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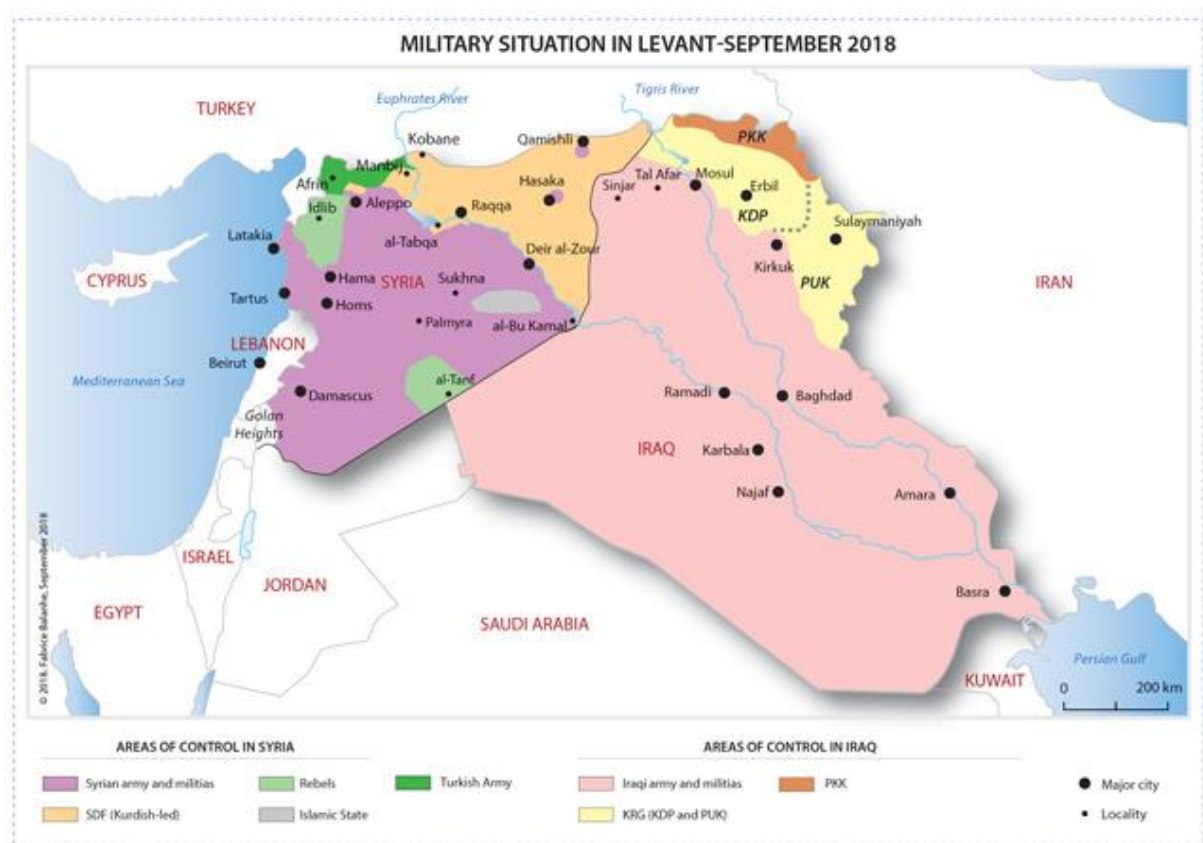
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# The Iranian Land Bridge in the Levant: The Return of Territory in Geopolitics

By [Fabrice Balanche](#) · Friday, September 14, 2018

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With the re-establishment of Bashar al-Assad's power in Syria, the strengthening of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and finally the political and military victory of pro-Iranian forces in Iraq, it is clear that an Iranian axis now prevails in the Levant. The strength of this geopolitical axis is reinforced by the territorial continuity between Tehran and Beirut via Damascus and Baghdad: "the Iranian land bridge" or "Iranian corridor," controlled by Iranian troops directly and by proxies. Since the Shia militias joined the Syrian-Iraqi border in May 2017, the Iranian land bridge<sup>[1]</sup> has continued to expand, despite the U.S. troop presence on both sides, in the al-Tanf pocket and in northeastern Syria. Until spring 2017, the West seemed incredulous about this reality. However, at that time, it was already too late to block the Shiite militias in eastern Syria, and the Iranian land bridge became a reality.



