

# *Islamism in West Asia-North Africa*

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## **Shia Islamism and Iranian Influence**

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In 2006, as Iraq's Shia majority watched the execution of former President Saddam Hussein, one clear victor emerged from America's controversial war: Iran. Iraq's transition from Iran's fierce enemy, to probable ally was a major success for the Islamic Republic and one of the biggest shifts in the regional order of power since Iran's establishment as an Islamic Republic in 1979. The region's Sunni leaders watched Iran's waxing power with open concern, leading some to term Iran's influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon the "Shia crescent."

### **The birth of the Islamic Republic**

In 1979, despite Iran having the fifth largest military in the world and US backing,<sup>1</sup> mass opposition overthrew the Shah with little violence. In a shift similar to the Arab Revolutions, power slipped to the group best organized to fill the power vacuum: religious organizations, specifically Islamists led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Unlike the recent Arab revolutions, these Islamists were Shia.

For Shia Muslims, the integration of religion and politics was a major shift. Although Shias credit their clerics with more authority than Sunnis traditionally allot their leaders, Shia clerics usually avoided the political realm. Ayatollah Khomeini entered this sphere by establishing a theocratic republic, rooted in Islamic law.

Iran's republic is ostensibly led by a democratically elected president, but it is Ayatollah Khamenei who leads the military, judiciary, and state media. Iran has shifted between fundamentalist and reformist interpretations of Islam depending on its political leadership, but consistencies in foreign policy include 30 years of enmity with the US and fierce opposition to Israel. Iran departed from attempts to export its revolution to the Gulf States after the Iran-Iraq war allowing tensions with the Gulf states to ease, but the somewhat

strengthened relations fell apart after Saddam Hussein's fall from power in 2003.<sup>2</sup>

### **Iraq: Rival turned reluctant ally**

Despite Iraq's Shia majority, Sunnis dominated the political system through the secular-nationalist Ba'athist party for decades championing a rivalry with Iran that culminated in a nine-year war in the 1980s. However after Saddam Hussein fell, Iraq experienced a Shia resurgence. Although this development shook Iran's foes, Iran-Iraq relations remain complicated.

There is no doubt that the new government is more amenable to Iran than Saddam Hussein's regime, but with centuries of rivalry and a bloody recent war, Iraq's people are wary. Iran has built on its pre-existing ties with certain Iraqi Shia parties like the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, Dawa, and the Sadrists. But many Iraqis, even Shias, remain wary of their former enemy and are suspicious of Iranian involvement in internal politics.<sup>3</sup>

The real development that may shift Iraq in Iran's favor is the rapid rise of Daesh, the Sunni so-called Islamic state. Iran can be a powerful backer, but excessive Iranian influence may further fissure the delicate balance; many analysts blame the exclusivity of the post-Saddam Shia-led government for fomenting the divides now present in Iraq.

### **Syria: Long-term ally, short-term Shias**

Syria is a major Iranian partner and references to a "Shia Crescent" assume Syria's inclusion; however, attributing Syria and Iran's relationship to a religious bond, let alone Shia Islamism, is mistaken. Most obviously, Syria's President Bashar Assad leads under the Ba'athist political party - a secular nationalist party with no inherent linkage to Islam.

A more nuanced distinction is perhaps more important: most Muslims do not consider Assad's religious denomination, the Alawites, Muslim, regardless of

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<sup>1</sup> Abrahamian, Ervand. "Structural Causes of the Iranian Revolution." MERIP Reports. No. 87 (May, 1980), pp. 21-26.

<sup>2</sup> Molavi, Afshin. "Iran and the Gulf States." *The Iran Primer*. United States Institute of Peace (December 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael. "Iran and Iraq." *The Iran Primer*. United States Institute of Peace (December 2010).

sect. Alawites were a stand-alone sect who faced religious prosecution for centuries, only gaining political and military influence in Syria through French colonialism. Alawites gained recognition as Shias through a Lebanese cleric's fatwa in 1973 after an outreach effort to gain legitimacy.<sup>4</sup> Thus the Shia linkage seems a tenuous bond with the Islamist Republic born within the same decade.

In any case, Iran and Syria have had strong ties since Iran's revolution. The two nations worked together to build up their combined geopolitical power and subdue the influence of Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Since the Syrian uprising began in 2011, Iran has acted as Syria's loyal ally. Although their long partnership is surely a factor in Iran's defense, Syria's Sunni majority, and the Islamist nature of large groups of its rebels, means that any replacement Syrian government would likely be less friendly to the Islamic Republic.

### Hezbollah: Lebanon's "Party of God"

Borne of Iranian influence against the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the strongest case for a religious-political bond with Iran can be made for Shia political organisation Hezbollah. Hezbollah aims to resist Israel and Western involvement in the Arab world as well as encouraging Islamist reforms within Lebanon. While many consider Hezbollah Iran's proxy actor against Israel, Hezbollah is also beholden to its Lebanese constituents, who are extremely antagonistic towards their former occupier. The resistance of Hezbollah's highly capable militia was a core factor in Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon. Like many Islamist organizations, Hezbollah also gained popularity by providing social services.

<sup>4</sup> Proctor, Pat. "The Mythical Shia Crescent." *Parameters*, Strategic Studies Institute (2008).

Since 1991, Hezbollah has been trying to transition into an accepted presence within the Lebanese political system, but terrorist tactics and suicide bombings have damaged their legitimacy. A new barrier to their credibility is Hezbollah's role in propping up Assad's government in Syria; this role has divided their constituents as well as Sunni sympathizers around the region. Accusations that Hezbollah is serving Iranian interests hold weight, but Hezbollah, like Iran, is threatened by the specter of a new neighboring Sunni government. The rise of Daesh has helped them regain popularity as Lebanon's army leans on the powerful militia. In the Lebanese context, this renewed support crosses sectarian lines. Hezbollah has resurrected their non-Shia militia branch, the Lebanese Resistance Brigades, once used against Israel, to strengthen their stand against Daesh.<sup>5</sup>

### Iranian power and Shia Islamism post-2015

During a tumultuous time in the region, Iranian power is in a state of flux. When the future looked more ominous for the Syrian regime, Iran stood to lose a major geopolitical asset. The rise of Daesh however has ironically presented Iran with new opportunities. Iran can consolidate its semblance of a Shia coalition and further fuel sectarian tensions. However the breadth of the opposition against Daesh also gives Iran the option of joining the wider coalition. A nuclear deal with the United States could be a major step in this direction. Whatever steps Iran takes, the repercussions of its actions will depend on how the rest of the region responds: subduing sectarianism must be a shared undertaking between leaders and governments on both sides of the Sunni-Shia divide.

<sup>5</sup> Daoud, David. "Hezbollah: the Party of Iran not Lebanon." *The Washington Institute*. <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-the-party-of-iran-not-lebanon1>>.



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Emily joins the WANA team to investigate the influence of political Islam in the WANA region, regional legal empowerment initiatives and the continuing impact of Arab Spring. Prior to joining the WANA Institute, Emily was a Fulbright research scholar studying the influence of demographic rifts on Jordan's HIRAK protest movement. She also interned at the Jordanian Institute of Diplomacy and the American Foreign Service Journal. Emily holds a Bachelor of Science in Political Science from Santa Clara University with a minor in Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies.