

Perceiving the Shia Dimension of Terrorism

Hanin Ghaddar

In trying to figure out what to do about ISIS, the international community seems to have forgotten the other side of the coin, that is, Iran's Shia militias in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and other places in the region. Countering terrorism requires a broader look at terrorist groups, and understanding that they feed on each other's sectarian rhetoric.

ISIS uses an anti-Shia sectarian rhetoric to recruit fighters, and Iran does the same with an increasingly anti-Sunni—or anti-Takfiri—rhetoric. To defeat ISIS, one must not ignore Iran's armed militias and their atrocities in the region, and vice versa. However, this does not mean that the solution is to bomb Iran's militias in Syria and Iraq, or continue bombing ISIS away. With the Russian involvement in Syria, the integration of Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) in Iraq's army, and Hizballah's control of Lebanon's state institutions, a military solution is not that simple.

Two main events placed the region at a crossroads in the last three years: the declaration of the "caliphate" or the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known commonly as the Iran deal or Iran nuclear deal, which is an international agreement on the nuclear program of Iran reached in Vienna on July 14th, 2015 between Iran and the P5+1. But while the world was focusing on these two happenings and their consequences in the region, Europe, and the United States, Iran has been working steadily to realize its main goal, which is boosting its regional hegemony and linking Tehran via Iraq and Syria to the South of Lebanon, both by fulfilling a geographical bridge that spans across the three countries, and seizing the political decision in the three capitals: Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut.

Implementing Hizballah's Sacred Narrative

Iran's plan began in Lebanon in 1979, as soon as the Islamic State of Iran was established in Tehran. Its efforts to bring the Lebanese Shia support resulted in establishing Hizballah in 1982 as an Islamic resistance against Israel. Although the concept of resistance was a very successful tool to attract support, it wouldn't have been successful without a strategy that constructed a new Shia identity. Hizballah has thus based its strategy on three pillars.

First, Hizballah established an independent economy and social services for the Shia community in Lebanon, making Shia dependent on Hizballah and independent from state

institutions. Hizballah became the Shia's protector and provider, and this was easy to accomplish because the state's institutions had been weakened by the Lebanese Civil War.

Second, Hizballah linked its ideology of resistance to the Shia's collective memory of the battle of Karbala in 680 CE, when an army sent by the Sunni Caliph Yazid I defeated Imam Hussein ibn Ali, grandson of the prophet Muhammad. This battle is the root of the historical schism between Sunni and Shia Islam, allowing Hizballah to portray the strongest component of Shia identity as part of Hizballah's resistance narrative. In effect, Ali and his family are equated with Hizballah and their enemies with Israel.

Third, Hizballah linked all of this to Iran's ideology of *wilayat al-faqih*, according to which Islamic judges have the right to rule over their people. This turns Iran, as the only country that is culturally, religiously, and economically ruled by Islamic jurists, into the main provider and protector of Shi'ism and its believers. This was done through meticulous and nuanced absorption of Lebanon's Shia cultural, religious, and social occasions and events into a broader narrative of resistance and Iran's definition of Shi'ism. Every occasion transformed into a space for politicization and lobbying public support.

All of this led to the extreme politicization of the Shia community, where politics and history combined to form a "sacred narrative." During the 2006 war with Israel, this narrative was used to declare a divine victory. And everything Hizballah had done or said was conceived by the Shia in Lebanon as sacred and could not be argued with.

But when Hizballah was dragged into the war in Syria, things started to change, and the sacred narrative started to crumble. Public discontent was quelled for a time by comparing the battles in Syria to Karbala. Besides claiming to defend Shia towns and shrines, Hizballah started marketing its involvement as necessary to defend the Shia identity, exactly as Hussein ibn Ali did in the seventh century. Hizballah also claimed that the war in Syria was a sacred battle that would pave the way for the appearance of the awaited Mahdi, the "twelfth Imam" who serves as a messianic figure for Shia Muslims. But as casualties mounted in Syria, the majority of Shia in Lebanon began to realize that the sacred narrative is not always a recipe for victory.

How Syria Transformed Hizballah

Syria has changed Hizballah's priorities, strategies, and narrative. Its budget became mostly devoted to military operations, and although funding for social services continued, more of it was directed to families and institutions linked to Hizballah's military infrastructure. Also, "resistance" against Israel became secondary as the group shifted its focus to the Syrian conflict. Today, Hizballah is openly hesitant to start a war with Israel. But most significantly, Hizballah

has failed to deliver its “divine victory.” Once considered a force that won quick, decisive victories, Hizballah is now a force that ships home the bodies of “martyrs” killed while fighting a foreign war.

As Hizballah becomes more deeply entrenched in Syria, the resistance that once attracted eager volunteers has transformed into a corporate institution for fighters looking for an income or status. Far from answering a calling, new recruits are now signing on for a job in the Syria war, encouraged by the monthly salary of \$500-1,200 with benefits.

Many Shia in Lebanon today see Hizballah as both a sectarian protector and an employer. The sectarian rhetoric that aggravated the Sunni-Shia rift in the region has isolated the Shia community from its Lebanese and Arab depth, depriving them of job opportunities in Lebanon and the Gulf countries. Fighting in Syria has become almost the only source of income for Shia Muslims coming from poor families and neighborhoods. The war no longer has any meaning, only a necessity.