The construction of a land bridge brings us back to the past, to the theories of Friedrich Ratzel and the French-British struggle in colonial Africa: the French "Dakar-Djibouti" land bridge against the English program of "Cape Town-Cairo," which culminated in the Fashoda crisis<sup>[2]</sup> in 1898. Today, in a global world, the principle of the network is alleged to have triumphed over territory, including in geopolitics. The Iranian strategy, based on territory, ought therefore be defeated by the power of the networks, the archetype of which was American strategy during the Cold War. This is how the French scholar Bertrand Badie<sup>[3]</sup> explains the American victory over the Soviet Union, a territorial power par

excellence. Will the confrontation between the United States and Iran have the same outcome in the Middle East? Is the construction of the Iranian axis therefore also doomed to failure by its nature? One might think so, but will it be necessary to wait half a century, as was the case with the end of the Soviet bloc? Iran seems today in the same situation as the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War. Tehran and its local allies arrogate victory against the Islamic State and try to occupy the former land of the terrorist organization.

### **1. The Iranian Axis in the Middle East: A Geopolitical Construction**

With the end of ISIS in Syria, regional geopolitical issues are resurfacing. Iran is taking over the construction of its corridor that connects Beirut to Tehran via Baghdad and Damascus. The Iranian axis, also called the Shiite crescent, is the major objective of Iran in the Levant and probably in the Middle East more broadly. Support for the Houthi rebellion in Yemen appears more like a diversionary war to force Saudi Arabia out of Syria and Lebanon politically. The project of the Iranian axis dates from the first years of the Islamic Republic. Khomeini wanted to break the encirclement of Iran and export the Islamic revolution, and Saddam Hussein's war with Iran forced him to focus on his western front. His alliance with Syria Hafez el Assad allowed Iran to challenge Saddam Hussein's Iraq from behind. At that time, we should not consider the religious factor between the Alawites and Shia Twelvers to have played a major role in this strategic alliance. In contrast, in Lebanon, religious ties enabled Khomeini to find support in the Shiite community. Iran created Hezbollah in 1982 and used it to open a new front against France and the United States, which supported Iraq but also Israel. Israel became a prime target of the Iranian regime for both strategic and ideological reasons. However the end of the Iran–Iraq war did not end the anti-Israeli strategy of the Islamic Republic because of the primacy of the ideological motivation.

#### **The Fight against Israel**

The construction of the Iranian axis concretized one of the ideological dogmas of Tehran: the fight against Israel. Admittedly, the Islamic Republic faces condemnation from the Western countries and embarrasses its Russian ally, which no longer maintains the same anti-Israeli policy it did during the time of the Soviet Union. However, the Iranian regime is not ready to give up this pillar of the 1979 revolution, perhaps the only one that remains. Indeed, since 2005, the anti-Zionist discourse has only been getting louder in Tehran, notably with the voice of the conservative president Ahmadinejad. The regime is increasingly challenged by a new generation, born after the revolution, which demands more freedom. In response, Ahmadinejad ramped up the anti-Zionist struggle and mobilized Iranian nationalism as vehicles to guarantee national unity. This ideological parameter is just as important as the development of the Iranian nuclear program, another subject of "pride" and national unity for the regime. The extension of the Iranian influence to the west means that its anti-Zionist discourse can be more threatening to Israel than simple anti-Semitic speeches and caricatures.<sup>[4]</sup>

Ahmadinejad's anti-Zionist rhetoric has been reinforced by that of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a staunch supporter of the Palestinian cause, and not just because of his Palestinian headscarf. Ali Khamenei is an admirer and translator of Sayyid Qutb,<sup>[5]</sup> the ideologue of jihadism, whose anti-Semitism is very strong.<sup>[6]</sup> Ali Khamenei's most recent statements about Israel are unambiguous: "Israel is a cancerous tumor that needs to be eradicated."<sup>[7]</sup> He justifies his remarks by describing Israel as both the representative of imperialism and the enemy of Islam. It is therefore the duty of the Islamic Republic to fight against the Jewish state until its destruction. This fight involves building a territorial axis to the west to support the anti-Israeli forces ( Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Syrian regime) and to participate directly in the fight.

Thanks to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and the takeover of southern Syria, in spring 2018, Iran can claim to have a near monopoly in the confrontation with Israel and the defense of the Palestinian cause. It can further blame the Sunni Arab countries for renouncing this struggle and, on the contrary, for joining forces with Israel. The popularity of the Palestinian cause in the Sunni street transcends the Sunni–Shiite cleavage and allows Iran to emerge from its Shia and Persian confinement to find allies among the Sunni Arab populations. It can therefore use the Palestinian cause and anti-Semitism to weaken the Sunni Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, who are tempted to forge an alliance with the Jewish state to contain Iranian expansionism. The fight against Israel is therefore an excellent source of division inside the Sunni world, which is already divided, while Iran can rely on the unity of the Shiites. The fight against Israel is therefore an integral part of the regional conflict between Shiites and Sunnis.

