’s decision to attack, initiating war.

The war between Iran and Iraq began in 1980 and lasted almost ten years; well over a million people were killed and injured.\(^\text{24}\) As a result of the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq suffered major losses and gained little. Though, one major accomplishment for which Saddam Hussein is responsible is the limiting of Iranian and Shiite interests throughout the region. Largely due to the Iran-Iraq War, Iran experienced decades of turmoil from the onset of the 1979 Revolution. The Revolution had not even begun to settle when Hussein attacked Iran, prompting a generation of war which was followed by decades of recovery.

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq which resulted in the removal of Saddam Hussein served as a major spark, reigniting sectarian tensions and destabilizing the region. Prior to Saddam’s deposal, Iraq had prohibited Iran from having a much desired reach throughout the region. Saddam not only kept Shiites from reaching their full power and potential in Iraq, but also kept the Shiite Crescent as a whole at bay. Therefore, with his removal, the once cast aside and disempowered Shiite population was able to act within Iraq’s newly cemented legal framework in order to vie for political and religious control. This ultimately allowed for the expansion and development of the Shiite Crescent, thereby creating an escalation of tensions between Sunni and Shiite political and religious actors both within and outside of Iraq. Moving forward, the Shiite Crescent would be allowed

considerable room for growth. Recognizing these facts, it is not hard to understand why Iran was the first in the region to recognize Iraq’s new government.\textsuperscript{25}

Since the American invasion, Iranian leaders have worked closely with some of the most influential leaders in Iraq. Prompting concern, Iran's influence has been most apparent in the Shiite populated area of south Iraq, Basra: where much of Iraq's richest oil reserves are located.\textsuperscript{26} In 2006 Juan Cole, renowned author and professor of Middle East history at the University of Michigan, remarked that the invasion of Iraq had inadvertently unleashed “a religious tsunami,” making it evident that the longstanding dynamic of Sunni rulers and Shiite ruled had changed forever.\textsuperscript{27} Overwhelmingly, Iran has benefited tremendously from the disorder which ensued the 2003 American invasion of Iraq.

Post-Saddam Iraq is now largely dominated by Shiite friends of Iran. In fact, many of the exiled Iraqi political leaders who went to Iran for asylum have now returned home. Although many feel that the removal of Saddam Hussein was necessary, America’s invasion of Iraq during the 2003 Iraq War resulted in extreme regional destabilization which largely benefitted the Shiite alliance. The removal of the Taliban further benefitted the Shiite Crescent as the Taliban had been as an enemy at the gate for


Iran. Iran has a history of aggression and skirmishes with Afghanistan which at times have left many fearing war would break out between the two. With the Taliban gone, the Shiites of Afghanistan have much to gain. Democracy would grant them greater influence and potential as they are one-fifth of the entire population.

Democracy in Iraq has meant that Shiites, once disenfranchised and ignored, now hold the majority of power. Iran is determined to maintain this power balance by staying engaged in and dominating Iraqi politics. Iran has spent millions of dollars investing in Iraq both economically and politically since the removal of Saddam. Recently, during February of 2013: Iran, Syria, and Iraq entered into an accord to begin the construction of two major oil and gas pipelines. Completion of these pipelines will mean millions of barrels per a day being pumped between these three countries.

Moves such as this strengthen their alliance, but also haven’t gone unnoticed by Sunni led Gulf States. Even before this latest move, Iraq’s obedience to Iran was discussed in May of 2012 at the GCC national security talks as one of the “top five potential security threats to the Gulf”.

It is undeniable that this region’s centrality, strategic weight, and oil reserves greatly impact the international arena both economically and politically. For these


reasons, the potential fall of Bashar al-Assad has come to mean much more than the collapse of a ruling Alawite minority regime. Syria is the bridgehead through which Iran has provided logistical and military support to Hezbollah. Additionally, prior to the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, the axis of resistance had been a major supplier of material and financial support to Hamas.

Without Syria, the ability of these actors to act defiantly and with consequence both regionally and within the international community will be critically hindered, putting the Shiite Crescent at risk of fragmentation. Furthermore, Iran’s ability to re-arm the allies of the Shiite Crescent will be reduced. As a result, regionally, Iran focuses much of its political efforts towards strengthening the Shiite Crescent. Iran has the highest concentration of Shiites with 90%-95%. Though, Iraq is not far behind with a Shiite majority which comprises 65%-70% of its entire population.

The Arab uprisings provided Iran and Saudi Arabia, each a leader on respective opposite sides of the Shiite-Sunni divide, with renewed opportunities to vie over the political and spiritual leadership of the region. Hamas, a Palestinian resistance group which previously was clearly identified with the axis of resistance, has since broken rank in order to back the rebellion against Bashar al-Assad. Hamas spokesman Ayman Taha


33. Ibid.
stated that their offices in Syria would be closing due to their “siding with the Syrian people in their struggle.”

Hamas’ course of action was still being debated in November 2012 when a renewed conflict with Israel resulted in Syria’s allies (Iran and Hezbollah) ramping up their support for Hamas. Though, Iran and Hezbollah were not the only entities offering Hamas support. During fighting, Hamas also found refuge with the growing alliance between Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey.

The competition between Sunnis and Shiites has been revived, and the consequences of this contest will resound for generations. In order for Shiites to be respected as a serious force within the international community, their threats need be believed credible. Iran is engaged in a momentous struggle to maintain its regional position while sustaining a crucial component to the Shiite Crescent: Syria. The fight for Syria has the potential to redefine Shiite power throughout the region. Without Syria, the once strong and defiant axis of resistance will suffer a crucial blow. It is essential to the maintenance and strength of this alliance that Syria not fall out of the hands of Bashar al-Assad. Sunni led states recognize the advantage of a Syria without Bashar al-Assad and anxiously await a conclusion.


The Arab uprisings have muddled the future of the entire region. The fragility and significance of the alliance uniting Sunni and Shiite states is demonstrated by the critical concern which surrounds the political survival of each entity to its respective alliance. This can most clearly be seen in the case of Syria, and the axis of resistance. Shiite religious and political parties have gone to great lengths to gain the political and social power which has resulted in their being a formidable foe, and a perceived threat to the United States and their allies in the region. The axis of resistance is desperately struggling to not forgo these gains.

Shiite leaders struggle to increase their supremacy and command throughout the region vis-à-vis Western backed Sunni leaders; it has been an arduous battle for Shiites. Saudi Arabia is at the forefront of the Sunni aligned states, fighting to maintain and increase their regional control. Throughout the uprisings, and still now, the Sunni stronghold of Saudi Arabia has used its influence to strengthen and uphold unstable Sunni regimes in countries like Kuwait and Bahrain. Their efforts have helped to ensure that Shiite influence in the region does not spread.

Due to its major regional implications, the potential consequences of this situation must be examined. Without Syria, the axis of resistance, as well as its allies, will be weakened considerably, altering the regional balance of power. The opportunity to influence this zero sum game has been too tempting for some to resist. Political theorists and international politicians have been forced to pay attention to the importance of
religious ideology as it pertains to politics. There is little room for neutrality, polarization is increasingly seen.

The importance of religion in this region, and specifically in this conflict, has motivated an analysis of the Shiite religious aspect of the axis of resistance. The power of religion and its supremacy within this narrative demands attention is paid to the alliance’s Shiite religious affiliation. The outcome of events in Syria will have a tremendous impact on Hezbollah and Iran’s political wherewithal and regional strength. The axis of resistance will witness their alliance be either strengthened or severely weakened. Modern politics has seen the divide between Shiite and Sunni played upon and even exploited in order to increase and maintain the preeminence of each respective side. Excessive foreign intervention or meddling is likely to produce a larger regional conflict with increasing potential to spill over into Iran and/or Saudi Arabia. The potential repercussions of such engagement will be addressed in the conclusion of this analysis.

Although the last 30 years have shown us the rise of a Shiite Pillar, it is likely that history is currently witnessing a significant blow to this achievement. Religious and ethnic divisions are sure to become more apparent as this crisis continues. As it pertains to the background of the Shiite alliance and how it has evolved, the following chapter will trace the formation of the Shiite Crescent going back to its early formative years, as well as the historic and ideological factors which contributed to making this at first unlikely union a reality. Shiite religious affiliation will be expanded upon as it has
created a strong basis for this alliance, engendering loyalty and a commitment to similar ideology and goals.
CHAPTER 2
THE BEGINNINGS OF THE SHIITE CRESCENT

Shiite Muslims gained international notoriety following the Iranian Revolution which took place from 1978-1979. Although the Iranian Revolution involved many different groups and ideologies, ultimately it came to be driven by one of its loudest voices, Shiite Islam. The Iranian Revolution deposed a Westernized and unpopular dictator, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi; and replaced him with revered Iranian Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Traditionally, Shiite religious leaders had minimal involvement in politics, but this drastically changed with Ayatollah Khomeini.¹

Prior to the triumph of the revolution, Khomeini was in exile for fourteen years. It was during this time that his involvement in politics escalated sharply. Khomeini first found refuge in neighboring Iraq, but as Iraq’s leader Saddam Hussein became increasingly displeased with Khomeini’s popularity, Khomeini was forced to abscond. Following his departure from Iraq, Khomeini was offered refuge in Syria; he instead chose to travel to France. Throughout his exile, Khomeini remained a profound political and vocal opposition to the Shah.²

During the years leading up to the Iranian Revolution the Syrian government offered refuge and support to numerous Iranian dissidents who were in need of safe haven. Symbolically, despite his sudden death in London, Ali Shariati, the prominent


². Ibid.
Iranian intellectual, and a staunch opponent of the Shah, was buried in Sayyda Zaynab, a religious sanctuary in the outskirts of Damascus. Shariati’s funeral was preceded over by Musa al-Sadr, an equally important Shiite figure, and at the time a rising star.³

The south of Lebanon has been a historical homeland for Lebanese Shiites; Jabel Amel, an area just outside of Tyre, is composed of various Shiite hilltop villages. Many prominent families from this area have ties to Iran: both familial and religious. It is from this area that Musa al-Sadr’s family originates. Sadr, a prominent Iranian born Lebanese Shiite religious figure, returned to Tyre, Lebanon in the late 1950s. Sadr returned in a Shiite religious capacity after being invited by the city’s religious leaders.

