

The Shiite Strategic Crescent and Israel

Mordechai Nisan

Mordechai Nisan teaches Middle East Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Dr. Nisan has authored a number of books and articles on a variety of subjects, including the Arab–Israeli conflict, minorities in the Middle East, Lebanese politics and Islamic themes.

The moon guiding Bedouins in the desert at night was revered by the ancients. Allah was depicted prior to Islam as a moon god. The crescent signifies the new moon and in Arabic is known as *hilal*. The full moon, *badr* in Arabic, recalls Muhammad’s first military victory for Islam over infidels in the year 624. In modern times, the term “fertile crescent” was coined to identify those countries in the Middle East, from Iraq to Israel, where the soil and the water facilitated agricultural productivity in contrast to the Syrian and Arabian dry desert regions. The word “crescent” has now been attached to the Shiite renaissance and its territorial sweep from Iran to Lebanon, and beyond. The crescent, indeed, represents a new moon, a new beginning, and this appropriately applies to the contemporary and revolutionary Shiite case. It is fertile with potentiality and its sword, like Muhammad’s, is drawn against the enemies.

*

*

*

It was in 2004 that King Abdullah II of Jordan, a Sunni Arab Muslim, spoke of the creation of a “Shiite Crescent” running from Iran through Iraq, and into Syria and Lebanon, that would destabilize the Arab world. Four years later, Egypt’s foreign minister, Ahmed Abu Al-Gheit, slammed Iran for working on “monopolizing power” in the region, and in Lebanon specifically, while referring to the division of the Islamic world that would seemingly establish Iran as the victor—in Iraq, Lebanon, and in Hamas-dominated Palestinian affairs. Egypt, he added, must defend Arab lands and, by implication, preserve the Sunnis over the Shiites as the predominant force in the Muslim world. The predominantly Arab political and religious epicenter of the Muslim world was being rocked at a critical historical crossroads at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Against the backdrop of the schism in classical Islam from which the Sunni–Shiite divide emerged, a new and vibrant Shiite axis has called into question the normative balance of power between the two camps in the Middle East,

and beyond. While Sunna Islam has promoted its own display of religious fundamentalism and unleashed its own brand of terrorism—key examples being Wahhabism, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Al-Qa’ida—the Shiite moment has arrived. And though the two camps share a like view of the role of religion and the ultimate expectation of Islam’s final victory, the differences and nuances between them merit highlighting.

The principles, leadership and vision of the traditional Sunna camp offer a seemingly coherent and this-worldly definition of things. Foremost is the sanctity of the Sharia as law grounded in tradition and reason, as designed to serve the public interest and reflect a community consensus. Religious leadership is grounded in scholarship and typically subjugated to political authority. Although the consummate vision posits Islamic triumphalism, this historical aspiration is a question of faith, with no final date in sight. Meanwhile, Muslim peoples from around the world acknowledge Mecca as the singular holy city that they visit as a personal obligation at least once in their lives.

Shiite notions and feelings have been woven from a radically different conceptual cloth. The mournful followers of ‘Ali Ibn Abi-Talib and his martyred son Hussein, from the seventh century, added grief to revenge. This was commemorated in the *ashura* passion play, in awaiting the return of the only legitimate heavenly chosen leader.

The hidden imam, descendant from the holy Mohammedan family, resides in occult oblivion, while representing the Shiite tragedy of loss to the Sunni powers. Upon his messianic (re)appearance rests the founding of justice and the crowning of truth in the world. During the long centuries of Shiite powerlessness, the secret hatred and cursing of the usurping Sunni caliphs and the Sunni community as a whole was never far from the lips, or removed from the hearts, of the Shiite believers.¹ Indeed, only the Shiites consider themselves real believers, while the Sunnis are “mere” Muslims.

With a mix of utopianism and self-righteousness, the Shiites await the end of days as an eschatological theme focusing on crushing the Sunnis and eradicating the Jews. Until then, melancholy hovers above their congregations and prayers in their distinctively holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, and Meshad and Qom in Iran. The Shiite cultists, affecting accommodation and passivity when necessary, anticipate the tide of history turning in *their* favor. And when this happens, and many signs indicate such a development, then according to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in remarks from 2007 in Kabul, the rule of Islam over the world will provide salvation to all mankind.²

The Shiite Crescent: Stage One—Components

The perennially frustrated, persecuted and oppressed losers in Muslim history have surfaced to overcome their adversaries. Today, Iran is the heartland and political core of the Shiite axis. The Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 transformed a secular monarchy into a “theocratic republic”; a pro-American country into the most vilifying bastion of anti-Americanism; a passive people into a society full of movement and verbiage. Now Iran, though nominally Shiite since 1501, has assumed the mantle of religious leadership, challenging Arab Sunni regimes and exporting the revolution to countries near and far.

