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IRAN AS A MIDDLE EASTERN HEGEMONY AND ITS INFLUENCE OVER ARAB SPRING AND THE LEVANT

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JCSP 45

Exercise *Solo Flight*

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INTRODUCTION

Iran or Persia as it was formerly called is unquestionably a key player in the Middle East, if not one of the greatest influencers in current events. The region has always been a chaos “an organized chaos”¹ where all the regional key players the like of Turkey, Israel, The kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Iran are in continuous contests. Iran has deep historical roots in the region, as Persia was an ancient regional power that periodically ruled large portions of the Middle East. These roots form a significant part of Iran’s identity, ambition, and motivation, with aim to re-establish Iran’s dominance within the region. Iran’s 80 million people, large oil and gas reserves also provide it with considerable weight within the Middle East. In addition to trying to position itself as a major Middle Eastern power, Iran’s revolutionary ruling regime has also attempted to position the nation to become a global power. Included within this effort are Iran’s attempts to develop nuclear weapons, which would limit the Western nations’ ability to contain Iran’s regional and global aspirations.

This paper will discuss the Iranian Islamic Regime which came to power in 1979, how much power and influence they have established in the region and what role they played in the event of the Arab spring in 2011 which lead for Iran to establish “Shia’ Crescent” that expanded the Iranians reach and helped the Syrian Regime to remain in power.

THE IRANIAN INFLUENCE OVER THE REGION

¹ Chennoufi, Miloud. “Regional Dynamics: Middle East (Part 2).” Lecture, Canadian Forces College, Toronto, ON, November 15, 2018.

While the people of Iran overthrew the Shah's regime in 1979, they did so out of a sense of desperation, similar to what we witnessed in 2011 when Tarek Bouazizi immolated himself in front of the governor's offices in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid. In 2009 the Green movement, which revealed an evident split between the Iranian people and their government the scale of the demonstrations that occurred in Tehran also conveyed the sense of being far larger than what occurred during the last days of the Shah.² These demonstrations were successfully crushed by the Iranian regime through sectarian measures which always have denied the Iranians their basic rights. What the current regime and Shah Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was the Shah of Iran until he was deposed in 1979, have in common is a strong security system and military power. Both have attempted to employ it to expand their influence beyond the geographic boundaries of Persia. This has been done to fulfill their vision of an Iran that has significant influence across the Levant and the Arabian Gulf.

The most important component of the Iran region influence is its religious authority which conveyed upon Iran through its status as the government of the Middle East's foremost Shia' nation. Religion in the Middle East is the most important factor in regional politics; everything else revolves around it. The divide that exists between Islam's two main sects, the Shia and the Sunni, significantly influences political alliances and tension within the region. This divide impacts every conflict in the region be they political or economic.³ Like nationalism, religion is an imagined community that

² Arjomand, Saïd Amir. "The Iranian Revolution in the New Era." *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 10, (2010): 5-20,208. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1439267757?accountid=9867>.

³ Constantin-Bercean, Ioana. "IMPACT OF IRAN ON AZERBAIJAN: MEANS OF RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE." *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai.Studia Europaea* 62, no. 4 (12, 2017): 131-149.

rationalizes self-sacrifice across space and time, but unlike nationalism, religion holds out the prospect of individual salvation and is less tied to territory.⁴

Iran is an Islamic state. Although its people are predominantly Persian and practice Shi'a, Shi'ism only became Iran's state religion through a Mahdist revolution that occurred in 1501. This revolution was led by Shah Ismail the Safavid. As he established his rule over Persia, he began to claim that he was acting as the representative of the Hidden Imam. Subsequently, he proceeded to import Shiite scholars from Jabal Amil (in modern day Lebanon) and Hilla (in modern Iraq) to convert the people of Iran to Shi'ism.⁵ The Iranian regime has sought to export its Islamic revolution, to extend its influence in neighboring nations, and to support Shia communities outside its borders since Imam Al-Khomeini inspired and later assumed control of Iran following the 1979 revolution. The common bond that exists through Shiism frequently leads Shi'a in Iraq, Lebanon, Gulf States and some parts of Asia and Africa to feel a stronger connection to Iran than their own countries. Shi'a from Iran can relate to their counterparts those countries because they share the same culture of mourning over the death of Imam Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Mohamed peace be upon him. To Shia's, Hussein's death is a symbol of the fight against injustice and corruption in the name of truth and dignity, represented by the Imam himself. It is frequently used in political contexts by the Shi'a political elite, including the Iranian regime following the Iranian revolution. The Iranian regimes considerable influence comes from the unquestionable support and fellowship to the Islamic religious authority that Shias across the Middle East convey

⁴ Constantin-Bercean, Ioana. "IMPACT OF IRAN ON AZERBAIJAN: MEANS OF RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE." *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai. Studia Europaea* 62, no. 4 (12, 2017): 131-149.

