

Middle East FAQs Volume 1: What is the Shia Crescent?

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Institute experts Patrick Clawson, Hanin Ghaddar, and Nader Uskowi discuss Iran's growing influence from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean and beyond.

In recent years, Iran has taken advantage of disruptions in the Middle East to spread its influence. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, the instability resulting from the Arab Spring, the rise of Sunni extremist movements like Isis all enabled Iran to advance its military and political goals.

Tehran is forming a "land bridge" that connects Iran through Iraq to Syria, Lebanon, to the Israeli border at Golan. This is what's called the Shia Crescent. Shia comprise just 10 percent of the world's Muslim population, yet they hold a massive majority in Iran. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian officials have sought to provide leadership for the global Shia community. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran sought to establish strong presence in Iraq by fostering ties with both the Shia-led Iraqi government and the Iraqi Shia militia groups on the ground. Since 2014, Iran-backed Shia groups have played a significant role in the fight against ISIS. Iran also seeks to cultivate its economic, cultural, and religious influence in Iraq.

In Syria, Iran remains a staunch ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; Iran is shored up the regime's ground forces, funneling regional proxies Lebanese Hezbollah and other Shia militias to Syria in effort to defend the regime. Iran has also sent Shia refugees and militants from Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight in Syria as well in Lebanon. Iran supports and has had a large degree of control over the Shia militant group Hezbollah since the early 1980s. Iran has fostered this Lebanese proxy as a means of perpetrating attacks against the United States and Israel. Hezbollah's regional clout has grown in recent years with its intervention in places like Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Today, Hezbollah boasts battle-hardened soldiers and an arsenal of over 100,000 rockets.

While Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon form the so-called core of Iran's Shia Crescent in the region, Iran has also taken advantage of Shia movements elsewhere to further its regional influence and challenge Saudi, U.S., and Israeli regional dominance. Basically, the expansion of the Iranian proxy network deters attacks on Iran itself. Potential aggressors across the region know that should they attack Iran, they would likely face retaliatory attacks by Iran's proxies. But more importantly, an expanded regional foothold affords Iran influence and prestige in the face of Western, Israeli, and Saudi power.

There are three main reasons why Iran is interested in this land bridge. First, it's much cheaper to move materiel, soldiers, and arms from Iran to its proxies in the region via land than via air. Second, for now this land bridge is not very important, but it's a good Plan B. In the next Israeli-Hezbollah war or any conflict in the region, Damascus Airport or any other airport in the region might be bombed. Third, which is much more important than the first two, this will be a very important symbolic victory for Iran and for Hezbollah, because even those who support Hezbollah are starting to doubt Hezbollah's involvement in Syria. A lot of people are tired of the war but when this land bridge is complete, the Iranian will sell it as another divine victory.

This Crescent of course presents challenges for U.S. interest in the region. Chief among these is the threat that the Iranian Network poses to vital trade routes and to the security and stability of key allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia. It makes intervention in Iranian-dominated areas even more complicated, given the potential for escalation between U.S.- and Iran-backed forces. More broadly, the Iranian presence fuels a growing sectarianism that will pose a threat to regional stability for years to come. ❖

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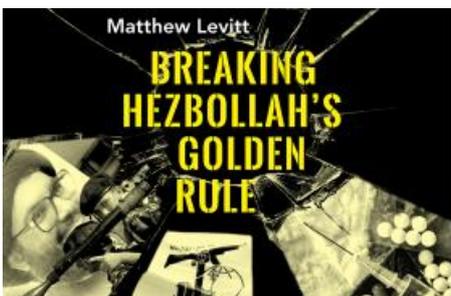
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