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The Rising power of Iran in the Middle East: Forming an axis with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon

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Summary

In his State of the Union Address on January 29, 2002 the former US President George W. Bush labeled Iran as part of the 'Axis of Evil'. Ten years later Tehran appears to be stronger than ever and is in the process of forming her own axis of influence in the Middle East. This analysis highlights the endeavors of Tehran to form this axis gradually and patiently in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon; it also focuses on the significance of the formation of this axis for future developments in the region.

Keywords

AMAL, Axis of Evil, cultural diplomacy, economic diplomacy, Hizbullah, Iran, Iraq, Islamic Axis, Israel, Kurdistan, Lebanon, Shiites, Sunnis, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, USA.

Contents

A.	Introduction	5
I.	The age-old past.....	6
II.	The Ancient Past.....	6
III.	The Islamic period.....	6
IV.	Colonialism - nationalism	8
V.	Islamism.....	9
VI.	Iranian Islamic foreign policy stages	11
VII.	Foreign policy orientation views	12
B.	Politics - Diplomacy	14
I.	Political ties with Iraq	14
i.	The Iraqi political system	15
ii.	Challenges to the Iraq-Iran rapprochement	16
a.	The precise position of the Iran-Iraq border	16
b.	Iran-Iraq War Reparations	16
c.	The case of Kurdistan.....	17
II.	Political Ties with Syria	18
III.	Political ties with Lebanon.....	20
C.	Economy.....	24
I.	Economic ties with Iraq	24
i.	Trade	24
ii.	Energy	26
iii.	Construction.....	27
iv.	Transportation	27
II.	Economic ties with Syria	28
III.	Economic ties with Lebanon	29
D.	Iranian Cultural Diplomacy.....	32
E.	Future prospects.....	37

A. Introduction

Amid the current crisis in the Arab world, the growing influence of Iran in the Middle East today is considered by analysts as an unprecedented geopolitical phenomenon in the region in modern times. Under generally unfavorable economic and geopolitical circumstances for Tehran since 1979, Iranian politicians have managed to exploit the economic, cultural and general geopolitical advantages in the Muslim world. Iran, which in the 19th century was stuck in a rut in terms of internal and geopolitical power, managed in the aftermath of the Second Gulf War to grow stronger and gain her own geopolitical role in the region.

The enhancement of the Iranian geopolitical role is dictated by geography and results from a long and systematic effort by the political elite of the country both during the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), particularly the 1960s and 1970s, and the period of the Islamic Republic (1979 onwards). It is related to the modernization of the country during the aforementioned period and the increasing role of Islam in a state and organizational level.

The progress made by the country in terms of technological infrastructure and economic growth results also from the ideological orientation of Iranians which is characterized by the dipole Islam-nation. This feature combined with the glorious pre-Islamic Iranian past and the historical presence of Iranians in their territories creates in the Iranian soul and conscience the feeling of separate cultures for people who have sole mission in history to stand out and excel.

The Iranian political and intellectual elite view the future of Iran through the prism of their long and glorious past. The knowledge of the ancient past of Iranians in the Middle East and the administration of the ancient Iranian dynasties, such as the Achaemenids, Arsacids and Sasanids, in conjunction with the special role of Shiite Islam amongst Muslims around the globe stand in the subconscious of modern Iranians as the criteria which determine the contemplation of the future in an ambitious context. In Iran there is a belief that the Middle East is a vital area for Iran, belonging to the Iranian political sphere of influence. The political power of Iran in the Middle East was occasionally expanding and contracting. In this geographical context, the country was and remains a protagonist and her strengthening role in the Middle East is not surprising.

Today Iran's influence in various different geographical contexts of the Middle East is an emerging reality. This analysis focuses on Iraq, Syria and Lebanon due to both the high degree of influence of Iran in political, social and economic developments in these countries and the special geo-strategic nature of these areas for security in the Middle East.

I. The age-old past

The technological advances, economic empowerment and improvement of the state's administrative ability require a collective vision and a common ideological base in order to form the people's worldview. The development of these relates to the past and in the case of Iran the political elite is based on the fact that the Iranian people always had a leading role both in pre-Islamic and Islamic times. The analysis of the Iranian influence of Iran in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria should be approached as part of the wider geopolitical activity of the Iranian world in Western Asia.