Sadr openly collaborated with Khomeini and the religious opposition to the Shah. He is responsible for supporting the growth of relations between the Assad regime of Syria and Shiite religious leaders in Lebanon and Iran during this time. Arguably, a major development between these three entities which is not given adequate attention is the July 1973 fatwa. This fatwa, given by Musa al-Sadr, declared Alawites Muslim coreligionists. This open collaboration between these parties set the stage for a great alliance, and later the birth of the Shiite Crescent.⁴ This will be further discussed in the coming chapter.

Sadr is a graduate of major Shiite theological centers in Qom, Iran and Najaf, Iraq. Najaf is the location of the same theological center at which Ayatollah Khomeini

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taught and outlined the principles of the Iranian revolution during his exile. Sadr’s education and relationships largely set the stage for these collaborations as they gave him both great credibility and experience.

While in exile, Khomeini continued to export his anti-regime rhetoric through pamphlets and sermons which were tape recorded and passed on to his followers. It was not until the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, that Khomeini was able to return to Iran as the manifest head of the Iranian Revolution. King of Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was indebted to the West. The Shah regained power in Iran only after being reinstated with the assistance of the United States and Britain following a 1953 CIA engineered coup. The coup deposed anti-imperialist and leftist democratically elected leader Mohammad Mossadegh. As such, the Shah’s regime, to put it mildly, was very much a friend and ally of the United States and Israel.

Under the Shah, and in coordination with the West, Israel and Iran collaborated in a number of sectors ranging from the more traditional military expertise, to tourism and agriculture. However, most of these collaborations remained somewhat clandestine. Ayatollah Khomeini publicly made it clear; post-revolutionary Iran would by no means be friendly with the United States or Israel. In stark contrast to the policies of the Shah, Khomeini saw resistance to Israel as intrinsic to the Islamic Revolution. Moving forward,

Iran was to be a Shiite religious icon and leader. Under Khomeini, Iran would aspire to maintain regional hegemony, regardless of a soured relationship with the United States and Israel.

The leadership of a Grand Shiite Cleric at the forefront of one of the most significant events in contemporary times indicated a paramount shift in regional politics. Khomeini viewed his return to Iran, and the establishment of an Iranian Islamic state as only part of a greater Islamic Revolution. For Khomeini, the Islamization of Iran took place within a greater Islamic regional framework, an agenda known as *Mashru al-Thawra al-Iraniya* (the Project of the Iranian Revolution). Throughout the region, Khomeini’s Iran would use Islam to motivate society and to establish a more perfect state of governance. Following his rise to power, Khomeini wasted no time taking succinct action towards the accomplishment of these goals, and the spread of the revolution beyond Iran’s borders.

Ayatollah Montazeri, one of Khomeini’s closest confidants, described the greater regional objective of the revolution with these words:

Had the aim of the Islamic Revolution of Iran been merely to overthrow the Shah of Iran, it would have been confined within the borders of Iran. If it had intended only to fight the US, it would possibly have penetrated the countries dominated by the US. But as the Islamic Revolution of Iran is an unswerving process which intends to eradicate falsehood, it will advance in any land where falsehood exists.9

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9. Ibid., 110.
The victorious homecoming of Ayatollah Khomeini and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran were seen by many anti-Western elements as the culmination of a long awaited struggle. Khomeini’s rhetoric was equally appealing to all Muslims, including Sunnis, at large. Khomeini’s political rhetoric largely revolved around challenging the hegemony of the Western powers, primarily the influence which the United States maintained over the region. While Khomeini continuously attacked the United States for its support of the Shah and other dictators, his anti-American rhetoric reached its zenith following his triumphant return to Iran.

The creation of a Shiite Islamic state was especially important to the region as disenfranchised Shiites now had a regional superpower with which they were willingly or unwillingly affiliated. However, much of what Khomeini publically endorsed was not exclusively directed at Shiites.

One of the pillars of the Iranian Islamic Revolution was the exportation of the revolution and its ideals to marginalized Muslim communities throughout the region. Khomeini reached out to Shiite communities in Lebanon by offering them much needed monetary, social, and spiritual support. The incorporation of Lebanese Shiites was especially fundamental to the revolution as their cooperation would ensure an advantageous location from which to launch a base of resistance against Israel.
Iran and the Shiites of Lebanon

Political representation in Lebanon is based on a census of dubious reliability which was taken in 1932. This census concluded that of the eighteen confessional groups in Lebanon; Maronite Christians were the majority, followed by Sunni Muslims, and Shiite Muslims. ¹⁰ This outcome guaranteed Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims the most important political and military positions in the country.¹¹ In contrast, Shiites were promised a relatively weak office, the speakership of the parliament. An official census has not been conducted since due to the desire of the more largely represented parties to maintain the current breakdown in political power.

Shiites are estimated to make up anywhere from 40%-50% of the Lebanese national population. Were Shiites to succeed in obtaining a new census, it is clear that due to their major population growth a substantial reallocation of political power would occur, giving Shiite Muslims the majority of parliamentary seats.¹² Although, Shiites were not the only socially neglected or politically underrepresented Lebanese confessional group, they were long considered the most disadvantaged. Historically, Lebanese governments had abandoned the Shiites, many of which reside in the south of Lebanon, to fend for themselves.


¹¹. Jaber, Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance, 10.

This became a significant issue in the late 1970's and early 1980's when conflict between Israel and the PLO positioned Shiites in the south of Lebanon in the midst of violent fighting. Israeli aggression increased, as did unrest and distrust in the central Lebanese government's ability to protect its minority populations. The combination of sectarianism and political fragmentation seriously increased the obstacles already facing the Lebanese government.\textsuperscript{13} Sufficient efforts to care for and protect Shiites who found themselves in the midst of violence were not made.

Shiites were made to exist in the periphery of Lebanese economy and society. They not only lacked fair representation in the Lebanese central government, but also endured negligence with regard to their standard of living; schools, hospitals, and a clean water supply were all areas which were overlooked.\textsuperscript{14} Using official Lebanese government statistics, Hasan Sharif found that during this period of unrest southern Lebanon accounted for 20% of the state population, but was receiving less than 0.7% of the national budget.\textsuperscript{15} Shiites were the most poorly educated confessional group, 50 percent of their population receiving no schooling, whereas nationally the average was only 30 percent.\textsuperscript{16} Shiites were in need of legitimate social and welfare assistance, but were instead not receiving even the minimum owed to them.

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\textsuperscript{13} Norton, \textit{Amal and the Shi‘a}, 11.
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\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 14-16.
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\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
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In Religion and Fertility: Arab Christian-Muslim Differences, Joseph Chamie notes that the average Shiite family earned 4,532 Lebanese pounds, in comparison with the state average of 6,247 Lebanese pounds.\textsuperscript{17} Shiites also made up the largest confessional group of families earning less than 1,500 Lebanese pounds annually.\textsuperscript{18}

Violence in the south drove many Shiites to flee north to the southern suburbs of Beirut; though, the quality of life for Shiites in this district was hardly an improvement. Ninety percent of the inhabitants in this area were without running water, and access to electricity was not common.\textsuperscript{19} Conditions were such that this area was commonly referred to as the ‘Belt of Misery’.\textsuperscript{20} Regardless of the relocation of much of the Shiite population to Beirut, an area more easily accessible to the Lebanese central government, little to nothing was done to alleviate this population’s suffering.

All the above, coupled with unjust sectarianism, created a situation in which Shiites were desperate for political will and social assistance. This set the scene not only for greater isolation, but also provided the ideal condition for an outside sponsor: Iran, to enter Lebanon in order to support and strengthen Lebanese Shiites. Khomeini’s anti-Israel rhetoric and his popularity with oppressed Shiites made him an ideal foreign

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Joseph Chamie, Religion and Fertility: Arab Christian-Muslim Differentials (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 34.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 36.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Jaber, Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance, 146.
\end{itemize}
patron. As will be discussed, Iran’s aid to Lebanese Shiites has increased over time. Throughout the years an entire social welfare system was created. The dire situation of Shiite Muslims created the perfect opportunity for Iran to gain a foothold in the Levant, begetting goodwill from their religious brethren.

Musa al-Sadr was one of Lebanon’s great Shiite leaders until 1978 when he disappeared while in Libya. Sadr is largely responsible for mobilizing the oppressed Shiite community. By the 1970s Sadr had succeeded in championing the Shiite struggle and strengthening their communal identity. He is responsible for founding Harakat al-Mahroumeen in 1974. This socio-political movement, whose name translated means “Movement of the Deprived,” brought the Lebanese central government to address the needs of Shiites. As a result of this movement, Sadr was greatly respected by the Shiite community. Hassan Nasrallah, who would go on to become Hezbollah’s Secretary General, also joined this movement soon after its founding.

