

## **Between Iran, the Shi'ites and Sunni Arab Weakness**

**by Asher Susser**

In recent years, the Middle East has witnessed a series of historical changes that provide the regional context to the ongoing confrontation Israel is engaged in on its southern front with Gaza and to what is now developing into an almost full-scale war between Israel and Hizballah in Lebanon.

The last quarter of a century has witnessed the continued, steady decline of the Arab states and the relative impotence of the Arab state system. The erstwhile hegemonic Arab powers, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, have all lost much of their regional clout. The Arab League is an empty vessel. In the present crisis it has not managed to convene its members because of internal dissension. Never mind doing anything about the current conflagration, the Arab collective is incapable even of convening to talk about it. The Middle East, therefore, is no longer the "Arab world," at least in the sense that it is not the Arab states that set the regional agenda.

The decline of the Arab states has been accompanied by the rising regional power and influence of the non-Arab states, Israel, Iran and Turkey. Indeed, it is Iran and Israel that are presently clashing indirectly in Lebanon, while the Arabs, much to Hizballah's displeasure, watch from the sidelines as more or less passive bystanders (apart from a few demonstrations here and there).

Iran's stature has been further reinforced by the demise of Baathist Iraq, hitherto the main bulwark to Iranian influence in the Arab East, now transformed into the first Arab Shi'ite-dominated state. Shi'ite Iraq has paved the way for a dramatic change in the regional balance of power between Sunna and Shia, and the creation of what King Abdallah of Jordan referred to as the "Shi'ite crescent," stretching from Tehran and Baghdad (via Syria) to Hizballah in Lebanon.

Iranian patronage, financial, political and military, has over many years (again via Syria) transformed Hizballah into a state within a state, not only with a relatively formidable military structure, but with an elaborate network of social services for the Shi'ites of Lebanon, whose widespread identification with Hizballah provides the organization with a solid foundation of popular support, essential for its political longevity and power in the Lebanese arena. For Iran (and Syria), the arming and entrenchment of Hizballah have transformed Lebanon into their own outpost and front-line of

defense (or attack) against Israel. A senior Iranian official recently described Hizballah as "one of the pillars of [Iran's] security strategy".

The weakening of the Arab state has raised the profile and relevance of primordial, sectarian and religious identities, coupled with the rise of non-state actors throughout the region. The likes of Bin Laden, Zarqawi and his successors, Hizballah and Hamas, the latter now in some mode of control of the non-state of Palestine, have created a unique brand of chaotic statelessness. Some Arab states, notably Sunni Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, are concerned by the emergence of both Iran and the destabilizing non-state actors and have in the recent conflict come out openly to criticize Hizballah for its rash and adventurous behavior in picking a fight with Israel. They would not be unhappy to see Israel downgrading Hizballah, and thereby weakening an Iranian client in what would be the first serious setback in recent years for Iranian-Shi'ite ascendancy, which they really and truly fear.

Israel, in a way, is being expected to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for them, too. Israel for its part would expect these Arab states to at least give their backing and blessing to a new political order in Lebanon that would embolden the Lebanese government and the non-Shi'ite majority to clip the wings of Hizballah. Syria, recently forced to leave Lebanon, has in this conflict played second fiddle to Iran. It might be worth exploring the possibility of reengaging Syria in the stabilizing of Lebanon.

If the Lebanese prove incapable, as they might, then encouraging Syria to assist in the containment of Hizballah would make sense. Syria may do so lest it be drawn in the future into an undesirable clash with Israel because of Hizballah's subservience to Iranian interests, which are not all in line with those of Syria. The Syrians, after all, are much more vulnerable than Iran to Israeli reprisal.

In conclusion, it is important to highlight what is perhaps the key linkage between Gaza and Beirut, above and beyond the coincidence of Israel's campaign on two fronts against its non-state enemies. Though it may not appear so on the surface, the present campaign, on all fronts, is an absolutely vital component of Israel's withdrawal strategy. It is not the undoing of that strategy but quite the opposite. It is intended to create the essential preconditions for Israeli redeployment, that is, to set the rules of play for the

neighborhood to ensure a secure Israel after withdrawal, without being dragged back into reoccupation with all the hazards that entails.

If Israel fails to set such rules by reinforcing its deterrence, it could become impossible for it to withdraw from the West Bank. That, in turn, would suck Israel into a host of other existential problems, related not to Arab power but to its own demographic vulnerabilities.

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