Iraq, home to a majority Shiite population, was transformed into a new theatre of religious turmoil. Since the country’s founding in 1921, the Shiites have been subjected to Sunni rule. In the last few decades, a volatile new environment within and beyond the country set off Shiite agitation and terrorism as a critical link in the Arab world for the Iranian-led Islamic transformation. In Iraq, the marginalization and persecution of the Shiites has come to an end.

Syria, under the leadership of the Alawi minority sect, provides an extraordinary example of a peripheral and disparaged Shiite-affiliated community coming to dominate, since 1966, a Sunni-majority Arab country. It is the controversial personality of ‘Ali from the early Islamic power struggle who is religiously venerated and sanctified jointly by Shiites and the Alawi sect. Under Assad the father (1970–2000) and Assad the son (2000–), a ruthless regime was installed, whose religious coloration—heretical, eclectic and esoteric Alawism—was anathema to mainstream and fundamentalist Sunni Islam. But the downtrodden and despised Alawites have avenged their forlorn past.

Lebanon, whose Shiite community is now the single largest religious confessional group in the country, has been a major element in the Shiite axis from the founding of Amal in 1974 by Iranian-born Musa al-Sadr through to the establishment of Hizbullah in 1982. The “dispossessed” will now “overcome” and defeat the enemies—Sunnis, Christians and Jews. Striving to translate demography into dominance, armed as an independent militia and propelled by the Khomeini revolutionary ethos, the Shiites under the Hizbullah banner seek to Islamicize Lebanon by overthrowing its traditional cultural ambiance and power configuration.

Once dimmed in bereavement and belittlement, the Shiite crescent is now a shining beacon, casting its light upon all those in the Middle East zone of escalating tensions, provocations, and warfare.

The Shiite Crescent: Stage Two—Foundation

The Arab world, as the historical and national core of the Muslim peoples, has suffered from a loss of dignity, unity and effectiveness in the latter part of the twentieth century. Egypt was defeated by Israel in war in 1967 and denied the charismatic leadership of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir, who died in 1970. Moreover, it alienated the rest of the Arab world by signing a peace treaty with Israel in 1979. In Arab eyes, Egypt has displayed weakness and disorientation, which have reverberated in pan-Arab ranks.

The year 1979 was the watershed for the “New Middle East.” A new global system and a new balance of power in the Middle East emerged following the events of that year. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and the repercussions were profound and extensive, including the Russian defeat and the strident Islamic/al-Qa'ida/Taliban victory. In the Muslim heartland, Iran experienced an Islamic revolution. In stark contrast to that, in the Arab heartland, Egypt, condemned for committing an act that was considered a travesty of Islam, was expelled from the locus and leadership of the Arab political system. A new era of Muslim personalities—Khomeini the Iranian, later Osama bin-Laden the Saudi—ascended the stage of history.

Ayatollah Khomeini returned home to consummate the revolution on February 2, 1979, and the first international personality to visit him on February 18 in Tehran was Yasir Arafat, legendary leader of the PLO and the “Palestinian Revolution.” In their conversation, Khomeini told Arafat to abandon his Arab nationalist aspirations in favor of Islamic ones, which would bring victory. Before 1979, Fatah fighters had trained Khomeini's men in the arts of war and revolutionary struggle; thereafter, Iran took it upon itself to be an important supplier of arms and training for the Palestinian struggle. In January 2002, the ship *Karine A*, sailing from Iran to Gaza loaded with massive quantities of weapons and ammunitions, was captured by an elite frogman unit of the Israeli army as it plied its way northward in the Red Sea toward its intended Palestinian Authority recipients, that is, Arafat's Fatah fighters.

In 1979, Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel and Iran underwent an Islamic revolution, the goals of which included war with Israel. Sadat, the ostensible peacemaker, was later assassinated; however, until Khomeini's own death in 1989, he promoted intensive jihad during the 1980s against Sunni-Arab Iraq. Exporting the Islamic Revolution to Shiite communities and Sunni countries, while preparing for a direct confrontation with Israel, became the staple program for the theocratic leadership of Tehran. The conventional naming of the “Arab-Israeli Conflict” required, as a result, a more inclusive and religious definition

such as the “Muslim–Israeli Conflict” or, perhaps better yet, the “Muslim–Jewish War.”

