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SNAPSHOT January 24, 2017

Iran's Axis of Resistance Rises

How It's Forging a New Middle East

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In 2006, in the midst of a fierce war between Israel and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice famously stated that the world was witnessing the “birth pangs of a new Middle East.” She was right—but not in the sense she had hoped. Instead of disempowering Hezbollah and its sponsor, Iran, the war only augmented the strength and prestige of what is known as the “axis of resistance,” a power bloc that includes Iran, Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas in Palestine.

reconfiguration of the contemporary Middle East order. Arab elites, grappling with the consequences of an eroding Arab state system, poor governance, and the delegitimization of authoritarian states following the 2011 Arab Spring, enabled Iran and its partners, including Russia, to build a new regional political and security architecture from the ground up. With the support of Tehran as the undisputed center of the axis, Shiite armed movements in Iraq and across the axis of resistance have created a transnational, multiethnic, and cross-confessional political and security network that has made the axis more muscular and effective than ever before.

The most important issue that the new U.S. administration will face in the Middle East will be the rise of the Iranian-led axis. But given the deterioration of the regional security order and the empowerment of Iran and its allies, especially after the 2015 Iranian nuclear agreement, the question is what to do about it. So far, policy discussions have focused on single issues on a case-by-case basis: balancing power in Syria, engaging or pushing back on Iran post-nuclear deal, or managing an increasingly volatile Yemen, for example. But crafting a Middle East policy requires a more comprehensive approach, one that understands the nature of the axis and how it has fundamentally changed over the past several years. The axis' ideology has evolved: From a primarily state-centered enterprise, it has transformed into a transnational project supported by an organic network of popular armed movements from across the region.

THE RISE OF POPULAR ARMIES

Prior to the Arab Spring, with the exception of Hezbollah and Hamas, the axis of resistance was a partnership of states—Iran, Iraq, and Syria—that largely assumed the quintessential markers of the modern Weberian state (notwithstanding the militant challenges Iraq faced after 2003): centralized decision-making, official state borders, and militaries with a near monopoly over legitimate means of violence, meaning that the state had the sole right to enforce domestic security and wage war externally. In ideology, they were united in their call for an independent regional order and their resistance to Israel and to what they saw as U.S. imperialism.

national army trained by the United States melted away in the face of an ISIS assault on Mosul, while inside Syria countrymen quickly turned on one another and significant segments of the Syrian army defected. Power within the axis devolved to the many nonstate actors and militias that rose up to fill the security vacuum in an indigenous process of “state building” that moved beyond the Weberian state, and they rallied not only against their traditional enemies but new ones too, such as Sunni extremists like ISIS. These new militias include the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Syrian National Defense Forces (SND), as well as foreign groups such as the Afghan Fatemiyoun and Pakistani Zaynabiyoun brigades operating in Syria. They encompass a rich mosaic of ethnicities and confessions, totaling hundreds of thousands of combatants. And they receive broad popular support, as they are often the military arms of social movements that emerged within critical segments of societies in war-torn countries.

Despite the diversity of beliefs and motives among the armed groups, the Iranian influence over them is clear. They are modeled after the Basij, the Iranian paramilitary that mobilized millions of people during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. Indeed, the Arabic name for the PMF, Hashd al-Shabi, carries the same meaning as the Basij—both the Arabic word *hashd* and the Persian word *basij*, meaning “mobilization.” The pluralization of military and security forces, trained and organized by Iran, has revitalized and localized institution building and patronage from the bottom up, giving way to new elites with mass support from across Iraq and Syria, and even more recently, from Yemen. In Iraq, for example, the security vacuum left by the failure of the Iraqi state and the fall of Mosul to ISIS gave rise to multiple armed movements, particularly following a fatwa issued by Ayatollah Ali Sistani in 2014 calling for armed resistance against the militant group. Notably, Sistani’s decree paralleled the order that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini gave in 1979 that established the Iranian Basij. Recently, the Iraqi parliament ratified a law legalizing the PMF on November 26, 2016, immediately following Basij Day in Iran, which celebrates Khomeini’s founding of the paramilitary group.

Today, the new Shiite militias, such as Kata’ib al-Imam Ali and Harakat Hezbollah al-

Army, for example, younger and senior clerics clashed over political and military strategy. Moreover, there was much friction between pro-Iranian militias committed to the *velayat-i faqih* (the theocratic model of governance in Iran) and those that championed Iraqi nationalism or were dismissive of clerical governance.