The outbreak of civil war in Lebanon during April 1975 provided Syria and Iran with the opportunity to increase the exportation of their interests and operations to Lebanon. Khomeini’s message was shared by the Shiite seminaries of al-Najaf and Karbala. Shiite religious leaders who traveled to these holy cities returned home to Lebanon impassioned with a vision of allegiance to Iran and the destruction of Israel. In

22. Ibid.
the late 1970’s, future leaders of Hezbollah: Subhi al-Tufayli and ‘Abbas al-Musawi were among those who returned to Lebanon. The pro-Iran pro-Khomeini disposition of religious Shi’a leaders, like them, influenced the opinions of many.\textsuperscript{24}

The early stages of the movement (which would later be called Hezbollah) had an organic connection to Khomeini’s Iran. This initially made it difficult for the group to become popular among Lebanese Shiites. Prior to the emergence of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite community was mainly divided by the traditional feudal leadership of families such as the Assads, the Hamadehs and the Osseirans, as well as the movement of Musa al-Sadr.\textsuperscript{25} Though notably, the rank and file of many Lebanese leftist parties were filled with activists who would soon be disenchanted by secular politics and discover the advantages of a Shiite revival.

Even as early as the 1960s, Sadr had made a name for himself as a reformer. Despite his Iranian birthright, Musa al-Sadr was true to his Lebanese heritage in his political perspectives. By 1978, when he disappeared, he was considered a pivotal figure and a leader of the Shiite community. Following Sadr’s disappearance, Hezbollah became aware not only of the opportunities provided by the gap in leadership, but also of the challenges involved in competing with the legacy of Sadr and his Amal Movement. After the abrupt disappearance of al-Sadr there was a struggle for the loyalty of Lebanese

\textsuperscript{24} Joseph Alagha, \textit{Hizbullah's Identity Construction} (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 19.

Shiites, the social movement Amal suffered tremendously. As a result Amal was not able to cater to the goals and desires of a large sect of Shiites.

The Lebanese central government and its impotent style of governance left the Shiites to fend for themselves. Against this backdrop, and in direct response to the Israeli invasion in 1982, a select group of Shiites who were studying in Najaf and Qom founded Hezbollah in Lebanon. In a conscious and calculated move, Hezbollah’s early rhetoric and campaigns stressed the fact that the movement was merely a continuation of Sadr’s legacy. Furthermore, Hezbollah underscored that Sadr and Khomeini were on good terms both personally and ideologically; a fact which Sadr unfortunately could not affirm or deny as in 1978 he had gone missing. Many of the signs and posters which Hezbollah exhibited in their strongholds stressed this fact. One such example, is a poster (shown to the left) depicting both Khomeini and Sadr hovering over the Dome of the Rock with the Star of David destroyed in the background. Interestingly, Khomeini, who occupies an elevated position, is watching over Sadr. The quote at the bottom reads: “Sayyed Musa al-Sadr was a son of mine.”

Despite attempts, Hezbollah was never able to win over Amal. The group remained staunchly pro-Syrian preferring to cooperate with the Assad regime, rather than introduce

a Persian element into the Shiite community. Much of the rivalry between these two factions was regulated by local factors as well as the ebb and flow of the Iran-Syria relationship.

Hezbollah was founded with the assistance of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, the Pasdaran. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard was founded in 1979 by Ayatollah Khomeini as a means to militarily secure Iran following the Revolution. The Guard went on to become one of the leading military groups in the Iranian Republic, and a primary tool through which the revolution has been exported from Iran.

Hezbollah established itself in Baalbeck, located in the East of the Bekaa Valley. This area was not under Israeli occupation and therefore allowed Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard a space from which they could train their militants and strategize their next move. Iran provided Lebanese Shiite wishing to fight against the Israeli invasion with 1,500 Iranian Revolutionary Guard members with which to train.27 The Lebanese central government’s preoccupation with the civil war taking place provided the Pasdaran with the freedom they needed to operate effectively. The south of Lebanon was especially cut off from the rest of the country during this time. Hala Jaber describes the south during this time as, “a miniature Iranian republic, where the doctrine

of the Guard, Khomeini and the Shiite clerics of Hezbollah resigned.”

This further intensified Iranian influence within Lebanon.

Being near the Syrian border gave Hezbollah, as well as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, the ability to travel to Iran via Syria. According to Eitan Azani, the fact that Hezbollah established itself in the Bekaa Valley also helped to augment its relationship with the Syrian regime. Since the late 1970s, Syria has maintained an alliance with Iran, and the Shiites of Lebanon.

Since its creation, Hezbollah has been remarkably active. Initially in the 1980’s the party resorted to brute violence, before later transforming into a more traditional role of political activism. Hezbollah, inspired by the practices of Iran throughout the Iran-Iraq war, adopted the tactic of suicide bombing. Hezbollah’s entry into the Western paradigm of Islamic terrorism occurred during 1983 in Beirut when a suicide bombing attack destroyed an American military barracks. According to Hala Jabber, this was the “single largest non-nuclear explosion since WWII.” This attack resulted in the killing of 241 Marines, a second explosion which occurred just moments later killed 58 French servicemen.


Although this bombing was publicly embraced by a terrorist faction calling itself Islamic Jihad, all evidence pointed to involvement by Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah.\textsuperscript{31} Imad Mughniyeh, who was responsible for a series of terrorist acts, was never officially linked to Hezbollah, but remained in the shadows of the suburbs of Damascus until his assassination in February 2008.\textsuperscript{32}

Despite the fact that no one claimed responsibility for his killing, Hezbollah and Iran publicly accused Israel of responsibility for his death, promising retribution.\textsuperscript{33} While many rumors surround the figure of Mughniyeh, his role and connection to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard are certain. The former leader and founder of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRG), General Yahya Rahim Safav, lamented the death of his comrade by issuing the following statement: “death of this unclean regime [Israel] will arrive soon following the revolt of Muslims.”\textsuperscript{34}

In addition to its military activity, Hezbollah is a prominent political party. Although, in its early years Hezbollah showed no intention of entering into Lebanese politics, today their parliamentary presence functions as one of their major representations in Lebanon. Hezbollah has stated that working within Parliament allows it


\textsuperscript{32} Jaber, \textit{Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance}, 120.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.

to more impressively influence events within the country, and has also effectively
legitimized the Islamic Resistance.\textsuperscript{35}

Hezbollah began providing social welfare services to Shiites during the late
1980s. Many Shiites were not aware of the health issues which were plaguing their
society, as the majority of their community was poor and illiterate. The expectation for
the central Lebanese government to guard the welfare of Shiites was negligible.
Hezbollah is responsible for an array of Lebanese social services which are provided to
not only Muslims, but also Christians.\textsuperscript{36}

The social services which Hezbollah provides are often superior to those which
the Lebanese state offers; Hezbollah has founded pharmacies and fully equipped
hospitals. Today, the social movement presides over the operation of schools, community
centers, and other public assistance facilities. Much of the work that Hezbollah does is
possible due to the funding that the group receives from Iran. For example, one of the
hospitals that Hezbollah built is named Imam Khomeini, this hospital is located in
Baalbek.\textsuperscript{37} Hezbollah maintains that the funding it receives from Iran is necessary as the
Lebanese central government has offered little assistance to the group otherwise.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} Jaber, \textit{Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance}, 73.

\textsuperscript{36} Joseph Alagha, \textit{Hizbullah's Identity Construction} (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press,
2011), 39.

\textsuperscript{37} Jaber, \textit{Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance}, 159.

\textsuperscript{38} Joshua L. Gleis and Benedetta Berti, \textit{Hezbollah and Hamas: a Comparative Study} (Baltimore:
Iran has provided Hezbollah with the funds it needs to operate as a social welfare group, militant powerhouse, and political party. Furthermore, Iran supplies Hezbollah with arms, training, and support within the international arena. The U.S. Department of Defense has estimated that Iran supplies Hezbollah with anywhere between $100 million and $200 million per a year. This is in addition to the millions of dollars in business deals which are contracted between the Lebanese and Iranian governments annually. Lebanon has been supportive of Iran’s ambitions for nuclear energy, stressing that it views these aspirations as peaceful. This meaningful alliance is perceived by many as an indication that the Sunni-Shiite divide in a "Post-Arab" Middle East is growing.

Regional leaders, such as former President of Egypt Hosni Mubarak and King Abdullah of Jordan, have criticized the militant group for dragging the region into greater violence and fighting. Though, it can be argued that were it not for the formation and creation of Hezbollah, Shiite Muslims in Lebanon would have remained downtrodden and in a state of neglect. Instead, today they are a militant force with which to be reckoned, and a significant Lebanese political party.

42. Ibid.
These three entities: Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria form the nucleus of the Shiite Crescent. While there are other growing Shiite populations, the majority is led by these entities and as such they are the focus of this study. As described, the axis of resistance has an enduring history which has persevered through both times of war and times of peace. Although the Assad regime’s complex relationship with Iran and the Shiites of Lebanon during the late 1970s may lead one to believe that Syria has always been more closely aligned with the Shiite Crescent than the Sunni moderate states, this was not always the case.

Syria was once a part of the Arab nationalist movement which swept the region under Gamal Abdul Nasser; though, this did not last. A 1961 Ba’athist coup in Syria brought about an end to the United Arab Republic (a united Egypt and Syria) and would usher in Alawite rule. A series of coups took place during which Syria remained staunchly aligned with Sunni states while continuing its war with Israel, but this would change with Bashar al-Assad’s rise to power in 1970.

Following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Syria’s regional attentions shifted. Syria had numerous egregious encounters with Israel which consisted of refugee issues, border skirmishes, access to water, and infringement on Syrian land. For the coming future, Syria would be focused on all aspects of its conflict with Israel. 43 However, Syria’s partner in this endeavor would soon shift radically.

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Initially following the establishment of Israel, Syria aligned with the Sunni states which bordered the new Israeli state: Jordan, Egypt, and Syria. These states were at war with the Israel, and also considered the “Zionist enemy” to be a grave concern. Although not always in agreement, overwhelmingly Jordan, Egypt, and Syria viewed their troubles with Israel as a top priority, and therefore often worked in unison.