The Shiite Crescent: Stage Three—Consolidation

The Shiite axis owes its origins, assets, direction and vision to the primacy of Iran as the hegemonic and revisionist revolutionary state in the new regional power equation. This non-Arab, Persian country has altered the contours of leadership in Islam, retracing Muslim history back to its early stages and past but not forgotten struggles. Once known as inferior *mawali*s [non-Arab Muslim clients] and illicit advocates of *shu'ubiyya* [Persian ethnic nationalism], the modern-day Iranians have shed their hesitations and anxieties in confronting their former Sunni patrons and princes.

The first concrete manifestation of Iran's expansionist drive was buoyed by the long war with Iraq from 1980 until 1988. It was Khomeini's hope to foment a Shiite uprising in Iraq to undermine Baghdad's war effort and to extend the Islamic Revolution into the Arab heartland of the “fertile crescent.” While these goals were stymied and the Iran–Iraq War ended in a draw, the flame of Shiite Islam shone forth. For, beyond other aspects of the decade, Iran forged an alliance with Syria against their common Iraqi adversary. Bonds of Arabism and Baathism that should have strengthened the ties between Syria and Iraq against Iran were severed in favor of Shiite–Alawi brotherhood. Tehran and Damascus became strategic allies, animated by military, economic, and oil-related deals, as Syria turned its back on the Arab world in preference for tight relations with non-Arab Iran. Once the self-styled “beating pulse of the Arab world,” Syria chose to shatter the myth of pan-Arab nationalism: state interests in facing the traditional rival neighbor Iraq were the guiding factors for Damascus. The acephalous Arab world, teeming with acrimony, was in disarray and Iran was trying to seize the mantle of leadership in challenging the regional political status quo.

Having taken the first steps toward communal consolidation and mobilization in the 1970s, the Shiites of Lebanon in the early 1980s articulated an integral religious identity appended to Iranian spiritual and political leadership and its comprehensive vision of the future. Ayatollah Khomeini was recognized by the Hizbullah movement as its singular and leading authority: Lebanese nationality and its very constitutional order had been demoted to a secondary rung of importance in the collective consciousness and political awareness of Shiites. Islamic solidarity under Iranian domination now controlled the hearts, minds, programs and ambitions of a growing and radical community of believers. Iran provided money and weapons, military training and economic assistance, and, above all, a myth of ultimate triumph over fellow citizens in Lebanon and the

Jews of Israel. Liberating Palestine was no less sacred a goal than rewriting the Lebanese narrative in an Islamic idiom.

A quintessential revelation of Hizbullah's place in the Shiite axis was provided by its deputy leader Naim Kassem in April 2007. He spoke of how all activities, suicide bombings, terrorist attacks and artillery barrages against Israel receive prior approval from the religious rulers in Tehran.⁵ The senior spiritual leader, Ali Khamenei, can permit or forbid any action. The commencement and conduct of the Second Lebanon War in July 2006 was, therefore, the result of decisions taken in Iran, and not in Lebanon. Nasrallah, Fadlallah, Tufayli, and other Lebanese Shiite sheikhs were important religious figures, but Khomeini in his time and Khamenei thereafter stood, while in Iran, at the apex of the spiritual hierarchy that Shiites in Beirut, Baalbek, Nabatiya and Tyre submitted to.

Of special significance is the fact that the sweeping Shiite crescent incorporated Sunni Arabs, the most exceptional being Palestinian Muslims. Beyond Fatah's flirtations and links with Iran, the Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) movement in its various factions coalesced in the 1980s, inspired in its "resistance" against Israel by the revolution in Iran. Iran and Syria supported the PIJ from the start and continue to do so, while promoting an Islamic awakening and jihad warfare. Money and weapons bound Iran to the Palestinians, while the common Islamic goal was the destruction of Israel. The Shiite front had co-opted the Palestinian intifada from 1987. For their part, the Palestinians reciprocated by supporting Iran in the war against Iraq during the decade of the Gulf struggle.⁴ In the twenty-first century, reports multiplied concerning members of Hamas, the Islamic Palestinian movement, traveling to receive military training in Iran as it expands its pivotal role in regional insurgencies and in global jihad as a whole.

The Shiite spiritual universe houses the hidden and the revealed, resentment and anticipation, ghosts and demons, Jewish and Christian *dhimmis*. It is not a world of cost-benefit analysis and rational temporal discourse. Ahmadinejad awaits the Mahdi's return and the annihilation of all Jews, specifically Israeli ones. The Shiite alignment and its Sunni allies—with Iran on the path to obtaining nuclear weapons—synthesize Muslim warrior camps and politico-religious doctrines to conjure up the realization of this messianic objective.