### **From the Fall of Saddam Hussein to the Re-establishment of the Assad Regime**

After the fall of Saddam Hussein and the unsurprising victory of the Shiite political parties in the 2004 parliament elections, Iraq was ripe to become an Iranian protectorate. It was enough for Tehran to wait patiently for the departure of the American troops, which Iran had accelerated by supporting the Shiite insurgency of Moqtada Sader and al-Qaeda. Like Lenin, who crossed Germany from Switzerland in a leaded wagon to come back to Russia in 1917, al-Qaeda terrorist Ayman al-Zawairi crossed Iran from Afghanistan, in 2004, with Tehran's permission to organize guerrilla warfare against U.S. troops in Iraq. The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 lifted the last obstacle to the formation of the Iranian axis in the Levant, but the rebellion in Syria and then the ISIS insurgency thwarted the Iranian plans.

From 2011 to 2016, Tehran gave priority to safeguarding the Syrian regime, but as soon as it was restored and sure of success after its victory in Aleppo in December 2016, Iran returned to its primary goal: to establish a territorial continuity between Tehran and the Mediterranean. The completion of this process was made possible by the poor analysis that Westerners made about the outcome of the Syrian conflict and the international geopolitical scene. Most underestimated the resilience of the Syrian regime and the will and capacity of Russia and Iran to support it. Military developments in eastern Syria in the spring of 2017 showed that the United States did not believe in the Syrian regime's return to that area.<sup>[8]</sup>

The West generally seems to disbelieve Shiite Iran's ability to impose itself in the Levant, where the Sunnis are the demographic majority and where the Kurds appear to be reliable allies of the United States. However, as I have shown in another essay,<sup>[9]</sup> that Sunni supremacy was overvalued in both absolute and relative terms because while the Shiites are united, the Sunnis have a capacity to divide and weaken themselves. As for the Kurds, they hardly believe that the United States can guarantee their autonomy after the capture of the Kurdish district of Afrin (winter 2018) by Turkey, without any American reaction, and the abandonment of Kirkuk to the Iraqi army (October 2017). Now the Syrian Kurds anticipate a near-term withdrawal of U.S. troops from their region. So do the Iraqi Kurds, who believe that their autonomy will be reduced again because the United States no longer will protect them against their enemies, including both Iran and the Baghdad government.<sup>[10]</sup>

### **Shiite Militias Form the Last Piece of the Iranian Land Bridge**

In March 2017, Iraqi Shiite militias moved into Sinjar and reached Syrian territory under the control of the YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK. The speed with which the Iraqi Shiite militias seized Tal Afar, a Turkmen Sunni-Shiite city west of Mosul, a few weeks earlier, indicated that the issue was more than just the recovery of Mosul. Analysts recognized that Iran now had a potential road between the Mediterranean and Tehran, since the Syrian army had reopened the road between

Manbij and Aleppo<sup>[11]</sup> to the west. The YPG is only a tactical ally of the United States against ISIS. It can therefore form alliances with Tehran and Damascus if the circumstances demand that and officially open its territory.

In May 2017, the Shiite militias made their junction on the Syrian-Iraqi border between the U.S. al-Tanf base and the city of al-Bu Kamal, opening the first direct route between Beirut and Tehran.<sup>[12]</sup> In addition, they blocked the advance of Syrian rebels to the north, reserving al-Bu Kamal. The liberation of al-Bu Kamal from ISIS in early November 2017, thanks to the Syrian Army and Hezbollah coming from the west and Iraqi Shiite militias coming from the east, has important consequences for the future of the Levant, as much as the French defeat at Fashoda had in 1898 for colonial Africa. The land bridge between Iraq and Syria, and more broadly Iran and the Mediterranean, is now firmly established. The pro-Iranian Shiite militias occupy the ground, and Iran is now trying to appeal to the local Arab Sunni population.<sup>[13]</sup> The next goal is to regain control of the entire Syrian-Iraqi borders and to expel the United States and its allies.