Israel desired a portion of Syria’s territory: the Golan Heights, in order to ensure a water supply. Access to water was a serious source of conflict between these two parties; as years passed tensions increased. The region was in uproar as Palestinians fled their homeland, refugees became an unavoidable issue. Syria joined Egypt and Jordan in order to fight against Israel during the June Six-Day War in 1967, but this war was disastrous for the Arab states. Syria lost the Golan Heights and Egypt the Sinai Desert.

In 1973 Egypt and Syria found themselves at war with Israel again, though this time with a distinctive outcome. In due course, Anwar Sadat would sign a peace treaty with Israel in exchange for the return of its land in the Sinai. Syria was left the “odd man out” as its neighbors made relative peace with the “Zionist enemy”. Syria was left without its territory, and with a feeling of betrayal. As this reality only grew bleaker, Syria would choose to align itself with the resistance movement: a group of Shiite actors committed to combating Israel. The Iranian Revolution allowed for the formation of a new alliance against Israel. This alliance would replace Syria’s wounded relationship with Egypt, and allow it to continue an offensive against Israel.
The early 1980s also saw Iranian and Syrian forces join together in order to combat the “Zionist enemy” in Lebanon. Although not always in sync, Iran and Syria both posited military arms in Lebanon. The two states found themselves exerting resources and militiamen, although with varying agendas, to rid Lebanon of American and Israeli agencies. The Lebanese Civil War was a tumultuous period, but Iran and Syria, while often having unstable relations, ultimately strengthened their alliance. Furthermore, in 1982, during the Iran-Iraq war, Syria chose to align itself with the non-Arab Islamic Republic, Iran. This was a drastic move as during this period every other Arab state had chosen to side with Iraq. Syria's support for Iran was not just rhetorical; it acted by shutting down a major Iraqi pipeline which passed through Syria. This move cost the rival Baathist regime millions of dollars a day. Iran showed Syria its gratitude for this gesture by subsidizing Syria's oil supply until the conclusion of the war in 1989.

These actors share in common a mutual enemy, Israel and the West. As will be discussed in the following chapter, it was during this period that Alawites gained recognition as Muslim coreligionists from Musa al-Sadr of Lebanon. Relations between these three parties: Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria, would go on to flourish in the coming years. The following chapter will establish that with this alliance, Syria also fictitiously took on a predominantly Shiite identity in order to further reinforce its regional position and coalition with the then developing Shiite resistance movement.


The Arab uprisings have revealed hypocrisy on a number of fronts. The axis of resistance’s continued support of Bashar al-Assad, in spite of the suffering and oppression he has wreaked upon the people of Syria, suggests a commitment to strategic rational and pragmatic decisions over ideology. I argue, that much like the axis’ moral and ethical standards which have been exposed as insincere, their Shiite affiliation with Syria’s Alawite regime is also disingenuous. The true motivation for this religious affiliation is the strengthening of Syria’s alliance with the axis of resistance and regional security concerns. I aim to analyze this situation from the perspective that Alawites are not authentic Muslim coreligionists.

Syria is renowned for its inclusion in the Shiite Crescent, but substantiation for its association with this group is not clear. Why and how did Syria become a part of the Shiite Crescent when neither the majority population of Syria nor the ruling Assad regime is Shiite? I will first establish that the beliefs of Alawites provide insufficient cause to merit their acceptance as Muslims. Next, I will demonstrate that the circumstances surrounding the fatwas which recognize Alawites as Muslim coreligionists arose out of geopolitical realities, and not religious ideology. These actualities support my argument that as with the axis of resistance’s commitment to protecting oppressed Muslims, the Shiite religious association between these entities is also hollow.
The Shiites of Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran are undoubtedly bonded together by their common faith. Religious ideology, coupled with Shiite seminaries, and the holy cities of Qom, Karbala, Najaf, and Mashhad provide Shiites with a sense of imagined community. These qualities have created an intimately connected religious culture. Pilgrimages to holy sites and the education of Imams and clerics in Iraq and Iran aid in creating strong bonds between the Shiites of Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. Though, Syria is not like these entities in that it does not share in a distinctly Shiite religious tradition.

There is much uncertainty regarding the religion of Alawites. Due to a history of persecution, few Alawites have been entrusted with the most intimate details of their faith. As a result, little information is available regarding this extremely guarded and secretive religious sect. The clandestine nature of this faith no doubt has led to assumptions and assertions regarding its heretical nature, but even so, I argue that which is known about this faith depicts a set of beliefs which many Muslims consider extremely unorthodox.

Even the religion itself was not originally known by the term “Alawite”; prior to the 20th century, Alawites were known as “Nusayris” or “Ansaris”.1 The term Nusayri is derived from the name of their prophet, Muhammad Ibn Nusayr (died in the 9th century), their central figure.2 In the coming pages, I will establish that even the alteration in name

from Nusayri to Alawite was done a millennium after the founding of this faith in order to affiliate Nusayris (Alawites) with Muslims.

As Nusayris do not circulate religious text, knowledge regarding their rites and doctrine is scarce. Still, the information which religious scholars and historians do have portrays a faith which many Muslims would (and do) deem heretical. While Nusayris share some beliefs with Shiite Muslims, they also deviate significantly from Shiite beliefs on a number of fundamental issues. These matters are of interest as they set Nusayris profoundly apart from the rest of the Shiite Crescent.

Historically, Nusayris were persecuted and recognized as infidels by both Muslims and Christians. As an oppressed minority, Alawites had traditionally chosen to reside in the mountains of Syria where they were able to live in isolation from the rest of the country. Matti Moosa tells of a history of distrust and oppression between Sunnis and Nusayris, describing Sunnis as the Nusayri’s “worst oppressors.” The everyday principles which guide the life of a Muslim vary a great deal from those in which Nusayris were engaged. Nusayris were met with allegations of promiscuous sex, belief in reincarnation, the use of alcohol in séances, a lack of adherence to Islamic dietary


4. Ibid.

restrictions, and belief in devil worship.⁶ These behaviors set the foundation for an “othering” of the Nusayri faith.

A belief in reincarnation was significant. There are many judgments of Nusayri beliefs regarding the afterlife. Sabrina Mervin describes a belief in transmigration in which following death; there is an observed intermediary period which is spent in another human being, or in an object. Following this period, the believer then transforms, returning to their original form, a star.⁷ Other scholars tell of the soul’s transmigration to an animal, possibly even into a dog, an animal which Muslims view as being dirty.⁸ In contrast, Muslims do not believe in reincarnation. The concept of having multiple lives is contradictory to their beliefs regarding the afterlife.

Unlike most faiths, Nusayris were without public houses of worship. Martin Kramer writes that in stark contrast to Muslims, Nusayris did not believe in prescribed prayer, “Prayer was not regarded as a general religious obligation since religious truth was the preserve of the religious shaykhs and those few Alawis initiated by them into the mysteries of the doctrine.”⁹ In order to facilitate assimilation and integration of this

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Several elements of the Nusayri faith link them to Christianity. In addition to the more minor likenesses of alcohol usage and consumption, Nusayris partake in a complex belief in trinity which some discuss as including the sun, the moon, and the sky. Still, others argue the Nusayri trinity is comprised of Ali (the successor to the prophet), Muhammad (the Prophet), and Salman al-Farisi (bab - gateway).11

One Christian priest who studied and wrote at length about Nusayris, Father Henry Lammens, assessed that prior to taking on their own distinct faith, Nusayris were Christian.12 Nusayris also share in the celebration of the Christian holy days of Easter, Christmas, Pentecost, and Palm Sunday. Though, not only Christian elements are included in the Nusayri faith; aspects of belief are shared with Sufism, Zoroastrianism, Eastern reincarnation, and paganism.13

Nusayris consider Ali, recognized as the successor to Prophet Muhammad, as having a divine nature. Although Shiite Muslims also recognize Ali, they do not believe he had a divine nature; some argue that this cornerstone of the Nusayri faith is cause for

10. Ibid.
accusation of heresy.\textsuperscript{14} As has been described, Nusayri doctrine was widely perceived as being intolerably flagrant of moral and religious wrongdoing.\textsuperscript{15} For these reasons, Nusayris were overwhelmingly considered heretics, and persecuted by Muslims. Matti Moosa writes that in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, just prior to the first fatwa which established Nusayris as Muslims, “Nusayris were despised by their Muslim and Christian neighbors.”\textsuperscript{16}

Fatwas dating back to the 9\textsuperscript{th} Century accuse Nusayris of being heretics and ask that they be removed from Islamic faith. The last of the three fatwas condemning Nusayris may also be the most widely recognized; this fatwa was issued by the great Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyya and describes in detail, using many of the aforementioned characteristics, why he viewed the Nusayri faith as such an aberration.\textsuperscript{17} Citing the divinity of Ali, transmigration of souls, and morally corrupt activity, Ibn Taymiyya condemns Nusayris, regarding them as enemies of Islam.\textsuperscript{18}

In response to persecution, Nusayris acted as many religious groups have throughout history by partaking in religious dissimulation. Nusayris have made alliances and concealed their religious and cultural identity repeatedly throughout history in the

\textsuperscript{13} Stephen Kramer, \textit{Surrogate Terrorists: Iran's Formula for Success} (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 12.


\textsuperscript{15} Mordechai, \textit{Minorities in the Middle East: a History of Struggle and Self-Expression}, 112.


\textsuperscript{17} Mervin, “Arab Spring, Act Two; Syria's Alawites”.