The Shiite Crescent: Stage Four—Muslim Implications

Two colossal struggles have developed in the Islamic world and ripped asunder its rather pathetic and pretentious endeavor to present a picture of unity: the Sunni-Shiite theological rivalry and the Arab-Iranian national rivalry have together exposed the "Community of the Faithful" to animosity and bloodshed

whose fanaticism and violence exceed that known for many centuries. One could recall the Umayyad–Abbasid struggle of the eighth century, the Fatimid–Ayyubid struggle of the twelfth century, and the Ottoman–Persian struggles of the nineteenth century, to evoke a resonance of the kind of conflagration now escalating across the territorial canvas of the Muslim world, from North Africa to the sub-Indian continent. The Arab–Sunni political icons are all gone—Nasir, Saddam, and Arafat; the Shiite heroes—Khomeini and Nasrallah—electrify the hearts of millions of Muslims, and not only the Shiite among them. Major religions have often encountered internal divisions and schismatic struggles, but when this happens in the Muslim world, it is a war never forgotten and never forgiven by both sides.

A series of Iranian provocations and interventions have intimidated Sunni regimes and peoples. The majority Shiite-inhabited but Sunni-ruled Arab sultanate of Bahrain has been a target for exporting the Islamic revolution. The three Persian Gulf islands seized by Iran in 1971, but the sovereignty of which has been contested by the United Arab Emirates, is another open wound. Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province of Hasa, with its Shiite concentration in the Sunni kingdom, is a source of political tussling and tensions. In Yemen, the Shiite Zaydi sectarians supported by Iran have battled the regime forces. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, Sunnis and Shiites engage in mutual terror attacks against their respective mosques and markets.

In North Africa, with its virtually monolithic Sunni population, Libyan leader Mu’ammar Qadhafi injected his own rather original and quixotic interpretation of the Sunni–Shiite fissure. In fact, he stated, there are not two Islams, and therefore there is no inherent Arab–Iranian divide. Then Qadhafi proposed establishing a new Fatimid [Shiite] state in North Africa, going ahead to square the religious circle by arguing that all the Arabs are Shiites and all the Iranians are Sunnis—because the Arabs identify with Muhammad’s family and the Iranians follow Muhammad’s tradition (*sunna*). With his graphic imagination, Qadhafi also denied the Berber Amazigh people their authentic identity by affirming that they are Arabs “like all the others.”⁵

Three bloody arenas of Sunni–Shiite confrontations demand particular mention. In Iraq, national disunity and religious rivalries have led to incessant terrorism executed by Sunni forces against Shiites, and vice versa. In Lebanon, the rise of Shiite militancy and their local allies has led to clashes with Sunnis, particularly in Beirut and Tripoli, and incessant political jostling. And among the Palestinians, in the Gaza Strip in particular, Hamas–Fatah skirmishes were colored by Fatah members labeling Hamas members by the disdainful epithet—Shiites.

The Hamas connection with Iran was sufficient reason to verbally insult the religious reputation of certain Palestinian Muslims.

In May 2004, Abu Musab Zarqawi, affiliated with al-Qa'ida and subsequently killed in 2006 in a US air strike in Iraq, branded the Shiites religious hypocrites (*munafiqun*), in the spirit of the overall disdain with which the Shiites were perceived. This was fully consistent with the anti-Shiite literature which spread in Sunni religious circles, as in Mecca. Moreover, the idea of jihad against the Shiites was even seen to be legitimate. Certainly the Saudi Wahhabi school of thought freely attacked Shiism as an apostasy.⁶ In July 2008, Sunni clerics again dismissed Shiites as infidels, leading Shiite clerics to then accuse their religious brothers-turned-adversaries as engaging in “confrontation and insults.”⁷ For its part, al-Qa'ida accused Ahmadinejad of wanting to establish a Shiite caliphate designed to destroy the Sunni countries.

The Shiite Crescent: Stage Five—Implications for Israel

As such, a divided Muslim world diminishes the overall array of threats to Israel's security and existence. Iranian–Egyptian tensions and Saudi–Syrian bickering somewhat suspend, however partially and temporarily, issues relating to Israel, without denying the powerful reality that the overall conflict with Israel is an Islamic religious war against the Jewish state. The forces of jihad and fundamentalism dream of victory that may, however, dissolve like an Oriental delusion that cannot be achieved.

Meanwhile, Israel's conception that territorial withdrawal can satisfy and pacify Muslim enemies has been tested, and requires careful reexamination in the face of visible and painful realities. Leaving south Lebanon in 2000 and all of the Gaza Strip in 2005 handed Hizbullah and Hamas, respectively, unilateral victories. Warfare and human loss of life ensued and escalated. The Islamic ethos to “liberate Palestine” has proved to be ideologically resilient, while challenging Israel's military reputation and political standing as fundamental national interests.