The historic presence and diverse political and cultural presence of Iran in the Middle East is divided into two periods based on the appearance of Islam: the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. During these periods, the Iranian people played a leading role in political developments. The era before the advent of Islam is described as the period of the Iranian political prosperity and autocracy in the Middle East. The emergence and expansion of Islam brought to the forefront of international politics the Arab and Turkish worlds that have since co-existed with the Iranian political scheme within the Islamic world.

II. The Ancient Past

As regards the pre-Islamic period, the Iranian geopolitical power was established in this period. The advent of the Achaemenids (549-330 BC) saw the continuation, consolidation and expansion of the Iranian kingdom which the Medes (780-549 BC) had set up in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus.¹ The Iranian hegemony continued after the defeat of the Achaemenid kingdom by Alexander the Great: the Seleucids (312-63 BC) were a Greco-Iranian dynasty and through them the Parthians (250 BC - 224 AD) and Sasanids (225 AD-651 AD) revived the Achaemenid glory.² In this period Iran lays the foundation for its stable leading geopolitical presence in Central and West Asia. During this time the regions of modern Iraq, Syria and Lebanon were key provinces of the Iranian kingdom, accepting the influence of the Iranian culture with which local cultural entities interact.

III. The Islamic period

The overthrow of the Iranian Sassanian kingdom by Muslim Arabs and the predominance of Islam in the territories the Iranians ruled before was a momentous event with consequences visible even today in international politics. The main feature of this period was decline, but not elimination, of political influence of Iran. Moreover, Iranian cultural influence was initially maintained and then strengthened within the Caliphate until 1258 and the Sultanate until 1923. In fact, the Iranian political influence

¹ R.N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran* (München, 1984), 87-136.

² A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, Copenhagen 1944 ; T. Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia, The Rise and Fall of an*

continued in a veiled form and was promoted through Islamized educated Iranians and the catalytic influence of Iranian culture in the shaping of Islamic culture, especially the material and secular side of architecture, science, arts and letters and foremost in Islamic philosophy and theology.

The extent of Iranian influence in shaping the Islamic world, along with the Arabic cultural component was such that two parallel functions occurred, i.e. 'the Islamization of Iran and the Iranization of Islam'. This is representative of the cultural ferment that took place during the past 14 centuries in the Middle East and Western Asia in general.³

The main change in this period was the systematic and comprehensive acceptance of Shiite Islam by the Safavid Iran (1504-1722); thus the fortunes of Iran and Shiism were inextricably interwoven.⁴ This development diversified permanently the Iranian people and a portion of the Arabs in Mesopotamia, the Persian Gulf and Lebanon from the Sunni version of Islam, creating the political power struggle between the Shiite Iranian kingdom, and the Sunni Ottoman Sultanate (16th-20th century AD).

The areas of Lebanon and Iraq became the place of cultural ferment and political-theological pursuits between the Iranians, Arabs and the Turks. The Iranian people exerted and still exert major influence on a reciprocal basis upon the Shiite Arab population of these lands. Prior to the colonial period, when there were no national state borders in the Middle East, except a loose border line between the Sunni world of Istanbul/Constantinople and the Shiite world of Isfahan, people and ideas flowed with ease, giving priority to ideological ferment and cultural contacts.⁵

In this context, Shiite priestly families from Lebanon, Iran and Iraq used to migrate to Shiite sacred centers of Najaf and Karballa (Iraq), Damascus (Syria) of Qum and Mashhad (Iran). Thus they were able to establish clerical and family ties with multiple sociological and political effects, based on Shiite customs and habits. In this process, the ethnic element was of subordinate significance whilst the religious element was the point of reference to cultural contacts between these peoples; many of them were bilingual (Arabic speakers and Persian-speakers).⁶

The aforementioned cultural channel of communication between Arabic-speaking and Persian-speaking people has been maintained unaltered until today, providing a steady path of ideas, economic and politico-religious effects of various cultures and ethnicities. One result of this long-standing contact is the large priestly families which are more of multinational (Arab and Iranian) origin, such as the Sadr, Hakīm families and so on. In this way the concept of religion remained strong and remains of primary importance for Muslims in terms of self-determination, contrary to any spirit of regionalism, race and nationalism. The role of religion would be tested, and it is still tested, even during the colonial period.

Empire (London-New York, 2009), 4.

³ R.N. Frye, "The Iranianization of Islam." In *Islamic Iran and Central Asia (7th-12th centuries)*. Richmond, Surrey: Variorum Reprints 1979.