Today, the rise of ISIS and insecurity in the region—as well as greater clerical authority and the issuing of authoritative fatwas—have made the new militias more cohesive and strategically minded. Indeed, not only does the clerical establishment have a higher degree of control over the militias but it has also narrowed the differences between the clerics who are critical and sympathetic to the idea of *velayat-i faqih*. The protection of Shiite holy sites is also much more paramount today than in the past, as ISIS has threatened to attack the holy cities of Karbala, Najaf, and Samarra in Iraq and the shrine of Lady Zaynab bint Ali, the sister of the prominent Shiite Imam Hussein ibn Ali, in Damascus, which are the geopolitical and religious nexus of the axis groups. Historically embedded within the social fabric of these shrine communities and centers of pilgrimage, the clergy and clerical institutions therefore serve as the ideological backbone to enable the transnationalization of popular armed movements throughout the axis' domains of power by providing meaning, symbols, and strategic focus to these groups.

The formation of the PMF in 2014 as an umbrella organization also critically changed the nature of the militias, centralizing power through a ruling committee and unifying their strategic and operational objectives. Importantly, the PMF is seen as legitimate by many actors—Iraq granted the group legal status and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad formally invited it to fight alongside him in the civil war. The fact that these militias now exercise “legitimate” means of violence suggests that there will be far-reaching consequences for the Middle East, one of which is that they will have important roles to play in the post-conflict period, whenever that is achieved.

SECTARIAN IDENTITY WITHOUT SECTARIAN IDEOLOGY

In the 2000s, the axis was first and foremost marked by its resistance against Israel and the U.S. regional order, and its push for independence and against anti-

cultivated, anti-Sunni rhetoric is actively discouraged (except against the Wahhabi doctrine of *takfirism*, or excommunication of different religions or Islamic sects, particularly Shiism). This does not mean that Shiite groups in Iraq are innocent of abusing or discriminating against Sunnis. But the overall policy of the axis has continued to be supportive of pluralistic religious and ethnic identities, especially in comparison to the rise of fundamentalist movements in the Muslim world.

The Shiite and religious minorities also now have greater shared interests with secular, Arab nationalist regimes. In Syria, for example, Assad and many of his top military-security officials are Alawi Shiites, but the Syrian state is staunchly secular and pan-Arab. The majority of the Syrian Arab Army is Sunni as are the geographic areas under the control of the Syrian government, such as the strategic urban cores of Damascus and Aleppo. Further, a range of minority groups including Christians and the Druze have rallied around the Syrian state and joined the various pro-government militias. The National Defense Forces, established explicitly in conjunction with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and based on the Basij model, are more than 100,000 soldiers strong and have mobilized Christians, Druze, and Sunnis opposed to extremism. In Lebanon, too, the axis has effectively incorporated leading Christian political parties, and there has been outreach to the Kurds as well, both in Syria and Iraq.

With the increased radicalism and fundamentalism of fringe Sunni groups, such as ISIS and al-Qaeda ally Jabhat Fath al-Sham (formerly the al-Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra Front), vulnerable minority groups have come to view Iran and its allies as moderate, reasonable, and as a source of protection. This is a far cry from only a few years ago, when Iran was viewed as radical, and the Saudi and Gulf states portrayed themselves as the “moderate” regional allies of the United States working to contain Iran. In addition, Iran’s support for Palestinian groups, such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the secular Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, has been a key feature in spearheading pro-resistance and pan-Islamic solidarity. The spread of conspiracy theories that the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia worked together to create ISIS and other jihadist groups has also downplayed religious sectarianism and

pillar of Saudi legitimacy—after the Hajj Mina stampede in Mecca that year killed hundreds of Iranian pilgrims (and thousands overall). And over the last year, Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah has sought to delegitimize the Saudi state by refusing to acknowledge its official name, referring instead to Saudi Arabia as the land of “Hejaz and the Najd.” This war of words has been fueled not only by the perception that the Saudis back ISIS and other extremist groups such as al Nusra Front but also by the broader geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Tensions rose with the regionalization of the civil war in Syria, after Tehran blamed Saudi Arabia for the death of Iranians during the hajj, and then again when Riyadh executed the leading Shiite Saudi Ayatollah, Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr, in early 2016.