The overall strategic situation identifies the centrality of Iran on all the menacing fronts on Israel's borders: Syria across the Golan Heights, Hizbullah across the Lebanese border, and the Palestinians—armed and motivated—from Gaza and in Judea and Samaria as well. As the hegemonic patron and coordinator of the Shiite crescent, its ideological and religious indoctrination and the resource lifeline in arms and funds, Tehran is the home of the “Islamic Resistance” against Zionism and Israel. The interconnection of Shiite forces must be considered before Jerusalem contemplates any major attack against Iran. Such an action could

unleash an extensive response by Hizbullah, as indeed its spokesman Muhammad Raad threatened in late August 2008.⁸ For Israel to attack Iran is to provoke a Hizbullah response; however, if Israel considers striking out against Hizbullah and Hamas, the more immediate and proximate Shiite axis enemies, in an Israeli military operation of active defense and preemption, it may not trigger Iranian involvement. In Teheran, Iran “the State” may enjoy first priority over Iran “the Revolution.”

Israeli leaders have explicitly identified the Iranian nuclear threat as existential, therefore intolerable and unacceptable, and one which must be neutralized before it becomes operational. In July 2008, Defense Minister Ehud Barak stated that Israel would not be deterred from taking action, and the Army’s chief-of-staff Lieutenant-General Gabi Ashkenazi advised that Israel must confront Iran’s aggressive posture. Indeed, when President Ahmadinejad announced more than once that Israel must be erased from the map, the countdown to warfare had really begun. Later, sometime in the future, the court of world opinion will debate whether Iran’s bellicosity was the cause of the eruption of warfare, or Israel’s preemptive attack. The winds of 1967 are still felt and the Six-Day War scenario has not been forgotten.

Meanwhile, Israel’s political and strategic options, with logistical and tactical relevance, are part of the mix of considerations. We cannot easily know if the theoretical possibilities have been, or will be, practically implemented, but among them we note the following:

- Israeli–Sunni cooperation, including the use of Jordanian air space, Turkish or Central Asian air bases, Persian Gulf waters, perhaps Pakistani land routes, to facilitate Israeli military operations.
- Israeli–Iraqi cooperation to enable short-distance attacks against the Iranian heartland.
- Israeli–Kurdish cooperation, with Kurds strategically situated in Iran and Iraq, proximate to the target sites in Iran.

While the Middle East totters on the verge of an immense crash, Israeli policy makers have undertaken steps to calm the political arena and even engage in peace-making talks. These endeavors vis-à-vis both the Palestinians and the Syrians may, however, be designed to distract attention from Israel’s major preoccupation with planning a military operation against Iran. There is hope that such an eventuality will be contained and isolated without broader repercussions on the Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian fronts.

Global jihad, and specifically the strategic Shiite Crescent, offer a different calculus that can override Israel's partial and shortsighted grasp of things. Syria has refused to cut ties with Iran, Hizbullah's Hasan Nasrallah and with Hamas' leader Khaled Mashal. These players, individually and collectively, cannot reasonably or easily be battered into submission. The use of force when diplomacy fails cannot but be the rational choice in a world of limited and imperfect options. The days ahead are fraught with grave danger, but crisis often opens the door to opportunity.

In conclusion, the Shiite Crescent has created its own strategic nemesis in the form of Israel and Arab states—and perhaps the United States—according to an ineluctable historic dialectic. Due to the interconnection of all things, in the Hegelian way that a tendency breeds an opposite tendency which destroys it, the irony of the Iranian case, and its expansionist and bellicose policy, is that its negation was embedded and born in its political womb. This is how history ultimately vindicates good and punishes evil.

Notes

- ¹ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, Vol. IX (Leiden, 1997), pp. 420–424. Also: http://www.allaahuakbar.net/Shiites/whats_in_the_kashful_asrar.htm.
- ² IRNA, Kabul, August 14, 2007, www2.irna.com/en/news/view/menu-234/0708142013173859.htm.
- ³ Interview on the Iranian Arabic language TV station Al-Qawthar (April 15, 2007).
- ⁴ Anat Kurtz (ed.), *Islamic Terror and Israel* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv, 1993), chapters 1–3.
- ⁵ MEMRI, special dispatch, number 1535, “Libya–North Africa,” April 6, 2007.
- ⁶ Shmuel Bar, “Sunnis and Shiites: Between Rapprochement and Conflict, *Current Trends*, <http://www.futureofmuslimworld.com/research/pubID.26/>.
- ⁷ <http://www.gulfinthedia.com/index.php?id=413891&news>.
- ⁸ *Haaretz*, August 24, 2008.