⁴ A.J. Newman, *Safavid Iran. Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (London, 2009), 13-23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24, 39; R. Gleave, *Scripturalist Islam, The History and Doctrines of the Akhbārī Shī'ī Schol* (Leiden, Boston, 2007), 57, 68, 163, 198.

⁶ A.J. Newman, "Anti-Akhbārī sentiments among the Qajar 'Ulamā: the case of Muḥamad Bāqir al-Khāwnsārī (d. 1313-1895)," in *Religion and Society in Qajar Iran*, ed. R. Gleave (London-New York, 2005), 163.

IV. Colonialism - nationalism

A key feature of modern Islamic period in the Middle East was colonialism and the parallel introduction of ideas of the French Revolution, led by those of nationalism and secularism. The discovery of the New World gave the major European countries the opportunity of economic, political and cultural penetration in the territories of the Ottoman Sultanate. The result of this process was the idea of introducing the concept of nation in the upper middle class of every Muslim country. In the 20th century this process took the political form of establishing nation-states and borders and led to the political division of the Sunni world in its present form, as a result of the fall of the Ottoman Sultanate.⁷

In this process, Iran was an observer, for, except the presence of the Portuguese in the Persian Gulf (16th century) and the political influence of the West in the second half of the 19th c./early 20th century, Iran never became a colony, unlike the former Ottoman Arab provinces. Iran maintained its political independence and consistency as a kingdom despite the fact that in the 19th century Iran witnessed a long and protracted decline.⁸ The advent of the Pahlavi dynasty led to the systematic process of nation-awakening and secularism in Iran, internal reconstruction, and the formulation of foreign policy under the ambitious national goals. The nation-making of Iranians through the educational process has led the political elite of the country in contemplation of the future based on a national irredentist attitude, such as the movement of Pan-Iranism advocated.⁹

Based on the theory of continuity, the Iranian politicians and diplomats saw the history of the Iranian nation as a continuous line going back politically to the Achaemenid era. In Pan-Iranism, the relationship between Iran and the region was closely connected with Iranian pre-Islamic splendor. In their view modern Iran should be built on the legacy of pre-Islamic times in order to reconstitute the foreign policy of the Achaemenid kingdom. Pan-Iranists view the Middle East as a vital area for Iran and the occasional political rule of non-Iranian peoples (Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, Britons and Americans) in the region is transient in contrast to the perpetual presence of Iran.

The aim of modern Iran would be, after her successful internal restructuring, the growth and expansion of Iranian political influence in the territories where their ancestors had prospered. That perception is clearly evident from the statement of the Shah that Iran has a historical tendency to have access to the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁰ The Iranian ambitious policy in the Pahlavi era sought to reconstitute the Achaemenid power in the territories ruled by the ancient Iranians, i.e. from the shores of the Mediterranean to the Indies and the Caucasus and Central Asia to the Arabian Peninsula.

The Shah knew that such a recovery would not be feasible during his lifetime because of both the geopolitical presence in the region of powers such as Britain, the USA and the USSR, and the

⁷ E.J. Zürcher, *Turkey, A Modern History* (London-New York, 1993), 166.

⁸ S-A, Arjomand, "Political ethic and public law in the early Qajar period," in *Religion and Society in Qajar Iran*, ed. R. Gleave (London-New York, 2005), 33.

⁹ T. Atabaki, "Recasting Oneself, Rejecting the Other: Pan-Turkism and Iranian Nationalism," in *Identity Politics in Central Asia and the Muslim World: Nationalism, Ethnicity and Labour in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Willem Van Schendel (London, GBR: I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001), 66-83.

¹⁰ The Shah of Iran, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi Aryamehr, *Answer to History* (London, 1980), 1

simultaneous enhancement of Pan-Arabism and Pan-Turkism.¹¹ However the geopolitical balance did not prevent him from organizing, planning and trying out, wherever permissible, thus preparing the ground for the implementation of his projects on the prospective successor, his son Reza II. The temporary presence of these foreign forces in the Middle East compelled Iran to be prepared to cover the time gap upon departure of these non-indigenous forces from the region. Hence, following the withdrawal of British forces in 1971, the Shah sought the adoption of the Nixon Doctrine in the Middle East, making thus Iran a deputy of the U.S. in the Persian Gulf. The Shah's funding of the diversionary program of the Shiites in Lebanon under Imam Musa Sadr and Iran's ascent in sixth place worldwide in terms of military equipment verified this claim.