Russia’s entry into the Syrian civil war in September 2015 has also significantly altered the standing and power of the axis. Moscow has deftly exploited the gradual decline of U.S. influence in the Middle East and the strengthening of Iran and its allies, especially following the Iranian nuclear agreement. Not only have the Russians helped tilt the military balance in Syria in favor of Assad, but Russia is now an important regional actor—from its participation in an intelligence sharing base in Baghdad (comprised of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah), to its improved bilateral relations with Iran (providing Tehran with the all-important S-300 air missile defense system).

But given the messy alignments in the region, it is often difficult to determine who is a friend or foe of the axis as Russia and the United States are engaged in seemingly contradictory axis politics. For example, Washington is simultaneously supporting the Iraqi government’s campaign to oust ISIS from Mosul while also backing Syrian rebels to overthrow Iraq’s ally, the Assad regime. Iraq is an important marker for where relations between Iran and the United States will head as both countries have strong influences over Iraq. Washington’s interest in a centralized Iraqi state is also to ensure, in part, that Iran does not gain complete control of the country. Washington’s policy in the region will therefore be critical in determining the leverage it has in curtailing Russia and shaping some of the core issues facing the axis, such as power-sharing and governance, anti-terrorism and demilitarization, de-escalation of sectarian conflict, and, of course, engagement with Iran.

populous Arab states, Egypt, for example, refused to back a Saudi-favored UN Security Council resolution on the Syrian civil war in October 2016. Shortly afterward, Egypt voted in favor of a Russian-backed resolution on Syria and surprisingly sent its oil minister to Tehran in November after Saudi Arabia punished Egypt by severing oil shipments to the country—an all the more unexpected development given the lack of full diplomatic ties between Iran and Egypt following the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

The Egyptians have signaled their cooperation over security as well as the fight against terrorism. Syrian security chief Ali Mamlouk met publicly with Egyptian intelligence officials in Cairo in October (his previous few visits having been conducted privately). And the leadership at Egypt's al-Azhar, the world's leading Sunni seminary and academic institution, repudiated the dominant Saudi discourse on sectarianism—the excommunication of Shiites—and strongly defended Shiism as a mainstream Muslim denomination. This behavior demonstrates that, despite the tactical partnership between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Egyptian and Saudi strategic visions are greatly at odds, and Egypt is moving to position itself as an independent actor between the pro-axis and pro-Saudi blocs. Further, as a secular pan-Arab state, Egypt is wary of Wahhabi fundamentalism and rejects sectarianism, which it considers a Saudi strategy to position itself as the leader of the Sunni world.

Similar shifts have occurred in Lebanon, a bellwether for the balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In a reflection of the growing influence of the axis, in October 2016, the pro-Saudi Sunni Lebanese leader Saad Hariri endorsed presidential candidate Michel Aoun, an ally of Hezbollah and head of the largest Christian parliamentary bloc. Hariri had originally endorsed Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces Party and member of Hariri's March 14 Alliance, expecting the Syrian government to fall, but when that failed to happen, threw his support behind Suleiman Frangieh, a pro-Syrian ally and member of Hezbollah's political coalition. It took nearly a year, but eventually Hariri was forced to accept Aoun—Hezbollah's consistent choice for office since the beginning of Lebanon's political stalemate. Hariri's decision to cede to these pressures was influenced by the Iranian nuclear

politburo. (Hamas' leaders typically live outside of Gaza so that they can travel freely.) The internal splits within Hamas are reflected in the military and political wings of the movement, the former having been historically closer to Iran and the latter to the Gulf monarchies, especially following the Arab Spring. Imad al-Alami, reportedly the new transitional leader of Hamas in Gaza, has been the group's main link to the axis of resistance, having cultivated close ties to the IRGC and Hezbollah over the past few decades and traveling frequently to Iran.

Also partly in reaction to regional developments favoring the axis, Morocco appointed its first ambassador to Iran in October 2016, seven years after it unceremoniously cut off diplomatic ties with Tehran. Morocco is currently trying to diversify its political relations with international and regional powers, and is looking for opportunities to diminish some of its traditional reliance on Western powers and Saudi Arabia, especially given the perception in the Middle East that Washington had abandoned former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Further, Morocco, like Egypt, is concerned with the rise of the extremist religious threat within the Maghreb, which is largely perceived to be linked to Saudi patronage and funding.

THE MODERATION OF IRAN?

As the key player and lead state in the axis of resistance, and with the completion of the nuclear agreement and the possibility of Iranian "moderation" as a consequence of the deal, the question of whether Iran will shift its policies away from the axis deserves special attention. Will Iran moderate? And what would "moderation" mean in the current geopolitical context within the Middle East?

