



## PERSPECTIVES

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# How Iran Became the Dominant Power in the Middle East

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 706, January 4, 2018

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Iran has emerged as the big winner of the so-called “Arab Spring.” Russia also benefited greatly – it achieved its aims in Syria by helping to preserve the Assad regime, and in the process, became the key broker of the postwar settlement – but Tehran made major gains not only in Syria but in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon as well.

Iran has emerged as the winner of the so-called “Arab Spring,” a state of affairs some lay at the feet of the Obama administration. When the US administration (together with five other powers) signed a nuclear accord with Tehran to curb its nuclear program, it did not insist on a halt to Iran’s assorted aggressions in the Middle East.

But Obama is not entirely to blame for Iran’s success. In each of the four Arab countries in which Tehran has made incursions, its rivals inadvertently played a key role in strengthening the Iranian position through the trans-border Shiite connection.

In other words, interventions by other foreign powers unintentionally strengthened the pro-Iranian Shiite group in each of the countries in question. In some cases (though not all), the outcome was influenced by nationalist opposition to foreign interference. In all four cases, however, the interventions reinforced a regional transnational sectarian connection that is enabling the fulfillment of Iranian aspirations to become the dominant force in the Middle East.

How have the other intervening powers helped Iran win the Middle East game (at least for now)?

**Israel**

Israel is a key enemy of the Islamic Revolutionary regime – yet it was Israel that helped move the first Arab country into Tehran’s sphere of influence. The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and subsequent presence in South Lebanon until May 2000 inadvertently reinforced Iranian influence. The unintended outcome was the rise of Hezbollah, an Iran-supported Shiite guerrilla organization.

The Hezbollah movement, which developed powerful military and political branches, was inspired by the Shiite-led Islamic Revolution in Iran. But the fight against the Israeli presence also drew support from the largest sect in Lebanon, the Shiites, who became more and more alienated from Israeli control. The result was the emergence of a powerful Iranian proxy in a politically and ideologically fragmented Lebanon.

Such a powerful force guarantees major Iranian influence in Lebanon even if it is resented (to different degrees) by the country’s non-Shiite sects. Thus, an arch enemy of Israel has gained a major foothold on its northern border, triggering a violent conflict in 2006 and creating the permanent threat of a major escalation. Moreover, the struggle against Israel has provided Hezbollah with an ongoing source of legitimacy for bearing arms and directing a state-within-a-state.

## **Iraq**

In the case of Iraq, another enemy of the Islamic Republic accidentally brought about Iranian dominance in a country that used to be a major rival. In this instance it was the US that played the key role. Following their 2003 occupation of Iraq, the Americans tried to democratize the country. But elections in an ethnically and religiously fragmented state like Iraq mean that the largest ethnic or sectarian group is going to win.

The Shiites are the majority group in a polarized Iraq, and some of their leaders are allies of the Iranian Shiite regime. This trans-border connection has guaranteed significant Iranian influence in Iraq. Thus, the US invasion and democratization project in Iraq brought to power forces allied with its main enemy in the region – even if the alliance with Tehran is not welcomed by all Iraqis, including some Shiites.

## **Syria**

The third case of an external intervention that resulted in growing Iranian influence is the Russian involvement in Syria. In this instance, the intervening power is not an enemy of Iran’s – at the moment. It was one for a very long time, however, and the future of the alliance is uncertain.

At any rate, the Russian bombing in 2015 was the decisive factor that ultimately brought about the victory of the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war. This is the

case even though Tehran, Hezbollah, and other Iranian-led Shiite militias had been fighting alongside the regime since well before the Russian bombing started.

As in the other cases, the support of Iran and its Shiite allies for the Alawite regime in Damascus is based at least partly on a common sectarian affiliation, as the Alawites are considered an offshoot of Shiite Islam. The Assad regime's dependence on the Iranian/Shiite militias' support seems to guarantee that Tehran will remain a major influence in Syria.

While the Russian bombing provided the coup de grâce, the Iranians and their allies continue to provide the ground forces necessary to preserve the regime. Israel is worried that the regime's debt to Iran will translate into a continuous Iranian/Hezbollah military presence in Syria near the border with the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. Recent Russian statements seem to indicate Moscow's acceptance of such a military presence. This forward military deployment of Iran and its allies creates the potential for escalation, whether intended or inadvertent.

## **Yemen**

Finally, there is the case of the war in Yemen, which grinds on at great cost to the civilian population. We can't be sure about the outcome as the war is still ongoing, but at least one thing is clear: The persistent bombing by the Saudi-led Sunni coalition has failed to remove from power the Shiite-affiliated Houthis, who still control a considerable part of the country. Moreover, the Sunni military campaign against them has reinforced the Houthis' alliance with Tehran and probably alienated a large proportion of the Yemeni population from the Saudis and their Sunni allies, creating another bastion of Iranian influence in the Arab world.

In this case the stronghold is adjacent to Iran's number one opponent in the Arab world: Saudi Arabia. Here, too, the situation contains the potential for an escalation in which the Iranian-Saudi cold war turns hot.

## **Conclusion**

The instability and polarization that characterize the Middle East raise doubts about the future of the Iranian rise. Still, developments over the past few decades, culminating in the American intervention in Iraq and the "Arab Spring," have resulted in major Iranian achievements irrespective of the nuclear issue. The causes of these gains in the four countries discussed here are 1) the sectarian divisions in the region, particularly the trans-border Shiite connection; and 2) the effects of external intervention.

In most cases, those effects – which were based on nationalist/sectarian resentment of the external intervening force – were unintended. In the Syrian instance, however, the outcome reflects the military victory of the intervening force. In all four cases, Iran is the regional power that has gained the most.

This poses a major challenge to Riyadh and its Sunni allies, as well as to Israel. It largely explains the recent Saudi-Israeli rapprochement, manifested in the recent, unprecedented interview of Israeli Chief of Staff Lt. General Gadi Eisenkot by a Saudi news outlet. In the interview, Eisenkot highlighted the perception of the Iranian threat shared by the two parties and declared Israel's willingness to share intelligence with Riyadh. Such developments could augur a major realignment in the Middle East with far-reaching implications for both war and peace.

For war, the key implication is the rising likelihood of a confrontation between Israel and Iranian allies in Syria and Lebanon, notably Hezbollah, although mutual deterrence is likely to reduce the probability of actual fighting.

For peace, the emerging Israeli-Saudi/Sunni alliance, based on the “enemy of my enemy is my friend” principle, creates the potential for progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. But in that context, there is a crucial role for the Trump administration, which maintains good relations with both Israel and the Saudis.

This will be a key challenge for the US administration, which thus far has essentially maintained US disengagement from the Middle East. That disengagement is likely to accelerate with the destruction of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The new developments in Israeli-Sunni relations create a great opportunity for the administration. It might be tempted to take advantage of it to rack up some accomplishments in foreign policy, which have been sparse so far.

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