⁵ Arjomand, Saïd Amir. "The Iranian Revolution in the New Era." *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 10, (2010): 5-20, 208. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1439267757?accountid=9867>

upon the Iranian religious elite. This power concerns all of the Sunni regimes in the region because it provides Iran with significant influence within their nations. This is because the Shi'a belief requires the Shia to be fully obedient to whatever the appointed religious clerk orders the community to perform. Most of these clerks have aligned themselves with the late Iranian Islamic revolutionary regime Supreme Leader "Ayatollah" Khomeini and his successor Khamenei. They will also undoubtedly follow whoever fills this position in the future.⁶

The Iranian regime also continues to spend vast amounts of economic resources to foster Shiite revolutions in other nations because expanding their base of followers allows the Iranian regime to also increase their influence. This is also why they are seeking to convert Muslims to Shi'ism through the exploitation of some African nations such as; north Nigeria and Senegal. According to two studies by the Pew Research Center, around 20% of Muslims in Chad and Tanzania are Shia Muslims.⁷ The current Iranian regime has also focussed its efforts and investments towards Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan. While their religious power was evident after the 1979 revolution, it reached its peak following the American invasion of Iraq. The American overthrowing of Saddam Hussein allowed Iran to significantly increase its popularity in the country. Iran's strategy in Iraq has been to exploit Iraq's sectarian divide, using Shiite parties to increase its influence not only among the political elite but also among average Iraqi Shiites.

⁶ Mohammad Nafissi (2016) Iranian Exceptionalism and Twelver Shi'ism, *Iranian Studies*, 49:5, 753-789, DOI: 10.1080/00210862.2016.1213503

⁷ Tolerance and tension : Islam and Christianity in sub-saharan Africa, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2010. <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2010/04/sub-saharan-africa-full-report.pdf>

Sectarian religious propaganda is one of the main tools used by Iran to increase its popularity and influence among Iraqis.⁸

Iran's status as a major regional power has also allowed Muslim Shi'as across the Middle East to increasingly feel more empowered after generations of feeling marginalized. This empowerment has led Middle Eastern Shi'a to demands more political power and better quality of life within their nations, which has occasionally led to confrontations with their governments. Such conflicts have occurred in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the Kingdom of Bahrain. The Shi'a in states like Kuwait, Qatar, and UAE have only been more content due to their having higher quality of life by being richer. While the comprehensive support that the Iranian regime provides to the Syrian regime and the Houthie rebels is based on their religious affiliation, the Iranian regime is also seeking to maintain its influence within the Levant and to gain geostrategic advantage over the KSA by creating a "shia' crescent" from their south.

The Iranian regime cunningness in politics gave them an edge in the region in the last 40 years. The Iranian regime and Persians in general have traditionally been far more politically astute than their Arabs neighbours. They have shown cunningness in politics and diplomacy. One of the greatest victories that Iranian regime has achieved since the American invasion of Iraq is convincing western nations that the Iranian regime share some of their values and they share with them the goal of defeating "Daesh" and terrorism. They have also attempted to portray themselves as being a better security partner than the Saudis by portraying Shi'ism as being more peaceful than the form of Sunni Islam practiced in KSA. As part of establishing their narrative within Iran and the

⁸ al-Dagher, Munqith. *Iran's Influence in Iraq is Declining. Here's Why*. Washington: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post, 2018. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2134167199?accountid=9867>.

region, the Iranian regime always represents itself as being the saviours of the oppressed and combating American and Israeli evil. They have also concurrently worked with Americans and Israelis to achieve common goals⁹.

Although using strong rhetoric against Israel allows the Iranian regime to enhance their image as a symbol for all refusing Muslims to Western imperialism and the Zionism influence but at the same time remain passive when it comes to Israel. The Iranians realize that they cannot realistically win a major war against the Gulf Cooperative Council nations or Israel because they would be backed by the United States and its military power. The importance of rhetoric in the Middle East cannot be understated as Middle Easterners are emotionally driven. Delivering a proper speech filled with courage and enthusiasm and demonstrating courage and a willingness to fight evil, can secure significant support from the passionate “always oppressed” Middle Easterners. The Iranian regime also found a major opportunity to strengthen its relations with the western countries by backing the Shiite militias and confronting ISIS. This endeavour also enabled them to establish themselves as a major influencer in Baghdad's belt areas and in some of Iraq's Sunni and Kurdish regions. Iran was also accused of attempting to sway the outcome of the 2005 Iraqi parliamentary election. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani denied these efforts and ambitions during the 29th International Islamic Unity Conference in Tehran when he called on Muslim countries to unite and strive to improve Islam's public image. He noted during this speech that “There is neither a Shiite nor a Sunni crescent. We have an Islamic moon. We, Muslims, are in a world where we must

⁹ Jödicke, Ansgar. *Religious Soft Power in the South Caucasus: The Influence of Iran and Turkey*. Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2018. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2155443986?accountid=9867>.

be united”.¹⁰ Despite his claim, the Iranian regime orchestrated a violent, punitive response by the Iraqi government and its militias against the Kurds. Then, when Kurdish appeals to the U.S. went unanswered, Iran began to present itself to the Kurds as a friend.¹¹ The Iranian regime willingness to work with both sides shows how it effectively uses diplomacy and politics to enhance its influence and its sense of credibility.

The Iranian regime is able to spread its message by maintaining an effective and diverse media machine that broadcasts on multiple channels in many languages. These broadcasts are directed towards the Middle East, North Africa, southern Asia and the west. For instance, the Al-Alam channel was commissioned at the same time that Iraq was invaded in 2003. The Iranian regime also produces media in Arabic for the Gulf States and the Levant to influence the narrative occurring within these regions and established religious channels in Iran and Lebanon that provide minute-by-minute coverage of Hezbollah’s conflict with Israel. Finally, Iran’s “Press TV,” which broadcasts in English on a 24/7 basis has also grown popular in the west by providing a different perspective to other news networks like CNN, BBC World, and Al-Jazeera English.¹² The Iranian regime is also extremely active on social media. For example, Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses its Twitter account as a form of digital diplomacy to [provide] a more nuanced idea of #Iran One tweet at a time.” This mission statement represents the IIRR’s desire to portray itself as a peaceful nation globally. Although Iran is actively

¹⁰ Sharnoff, Michael. "Arab Decline and Iran's Rising Influence." AOL Inc.

¹¹ Jödicke, Ansgar. *Religious Soft Power in the South Caucasus: The Influence of Iran and Turkey*. Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2018.
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/2155443986?accountid=9867>.

¹² Wastnidge, Edward. “The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War.” *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (November 2015): 364–77. doi:10.1111/1467-9256.12084.

producing media for global consumption, it is ironic to note that many of these channels are officially banned in Iran.¹³

Finally the Iranians have remarkable cunningness and effectiveness enhancing their influence. This is reflected clearly through the language that Iranian officials' use such as aiding of the oppressed. This language also enables the Iranian regime to portray themselves and Iran in a way that is more appealing to international audiences, which helps enhance their global image and helps undermine efforts to maintain or expand the sanctions that are currently in place against Iran. By depicting the U.S. as a non-regional power that does not promote Islamic values, the Iranian regime is also able to enhance its prestige by presenting itself as rivalling the U.S. and its allies in the region. It is also able to portray the rulers of the Gulf States as being as anti-democratic and anti-Shi'a puppets of the U.S. Defining the U.S. and the other regional powers in this manner allows them to present themselves as a religiously legitimate alternative to the American and Gulf nations.¹⁴

THE IRANIAN DETERRENCE

Establishing themselves as a great hegemony in the Middle East with unlimited control over both sides of the Gulf and the Levant requires active agents who are willing to support the Iranian regime expeditionary ambitions. The Islamic Revolution in Iran made Khomeini the country's leader in 1979. Khomeini wanted to "spread the revolution to the Islamic world." This included seeking to free the Iraqi people from "dictatorship." This ambition led Iraq to abolish the "Algiers Agreement" on 17 September 1980, which

¹³ Wastnidge, Edward. "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War." *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (November 2015): 364–77. doi:10.1111/1467-9256.12084.