Washington was been incredulous about the construction of the Iranian corridor for an extended period of time. The territorial continuity sought by Iran was probably not considered strategically important enough to cause an additional threat to Israel and Saudi Arabia. After all, Iran does not need land routes to send weapons to Hezbollah: it has made the transfers so far by air via Damascus and by boat via Latakia or Tartus. However, having land routes makes the transfers less detectable, as it is more difficult to monitor thousands of kilometers of roads than a port or an airport. However, in the case of an open war with Israel in Syria and Lebanon or a new insurgency in Syria, the land route will make it easier for Iran to deploy troops in the Levant and bring military equipment to its allies. The action of the Islamic Republic will no longer be susceptible to a possible air and sea blockade. Iran is above all a land power, and its aviation and navy are minor. It relies more on territorial continuity than on a network of bases, unlike the United States, which has a strong network of air and sea bases allowing it to free itself from the imperatives of territorial control. Here again, we find the old strategic opposition between the Spartan model (the land territory) and the Athenian model (the network of bases and alliances). Similarly, the former opposed Napoleon's France to the latter's Britain and then the Soviet Union to the United States during the Cold War.

### **Protect the Western Front to the Sea**

The insistence and consistency with which the Islamic Republic strives to build a geopolitical axis toward the Mediterranean, in addition to its ideological anti-Israel motivation, are linked to its perception of the dangers that threaten it. Iran was scarred by the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1989) and believes that a new attack is possible from the west; the other borders are considered less sensitive. It must therefore build an area of influence toward the Mediterranean to prevent any future danger. The presence of Israel adds an ideological dimension to its policy of influence, but it is more Iranian nationalism that forms a consensus among the Iranian population. In early 2011, Iran was on track to achieve its goal thanks to the planned withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. There was no longer any obstacle to the creation of the Iranian axis and the land bridge to Beirut. However, the rebellion in Syria blocked that process. Tehran's discreet support for Bashar al-Assad against the rebellion changed in nature when the Gulf monarchies and Turkey saw it as an opportunity to break the Iranian axis. These Sunni countries were more worried than was the United States about the progress of the Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq.

Therefore Iran had to prevent the rebels from winning at all costs, because Hezbollah would have been isolated and Baghdad could also switch to the camp of its enemies. The Iranian leaders did not want to see recreating their country's encirclement, unacceptable for Iran's security after eight years

of a war (1980–1988) that nearly destroyed the regime. Despite the strong Iranian investment in Bashar al-Assad, his regime was struggling in the spring of 2015. The Syrian regime had lost total control of the province of Idlib and Palmyra. It risked losing altogether or at least being reduced to controlling only southwestern Syria, which would have undermined Iranian strategy. Yet ultimately the Iranian axis would probably not have materialized if Iran had not been helped by Russia.

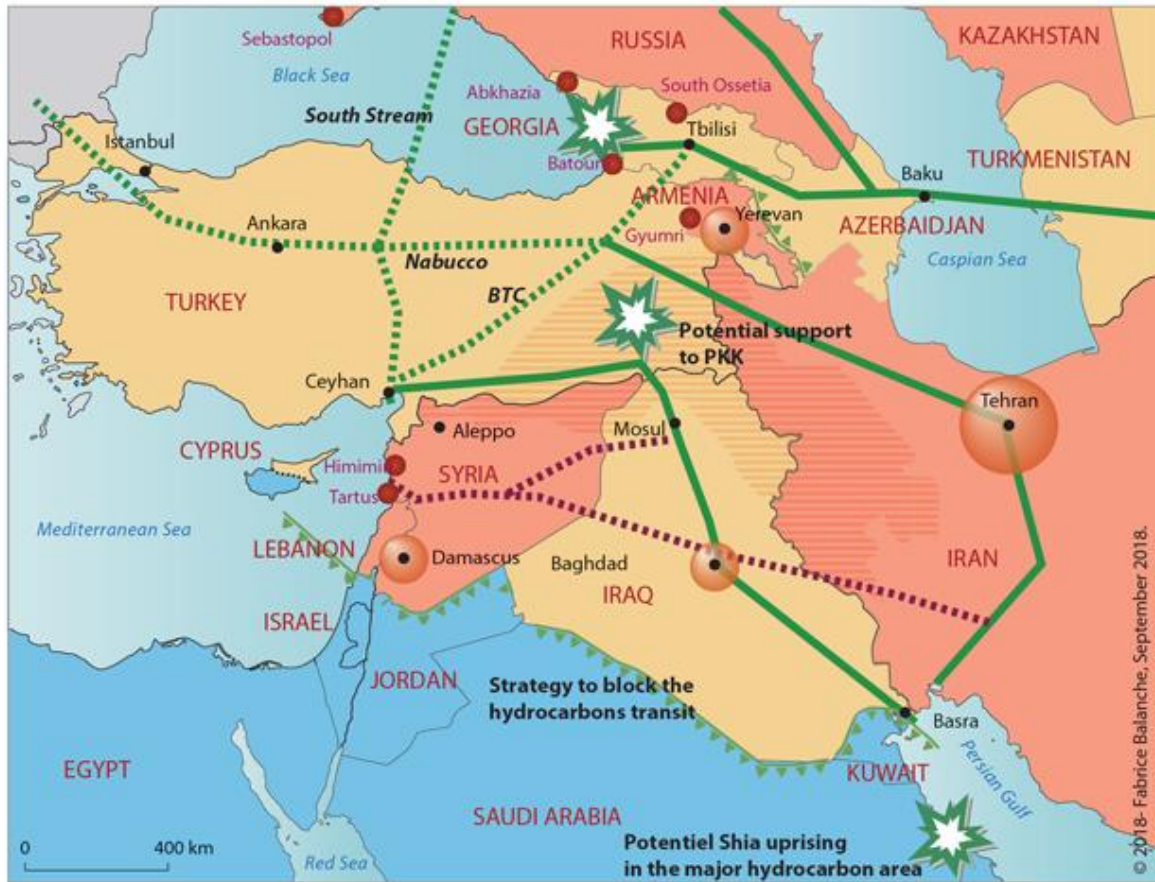
## **2. The Iranian Axis Is in Accord with the Russian Interests in Middle East**