\textsuperscript{18} Sivan, \textit{Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics}, 107.
interest of self-preservation, this act is called *taqiyya*. *Taqiyya*, the act of hiding or veiling one’s religious beliefs for preservation, is a practice repeatedly drawn upon by these actors. I argue invocation of *Taqiyya*, and a volatile political climate brought about the fourth fatwa regarding Nusayris. This fatwa would be the first attempt at recognizing Nusayris as Muslims. Regardless of this sect having distinct religious beliefs and a unique identity for over a millennium, the 20th century would introduce Nusayris as Muslim coreligionists, but under a new name: Alawites.

The term “Alawite” became popular during the 1920's following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the transfer of Syrian dominion to the French. This engineered term became preferential to “Nusayri” as it was believed to emphasize and reinforce a relationship with the successor to Muhammad, Ali, and thereby Muslims. The term Nusayri made a connection to Islam less clear. This was of importance as the "other" and foreign nature of Nusayris had historically been a source of much discrimination and an unfavorable reputation. This action was taken in conjunction with the first issued fatwa recognizing Nusayris as Muslims.


In 1936, under French rule and with Syrian independence approaching, Syrian Sunnis and Alawites struggled to assimilate into one state. Unification would combine the French mandated, though independent, state in which Nusayris enjoyed a considerable amount of autonomy, with French ruled and majority Sunni Syria. Though, integration would be no simple task. These two groups, having long been pitted against one another, would require additional measures to facilitate their unification into a single state. The two entities set out to design conditions which would allow for an easy and cooperative integration. After some debate, it was determined that a religious declaration recognizing Nusayris as Sunni Muslims would best achieve the objective of merging these two groups into a single state. 23

Such a declaration would be most effective if obtained by a leading religious figure. It was during this period that a fatwa was issued, which, for the first time, recognized Nusayris as Sunni Muslim coreligionists. The Sunni Mufti in Palestine, and president of the General Islamic Congress in Jerusalem: Haj Amin al-Husayni, proclaimed, through fatwa, that Alawites were Sunni Muslims. Acceptance and recognition from Sunni Muslims was granted to Alawites in July 1936. 24


24. Ibid.
Yvette Talhamy marks this occurrence as a turning point for Alawites amongst Muslims.\textsuperscript{25} Previous to this, and since the 9\textsuperscript{th} century, fatwas had solely been issued in order to declare Nusayris heretics and disassociate them from Islam. This fatwa was not issued without Nusayris first taking action to affirm their acceptance of Islam. As mentioned, Nusayris changed the name of their religion to Alawites in the period leading up to the deliverance of this fatwa. In addition to this act, drastic alterations were made to the Nusayri creed.

In support of this initiative, Nusayri religious leaders prominently declared an acceptance of the five pillars of Islam, something which up until that point had not occurred.\textsuperscript{26} The five pillars of Islam include: the Shahada (profession of faith), prayer, zakat (religious charity), fasting (during Ramadan), and hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca).\textsuperscript{27} The validity behind their testament cannot be known; though, one religion adopting the core tenets of another religion, as their own, is no doubt radical. It appears these actions were taken due to their being necessary in order for Nusayris to obtain Islamic confirmation. There is also no indication that this decision, made by the leaders of the Nusayri community, in any way reflected the greater religious communities’ wishes. The discussed religious differences between Alawites and Muslims did not prevent the Sunni Mufti: Haj Amin al-Husayni from issuing a fatwa recognizing Nusayris as Muslims.


\textsuperscript{26} Federal Research Division, \textit{Lebanon a Country Study} (Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2004), 86.

\textsuperscript{27} Esposito, \textit{The Oxford Dictionary of Islam} (Oxford Paperback Reference, 247).
The issuance of this fatwa is no doubt questionable as it arose out of necessity and furthermore came from a Sunni authority. As discussed, Sunnis had a deep dislike for Nusayris during this historical period. Still, none of these facts prevented Nusayris from accepting this fatwa and acknowledging their newly obtained status as Muslims. I argue that the existence of the Nusayri faith, for over a millennium previous to this action, the circumstances surrounding this event, and the great political gains which hung in the balance demand that at a minimum suspicion as to the motivation behind this act be raised.

Additionally, as questioned by Martin Kramer: “Why did a Sunni authority in Jerusalem, Palestine and not in Damascus, Syria issue this fatwa”? 28 Seemingly, Haj Amin al-Husayni did not engage in research or interact with Nusayris prior to his issuing this fatwa as Nusayris did not have a population in Palestine; furthermore, no research on his behalf is cited. 29 Notably, Haj Amin had close ties to the pan-Arabist national bloc, the group which was leading deliberations between Sunni Muslims and Nusayris in the effort towards a united Syria. 30 Though, the acceptance of Nusayris as Muslims would not persist. This would not be the last time that Nusayris required acceptance from the Muslim community. Nusayris would again later be declared Muslims, this time by Musa al-Sadr, as part of a political strategy almost 40 years later, in the 1970s.


29. Ibid.

In 1963, a Syrian military coup purged the ruling party; Alawites were the successors to this coup. In 1971, following a second Alawi coup, Hafez al-Assad: the father of current Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, became the ruling Alawite leader of Syria.31 During this period Nasser’s Pan-Arabism movement was sweeping the region; many abroad and within Syria began to question the ruling of a Sunni majority state by a non-Muslim. The Muslim Brotherhood added to these pressures as it had also gained strength and popularity during this time. Both of these factors posed a substantial threat to the Assad regime in Syria.

The 1936 marriage of convenience between Alawites and Sunnis had not provided Alawites, and thereby the Assads, with the legitimacy needed to survive politically in the region. In order to obtain acceptance within the region, and even within Syria, the Assad regime found it necessary to once again establish an Islamic religious identity. Once more, it was thought that the most effective manner of alleviating this situation would be through the issuance of a fatwa, recognizing Alawites akin to Muslims.

The fifth and final fatwa regarding “Alawites” was delivered by Musa al-Sadr in July 1973. Over four years of discussions and placating were necessary before Sadr was able to ascertain the necessary level of comfort from Alawi religious leaders in order to move forward. There are several reasons for the delay, the backlash from members of the

Alawite community who did not wish to lose their unique religious identity was significant.32

To mark the occasion of this fatwa, Sadr presided over a ceremony in a Tripoli hotel in July, 1973. The decree was delivered from Sadr’s official office of the Supreme Islamic Shi’ite Council (SISC), an office he had created in 1969, only a decade after his arrival in Lebanon.33 The fatwa’s issuance would give the Assad regime the confirmation it needed. This decision would not only benefit Alawites, Sadr also profited from this declaration as it extended the reach of his office over the Alawite community.34

Musa al-Sadr declared Alawites Muslim coreligionists, giving them the seal of approval which they had been seeking. Sadr's acceptance was the last action needed to create a guise over the questionable nature of the Alawi faith. From that point forward the Assad regime and the leaders of the Shiite Crescent had a legitimate coalition and partnership which was supported by a common Shiite religious affiliation. The scarcity of available knowledge regarding the Alawi faith, coupled with the support of Musa al-Sadr, created an overwhelming narrative. Few would question the Muslim nature of Alawites.


moving forward. Alawites (Nusayris) have a clear history of welcoming disassociation from Islam when possible and associating themselves with Islam when it is beneficial.

This revolutionary (seemingly forged) statement may have pleased the Assad regime, but it angered various Muslims and Alawites. Alawites in Lebanon, and even in Syria, felt that Sadr did not have the right to speak for their religious community; he especially did not have the right to take away their distinct identity. Displeasure with his proclamation required Sadr to give another statement shortly thereafter. Sadr attempted to legitimize his decision and called for tensions between Syria and Lebanon to be put to an end.35

In accordance with these facts, I argue that the religious criterion needed to qualify Nusayris akin to Muslims does not exist. The Assads, like the religious Alawite clan to which they belong, have strategically aligned themselves both politically and religiously as the times have demanded. The aforementioned events support that both in the 1970’s and 1930’s there was insufficient basis for the acceptance of Nusayris as Muslim coreligionists. In both instances, Alawites needed to re-establish religious acceptance in order to solidify their position not only in Syria, but throughout the region. Only within an insecure geopolitical setting have Alawites felt compelled to declare themselves Muslim coreligionists. It seems likely that the Assads and the axis of

resistance embarked upon this alliance, based on a Shiite identity, out of a desire to survive the political and religious climate, and not out of sincere religious ideology.

Historically, states and movements have used popular sentiments, emotions and terminology to bring together individuals, creating a source of strength. Since the 1970s, the Assad family has voiced: support for the PLO, brute antagonism for Israel, and pan-Arab solidarity in order to enjoy the camaraderie of their neighbors. Though, these items did not represent a platform that was near and dear to the Assads or the Alawites; instead they represented a survival tactic. These “loyalties” did not stop the Syrian Army from entering Lebanon in 1976 to fight the Palestinians, nor was their Arabness of importance when they sided with Iran instead of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. Syria’s Shiite identification with Iran and Hezbollah has been a further extension of this tactic. As was necessary, Syria took on this identity in order to stabilize itself within a turbulent region and align itself with states with which it shared similar interests.

Hafiz al-Assad's presidency was given the confirmation it needed to move forward confidently in the region and the Muslim world. In return for this proclamation, the alliance between Syria, Lebanon and Iran was made even stronger. Though, this fatwa did not come without an exchange. Moving forward, Syria would act as a significant regional patron of Lebanese Shiites.

Seemingly, the decision to designate Alawites Shiite Muslims has been a tactical decision based on creating a larger and more effective coalition. The designation of Alawites as Muslims was not embarked upon due to religious conviction or a change in
the religious beliefs of Alawites. This action was taken for long term political and internal gains which it cemented. Through its affiliation with Shiites, the Assad regime gained acceptance, prestige, and popularity; regardless of how ideologically hollow their claims may have been.

