

# IS IRAN IN THE PROCESS OF OVEREXTENDING ITSELF? ISRAEL'S FEAR OF A SUPER-HEZBOLLAH

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March 2017

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In the last few months, the presence of pro-Iranian Shia militias in Syria has repeatedly been criticized. Israel especially made it clear that a deployment of these groups close to the Israeli border will be regarded as a threat and therefore, will be forcefully resisted. The shooting down of an Iranian drone over Israeli territory and the alleged destruction of an Israeli fighter jet by Syrian anti-air defense was also put into this context by Israel. The dreaded escalation between Israel and Iran may not have occurred, yet—the situation, however, remains very tense. Just how tense? One could see at the Munich Security Conference where Prime Minister Netanyahu warned the international community of Iranian meddling in Syria and Iran's Foreign Minister Zarif retorted the Islamic Republic would confront any power threatening its interests.

The presence of Iranian forces in Syria, Iran's sole Arab ally, is nothing new and dates back to the early 1980s. At that time Teheran, with Lebanese sympathizers and condoned by Syria, established Hezbollah. After only a few years, Hezbollah was to become the toughest and best-led anti-Israeli force in the region and enjoys great respect among the population. For decades, the alliance between Teheran, Damascus, and the Lebanese Hezbollah, of which the Palestinian HAMAS was occasionally a part, remained the core element of Iranian power projection in the direction of the Levant and against Israel. Iranian propaganda referred to this constellation as the "axis of resistance." Saudi and, subsequently, Western authors however, have called it the "Shia Crescent" at least from 2006 onwards.

An involvement of Teheran, and later Hezbollah, in the Syrian civil war on the side of the weakened Assad regime was therefore just logical, even if originally many in Teheran rated the chances of survival for the rulers in Damascus to be negligible. Initial support consisted of an extension of bilateral military aid and intelligence cooperation, economic aid, and the employment of volunteer forces, typically veterans of the Revolutionary Guards. For the first time other forces were used as elements of the *Qods* forces (*niru-ye Qods*), which are earmarked for international operations. These were *Saberin* volunteer battalions of the Revolutionary Guards, and *Fatehin* from the *Basij*. In emergencies, Teheran employs both units domestically for counter-insurgency purposes. Beginning in 2016, regular army units of the 65th Airborne Brigade were also sent on operations. They obviously played a role similar to that of the *Qods*: as instructors and military coordinators, whereas the *Fatehin* and *Saberin* units

were originally responsible for military security in the district around the *Zaynabiyya* complex of mosques in Damascus.

The *Zaynabiyya* is a Shia shrine which, during the Iraqi civil war, increasingly developed into an exile for Iraqi Shiites. Even before the Iranian presence, representatives of various Shia militias from Iraq and Lebanon could be found there; especially, of course, the Lebanese Hezbollah. After ISIS/Da'esh expanded into Syria, Hezbollah, the Iranians, and Iraqi militias set up an Arab volunteer brigade called *Abu l-Fadhl al-Abbas*, to which the Iranians soon added a further Afghan (*Fatemiyun*) and a Pakistani (*Zaynabiyun*) battalion. Damascus thus became the epicentre of a “Shia International,” loyal to Iran, and both crucially important—as well as dangerous—for the Syrian regime fighting for survival.

The Shia volunteer fighters from Iraq and other states provide the ground troops which the Syrian regime so desperately needs. The fact that Shia militias in Iraq take care of their basic training and security checks, that Tehran and Hezbollah carry out their further training, finally funneling the fighters into Syria, where they are supplied by the Iranians, coordinated by *Qods*, and led into battle in coordination with the Syrians, hugely helps in the preservation of Syrian resources. Importantly, these fighters do not act out of love for the Assad regime, but rather regard the *Zaynabiyya* complex as the heart of an international Shiite struggle against Da'esh, and subsequently against Israel. Statements made by Iraqi militia leaders such as Akram Ka' bi of the *al-Nujaba Militia*, or Qais al-Khaz' ali of the *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq*, need to be interpreted in this way. They represent the younger generation of radical Iraqi Shiite leaders and are trying to redirect the militias remaining in Syria as part of the *Abu l-Fadhl* against Israel. In this way, they prevent the Syrian regime from being able to determine its own Israel policy autonomously, and ensure that it can move strategically only along the “axis of resistance” as defined by Tehran.

In Iran, the concept of an “axis of resistance” also boasts a concrete domestic dimension. Failed presidential candidate Ayatollah Ra'isadati, called Ra'isi, is not only the spokesman for the resistance against President Ruhani. With his political course geared towards moderation, he is also an important political and, very probably, also financial sponsor of Khaz'ali and Ka'bi. In addition, he also employs funds from the fabulously wealthy *Astane Qods-e Razavi Foundation* for Afghan Syrian veterans in Mashhad, whose loyalty he ensures through generous welfare measures. This suggests that he is planning to turn them into a private militia. The pressure exerted by the Iranian government on the foundations concerning their misappropriations, and especially the distortion of competition caused by their economic activities as well as rampant corruption, pushed Ra'isi and his associates into the political defensive from which they wanted to escape by escalating domestic and foreign policy: domestically, by focusing on social populism, and in foreign policy through their involvement in Syria.

Behind this lies an ideological-strategic factional struggle: will Iran, as Ruhani wants, act as a nation-state which uses its resources for its own economic development, or will Ra'isi's faction prevail, who, like his Iraqi friends, has visions of a permanent Shiite world revolution which must ultimately culminate in confronting Israel?

The Israelis may have closely observed the military activities of the Shia militias in Syria, but, at first, did not perceive them as a direct threat. The Lebanese Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war, its military fragmentation, and its loss of prestige among the Arab Sunnis were noted with some satisfaction—initially. However, the professionalism with

which Hezbollah and the other Shiite militias faced the military challenge came as a surprise. If the number of troops and weapon systems are aggregated, factoring in combat experience and ideological determination, Israel is faced with a true super-Hezbollah on its eastern border, which, in addition, is led by commanders who may be politically inexperienced but willing to take risks. Established regional deescalation mechanisms, as they exist with the Lebanese Hezbollah, simply are not in place here. Iranians, Israelis, and Lebanese Hezbollah are able to control the tense situation, still.

How long this can continue not only depends on whether all sides manage to keep their wits about them, but especially on whether the Iranians remain able to coordinate and control all the groups they led into the field, and whether or not Ra'isi's political course will prevail over Ruhani's in Tehran.