Since the beginning of the war in Syria, analysts have been tracking Russian and Iranian speeches for signs of any break in the relationship. The West continues to bet on the fragility of the alliance between Russia and Iran and the inevitable conflict that should break out between them. However, history is not an eternal beginning, and the long enmity between Iran and Russia, including the Russian Empire's nineteenth-century amputation of part of the Persian Empire, does not mean that the two countries cannot find reconciliation. France and England were also long-standing enemies, but they ended up united against Germany in the twentieth century because the geopolitics had changed. Many analyses of this so-called fundamental Russian–Iranian conflict are based on a historical determinism that no longer has any relevance.

Russia did not intervene in Syria simply to keep the naval base of Tartus, which has been limited to a simple wharf in the Syrian military port since 2008. It has much greater geopolitical ambitions. Of course, Islamic terrorism is a threat to its security because of the importance of Russian and Central Asian nationals in the jihadists' ranks. Russia was anxious that Syria would become a jihadist base. However, all of this is secondary compared to its geopolitical aspirations. Putin wants to make Russia a great power again, and he therefore benefits from the relative withdrawal of the United States. This intervention gives him the opportunity to weaken two major U.S. allies in the region: Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which also threaten the economic fundamentals of resurgent Russian power.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Turkey had the ambition to extend its influence to the Caucasus and Central Asia, a Turkish culture area. The goal was also to drain the hydrocarbons of the area to Turkey, which would become an energy hub. The discovery of gas fields in Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean was likely to compete with sales of Russian gas on the European market. By favoring the Iranian axis, Russia is completing Turkey's encirclement. During the Georgian War in 2008, Russia placed the Georgian coastline under its tutelage,<sup>[14]</sup> forcing the Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan to negotiate with it in the transfer of their hydrocarbons.<sup>[15]</sup> If Turkey wants to become an energy hub, it must now negotiate with Moscow, as took place at the Erdoğan–Putin summit in St. Petersburg on August 9, 2016. Putin announced the passage of the Russian South Stream gas pipeline across Turkey in exchange for the cessation of Turkish support for the Syrian rebellion, while Turkey also gained permission to intervene directly in Syria against the PKK project to create a Kurdish statelet in northern Syria, from Afrin to the Tigris River.

## RUSSIAN STRATEGY IN LEVANT



### POLICY VIS A VIS RUSSIA

- Strategic alliance
- Tactical alliance
- Pro-USA

### RUSSIAN SIEGE AROUND TURKEY

- Strategic alliance with Russia
- Russian base
- Kurdish threat

### RUSSIAN ENERGY STRATEGY

- Strategy to block the hydrocarbons transit
- Hydrocarbons road
- Planned hydrocarbons road
- Possible new hydrocarbons road
- Leverage

Russia's other target is Saudi Arabia, the global regulator of oil prices. The Saudi choice to increase production in a context of falling prices was a catastrophe for Russia. Oil and gas each account for 15 percent of Russia's GDP, two-thirds of foreign exchange earnings, and half of budget revenues. However, Russian oil is at least twice as expensive to produce as Saudi oil (\$9 per barrel).<sup>[16]</sup> Saudi Arabia would have to be forced to reduce its oil production for prices to rise. They cannot reach the peaks of 2014 with a barrel over \$140 because the world market is saturated. In addition, unconventional oil extraction in North America has made huge productivity gains in recent years, limiting the rise in oil prices. Nevertheless a barrel of oil above \$60 a barrel is enough for the good health of the Russian economy and the replenishment of the foreign currency reserves of the state. To convince Saudi Arabia to reduce oil production, Russia and Iran have no doubt threatened the kingdom with destabilization. For example, the Shiites of Hassa, the main oil region of the country, are ready to revolt against Riyadh on the grounds of claims of discrimination.

