

***memoranda*: The Return of the Region**

by
Terry Newman

Executive Summary

The recent conflict in Lebanon has reawakened the regional focus of policymakers in the Middle East. The schism between Sunnis and Shiites in the Arab world is growing. And the 'Shiite Arc', led by Iran, is attempting to implement its long-stated desire to reorient the Middle East from Western leaning states towards a nuclear Tehran. Western policymakers focussed on solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are now forced to look at the regional picture.

Introduction

The Middle East has never acted as a 'region.' Unlike the US and Europe it has failed in leveraging its collective. There is the Arab League, but it does not include non-Arab Iran and Israel, and it has failed to successfully unite its members over Arab and wider international socio-economic and political affairs. The simple opposites that defined the Middle East of the 20th Century are gone: Arab-Jewish, Soviet Satellite–US Satellite, Palestinian-Israeli, Shiite-Sunni, and Religious-Secular. The 'return of the region' adds layers of complexity and crosses these existing fault lines to reveal new realities on the ground.

Understanding of these new realities must be based on (1) how the Arab world divides itself; (2) the split between the Shiites and Sunnis and the leaders of the various camps; and (3) the growth of the Shiite Arc and its implications for the wider region.

The Arab World from the inside

The Arab world consists of 22 countries stretching from Mauritania in the west to Oman in the east. Today, they have a combined population of 323 million people and their combined economies surpass 1 trillion U.S. dollars. These countries were once conquered by the armies that expanded out of Arabia and are united by the use of Arabic as their official language, although dialects differ from country to country.

However the Arab world is far from monolithic and it is instructive to see how it views itself. Most notably, it splits itself into four parts: (1) al-Maghreb (Morocco to Libya); (2) Misr (Egypt); (3) al-Sham (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan); and (4) al-Khalij (Gulf States, Saudi, Iraq¹). These groups rarely see eye to eye, and vary from tribal identities in the Khalij, to fully Westernised individualism in other parts.

Shiite and Sunnis.

There are approximately 1.44 billion Muslims in the world today. 85% are Sunni and 15% are Shi'a.² This translates to approximately 1.24 billion Sunnis and 214 million Shiites.

¹ Iraq is less tribal but is still classified as Khaliji because of its location on the Persian Gulf.

² Estimates vary. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Islam

The Shiites are primarily concentrated in the Middle East. They are led by Iran, and constitute an absolute majority in Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan, and are the largest religious grouping in Lebanon. They remain as significant minorities in Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India and smaller Persian Gulf states such as Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

The Sunni world is led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Yet it stretches throughout the Middle East, Asia, Africa and the rest of the globe in its various and multifaceted forms.

Despite the global spread of Islam, the religion's spiritual and ideological core remains fixed in the Middle East. And the most powerful contemporary forms of Islam spring from three countries of the region – Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Iran

Iran burst on to the international scene as a specifically Shiite country with the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The promotion and spread of Islam and Iran's "Islamic revolution" was an overt foreign policy goal of the Khomeini government, explicitly stated in the exhortation of Iran's constitution: "to perpetuate the revolution both at home and abroad." Despite an apparent moderation during the reformist Presidency of Khatami, President Ahmednejad's ascent to power in July 2005, has seen a return to the old calls for global revolution whilst condemning pro-Western Muslim governments as 'un-Islamic.'

Saudi Arabia

Today's Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, and the spiritual homeland of Sunni Islam – albeit of the controversial Wahhabi interpretation. In recent times it has pitted itself against Iran as the true leader of the Muslim world. During the recent Lebanon crisis Saudi leaders were quick to point the finger at Iran as the guiding force behind Hezbollah. Indeed, a Prominent Saudi cleric, Abdullah ibn Jibreen, reissued a *fatwa* noting that Shiite groups like Hezbollah have a long history of betraying Sunnis; "It is not appropriate to support this rejectionist party and to fall under its authority, and it is not appropriate to pray for their victory and control." However, this approach that is reviled by many Saudis as too pro-Western is often publicly offset in part by a concomitant commitment to supporting the Arab resistance against the West.

Egypt

Egypt is the birthplace of Islamism – the movement that strives to create a modern political state based on traditional Islamic law (*Shariah*). The Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, has led the spread of Islamism to most countries in the Middle East and beyond. They already control the Palestinian government, hold seats in the Jordanian Parliament, and are the main opposition force in Egypt. Other affiliated groups are active worldwide.

In addition, Egypt has led the two other key movements in the Arab world over the last 50 years - pan-Arabism and reconciliation with Israel. The failure of the former contrasts with the success of the latter in its achievement of a stable peace and spurring the development of the Egyptian economy.

Much of the political tension between Sunnis and Shiites is rooted in historical and theological differences – in particular the murder of Hussein, the son of Caliph Ali and grandson of Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala. But this has been overlooked by many modern Islamists whose prime aspiration is an Islamist state. For these people, this joint political aim overrides their historical and theological connections to fellow religious partisans.