This has led to serious turnover within Hizballah’s ranks. Trained fighters who joined Hizballah prior to the Syria war are leaving the moment they can find another source of income, while there is a wave of newcomers, who are less trained, not as loyal, less religious, but more sectarian.

Iran’s Big Picture

Regardless, Iran—with new Shia recruits from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan—has almost completed its regional plan. Today, Hizballah, the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), and other Pakistani and Afghani Shia militias—referred to as *The Fatimiyun*—constitute one force under the control of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). This pan-Shia army is founded, funded, and trained by the IRGC in order to consolidate Iranian control over the region. In Syria, this Shia army’s main mission is to protect the “useful Syria”—which is a geographic corridor stretching from the Alawite coast, through Homs, the suburbs of Damascus, all the way to al-Qalamun at the borders of Lebanon. It also goes through Homs to the borders of Iraq through Aleppo and Deir al-Zour, thereby linking Syria to Iraq through Tal Afar, where the PMU are very active today.

Despite the Russian intervention in Syria and its boosted control over Syria’s state institutions, Iran’s “Useful Syria” is still intact. Russian President Vladimir Putin does not mind an Iranian corridor in Syria as long as Tehran does not try to overpower Russia in Damascus. And Iran knows that it needs Moscow, given that the incoming Trump Administration has signaled a tougher US stance on the nuclear deal and other Iranian interests. So, if Russia wants

to call the shots on the international front while Iran secures its position in Syria, Tehran will not make too much noise.

But for Iran, this corridor will not be secure unless it is Sunni-free, and secured by Shia militias, mainly Hizballah, and that is due to the lack of trust between the IRGC and the Syrian Army. Therefore, while Assad was protecting Damascus by signing deals with rebels in surrounding towns after besieging them for years, Iran was taking advantage of these deals to evacuate Sunnis to northern Syria.

Hizballah has already conducted ethnic cleansing of its own in certain areas along the border (e.g., its 2013 campaigns in al-Qusayr and the al-Qalamun region). Also, hundreds of thousands of Sunnis were evacuated from Homs between 2011 and 2014, when a deal was finally struck with regime forces after starvation reached horrifying levels. According to pan-Arab press, Iraqi families, “particularly from the Shia-[populated] southern provinces,” were moved to Syria to repopulate the recently evacuated Damascus suburbs. Harakat Hizballah al-Nujabah, an Iraqi Shia paramilitary force close to Iran, has reportedly overseen the resettlement of 300 such families, who were granted homes and \$2,000 each.

This Syrian corridor is important for Iran because it will be the bridge that links Tehran to the south of Lebanon. Physically, it will be a cheaper and easier way to transport weapons, equipment, and fighters, but it is also a platform of power that gives Iran a stronger presence and a say in political and military decisions.

Iran has invested too many resources, money, fighters, and energy in Syria to just abandon its interests if an international agreement was made. Iran is there to stay, and Hizballah will not return to Lebanon any time soon.

Looking Forward

Despite Iran’s determination to take and secure this corridor, there will be challenges that the international community could take advantage of.

This corridor will be surrounded by a sea of angry Sunnis who—without a political solution approved by all regional and international players—will not surrender to Iran’s hegemony. Iran still prefers a military solution, at least until it completes its control over the “Useful Syria” and links it to both Iraq’s and Lebanon’s borders. Although it is not simple to disrupt this corridor, it is not too late to try, at least in areas that are not finalized. A strategic long-term political solution can put an end to Iran’s military proceedings, and force the IRGC to halt its plan to complete this corridor. However, a solution only brokered by Russia—such as the

Astana agreement—cannot work. Any solution needs to involve all regional players and the United States cannot be a mere observer.

More sanctions targeting entities involved in Iran’s regional operations could be another way to increase pressure on Shia militias fighting under the IRGC. But this could be a more successful tool if it was accompanied by providing economic alternatives for the Shia community.

For example, many Shia fighters and non-fighters I have interviewed said that they wouldn’t consider the war in Syria if they had access to jobs or loans to start small businesses. The problem is that they are too financially dependent on Hizballah and have no other options. Before the war in Syria, this financial dependence was not problematic, due to the resistance rhetoric accompanied by social services. It all made sense. Today, because of the militarization of the Shia community in Lebanon, many want a way out. Therefore, a demilitarization of this community requires serious and long-term efforts to financially detach it from Hizballah and Iran.

The good news is that many in this community want this now.

About the Author

Hanin Ghaddar is the inaugural Friedmann Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. The longtime managing editor of Lebanon’s NOW news website, her research is focused on Shi’ite politics throughout the Levant. Ghaddar has shed light on a broad range of cutting-edge issues, from the evolution of Hezbollah inside Lebanon’s fractured political system to Iran’s growing influence throughout the Middle East. In addition, she has contributed to a number of US-based magazines and newspapers, including The New York Times, The Washington Post, and Foreign Policy. Prior to joining NOW in 2007, Ghaddar wrote for Lebanese newspapers As-Safir, An-Nahar, and Al-Hayat, and also worked as a researcher for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) regional office. Ghaddar holds a bachelor’s degree in English Literature and a master’s degree in Middle Eastern Studies, both from the American University in Beirut.