Assad’s desperate circumstances in 1973 and a history of several fatwas, both distancing Nusayris from Islam and confirming them as Muslims, demand a shadow of doubt be cast over whether Alawites should in fact be considered Muslims. The aforementioned occurrences support the strategic and disingenuous nature of this fatwa. Evidence sustains that this fatwa was a rouse done to legitimize the presidency of Hafez al-Assad and embolden a strategic partnership between the leaders of the Shiite Crescent and the Assad regime.

The actors belonging to the axis of resistance are aware of the vigor afforded to narratives which invoke religion and justice and have used this tactic in order to advance their alliance. Reflecting upon the fact that Syria’s Shiite identity is the basis for their inclusion in one of the most important regional alliances (the Shiite Crescent), it is surprising that the Assad regime’s fragile religious identity goes largely unchallenged. Little attention has been paid as to whether there is sufficient cause to assert that Alawites are Muslims.36 As Martin Kramer states, the acceptance of Alawites by Muslims “cannot

be lightly dismissed or unthinkingly accepted.”³⁷ Due to Syria’s disingenuous Shiite religious affiliation, I argue that the Shiite Crescent is a manipulated phenomenon.

The manipulation of religious association in order to solidify and strengthen their alliance is only one manner by which the axis of resistance fortifies its coalition. The following chapter will discuss the rhetoric and actions which the axis of resistance uses in order to engender legitimacy and support for its actions. Furthermore, the actions of Israel and the West are used to create a narrative of good vs. evil, a narrative which both sides are guilty of attempting to espouse.

As has been discussed, the leaders of the Shiite alliance believe that they are above the West morally and ethically. Their rhetoric and narrative maintains that the Shiite Crescent’s platform is based on a commitment to religion, justice and solidarity; though, their actions have shown that they are no better than the West. The ongoing and relentless conflict between the anti-Western alliance of resistance consisting of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, vis-à-vis the United States and Israel frames the strategic political and military efforts which each actor assiduously elects. The battle between these two sides and the enthusiasm which this quarrel elicits have created a polarized Middle East which is engaged by passionate advocates and rigid belief; outside of either side there is little middle ground.

The conflict in Syria has amplified the disparity between these two sides and forced otherwise complacent bystanders into active contributors due both to sins of omission and commission. Though, the divide between these two sides did not begin with Syria. Syria is the latest chapter in a saga of events which further divide these two actors. The narrative between the West and the axis of resistance is complete with a history which today helps us to understand the origin of these divisions.

In one of his most famous addresses, the leader of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, branded the United States as “the great Satan, the wounded snake"
blaming them for the plight of the oppressed in Iran and beyond.¹ This anti-American sentiment was further enhanced by Ayatollah Khomeini when he targeted US allies in the region, primarily, the Zionist entity Israel. The placement of the Arab-Israeli conflict at center stage provided the Iranian revolution and its leader with the mobility needed to bridge Sunni-Shiite sectarian lines. When Khomeini, and later Hezbollah, launched their offensive of propaganda regarding Israel’s indiscriminate campaign of violence in occupied Palestine and Lebanon, there was no shortage of accounts of brutal violence, destruction of livelihood, and illegal occupation.

Upon the suggestion of his foreign minister, Khomeini proclaimed an international day for solidarity with the Palestinian people. This annual event was called, Youm al-Quds, Jerusalem Day.² Jerusalem Day symbolically and literally recognized the importance and centrality of Jerusalem, the third holiest city in Islam. This permitted Khomeini to endorse the Palestinian cause as both a religious and political duty, something the former regime did not champion. The plight of the Palestinians and the various onslaughts of the United States and Israel in the region have been a central theme used by the axis of resistance to obtain sympathy from all nationalities and creeds. Khomeini’s inauguration of this ceremony attests to this:

For many years, I have been notifying the Muslims of the danger posed by the usurper Israel which today has intensified its savage attacks against the Palestinian brothers and sisters, and which, in the south of Lebanon in particular, is continually bombing Palestinian homes in the hope of


crushing the Palestinian struggle. I ask all the Muslims of the world and the Muslim governments to join together to sever the hand of this usurper and its supporters. I call on all the Muslims of the world to select as Quds Day the last Friday in the holy month of Ramadan - which is itself a determining period and can also be the determiner of the Palestinian people’s fate - and through a ceremony demonstrating the solidarity of Muslims world-wide, announce their support for the legitimate rights of the Muslim people. I ask God Almighty for the victory of the Muslims over the infidels.³

The occupation and military warfare waged throughout the Middle East by the United States and Israel have ensured that the vast regional population detests any military or political presence of the West within their homeland. This is also the reason why the majority does not approve of the West intervening in the situation in Syria. A history of intervention in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan stand as a strong testament to the adverse destruction which can result from American involvement.

A lack of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process as well as the West’s support for undemocratic and autocratic regimes have further plummeted the popularity of the United States and Israel within recent years. The ammunition needed by the alliance of resistance is readily provided by the many flawed and short-sighted decisions in which the United States and Israel engage. Tehran and Hezbollah have successfully channeled these sentiments and use them to boost their own popularity and standing throughout the region.

Whether the majority believes that Israel, as a state, has no place in the Middle East, one would be hard pressed to find anyone in the region who does not believe gross

injustices are supported by the United States and carried out by Israel against the Palestinians. Hassan Nasrallah described the situation in Palestine as follows:

This project (Israel) is occupying Palestine and the Muslim and Christian sanctities in Palestine, is working on Judaizing Al-Quds, and inflicted and is inflicting the Palestinian people with all these oppressions, catastrophes, and pains whether inside Palestine or in exodus. … For over 60 years since the establishment of this usurping occupation which occupied Palestine, some governments and regimes in our Arab and Islamic world have colluded with America, the West and Israel on the account of Palestine and the nation’s interests and worked on strengthening this entity and making the nation lose hope of triumphing over it. They tried to convince the Palestinian people and the peoples of the nations to accept a settlement with American and Israeli conditions. I may say that some of the regimes and governments in the Arab and Islamic world were very truthful and loyal to America and Israel. They exerted all efforts to achieve the goals of this project. Unfortunately, there is another category of governments and Arab and Islamic regimes – I mean they are Islamic countries – which took a neutral stance. That means they kept apart and got occupied in their internal causes and thus remained apart from this struggle. These countries are responsible for forsaking Palestine, the People of Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and Jordan which had and still has occupied territories. There is still another category of governments and regimes which from the very first day had a resisting opposing stance, and consequently they bore repercussions, risks, sanctions, sieges and colossal conspiracies.4

The framing of this conflict has been central to the axis of resistance’s narrative. Their portrayal of this struggle is vigorous and extremely effective as it taps into not only an ethical and moral dilemma, but a religious obligation as well. As Palestine is the holy land and native Arabs have been persecuted by an ethnically and religiously foreign entity, it is mandatory that action be taken. Overtones of religion and justice dictate the unavoidable nature of this conflict as one which must be corrected.

Still, as described by Hassan Nasrallah above, not only the United States and Israel are at fault; guilt is shared by those Arab states which share alliances with the West and allow injustice to continue. Within this narrative, Iran, Hezbollah and Syria are considered superior to states like Saudi Arabia or Egypt, who in modern history they have maintained alliances with the West, and even relative peace with Israel. Assad has been unwilling to accept anything less than a complete return of the Golan Heights; whereas Mubarak upheld the peace treaty brokered by the West between Israel and Egypt. At the opposite end, the axis of resistance has remained the West’s largest opposition in the region. The leaders of the axis of resistance are among the few who have remained firmly against establishing a peace with Israel and instead actively resisted the current situation. Their ability to set themselves apart from the Sunni led states who have been complicit in these crimes has gained them a great deal of credibility.

By taking possession of this narrative and designating themselves the protectors of oppressed peoples, Hezbollah and Iran have created a support base which is undeniably powerful and robust. Hezbollah has become the guardian of the unprotected in Lebanon and Palestine. The social movement has gone to battle against world super powers (Israel, supported by the United States) with comparatively modest arms and financial resources. It is a battle of David versus Goliath in the truest sense, and Hezbollah has managed to exit out of conflicts like the 2006 War, as the perceived victor. The unbalanced nature of the conflict between these parties renders a rallying of measure for the underdog.
Although Western media presents a narrative in which it deserves little blame for its unpopularity in this region, this is far from the truth. The history between the West and the Middle East is stock full of accusations of wrongdoing and very real grievances. The West is not without real fault in this narrative. Still, regardless of the axis of resistance constantly criticizing the regional policies of the West and their malevolent actions, neither the United States nor Israel has adjusted, modified, or even examined their policies. This is significant as the axis of resistance uses this narrative to justify their hate for the West. For the resistance, the cosmic narrative of good versus evil originates with the actions perpetrated by the West.

Many countries in the region have very real grievances against the West. For example, Iran carries a history of afflictions which it lists in detail whenever possible. In addition to the previously mentioned 1953 coup in which a democratically elected leader was removed, the United States has meddled in Iranian affairs on several significant occasions. During the period leading up to the Iranian Revolution, the United States assisted the Pahlavi regime’s attempts to remain in power; this included military as well as civil initiatives.\textsuperscript{5} Large numbers of the opposition were killed during the Pahlavi regime’s demise; the United States is largely to blame for this as it propped up the failing regime.

Furthermore, during the Iran-Iraq War, the United States provided Iraq with military support, including chemical weapons such as anthrax and bubonic plague. In addition to their support for Iraq against Iran, in 1987 and 1988 American navy and air forces aided Iraq’s ally Kuwait by re-registering Kuwaiti tankers under US ownership. This strategy was enlisted so that the U.S. could protect the tankers from Iran, a decidedly underhanded tactic. Simultaneously, the United States attempted to hinder Iran’s access to arms and military technology.