However, the use of nationalism as the ideological basis of the foreign policy of Iran in the Middle East did not remain unchallenged. The Shah established both the foreign policy and domestic modernization and reconstruction of Iran based on the cultural and ideological pre-Islamic past, a means of forming nationalism. The above inhibitors inside and outside the region did not prevent him from implementing a successful Iranian foreign policy in the ideological form of nationalism. However, nationalism in the form of Pan-Iranism was an ideological debate which occurred simultaneously alongside the Arabic-speaking people, Iraq and Lebanon included, and the Turkish-speaking world. Therefore, Pan-Iranism could not expand as much as the Shah wanted among the Arabs and the Turks, resulting in a fragile ideological balance of geopolitical power in the Middle East. This balance was reinforced by the intervention of Western countries in favor of one side or the other every time. This intervention was well depicted in the formation of the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), where Turkey actually played a key role by being also a NATO member. This balance put in doubt or delayed the implementation of Iranian ambitions for increased geopolitical influence in the region.

Similarly, the nationalist foreign policy of the Shah had found opponents in the domestic political scene of Iran, i.e. in the ideological circles of the Islamic and leftist ideological schemes, which coexisted along the nationalism of the Pahlavis. During the 1960s and 1970s these two forces structured systematically the internal political resistance to the Shah with international ramifications in the Middle East. This conflict led to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 which changed the geostrategic doctrine of Iran in the Middle East, shifting the ideological message of the nationalist-secular-Islamic religious context with consequences that have just started to become visible today to the western world.

V. Islamism

The Islamic Revolution of 1979, unique in modern world history due to its particularly religious character, changed the geopolitical circumstances of the Middle East and laid the foundations for the ousting of nationalism as the prevalent political concept in the region.¹² The prevalence of the ideological messages of Ayyatullah Khomeini was the result of a long process that started in the 19th

¹¹ M. Kramer, "Arab Nationalism: Mistaken Identity," *Daedalus* (Summer 1993), 171-206.

century in the Shiite and the Sunni Islamic world and in response to Western colonial expansion in the territories of Islam. Under the influence of the teachings of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and other Muslim intellectuals and in response to the secularism advocated by the French Revolution as a means of altering the cultural establishment of the Islamic world, Islam contrasted its long politico-religious heritage.¹³ Muslim thinkers projected the concept of the Islamic community ('Umma) and unity (Ittihad) vis-à-vis the nation-state model which divided the peoples of the Middle East, and the Islamic legal tradition vis-à-vis the influence of Greco-Roman law.

Islamist thinkers pursued the Islamic revival in the 19th century and they intensified their efforts in the 20th century, after the abolition of the Sunni Ottoman Caliphate, the Western political, economic and cultural penetration in the fragmented Ottoman territory. In Iran, which has maintained its territorial independence from the Ottoman sultanate, the Shiite clergy was alarmed and concerned with the British and Russian penetration in the early 20th century. The change of dynasty to the throne of Iran and the advent of the Pahlavis was perceived by the Shiite clergy as a long period of Western hegemony in the country. The Shiite priests reacted to the Pahlavi modernization efforts, believing that the modernization was against the interests of Islam because secularism was identified with materialism and atheism.¹⁴

As a result, a discussion erupted amongst the clerics regarding the means and ways to address the reform policy of the Shah and the latter's effort to reduce the influence of the Shiite clergy in the country. From this process emerged a novel form of militarized Islam, whose main ideologue was Ayyatullah Khomeini. On this basis, the penetration of the West in the Muslim society, not only in Iran but in every Muslim country, threatened and still threatens the integrity of Islam and, due to its extensive character in every sector of the society, the clergy decided that the only way to deal with it is the armed struggle of the Islamic society against Western interests and their representatives.

Khomeini's supporters contacted the Shiite priesthood in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and other countries to share their revolutionary manifesto. In this context, they agreed to adopt of the cooperation and coordination between the militarist Shiite clergymen in each country. Khomeini took forward his positions, and approached Sunni Islamist groups in other countries to propose setting aside intra-Islamic Sunni-Shiite differences, and to form a coalition in order to address the common external enemy, i.e. the western expansionism and materialism. Muslims in other countries heard the message with consideration and concern due to the influence of Pan-Arabism in the 1960's. Nevertheless, Khomeini's message set the groundwork for the subsequent influence of the Islamic Revolution in the Middle East today.