The Iranian land bridge project is therefore likely to succeed because it converges with Russian strategy and, since the summer of 2016, it has benefited from the benevolent neutrality of Turkey. For the latter, Iran appears as a better guarantor against the Kurds than the United States, which relied on them in their fight against ISIS, neglecting the consequences that this could have on the security of Turkey. Tehran and Ankara have a common interest in limiting Kurdish territorial extension and their desire for independence in Syria and Iraq in order to avoid contagion in their own countries. Saudi Arabia and Israel remain fiercely opposed to this Iranian axis. They are betting on the resistance of the Sunni population, especially in Syria where it is the majority and are assumed to be reluctant to live in a satellite country of Shiite Iran. On the one hand, the ability of Syrian Sunnis to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad has been overestimated. On the other, hand Iran and its allies will now be careful not to give them a second chance. In this, they can rely on Shiite militias who have recently proven their effectiveness in Iraq and Syria.

### **3. The Shiite Militias Are the Privileged Instrument of Tehran**

Shiite militias are the key to Iran's expansion in the Middle East. They began in Lebanon with the creation of Hezbollah in 1982 and in Iraq during the U.S. occupation, especially after the ISIS offensive in 2014. In Syria, Shiite militias have multiplied during the civil war, but it is mainly the foreign Shiite militias who intervene on the Syrian ground because of the weakness of the Shiite population Syria. The advantage of militias over regular armies is that they can intervene outside their country of origin without an official military declaration. This transnational dimension has been affirmed by the Syrian civil war and the struggle against the Islamic State. However, the militias possess neither aviation nor a navy, which makes geographical continuity even more essential.

#### **Iran Use Lebanese Hezbollah as an Example to Follow**

In Lebanon, Hezbollah was founded in 1982 with the help of Iran. It is now the first military and political force in the country. The struggle against Israel, which occupied southern Lebanon until 2000, was its *raison d'être*. Once southern Lebanon was evacuated by the Israeli army, Hezbollah should have laid down its arms, but it refused to do so in order to continue the fight against the Jewish State and thus participate in the "liberation of Palestine." The war of the summer 2006 gave Hezbollah the perfect excuse to keep its weapons. It is a real state within a state, with its own police but also educational, health, and charitable institutions. The Lebanese police and army cannot intervene in the Shiite territories under its control. In non-Shia areas, it relies on allies, such as the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP) in northern Lebanon and Beirut. During the mini civil war of May 2008, Hezbollah seized West Beirut in less than 24 hours to the detriment of Walid Jumblat's Druze militias and that of the Sunni leader Saad Hariri. Hezbollah then entrusted the control of the conquered neighborhoods to the SSNP because this secular party, made up of different communities, is better accepted in the multi-sectarian West Beirut than the Shia militia from the southern suburbs. In the Sunni territories Hezbollah has managed to create militias based on figures who are driven more by a hunger for power and money than by the liberation of Palestine. For example, in the conservative Sunni district of Tariq al-Jedideh, Hezbollah supported from 2008 to 2012, the Arab Movement Party of Shaker Berjawi. However, he was expelled from the neighborhood by militants of the Future Party, led by Saad Hariri. It is not difficult to recruit Sunni militiamen ready to fight against their co-religionists because of the massive unemployment that afflicts the popular Lebanese classes. The fight against Israel serves as an ideological smoke screen for much more material motives.

In Syria, Hezbollah intervened in 2012. Initially, it wanted to protect the Shiite villages around Homs,<sup>[171](#)</sup> before committing to the Syrian regime on all fronts. Hezbollah went on to play an active



role in all the main battles. In May 2013, it took over the city of Qussayr, and it was strongly involved in the fights for Homs, Aleppo, and Deir al-Zour. The other function of Hezbollah was to train the National Defense, the local militias controlling the territory in order to free up the regular army for offensive operations. However, these militias also quickly took the offensive because of the lack of regular troops and their better knowledge of the ground. At its peak, Hezbollah has had thousands of soldiers in Syria, and the losses have been offset by a permanent turnover of its fighters. It can draw on its demographic reserve of southern Lebanon and the suburbs of Beirut. However, the supply is not unlimited. The Shia population in Lebanon is estimated at 1.5 million, its fertility is close to the Lebanese average, 2 children per woman, and this begins to create a recruitment shortage.<sup>[18]</sup>