The United States is not the only entity guilty of meddling in the Iran-Iraq War in a biased fashion. The international community largely remained silent while Iraq attacked Iran, beginning the war. Though, when Iran retaliated measures were put in place in order to punish and prohibit Iran from taking further action. Sanctions were leveled against Iran while Saddam Hussein was allowed to continue his war on the Iranian people, even having assaulted them with chemical weapons.

Today many argue an unfair strategy continues. With each day that passes the drums of war seem to be growing louder as Israel and the United States edge closer to waging a war against Iran. Both the United State and Israel do their utmost to rally the international community against the Islamic Republic. Both entities working diligently at


maintaining a narrative in which Iran is one of the greatest threats to global stability. This strategy is in many ways similar to the narrative which the axis of resistance has cultivated in which Israel and the United States are their greatest enemies.

Administrative officials and policy makers have capitalized on the Iran threat; using it to further rally Sunni led Arab States as well as the international community. From the Iranian perspective such a narrative is quite unbalanced. In reality, Iran is extremely threatened by the United States. Not only have international sanctions which the United States called for crippled the Iranian economy, but American military bases almost completely surround the state’s borders. Still, the United States continues a narrative within which Iran is the aggressor.

Due to the reality that the United States is largely thought of as an impetuous child in the Middle East, entities such as Hezbollah and Iran who take action and reproach the United States are largely admired. It is not just through proclamations or televised speeches that Hezbollah has demonstrated its commitment to the region and the welfare of its inhabitants, during Israel’s occupation of south Lebanon, Hezbollah was the only entity, state or non-governmental organization, which was able to act defiantly and effectively against Israel. Hezbollah alone was able to force Israel to alter its course, and withdrawal. Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah has pointed out that no other party, not the

Lebanese government, American government or international negotiations were able to obtain this result.10

Regardless of the fact that Hezbollah has waged military campaigns against Israel, the reality of Israel’s illicit occupation against Palestinians has engendered a large and resilient support base for the anti-Western alliance. With each offensive that Israel launches, this base is only strengthened.

In Lebanon, Israel has engaged in the tactic of communal punishment time and time again. Arguably, Israel has engaged in the strategy with the hope of uniting the civilian population against Hezbollah, but to no avail, it has failed. Israel has assassinated the leaders of Hezbollah in hopes it would cause disunity and breakdown the determination of the resistance movement, but this too has been largely ineffective. Though their tactics of assassination may have worked, their strategy has overwhelmingly failed.

These military initiatives have resulted in an increase in anger, frustration, and the unification of anti-Israel supporters. Instead of weakening Hezbollah, targeted assassinations of key members have resulted in the idolization of those who are martyred as well as further radicalization, and a resolve that the fight must continue.

The murder of Hezbollah’s secretary general, Sayyed Abbas Mussawi, along with his wife and one year-old baby, by an Israeli helicopter gunship is one such example. Mussawi’s motorcade was targeted while returning from the anniversary of Ragheb

Harb’s murder, which was also the anniversary of the founding of the Islamic Resistance. Israel hoped the killing of Mussawi, a founder and pivotal leader of Hezbollah, would crush the movement and leave the resistance weakened and vulnerable, but this did not happen. The death of Mussawi only reinvigorated his followers.

Strategically, the timing of this attack was peculiar as Hezbollah was experiencing a relative lull in violent activity while it prepared for participation in Lebanese elections. Additionally, the gulf war had just ended and with it followed a time of encouraged peace. Even peace with Israel was being discussed throughout the region.11 The assassination of Mussawi would reverse Hezbollah away from this course and instead veer the party down a deadlier and more violent path.

The killing of Mussawi, along with his wife and baby, incensed a great amount of hate for Israel while simultaneously engendering new-found sympathies for Hezbollah, revamping their support base. The coffin of Mussawi was carried through the streets of Beirut’s suburbs surrounded by a parade of tens of thousands of mourners and Hezbollah supporters. Just hours after Mussawi’s assassination, Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah was chosen to replace Mussawi and take the position of secretary general.12

On the 20th anniversary of Mussawi’s death Nasrallah delivered a passionate speech in which he continued to vow vengeance for this horrific act. He stated:

11. Ibid., 44.
12. Ibid., 45.
Thus our martyrs are as noble as Abbass Mussawi, Ragheb Harb, and Imad Moghniyeh. We are the people of this resistance. I tell you: We will remain here. We will proceed in this methodology, vision, clarity and principles. Do not worry about the future. The Israelis and the Americans are the anxious ones today. The Americans and the Israelis are the weak ones today. This is ordeal. This is the chance for the Israelis and we together will be able to confront it with awareness, firmness and the undefeatable will.  

With passionate speeches like this Hezbollah uses Israel’s mistakes to their advantage, ensuring that these events nurture their support base. Theirs has been the “greater” narrative within the region, the sole legitimate account of events. The axis of resistance largely maintained a greater ethical standing, until the uprisings in Syria.

The situation in Syria provides an opportunity to counter the narrative of the axis of resistance and highlight the contradictory nature of its ideology and policy decisions. The aforementioned “moral high ground” which Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria enjoyed prior to the Syrian uprisings provided real gains for the alliance. Up until this point the predominant narrative in the Middle East agreed with an assessment of the West as being unfair, unjust, and meddlesome. Though, these gains have been endangered and put in question by the axis of resistance’s support for the tyrannical and brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad. The following chapter focuses on the impact of the uprisings in Syria on the Crescent and discusses the possible consequences and outcomes of this challenge.

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Leaders of the Shiite alliance believe they are above the West morally and ethically. Although the rhetoric and narrative used by the Shiite Crescent suggests a platform of loyalty, religious affiliation, justice and solidarity; the axis of resistance’s actions have demonstrated that they are no better than the West. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Nasrallah have made a strategic decision to support Bashar al-Assad regardless of whether doing so is morally outrageous or contrary to their Pan-Islamic platform. Decisions are solely a reflection of strategic regional goals and political survival.

The Arab uprisings have exposed hypocrisy among the Shiite Crescent, a group of entities who have vowed to struggle relentlessly for the deprived. Instead today the oppressed are being sacrificed by these same actors due to political realities. The alliance of resistance has been unjust, un-Islamic, inhumane, and fraudulent. The title of “oppressor”, which had previously overwhelmingly been used popularly within the Middle East with reference to the West, is now used frequently with regard to the Shiite Crescent.

The major actors of the Shiite Crescent: Syria, Hezbollah, and Iran, have attempted to establish that religious and moral allegiance is the basis for their commitment to Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Though, I argue that the aforementioned ideologically hollow values of these actors demonstrate the true strategic and geopolitical
motivations for their actions. In fact, religious ideology and a commitment to justice have overwhelmingly been used as an enabling force. Contrary to what these leaders would have you believe, they are little better than those in the West whom they call oppressors.

In their narrative, Hezbollah and Iran emphasize the centrality of fighting injustice everywhere. As Nasrallah stated during the 1992 Lebanese parliamentary elections, “In Islam, the act of serving the people and God’s families, rescuing the oppressed, saving the distressed and stretching one’s hand to the weak and dispossessed, are major to the faith. These are mentioned in the Quran, and we care to encourage them anew.”¹ The axis of resistance has failed to keep these commitments. Their disregard for the injustices committed by the Alawite regime has brought the blatant hypocrisy of the anti-Western Shiite alliance to the surface.

Syria’s Bashar al-Assad has struggled to come out victorious from an unrelenting battle waged by a staunch internal opposition. The axis of resistance assists the Assad regime by supplying him with tactical and military support which is widely used on a civilian population. Their actions effectively aid the propping up of a ruthless dictator. The true motivations of this strategic alliance and its leaders are exposed as their would-be foundational pillars are ignored in exchange for the social and political security which the Crescent provides its figurative heads.

Though, those familiar with the uprisings in Iran following the highly contested second term election results which favored Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during 2009-2010

should not be surprised by these actions. Iran used little restraint in putting down its own revolt, engaging in serious violence against innocent protestors. As recounted by Tareq Ramadan, “Brutal repression followed, as the regime cracked down on anyone who had challenged the official results: demonstrators were beaten, summarily arrested, tortured, and even raped in custody, according to multiple, concordant, and confirmed testimony.”

Some thought this might have been the end of the Ahmadinejad regime, but the protest movement was put down.

Hezbollah and Syria provide Iran with two fronts from which to launch attack against Israel. Without a connection between these entities via Syria, they could both be segregated and weakened. The response of Iran and Hezbollah to the uprisings in Syria affirms the dire need for this alliance to persevere. Were this not the case I do not believe we would be witnessing the deterioration and moral repudiation of each of these entities in order to salvage the deteriorating Assad regime. Clearly, the axis of resistance cannot afford to lose Syria.

These entities have been unable to reconcile a commitment to their faith and support for the Syrian regime, as the two are seriously at odds with one another. Lack of action with regard to Syria demonstrates that Hezbollah and Iran have chosen their political and strategic relationships over their ethical and moral commitment to the oppressed. These actions demonstrate the primary nature of the alliance between these

actors is strategic and religion is only used as a legitimizer, making their alliance appear more natural.

The aforementioned points demonstrate that Iran and Hezbollah are themselves engaged in a form of taqiyya. They use the guise of religious allegiance and affiliation in order to garner support for their movement and its policies. Doctor Walid Phares argues that Bashar al-Assad's indications that he is willing to instill political change in his regime and become a more “moderate” ruler are in fact a modern form of taqiyya. As the tragedy in Syria has shown, their true allegiances are not first to the movement for justice, of which they purport to be chiefdoms, but instead to the political and military survival of an alliance which they have dedicated themselves to regardless of ethical misconduct or a malaise of allegiances.