¹⁴ Mohammad Shahi, Mohammad Reza Talebinejad. (2017) The ideological role of selective translation in reconfiguration of news frames. *FORUM* 15:1, pages 85-105.

led to the commencement of the Iran-Iraq War.¹⁵ The requirements of the war forced Iran to significantly increase its military expenditure. Iran's deterrence capabilities are mainly expressed through its domestic ballistic missile program and its capacity to use those missiles to hit targets regionally, the reported strikes in Iraqi Kurdistan and on ISIS alleged positions in Syria in 2018 demonstrated that capability. Iran's most important asymmetrical deterrence capability is the support of regional non-state actors, through the operational activities of the Quds Force, the external branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, and secondly the likes of Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹⁶ The Iranian proxy force have always been heavily backed and funded. Significant spending was required to create military forces that were willing to fight for the Iranian regime vision of Iranian led shia' states coalition in Middle East. The main component of the Iranian regime deterrence actor is "The Quds Force," which is a unit of Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRG). This force carries out unconventional warfare and intelligence activities, including extraterritorial operations. While the Quds Force was allegedly founded with the goal of liberating Palestine, it now operates openly within Iraq and Syria and maintains sleeper cells within the KSA, Bahrain, and Yemen. The Quds Force also provides military assistance, including training, to numerous non-state actors in the Middle East, like Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad within Palestine and "Liwa Zainabiyoon" in Syria.¹⁷ The Iranian regime depends on these non-state militias for imposing its will within their countries because these groups generally have considerable power within their nations. The employment of these groups also forces KSA to react, which ties up

¹⁵ Mohammed Alaydroos, *The Arabian – Iranian relations 1921-1971*, 1985

¹⁶ Hassan Ahmadian, Payam Mohseni, *Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence*, *International Affairs*, Volume 95, Issue 2, March 2019, Pages 341–364, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy271>

¹⁷ Operational Environment Analysis (OEA) Team Ft. Leavenworth, KS, April 2010
<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/ace-threats-integration/m/documents/212529>

Saudi power and enhances the Iranian regime prestige. For example, the Iranian regime convinced its proxy forces to support American efforts to overthrow the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, which shifted the balance of power within the region towards their benefit. The KSA was unable to prevent this shift to their detriment.

At this time, the Iranian regime has infiltrated everywhere in Iraq. They have established an information network covering every part of the country by supporting the Iraqi militias and enhancing their power by enabling their efforts to recruit fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan. The religious and cultural dimension of Iran's strategy helped its proxies transition from armed groups to socio-cultural movement and then into integrated components of their national political systems. This includes members of these militias into their national army and police forces or by establishing these groups as auxiliary forces that “support” their national militaries.¹⁸

THE ARABS SPRING: IRAN’S WAY INTO SYRIA

Most of the regional regimes in the Middle East and specifically the Arab world have been caught off guard by the Arab spring; they underestimated the media and the technology effect over masses. It seems that the Arabs world will always suffer from their biggest flaw, the short vision. The exception though has been the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose leadership did not hesitate to grasp this opportunity; they glowed with delight at the turn of events. For instance, Syria, Yemen, and Libya are currently plagued with civil war and their governments do not exercise control over all of their territory¹⁹. The inability of their governments to effectively rule provides the Iranian regime with an

¹⁸ Alaaldin, Ranj. *Iran's Complicated but Resistible Influence in Syria*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2017. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1900536483?accountid=9867>.

¹⁹ Hassan Ahmadian, Payam Mohseni, Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence, *International Affairs*, Volume 95, Issue 2, March 2019, Pages 341–364, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy271>

opening to enhance their influence by continuing to support Iranian proxy forces operating in these countries. For instance the Iranian regime has gone from training the Houthis to becoming the group's primary global sponsor and supplier²⁰. They have also used the conflict to enhance their prestige by making themselves a crucial player in any peace talks that occur.²¹ Analyst Hassan Hassan astutely notes that Gulf States monarchies have the right to feel that there is now not a Shia crescent but a "full moon."²² Members of the Iranian regime now openly refer to the Houthis as being part of the "axis of resistance" that exists in the region. On January 25, 2015, cleric Ali Shirazi, the Iranian Supreme Leader's representative to the IRGC, stated that "Hezbollah was formed in Lebanon as a popular force like Basij [Iran's militia]. Similarly popular forces were also formed in Syria and Iraq, and today we are watching the formation of Ansar Allah in Yemen." The Houthis consistently deny any material support, but the connection between the Houthis and the Iranian regime is firmly established in the minds of Yemenis and other Arabs around the Arabian Gulf.²³ With their influence extending into Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sana'a, Iran has successfully established its influence over one-fifth of the Arab world.

