Articles & Op-Eds

The Shia vs. the 'Shia Crescent'

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Whether by force or politics, Iran desperately needs to reconsolidate power among Shia constituencies throughout the region, but this challenge may prove insurmountable given current public sentiment in Iraq and Lebanon.

On February 15, 2020, Hezbollah organized a ceremony to unveil a statue of Qassem Soleimani in the Lebanese town of Maroun al-Ras, roughly half a mile from the border with Israel. The statue shows Soleimani with his arm stretched out in front of him, pointing toward Israel. While Hezbollah's officials and supporters were celebrating at the Lebanese-Israeli borders, the Lebanese people were commemorating four months of dynamic but painful protests against the Lebanese political class, whose corruption and failed policies have led to Lebanon's financial collapse.

In Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, and inside Iran itself—the countries that fall along the Shia Crescent—the people have realized that the enemy is within. It's their own governments that have allowed the Iranian regime to take over the state and its institutions. Ideologies, resistance rhetoric, sectarian identities and conspiracy theories that have shaped the collective identities and views of the Shia communities across the region, are slowly but surely disintegrating and are being replaced with economic concerns, and strong aspirations towards citizenship and national identities.

The Shia Crescent, which Iran has been investing in for decades, is finally turning against the Iranian regime and its proxies. From Beirut to Baghdad, all the way to Tehran, Iran is facing its most complicated adversary in years—the Shia protestors. For Iran, the enemy is also within, and it's one that cannot be contained without a drastic upheaval in Iran's own strategies and political alliances across the region.

Iran has probably never thought that its main challenge was going to emerge from the Shia communities themselves. The regime in Tehran has been following one strategy across the region: empower the Shia identity, throw weapons and money at proxies, and become the father-figure for the Shia by replacing the state and state institutions. However, they never realized that after all the investments in resources and people, and after achieving all the military victories in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, the people—mainly the Shia—needed a practical translation of these victories; that is more—not less—food on the table, and better prospects for their children. The reality is the opposite. With the absence of a socio-economic vision for Iran-controlled capitals, living conditions are no longer viable.

THE PEOPLE VS. THE RESISTANCE ECONOMY

Iran's worst nightmare started when the Iraqis—mostly in Shia towns and cities—started to chant "Iran, out out, Iraq free, free," and when the Lebanese took to the streets with one unifying slogan: "All of you means all of you." This nightmare became a serious challenge when Iraqi protestors set Iranian consulates on fire and when Lebanese protestors included Hassan Nasrallah among the failed Lebanese political figures, and blamed Hezbollah for Lebanon's calamities.

Iran and its proxies—who have long promised the Shia communities to fight injustice and empower the Shia identity—are today being blamed for the same injustices and shortcomings. This is mostly due to two main flaws in Iran's strategy in these countries.

First, in order to gain access to state institutions, Iran built alliances with local political figures and parties. It is not enough to form militias and armed proxies, if these couldn't control the state's decisions and infrastructure. For Iran, it is always easier to build these alliances with corrupt politicians, by either buying them off directly, or promising them positions through which they can access the state's resources.

For example, it is not a coincidence that Hezbollah's allies in Lebanon are the corrupt figures that the protestors want to hold accountable. These allies—such as Speaker Nabih Berri and former Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil—have benefited from this alliance with Iran (politically and financially) but also provided Hezbollah with the access they needed. For example, Hezbollah has 13 seats out of 128 total seats in the current Lebanese parliament. However, because of its allies, Hezbollah controls more than 70 parliamentarians. Same thing goes for the

government and other state institutions.

Second, Iran has made it clear to the Shia communities in Lebanon, Iraq and Iran that it is time for them to pay the price for years of free services, political empowerment and quick military victories. When US sanctions against the Iranian regime started to squeeze its finances, this affected the Iranian people, Iran's proxies and their constituencies.

It was clear that Hezbollah's finances were hit and many of its social services were put on hold. Eventually, Hezbollah stopped paying salaries to its contractual employees and started firing non-essential staff, mainly those who were hired during the Syria war, and were no longer needed. The Shia in Lebanon were expected to endure and prove their loyalty as Hezbollah implemented its own version of the resistance economy.

Many are trying to be loyal, and are hoping that Hezbollah's financial crisis will ease as Iran eventually wins over the US in the region, or so they tell themselves as they do not have another choice. But many refuse to pay the price, and the three main Shia cities in Lebanon witnessed widespread protests, despite Hezbollah's constant intimidation and threats to protestors.

For many Shia in Lebanon and Iraq, they have already paid the price for Iran's hegemony, and they no longer want to be the silent majority. But speaking out has its own price as well. According to Amnesty International, more than 500 demonstrators were killed in Iraq and over 300 in Iran in brutal crackdowns on protests. In Lebanon, "protests were met with unlawful and excessive force and security forces failed to intervene effectively to protect peaceful demonstrators from attacks by supporters of rival political groups."