Khomeini's main argument was that due to secularism the monarchy in Iran had been corrupted, and the king was unable to lead the faithful in the virtuous life and the Islamic community on the right track in view of the Day of Judgment and the advent of the Mahdi, the twelfth Apostle of the Shiites. Therefore, the king was not entitled to rule. In this case, the clergy had the sacred duty to seize

¹² V. Martin, *Creating an Islamic State. Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (London, New York, 2007), 100.

¹³ N. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal al-Din "al-Afghani": A Political Biography* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972).

¹⁴ Martin, *op.cit.*, 93, 134.

political power, for the priests knew the good principles that should underpin the governance of the faithful, although until then the priesthood had never seized power and ruled independently. Thus Khomeini created the Shiite version of Islamism which was not binding on Sunnis whom he also called to act together with the Shiites in order to be redeemed from western influence.¹⁵

The Islamic revolution in Iran (1979) marked the fall of the Shah and the eruption of the first so far successful political manifestation of the Islamist movement in modern history. Iran, from a staunch U.S. ally became a stubborn enemy. The Revolution eliminated the CENTO role in the region and forced a change in Iranian attitudes toward Israel and set as a main goal of her foreign policy the liberation of Jerusalem from Israeli occupation, due to the sanctity of the city and its messianic significance for all Muslims. In the Sunni world a similar development has not occurred so far despite the efforts of the Islamic Brotherhood and al-Qaeda. A major aim of Islamism is the complete elimination of Western influence from the Islamic world, the replacement of nation-states by several emirates in the short-term; then these would later unite in one or two sultanates that will be run under Islamic law.

The 1980-1988 war between Iran and Iraq prevented the spread of revolution to other Muslim states except Lebanon, where Hezbollah was successfully established (1982) and Afghanistan, where Tehran financed her proxies to oust the Soviets from the country. The years 1989-1997 were a period of internal restructuring for the country. That decade marked the resumption of efforts to spread the Islamic revolution after the completion of the internal reorganization and the simultaneous collapse of the Soviet Union, which created a power vacuum in the Middle East. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq (2003), Iranian influence surged unexpectedly with very visible consequences today.¹⁶

Therefore a comparison of the foreign policy of Iran prior to and after 1979 shows that Iranian diplomacy geopolitically ranges in same geographic area with the same geopolitical trends, except the ideological framework which changed from secular-nationalist to Islamic-religious.¹⁷ This shift has brought another impetus for the Iranian foreign policy. Now Iran's geopolitical goals include the Liberation of Palestine, which the Shah did not pursue actively. The Islamic ideal, because of the universality of its message, is more profitable for Tehran geopolitically among the Arab and Turks; Iran's main message to Muslims is Islamic unity, which is a stronger concept than national specificity of the Muslims and every kind of localism, tribalism or the Sunni-Shiite schism; for instance Tehran's influence in the Sunni Palestinian organization Hamas and the popularity of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Sunni world after the war of 2006.

VI. Iranian Islamic foreign policy stages

\This change of the ideological political framework in Iran, from nationalism to Islam, has led to the

¹⁵ Martin, *op.cit.*, 72, 102.

¹⁶ Vali Nasr, "When the Shiites Rise," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (Jul. - Aug., 2006), 58-71, 73-74.

¹⁷ A. Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran," in *The foreign policies of Middle East states* ed. Lynne Rienner (Boulder, Co., 2002), 283-309.

dramatic enhancement of Iran's influence in the Middle East. In the past three decades the Iranian foreign policy in the region underwent various stages depending on the geopolitical developments each time.

The first stage, known as that of consolidation, was characterised by the struggle between the liberals (Bazargan, Bani Sadr) and the Maktabis. In the end the latter prevailed and formed the post-Pahlavi Iranian foreign policy with its powerful Islamic profile. The Maktabis denied alliances with western countries and attempted to export the revolution.

The second stage (1981-8) is known for the rejectionist policy of Tehran. During the Iran-Iraq war, Iran was isolated and the only friendly countries toward her were Syria, Libya and South Yemen, whilst Iran maintained neutral ties with Turkey, Pakistan and Algeria. The main aims of Iran at the time were to defeat Iraq in the battlefield, to distance the Arab states of the Persian Gulf from Baghdad and enhance Tehran's relations with the Shiite populations of the Arab states. The main successes of Iranian foreign policy at the time were the formation and consolidation of the Iranian-Syrian alliance and the formation of Hizbullah in Lebanon.