This exhibition of strategic realism likens them to the very entities which they consider their enemies, the United States and Israel. The United States and Israel engage in violent policies in which collateral damage at times means the maiming and killing of innocents. The current situation in Syria has demonstrated that while both these entities believe themselves to be better than the other, in reality they are frequently equals. Both have demonstrated an ability to sacrifice ethical, moral, and religious standards in order to accomplish larger political and military goals. Furthermore, each side remains unwilling to admit to the hypocrisy and lies between their ideology and the policies which they elect.

When the protests in Tunisia reached a tipping point in December 2010 Tehran moved quickly to offer its support to the resistance movement. As revolutions continued, the message from Tehran was one of victory. Tehran viewed the changes taking place as fortuitous since many of the regimes being challenged were regional allies of the West. This generally remained true until the circumstances changed and uprisings began in Syria. As violence followed and their support did not waver the alliance of resistance quickly went from being a regionally favored leader of opposition to the West, to facing accusations of hypocrisy and opportunism. The fallout from alliance with Syria was further called into question when Hamas, usually an ally of Tehran, went against Iran’s wishes and refused to back Assad. Hamas even went so far as to publicly back the opposition movement in Syria.

Iran and Hezbollah have no doubt lost favor with supporters as they continue to stand by a murderous autocrat, Bashar al-Assad. Still, recent polling shows that this does not mean that the region approves of the West’s maltreatment of Iran and Hezbollah. Even with the situation in Syria the majority of individuals polled disapprove of the perceived unfair treatment which Iran receives from the international community with regard to its nuclear aspirations. Any potential actions taken by the United States, Israel, or the international community in an effort to deter Iran’s nuclear program are viewed unfavorably.4

Protests in Syria quickly turned more violent than the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, or Libya. Cries from the international community and from within Syria demanded action

4. Telhami, *Arab Perspective’s on Iran’s Changing Role in the Middle East*, 2.
be taken, but the West was, and remains, slow to act. Following the intervention of NATO in Libya, many see little reason similar action should not be taken in Syria. Though, the answer for Syria is not as simple from a Western perspective. Were action taken to rid Syria of Assad, who would rule Syria? What will become of the Christian and Alawite minorities? Will Islamists or Salafists come to rule? There are many uncertainties which have prevented the United States from intervening as they did in Libya. In Syria the answers to these questions are exceedingly complex and the outcome for American interests often seems bleak.

Iran has publicly stated that it will not back down from its efforts to support the Syrian regime. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has stated, "The whole world should know that Iran will stand behind the Syrian nation till the end." Ahmadinejad is not on his own with this commitment, Iran’s Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, stated that Iran would: “absolutely not allow any Western project to forcefully depose Syrian president Bashar Assad.” Salehi added that although Iran believes the West is acting covertly to change the regime in Syria, Iran is and will continue to put the entirety of its efforts into “preventing this by any means necessary.”

Regardless of statements such as this Iran continues to insist that it does in fact support a negotiated settlement between Assad and his opponents. Statements


7. Ibid.
resembling the latter hardly seem genuine as Iran continues to support Assad both financially and militarily, in fact, the statements coming out of Tehran seem to be in direct contrast with one another. Just days after this announcement Hezbollah Secretary General Seyyed Hasssan Nasrallah followed in Tehran’s footsteps by continuing with his pointed assessment stating that Assad is still firmly in power and that the opposition movement will fail.

Nasrallah pointed out that the only possible solution to this violence is a negotiated settlement. Nasrallah enjoys citing the fact that the majority of Arab and Western media outlets have reported the Assad regime as being on the brink of collapse for over a year, while Assad, although weakened, has held on to power. It is possible that Tehran is hoping for a negotiated resolution similar to what occurred in Beirut after the civil war. If able to retain certain strongholds in areas like Damascus and the Alawite coastal region, Tehran may be able to continue to hold adequate influence, by way of Assad.

The military assistance Iran provides Syria, while attempting to be covert, is flagrant. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards have clearly been training and arming military surrogates throughout Syria. The actions of Iran and Hezbollah in supporting fighters for Assad arguably have been inconsistent with Khomeini’s goal of exporting the revolution and supporting those that are a part of that vision as Iran has chosen to side with the secularist Assad regime over Islamists within Syria.
The regional explosion of the Arab Spring provided the perfect opportunity for states in the region to meddle in the affairs of their neighbors and for many this opportunity was not missed. Today, the great powers have converged on Syria as a battle waged by proxy destroys a civilian population. The great powers of Russia and the United States, along with their regional counterparts, have much at stake. Their involvement is criticized by members on both sides as being both too much and too little. Regardless, signs of an Iran-Saudi Arabia proxy war are unmistakable and have many questioning whether further escalation of this conflict or greater involvement by the outside parties may result in either a Second Cold War or, while undoubtedly more extreme, a Third World War.

Super powers have been supporting entities on both sides of this conflict. The Sunni ruled regimes are working in coordination with the West, attempting to ensure an outcome that will be favorable to their interests. The axis of resistance has also not been alone in this battle. The axis of resistance is supported by China and Russia (arguably also a part of the axis of resistance), not just materially, but also at the United Nations by way of veto assistance.

The relationship between these regional countries and Russia has at times been mutually beneficial. In fact, the USSR was the first state to recognize the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran, followed by Syria. Syria supported Russia's invasion of Afghanistan and since then Syria has been receiving arms assistance from Russia. In 2008 Syria again supported Russia in their internationally decried invasion of the state of
Georgia. Today they continue to have a close relationship. Through its meddling and its ability to impede Western ambitions, Russia has exerted efforts towards establishing its role as a world superpower.

Assad’s Presidency has meant that Hezbollah has been able to travel back and forth to Iran with relative ease; with Assad gone this may very well come to an end. Syria has been instrumental in supplying Hezbollah arms and material support from Iran. Without a supply of arms from Iran Hezbollah would suffer greatly. If they are not able to act militarily with defiance and swiftness any claims or threats they make towards Israel will be seen with depleting strength.

Were Assad to fall, it is very likely a regime change in Syria would be the single deadliest blow to the Islamic Republic since its formation in 1979; the same would be true for Hezbollah. Syria has been a staunch supporter of Hezbollah’s Islamic Resistance for several decades. The loss of Syria would mean the loss of Hezbollah’s channel to Iran. The worst case scenario for Iran and Hezbollah would be a scenario in which a new Syrian regime is anti-Shiite or anti-resistance alliance and instead sides with Sunni powers and Saudi Arabia.

Assad is the key piece to a puzzle that is much bigger than a religious coalition or a commitment to moral principles. If Assad falls, the axis of resistance will lose the channel which provides Hezbollah and Hamas military, financial and logistical support.8

From a strategic point of view, it is difficult to imagine the ability of the Shiite Crescent to sustain itself or its military arm in Lebanon without the inclusion of Syria. Iran is protecting Alawites in exchange for their facilitation of arms supply to Hezbollah. This supply route is extremely valuable. Although there has been talk of sending arms to Hezbollah via Lebanese airports or seaports, these methods of transport would not be nearly as reliable or safe as the Syrian land route has been.

Even with consideration of the violence in Syria, Hassan Nasrallah has remained one of the most popular leaders in the region. The November 2012 War between Israel and Hamas is partially responsible for this as Hezbollah still supplies Hamas with long range missiles, the threat of which are what many argue forced this recent war to an end. A recent 2013 popularity poll cited Nasrallah as being one of the most popular regional actors. These results reaffirm that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is still at the center of regional conflict and continues to be the base of support for the Anti-Western axis of resistance.\(^9\)

No actor can get involved in what is happening in Syria without it being perceived as taking a side in a great sectarian regional battle. Western intervention in Syria in any form would be contributing to the expansion of a proxy war, which many already arguably exists. If the United States takes greater action it could be perceived as choosing to side with Sunnis and as such appear as if they have deserted the Shiites. This would also apply to the Shiites of Iraq with whom they have worked a great deal to establish a relationship.

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Still, there are many incentives for individuals on both sides to get involved. The United States must continue to have robust and frank discussions about what is evolving in the Middle East. The more the involved parties feel threatened the more likely they are to resort to confessional and sectarian divisions which will undoubtedly only escalate this conflict.

Syria is in a delicate position in the sense that if it shifts from the axis of resistance to a moderate Sunni ruled state or a Salafist led government the balance of regional power will have shifted dramatically. The ‘Liberation’ of Iraq created a similar effect, but in the opposite sense as it aided the Shi’a Crescent and especially Iran by extending their reach through Iraq.

The impact of Syria on the Shia Crescent is not just seen among their alliance, it is also impacting their progress regionally and their popular aspirations for regional growth. Once seen as the leading resistance player in the region recent developments in Syria and the recent election of a Muslim brotherhood president in Egypt and its aspirations for democracy could present a threat. As Shibley Telhami states “erode non-Arab Iran’s influence”\textsuperscript{10}

Up until the recent uprisings and revolutions, the axis of resistance demonstrated clear goals and a commitment to ideals beyond a national agenda. A commitment to injustice throughout the region was seen by their involvement in the Iraq War, the 2006 Israeli invasion into Lebanon, and their support of the Palestinian cause. Such actions

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
seemed to demonstrate a genuine interest in the growth and promise of its Islamic
neighbors. Iran’s engagement in events beyond their own borders appeared
overwhelmingly altruistic and compassionate to the masses.

Today much as changed, while action in Syria undoubtedly needs to be taken the
consequences of such action must be examined. If the United States intervenes in Syria it
will fit perfectly into the narratives of Hezbollah and Iran. Such action would allow the
axis of resistance to interpret their actions to their benefit and make what they want, or
rather what they need of the West’s actions.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