It is going to be very difficult for Iran and its proxies to come back from this. The Shia in these countries no longer believe that the Iranian ideology is the solution or that its strategy to defeat Israel and the US will elevate them from poverty and hunger. These disillusionments—if they persist; that is, if the international community's pressure on Iran and its proxies persists—will be reflected in the next municipal and parliamentary elections.

THE ABSENCE OF SOLEIMANI

While all these challenges were unfolding, the glue that held everything together—Qassem Soleimani—was assassinated. Soleimani's Shia Crescent project had already been shaken before he was assassinated. In his last hours, Soleimani was travelling from Beirut to Baghdad via Damascus—a trip that symbolized his priorities and anxieties. It is no secret that Soleimani had been travelling between Beirut, Baghdad and Tehran for many weeks before he died to help quell the protests challenging his project. However, Nasrallah did not mention Soleimani's micro-management approach, which will eventually lead to a serious void in the Quds Force system across the region.

After 2011, Soleimani's increased micro-management of all Iran-backed militias—including Hezbollah—led to the decrease of Hezbollah's military and political maneuverability. When Hezbollah's last military commander—Mustafa Badreddine—was killed in Syria, Soleimani insisted that he be replaced with four less senior commanders, partly because Hezbollah had lost most of its senior commanders and didn't have a ready replacement. But the main reason—according to a number of Hezbollah fighters—was that Soleimani wanted to be hands-on.

Therefore, Hezbollah has been relying on Soleimani as a military commander. As such, the group is currently spread too thin to play a much larger role in Iraq or the rest of the Shia Crescent. Hezbollah needs to find its own military leader now before playing Soleimani's role in the region. A proper replacement of Soleimani doesn't really exist, and Iran is going to struggle to fill that void.

That doesn't mean that Iran's militias will get out of control, or that Hezbollah will refuse to help out. At the end of the day, the money and weapons still come from Iran. However, no one enjoys the connections, the trust and the knowledge that Soleimani had accumulated over the years.

WILL IRAN RECOVER?

As the Shia Crescent shakes, Iran is doing its best to save it. Losing it means losing the ability to project power in the Middle East as well as losing many political and financial resources. The two pillars of this Crescent—Soleimani and the Shia communities—are suddenly depleted, and Iran will focus on overcoming these two challenges.

What Iran really needs now is to make sure that the anti-Iran protests in Beirut, Baghdad and Tehran fail. In Iraq, Iran's attempts to turn the protests into anti-US protests didn't work. In Iran, Iranians were filmed avoiding stepping on US and Israeli flags, while in Lebanon, people are still protesting against the new government, which is clearly Hezbollah-made.

If all these attempts continue to fail, Iran and its proxies will probably increase the use of violence until the protests lose momentum and vitality. To a certain extent, Hezbollah managed to do this in Lebanon, and the Iranian demonstrations have temporarily fizzled. However, even if people leave the streets and go home, the economic and social challenges are still there, and hunger will eventually bring people back to the streets.

Iran's speaker of parliament, Ali Larijani, visited Lebanon on February 18 and told the Lebanese president, Michel Aoun, that Iran is ready to help Lebanon financially. Of course this is tied to Lebanon's willingness to maintain Iran's access to Lebanon's institutions. However, with Iran's own financial crisis, it is doubtful that it will be able to

spare $9 billion in cash to Lebanon. But with Hezbollah making all of Lebanon's decisions, the Lebanese president, government and parliament will probably not allow real reforms or accept the international community's conditions. With further deterioration of the economy, and Iran's incapacity to help the Lebanese people, including the Shia community, Hezbollah will eventually lose most of its support base, a loss from which it will be hard to recover.

IS WAR AN OPTION?

In the midst of its battle with the enemy within, could Iran resort to war to distract the world—and the people—from the real challenges, and maybe elicit some sympathy? Iran has resorted to this strategy before in Lebanon, where Hezbollah has launched many wars against Israel, and gained the domestic and international sympathy they desperately needed.

This strategy will probably fail this time around, and Hezbollah and Iran both know it. There are three main reasons why Hezbollah can't start a war with Israel at this point. First, they do not have the money to fund a war, train fighters and hire new ones. Second, they cannot guarantee reconstruction as they did in 2006 when the pro-West March 14 camp was in power. Third, the Shia community doesn't want a new war with Israel—due to the financial situation and the fact that they cannot flee to Syria or other parts of Lebanon.

Hezbollah understands that the 2006 July war was the last war with Israel that the Shia community was willing to endure and that the Syria war has exhausted them. Therefore, Hezbollah has moved the fight against Israel from the field to speeches and stone statues.

As for a potential conflict with the US, Iran also understands that with its depleted resources, war is not an option. By killing Soleimani, the US has drawn a very clear line in the sand, and any Iranian response resulting in American casualties might draw a serious and dangerous response from the US, something that Iran is not ready to risk. Iran needs to re-consolidate its power along the Shia Crescent, and it cannot afford to lose sight while it attempts to bring the Shia back to its fold—by force or by politics. That is Iran's main priority, and has always been. But that's also Iran's most challenging mission. The Shia Crescent no longer appeals to the Shia.

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