The rise of the ‘Shiite Arc’ and its regional opponents

An alliance has developed throughout the Middle East during recent years known as the ‘*Shiite Arc*’. It curves through Lebanon-Syria-Iran-Iraq and parts of the Gulf. Yet it is linked with both Shiite and Sunni Islamist groups scattered throughout the Middle East such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Hamas in Palestine), Islamic Jihad, Shiite Radicals in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. These governments and groups are opposed to the pro-Western nature of other regimes and committed to implementing Shariah law - although the exact details differ from group to group.

Their opponents are an alliance composed of governments in Egypt, the presidential side of the Palestinian Authority, the anti-Syrian part of the Lebanese Government, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, pro-US Iraqis and some other Gulf States. These countries share a few interests. Firstly they are predominantly Sunni. Second, they receive support and funding from the US. And, third, they are scared of the destabilising power of the Islamists whether in the form of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood or Iranian inspired groups such as the Shiite Hezbollah. Instead, they prefer the nation-state as the principle form of political alignment in the Middle East.

The alliance in the ‘Shiite Arc’ has been waiting for an appropriate time to assert itself and catalyse regional realignment, and may be able to take advantage of several current opportunities:

(1) Iran is becoming increasingly isolated by the international community because of its determination to develop nuclear weapons. That Hezbollah crossed into Israeli territory, killed eight soldiers and kidnapped two just as world leaders were congregating at the G8 summit in Russia to discuss the Iranian nuclear threat is unlikely to have been a coincidence.

(2) Syria is facing huge domestic and international problems, both economic and political. In November 2005, the Egyptian *Al-Ahram Weekly* estimated that 30 percent of Syrian university graduates were unemployed. President Assad is generally viewed as a much weaker than his father. And the Syrians have been declared *personae non-gratae* in Lebanon. That this was done with the support of the majority of the Lebanese people, the Arab World and the wider international community has left Syria almost totally isolated with Iran as its only ally to publicly rally to its defence. Indeed, much of the recent Syrian rhetoric to reignite the armed conflict with Israel over the Golan Heights probably stems from this same desire to ‘seize the moment.’

(3) Even before this summer’s war, Lebanon remains weak and divided despite last year’s ‘Cedar Revolution’. The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri left a void in Lebanese politics that is yet to be filled. The Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon left the government split between pro and anti-Syrians, and incapable of exerting its authority throughout its own country

(4) Hezbollah has spent the last six years, following Israel's withdrawal, strengthening military positions in Southern Lebanon and political positions in Beirut and now possesses real might. But the recent demise of support for Syria in Lebanon was viewed as the first nail in Hezbollah's political coffin. Indeed, for the last year and a half, ever since the Syrians withdrew their forces and personnel, there has been a fierce domestic battle in Lebanon regarding Hezbollah's disarmament, with many in the Lebanese decision making forums, calling upon Hezbollah to hand over its weapons peacefully. These calls have the support of UN resolutions and various Arab and international alliances. The recent military conflict with Israel was viewed as a useful means to reduce domestic and international pressure for disarmament. Whilst, militarily, Hezbollah have been weakened, they appear to have been politically bolstered by the conflict.

(5) Hamas is facing an identity crisis in Palestine – should it recognise Israel and develop the Palestinian economy? Or should it follow the hardliners in Damascus, and insist on defeating the “Zionist entity” entirely? Although Hamas has agreed to join Fatah in a National Unity Government it has remained adamant that this does not constitute recognition of Israel and continues to engage in militant activity. Only an external conflict can postpone this crucial decision.

(6) The Egyptian government is nervous due to the succession narrative that is unfolding around who will replace President Mubarak. Political instability is a certain invitation for the Muslim Brotherhood, who excelled in last year's parliamentary elections. In July, the fence between Gaza and Egypt was breached and it is believed that many Brotherhood sympathisers from Gaza penetrated Egypt.

(7) The USA is mired in Iraq and Afghanistan – and limited both militarily and diplomatically in the region. Policy makers in Washington are being forced to tread a far more cautious line when discussing the Iranian threat.

(8) Israel is already involved on the Palestinian front, and it has two leaders with little military experience. It has spent the last few years trying to reduce military spending. Following the disengagement from Gaza and proposed withdrawal from the West Bank, it has turned its focus to domestic and economic problems. However in the months following the election of Prime Minister Olmert in March this year, there has been constant firing of missiles from Gaza and the abduction of Israeli soldiers in Gaza and Northern Israel. Olmert's failure to command a substantive victory in his efforts to disarm Hezbollah has weakened the image of Israel's military strength and damaged his own political platform of continued withdrawals from the West Bank.

(9) Al-Qaeda inspired instability is spreading throughout the Middle East. This is destabilising regimes from Iraq and Saudi Arabia to Jordan and Egypt. And there are reports of Al Qaeda operatives now working in the West Bank and Gaza. The existence of overt links between Al Qaeda and Iran are contested but recent reports that Iran 'released' Sa'ad Bin Laden, the son of Osama, on 28 July 2006 to prepare for fighting in Syria implies a degree of coordination.

The nexus of these realities, places Iran in a strong strategic position. The crisis engineered in Lebanon was designed to show Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the West that