For Iranians, especially hard-liners such as Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the IRGC, the roots of the regional geopolitical crisis—especially the conflict in Syria—are existential. In their minds, the Syrian conflict has less to do with Syria and more to do with the goal of the United States and its regional partners to undermine Iranian power. Thus, it is highly unlikely that the Supreme Leader and IRGC will give up on Syria—or, more broadly, the axis of resistance.

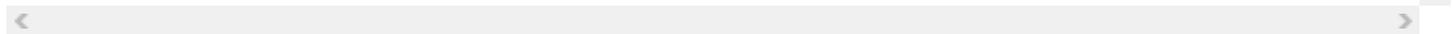
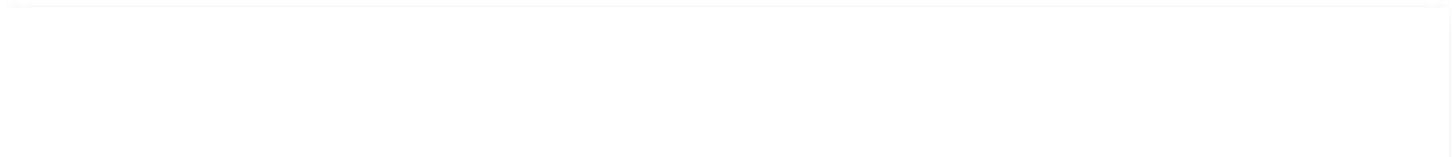
Iran's support for the axis also stems from its revolutionary ideology. The hard-liners

What does this hard-line worldview mean, then, for Iranian moderation, especially when moderates such as President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Affairs Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif do not have full control over regional security files such as Syria? In this light, Iranian moderation does not mean that Iran will give up support for the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and its regional allies. Moderation entails the degree to which Iran will be willing to cooperate and work with the United States, the international community, and regional actors within the geographic territory of the axis of resistance, including collaboration on issues of power-sharing, counterterrorism, development and reconstruction, and other areas of mutual interest. Moderation might also involve bargaining with Iran to pull back from Yemen or Bahrain, which are beyond the main contours of the axis, for example, and pursue meaningful detente with the Gulf monarchies. Iranian moderation on these terms would still be significant given the potentially positive role it could play in stabilizing the Middle East.

THE PATH FORWARD

Growing Iranian power means that there is a real risk of the axis expanding across Shiite-majority Bahrain and into the Shiite eastern Arabian Peninsula where the main Saudi oilfields rest, or consolidating its position in Yemen and the Bab al-Mandab. However, the regional security order on which the United States has traditionally based its policies to contain and isolate Iran has unraveled, thus rendering obsolete and counterproductive Washington's previous methods of containing and balancing Iran. Moreover, the challenge is not just limited to Iran. The new U.S. administration will be compelled to deal with a more resilient and autonomous set of actors within the axis.

At this point, dismantling the axis of resistance would be unfeasible. The clock cannot be turned back. There is a critical amount of social support behind the institutions and armed movements of the axis—many of its combatants are willing to fight and die for their cause. Without recognizing the changing facts on the ground and the means for credible engagement, applying greater pressure on Iran and the axis will yield



States has much to gain from axis players as well, such as cooperation over counterterrorism and providing stability in the Persian Gulf, Iraq, and the Gulf states in addition to counterbalancing Russia. And expanding the axis, especially in Iran

around Iran, and the United States must seem balanced, not taking actions that might be interpreted as heavy-handedly pro-Saudi by the larger Shiite communities in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Otherwise, this will only empower Iran and radicalize the Shiite world. In seeking to stabilize the Middle East, Washington must also remember that the Gulf states rely on external security umbrellas while the axis of resistance has managed to create its own indigenous regional security structure against all odds.

In tackling these challenges, the United States must recognize that resistance has transformed in fundamental ways. It has, in spite of all odds, strengthened in the midst of raging conflicts that have otherwise torn the Middle East apart. It has grown more muscular through its transnational alliance of irregular militias and international backing from Moscow and more vocal in its criticisms of Saudi Arabia and its promotion of Shiism. In return, it has received greater support and recognition from key regional players such as Egypt and Lebanon. If Washington is to truly move forward in the region, it must acknowledge these new realities and engage with Iran and its allies to influence the emergence of a new Middle East.

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