The Arab uprisings of 2010–11 and the ensuing instability that shook the Syrian regime have created a strategic battleground for regional dominance and Great Power

²⁰ Shahir Shahidsaless, "Does Iran really control Yemen?" Al-Monitor, February 12, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/iran-yemen-houthis-axis-of-resistance.html>.

²¹ Jödicke, Ansgar. *Religious Soft Power in the South Caucasus: The Influence of Iran and Turkey*. Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2018. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2155443986?accountid=9867>.

²² Sharnoff, Michael. "Arab Decline and Iran's Rising Influence." AOL Inc.

²³ Shahir Shahidsaless, "Does Iran really control Yemen?" Al-Monitor, February 12, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/iran-yemen-houthis-axis-of-resistance.html>.

contestation²⁴. After years of war the conflict didn't show sign of coming to an end, but dramatically has evolved from being proxy war to direct interstate clashes involving Israel, Iran, Turkey, Russia and the United States.²⁵

The Iranians have always had an eye on Egypt for its weight in the Arab world as it provided another axis towards Syria from the Mediterranean Sea. The situation in Egypt during the Arab Spring served the Iranian interests massively, especially with the Muslim brotherhood organization (MBO) in power. The Iranians also found an opening to finally exploit Egypt by working with the (MBO), when it ruled Egypt. Even though the MBO was unable to remain in power, the Iranians efforts during this timeframe highlight its willingness to exploit the opportunities provided by the Arab Spring. They realized that if they can by any means create coalition or at least positive relationship with Egypt new regime they will gain something they never achieved before which a strategic homogeneity over the Gulf States, Levant and North Africa. Great example of that short lived success was when the Egyptian administration allowed two Iranian warships to pass through the Suez Canal. Since the 1979 revolution and for the first time Iranian vessels passed through the Suez. And it is no surprise where the vessels arrived, at the "Latakia" Port in Syria to support "Al Assad" Administration. Iran has been forceful in its messages concerning the Arab Spring, making strong references to "democracy" and avoiding the condemnation of Arab rulers. Iranian rhetoric has portrayed the United States as the "usual suspect." The irony though was the Iranian stance to the uprising in

²⁴ Cenap Çakmak (2015) THE ARAB SPRING AND THE SHIITE CRESCENT: DOES ONGOING CHANGE SERVE IRANIAN INTERESTS?, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 13:2, 52-63, DOI: 10.1080/15570274.2015.1039299

²⁵ Hassan Ahmadian, Payam Mohseni, Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence, *International Affairs*, Volume 95, Issue 2, March 2019, Pages 341–364, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy271>

Syria. As expressed its support for call for democracy movements in other countries, Iran showed its full support to Syrian president “Alasad” to suppress the riots. The Iranian regime was arguing that Syria was in the spot light because the United States of America was distorting the facts about the people’s movements in the Middle East.²⁶ It’s important to understand that the notion of people calling for democracy in the Middle East serves the Iranian expansion module. Basically the modules essence is that the oppressed people of the Middle East called for democracy. Then the Iranian regime works toward “answering” the people demands for democracy, and once the regime shifts to “Shia” dominance then Iran gets the leverage of controlling this country through its religious power. If not then they will fuel that country with proxy war to create chaos which will drag the Iranian regime rivals to that depleting mayhem which doesn’t calm or stop without the Iranian intervention. It’s no secret to anyone that Iran’s ultimate goal is the expansion of its sphere of influence. The promotion of “democracy” in Arab countries is a strong narrative for the popular movements during the Arabs spring which sounds so appealing to media in the west without the proper knowledge of the micro dynamics of the Middle East, and the outcome in Iraq is the best example.