### **Iraqi Militias Have the Strength of Demographics**

The first Shia militias appeared in Iran with the Bader militia in the 1980s, fighting with the Iranian army against Saddam Hussein's troops. In 2003, the militias multiplied with the help of Iran to fight against the American presence. In 2008, most of the militias turned into political parties, such as the Mahdi militia of Moqtada Sadr, and became integrated into the political game. Part of the Mahdi militia decided to keep its weapons and gave birth to Kataeb Hezbollah, which played a leading role in Syria. The Iraqi Shiite militias were reconstituted first in favor of the war in Syria, where Shiite populations and Shiite holy sites were an urgent concern. There was no question of letting Sayyida Zaynab's Mausoleum in Damascus be destroyed, as was the case with the Samara Mosque in 2006. Then, the militias became involved with Hezbollah and the Syrian Army regarding various operations, especially in the siege of Aleppo.

The arrival of ISIS in Iraq, the fall of Mosul, and its rapid progress to the gates of Baghdad gave a new impulse to the Shiite militias. In July 2014, Ayatollah Sistani launched a call for general mobilization. Tens of thousands of volunteers answered his call, while the Iraqi army was struggling to find recruits. The number of militia in one year exceeded 100,000 men.<sup>[19]</sup> The Shiite population of Iraq is ten times larger than in Lebanon. Young Shiites prefer the militia to the Iraqi army because they are better paid, corruption is nonexistent, and everyone can choose a militia that suits him best. The Iranian al-Quds force commanded by Qassem al-Sulaymani provides military advisers and equipment, and is at the heart of the Iranian militia system. While militias loyal to Moqdada Sader and Sistani do not recognize the tutelage of the al-Quds force and are content to fight in Iraq, the others have a transnational dimension and obey Iranian directives. Their strategy is thus different from the simple control of Iraqi territory, as they participate in the construction of the Iranian axis. The battle of Mosul provides an excellent example.

The Iraqi army seemed inclined to leave an exit door to ISIS west of Mosul. The jihadists could have fled the city, which would have avoided destruction and favored a rapid takeover of Mosul. However, the Shiite militias bypassed Mosul from the west and canceled any possibility of retreat. In March 2017, the Shiite militias took control of Tal Afar airport, a Sunni-Shiite Turkmen city west of Mosul, joining the PKK in Sinjar to the detriment of pro-American KDP militia. Iran took an option on the Syrian-Iraqi border at the expense of the Iraqi federal army, which was less malleable than the militias. Tehran was no doubt afraid that thousands of jihadists would retreat into Syria, in the province of Deir al-Zour since Raqqa was already besieged. Such a development would have complicated the task of the Syrian army in the low Euphrates Valley, because Deir al-Zour threatened to fall completely into the hands of the Islamic State at that point.<sup>[20]</sup> This Shiite militia maneuver in northern Iraq allowed the Syrian army and Shiite militias in Syria to take al-Bu Kamal before the American backed rebels from al-Tanf and the Syrian Democratic Forces from the north side of the Euphrates River. This was further evidence that Iraqi Shiite militias serve Tehran's regional strategy.

## Syrian Militias Are not Iranian Tools

In Syria, Iran lacks an important reservoir of Shiite Twelvers, in contrast to Lebanon or Iraq. The Shiite Twelver population is estimated in 2015 at 1% of the population. As for the Alawites (13%), Druze (5%), and Ismailians (1%), who are heterodox Shiites,<sup>[21]</sup> they are far from adhering to the ideology of Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias. Hezbollah fighters have an aura among Alawite youth because of their warlike qualities, but that does not matter much. The heterodox Shiites are closer to the Russian way of life than the rigorous way of life that the Islamic Republic promotes.

The National Defense, the umbrella that covers all Syrian pro-government militias, has more than 100,000 members; it recruits in all communities, but minorities are, of course, overrepresented. One of the most famous militias, "The Desert Hawks," funded by the businessman Ayman Jaber, is composed mainly of Alawites from the coastal region, even if its preferred field of action is the Syrian Desert, where it has been taken over the sources of hydrocarbons from ISIS. However, his loyalty to Bashar al-Assad has a real value: he receives a percentage on the exploitation of its hydrocarbons fields. On the other hand, the Qaterji's militia in Aleppo is essentially Sunni. It became famous in February 2018 by taking part in the battle of Afrin alongside the YPG. Qaterji is not a Kurdish independence militant but merely the YPG trading partner. In the province of Swayda, various Druze militias were formed since 2012 to defend the Druze territory against the rebels. The young Druze refused to be incorporated into the Syrian army, but they agreed to join a local militia. This solution allowed the regime of Bashar al-Assad to mobilize beyond the Alawite community. Moreover, the salary in the militias is greater than in the army and discipline less rigorous; however, the chances of being killed are equal.