IRAQ LEADS TO SYRIA

With a sophisticated medium of power, consisting of an extensive network of leaders, fighters, resources, and weapons, the Iranian regime has demonstrated its ability to effectively expend its deterrence sphere further in Iraq. The effectiveness of this

²⁶ Cenap Çakmak (2015) THE ARAB SPRING AND THE SHIITE CRESCENT: DOES ONGOING CHANGE SERVE IRANIAN INTERESTS?, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 13:2, 52-63, DOI: 10.1080/15570274.2015.1039299

network also allowed Iran to extend its network into Syria by supporting the Al-Assad regime. Specifically, Iraq's Shiite militias have played a decisive role in shifting the balance of power within Syria in the Assad regime's favor. The support provided by the Iranian regime to the al Assad cannot be understated. It is estimated that the Iranian regime has spent \$15-19 billion on its military operations in Syria between 2011 and 2014.²⁷ Their success in Iraq and Syria has enabled it to establish an "avenue of influence" that flows from Iran to the Mediterranean. Although not a proxy of the Iranian regime, "Daesh's" existence as an extremist Islamic group and the international efforts that have occurred to defeat "Daesh" has provided the Iranian regime with the ability to employ its militia forces with relative impunity. This has enhanced the legitimacy of these groups and enabled the Iranians to expand their influence in Iraq and Syria by enhancing these groups' abilities. Any group or individual which attempted to limit the Iranian ambitions was easily eliminated. The Iranian regime gained international support for efforts to eliminate these threats by labelling them as being members of al Qaeda, ISIS, or Daesh. Operating in this manner has allowed the Iranian regime to forward its agenda in Iraq and Syria, which has further shifted the geo-social structure of the Levant.

THE KEY PLAYER IN SYRIA, THE US NO, RUSSIA MAYBE, IRAN DEFINITELY.

In recent years, especially since 2011, Iran has demonstrated its strong commitment to its ally and has been a major player in the Syrian conflict. Iran has consistently supported the Syrian government by sending military advisers to the country, establishing transnational militias there and providing political support in the

²⁷ Emile Hokayem (2014) Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War, *Survival*, 56:6, 59-86, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2014.985438

international arena. Yet many mainstream analyses, which are largely divorced from theoretical frameworks, interpret Iran's actions as expansionist, reflecting an attempt to recreate the Persian Empire, by means including the creation of a land bridge from the Iranian plateau to the Mediterranean Sea.²⁸ Others analyze Iranian behavior through a sectarian lens, focusing on Iran as a predominant Shi'a power, or on Iranian anti-Israeli ideology.²⁹ The Iran-Syria relationship tends to be understood in terms of either identity or geopolitics. Identity is a driver of Iranian policy toward Syria and focused on the symbolic importance to Iran of maintaining a so-called axis of refusal, including Hezbollah, Syria and the Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad.³⁰ The importance of the axis for Iran is Iran's identity as an opponent of Western imperialism and anti-Zionism which talks to the crowds of the Middle East. And that's how Iran's revolutionary identity is directed. Let us not forget that Syria was one of the first countries to recognize the Islamic Republic. Syria had been the only Arab country to stand by Iran during the Iraqi Iranian War (1980–1988) when all other Arab countries supported Iraq. On another field, The Syrians also took the initiative to train the Iranians in ballistic missiles technology, and the two countries coordinated support for non-state actors, including Hezbollah and Palestinian resistance organizations, against Israel and the United States in the Levant.

Another key factor is the relationship between Iran Islamist regime and Russia, which is more of fate than choice. Considering the fact that Iran main ideological base

²⁸ Hassan Ahmadian, Payam Mohseni, Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence, *International Affairs*, Volume 95, Issue 2, March 2019, Pages 341–364, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy271>

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ Stein, Ewan. "Ideological Codependency and Regional Order: Iran, Syria, and the Axis of Refusal." *PS, Political Science & Politics* 50, no. 3 (07, 2017): 676-680.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096517000385>.
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1908289612?accountid=9867>.

has always been Anti-Americanism specifically post the Islamic revolution in 1979. Iran's current regime has been successful in transforming Russia from a rival into a partner, which the previous regime had failed to achieve since World War II. The Russians made sure to build upon any possible partnership considering their situation with the west, which pushed them in the direction of building commercial relationships with whether enemies or friends. The Russian companies have not only done business with its former Arab allies but also with The Gulf states, Turkey, Iran, and Israel as well.³¹ For the Iranians it was vital for their development to keep working toward comprehensive and intense cooperation with Russia on sophisticated issues like technology, arms deals, and their nuclear programs, forced by the fact that cooperation with the West in these fields are limited by the number of sanctions imposed by the United States, Western countries and United Nations Security Council resolutions. Both Iran and Russia have come past their history and both have worked with the main eastern giants, China and India. But when it comes to the relationship with Israel, Iran sees Israel as a main rival in the region but not an enemy, while Russia has always maintained a diplomatic relationship with the Israelis³². It's worth mentioning that since the Arab Spring in 2011 the Israeli – Iranian – Saudi relationships have become more dynamic, for instance it caused further reinforcement to the Saudis realizing that Israel can play a role to maintain the balance of power in the Middle East chaotic system by containing an Iranian / Shi'a homogeny in the region. Some would describe the relationship between the Saudis and the Israeli as revolutionary since 1967, but the Arab spring ensured that it

³¹ . Küntzel, Matthias. 2014. "Hidden Diplomacy: The German–American Dispute over Iran." *American Foreign Policy Interests* 36 (4): 225–33. doi:10.1080/10803920.2014.947873.