With the end of the coming conflict, the whole question is, what will become of these militias? In Iraq the government has given up on any plans to dissolve them, and they now constitute an entity parallel to the national army. Some of the fighters, however, chose to join the Iraqi National Army. In Syria, Russia insists that the militia be integrated into the Syrian army. As an example, the Desert Hawks have been part of the 5th Corps since January 2017. The objective is to improve the coordination between the different units in order to avoid a defeat as was the case in Palmyra in December 2016, when the Islamic State took over Palmyra because of the poor coordination of the loyalist forces, which were vastly superior in number. Russia, which originated the integration of militias in the army, however is faced with the opposition of Iran that wishes to maintain its power over this para-military armed force. With the exception of purely Shiite militias,<sup>[22]</sup> members of the National Defense are not religiously and ideologically related to the Islamic Republic. If salary and promotion no longer depended on proximity to the Lebanese Hezbollah or the Revolutionary Guards, Tehran would no longer have power over the former militia members. They would be more inclined to follow Russia, which already supplies most of the military equipment and to whom they are culturally closer.

Militia power is an indispensable political and military leverage for Tehran. It allows Tehran to occupy territory and to influence the local governments. Iran therefore has a strong interest in the existence of militias based on the Hezbollah model. Admittedly, the integration into the regular army could be the opportunity to create a pro-Iranian officers lobby. However, unless the state is fully subordinated to Tehran, they will eventually return to the ranks and be emancipated from Iranian tutelage, especially since most of the military supply comes from Russia. While Russia is an ally of Iran, it intends to take advantage of its military and diplomatic superiority in the Syrian crisis to expand at the expense of Tehran. Russian intervention in Syria allows both the construction of the Iranian axis, but at the same time it lessens Iran's strategic importance.

## Conclusion: Iran Is One Step ahead in the Levantine Chess Game

According to a speech given by the then–U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, delivered at Stanford on January 18, 2018,<sup>[23]</sup> the Iranian land bridge project seems to be taken seriously by Washington. President Trump agreed to an indefinite military effort and a new diplomatic push in Syria in September 2018.<sup>[24]</sup> Now that ISIS has been defeated, the limitation of Iranian influence becomes the priority of the United States. However, does the United States, and more broadly the West, have a clear understanding of the chess game in Levant? In chess, the player who is content to respond to the attack by the adversary loses the game. The chess game played in the Levant is more complex for the West because it is played on a chessboard that has itself a dynamic called “sectarianism.” This Western ignorance or misunderstanding of these specifics “rules” allowed the Iranians to dominate Iraq after Saddam Hussein’s fall, Hezbollah to impose itself in Lebanon, and Bashar al-Assad to remain in power in Syria. By projecting a Western vision on Levant societies and neglecting sectarianism and tribal relations in favor of an artificial civil society,<sup>[25]</sup> the West can only lose the game against Iranians, who master the social and political architecture. Tehran moves its pieces on the chessboard without ending up on the ground and can instead put mines under the squares of his adversary.

The victory over the Soviet Union was not only due to the difference in strategy: network versus territory. The economic and political system of the Soviet Union was the main weak point of the country. The Soviet Union did not have the means to sustain its geopolitics in the long term—no offense to Nikita Khrushchev, who was persuaded of the ultimate victory of the Soviet model, as he said during his famous trip to the United States in 1959. It is clear that the Iranian economy will not be able to compete with that of the United States in the end. Therefore, the Iranian geopolitical ambitions will eventually find their limit. However, in the middle term, probably the next ten years, Iran can very well succeed in dominating the Levant, just as the Soviet Union did in Eastern Europe. In the current geopolitical reorganization in Eurasia, this Iranian axis could find its place in the Chinese project of Silk Road and the new Russian “sanitary cordon” against the Western influence. Iran could thus obtain external support capable of sustaining its presence in the Levant, because its territorial strategy is congruent with Russian and Chinese territorial strategies as well. The return of the principle of territory in geopolitics is a reality at the world level, and not only in Levant.

## Notes

1. The Iranian axis is a geopolitical construction including Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The Iranian corridor is a land bridge directly controlled by Iranian troops and proxies.
2. In 1898, French and British army competed in Fashoda for the control of the High Nile area. France and Britain were close to the war over that colonial dispute.
3. Bertrand Badie, *La fin des territoires* (Paris: Fayard, 1995).
4. In 2006, Iran organized an international Holocaust caricature competition in Tehran. In 2016, a second edition has been organized.
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