³² Therme, Clément. "Iran and Russia in the Middle East: Toward a Regional Alliance?" *The Middle East Journal* 72, no. 4 (Autumn, 2018): 549-562.

become more of evolutionary than revolutionary.³³ Iran and Russia both have reasons for providing financial and military help to the Syrian government against armed opposition movements supported by Gulf monarchies and Western powers.

Even the mighty United States came to the conclusion that the Iranian influence in the Levant is too great at the moment and especially in Syria. That explains the increased economic sanctions on Iran. The freedom to maneuver that Iran has achieved in the region is too great at this moment. According to more realistic explanations, Iran needs Syria so that it can reliably arm and fund Hizbullah, the better to threaten Israel and boost its power and influence in the Levant³⁴. Mr. Trump administration is very aware of this problem, the national security adviser H.R. McMaster said “one of the administration's chief objectives is to prevent Iran and its proxy Hezbollah from gaining strategic advantage in Syria as the Islamic State is slowly but steadily defeated there.”³⁵ Mr. Obama is no different than the Trump administration, at least the last could admit that it is not willing to expend the American blood and treasure necessary to prevent Syria falling under “Alasad” regime and Iranian control. Mr. Trump's Syria policy has two main objectives: a regional pushback campaign against Iran, and maintain some

³³ Podeh, Elie. "Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018." *The Middle East Journal* 72, no. 4 (Autumn, 2018): 563-586. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.3751/72.4.12>.
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/2138969007?accountid=9867>.

³⁴ Stein, Ewan. "Ideological Codependency and Regional Order: Iran, Syria, and the Axis of Refusal." *PS, Political Science & Politics* 50, no. 3 (07, 2017): 676-680.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096517000385>.<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1908289612?accountid=9867>.

³⁵ Rogin, Josh. Trump's Plan to Stop Iran in Syria is MIA. Washington: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post, 2017. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1943469703?accountid=9867>.

American presence in Syria, to be part of a postwar deal and have leverage in any future negotiations with Russia Iran and “Alasad” government.³⁶

CONCLUSION

The Iranian Regime continuously invests in exporting Shi’ism across the Middle East, and they utilize their cunningness in politics to further the extent of their influence within the region. They established themselves in the region as a key player by their deterrence capabilities which they practiced in the Levant since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The vision of exporting the revolution across the Middle East has been successful but it didn’t help the Iranians to achieve the homogeneity they always dreamt of. The power vacuum caused by Iraq invasion created the perfect environment for the Iranian regime to expend their influence uncontestedly through the Levant and increase their weight on the Gulf States. The Arab spring has been unexpectedly in favor of the Iranian regime, through the expansion of influence over Iraq, Yemen and North Africa. The Arab countries in the Middle East have woken up late to the aftershock of Arab spring and tried to regain balance, but it’s still an ongoing battle. The Iranian foothold in Iraq made it easy for further expansion. The Syrian regime would not have survived without the Iranian support, which would have been very difficult if Iran did not find it easy to cruise through Iraq. The new coalitions in the region have become even more dynamic with the involvement of the Russians. Their weight has backed Alasad regime and Iran influence at the cost of the stability of region and the lives of Syrians. The American role in the Levant has been minimal in Syria due to the change of leadership and the difference in the approach. The United States have practiced caution with minimal involvement to prevent

³⁶ Hassan Ahmadian, Payam Mohseni, Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence, *International Affairs*, Volume 95, Issue 2, March 2019, Pages 341–364, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy271>

major clash with the Russians which wouldn't serve their national interests. Assad remains in power in Syria, thanks partially to strong material and diplomatic support from Iran, Russia, and China. Although the situation is precarious, there is no sign that the regime will be replaced by a Sunni-dominated one in the near future. Of course, all this may change as regional turmoil and violence continue, and ultimately, Iran may lose out both in Syria and Iraq, but all indications are currently in favor of Iran's spring.

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