The third stage in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war was the reorientation policy, facilitating the transition from radicalism to pragmatism. The acceptance of the UNSC Resolution 598 ended the war and gave Tehran the opportunity to proceed to internal reconstruction and restoration of ties with most of the Arab states. The same happened with the USSR after the latter's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Iranian pragmatism was further enhanced by the Iraq-Kuwaiti war and the neutral stance Tehran adopted. Rafsanjani's non-confrontational foreign policy aimed to minimize trouble for the Iranian foreign policy in order to focus on the successful reconstruction of the country.

The fourth stage was introduced by the moderate policy of Muhammad Khatami (1997-2004). This policy was based on compromise, moderation and rule of law. He promoted the dogma of dialogue of civilisations as a means for establishing a *modus vivendi* with the West. However, Khatami's efforts did not come to fruition after all because of the 9/11 tragedy.

In 2002 the hardening of the US foreign policy towards Iran and the US presence in countries around the borders of Iran alarmed the Iranian political elite and resulted in a major shift of the Iranian foreign policy. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's tough stance in the foreign affairs of the country is interpreted as a response to the US shift of policy in the case of Iran and the Islamic World as a whole after 2001. Since then Iran decided to accelerate its nuclear programme and took a hard stance toward Israel, supporting with an unprecedented fervor Hizbullah and Hamas through the enhancement of her traditional alliance with Damascus. Moreover, Iran developed a complex foreign policy toward Iraq and Ahmadinejad led the formation for the current Iranian foreign policy in the region.

VII. Foreign policy orientation views

Nowadays Iran's influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon forms the backbone of the overall Iranian influence

in the region. Besides foreign developments in the region, the current Iranian foreign policy is the result of certain domestic political streams of thought interpreting the aforementioned US presence in the region. Based on these developments and the Islamic ideology of the country, two main streams of foreign policy have developed in Iran today, i.e. the conservatives and the moderates. These streams of thought hold usually the same views on the domestic policy.¹⁸

The conservatives in the foreign policy of the country are heavily influenced by the Hodjatiyyah movement.¹⁹ At this stage the Hodjatiyyah supporters are one of the key elements of the conservatives in the Islamic Republic. Their ranks consist mainly of the 'Maktabis' Islamic militarists, who are mostly members of the clergy and the Revolutionary Guards. They form a special entity in the political establishment of the country and they hold a large share in the assertive policy of the Islamic Republic since 2004. Along with other conservative politicians they support the development of an independent Iranian nuclear programme, the formation of the Islamic Axis in the region and the enhancement of Iran's relations with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. They maintain their views regardless of the results of the sanctions over Iranian economy. Their main argument is that an assertive Iranian policy based on political and economic and cultural diplomacy is the best way to counter US influence in the region.

The moderate foreign policy makers are in favor of a possible rapprochement with the West. They also support the idea of close contacts with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, but not in the assertive form of an Axis. They view themselves as more pragmatic and their main argument is that broader geopolitical developments favor Iran's power and that there is no hurry to unleash the power of the Iranian diplomacy so rapidly and assertively; instead they prefer to establish a *modus vivendi* with the West and then proceed to the expansion of Iranian foreign policy in a more gradual manner.

Apparently the development of the Islamic Axis manifests that the conservatives and hardliners have the upper hand regarding the formation of the foreign policy of the country. The following analysis based on three fields of political, economic and cultural diplomacy, highlights Tehran's initiative to boost ties with these countries, aiming to strengthen an in depth alliance with them. The proposed name for this alliance in this paper is 'Islamic Axis' based on the features of the Iranian diplomacy in the region and in comparison with the US term 'Axis of Evil.'

¹⁸ Evangelos Venetis, "Striving in the path of the Islamic Republic: Reconciliation in sight or an ephemeral truce?" ELIAMEP Blogs, April, 16, 2010: <http://blogs.eliamep.gr/en/evangelos/striving-in-the-path-of-the-islamic-republic-reconciliation-in-sight-or-an-ephemeral-truce/>

¹⁹ Evangelos Venetis, "The Coming of the Hidden Imam and the Iranian Presidential Elections" - In Greek- ELIAMEP Blogs, April, 16, 2010: <http://blogs.eliamep.gr/venetis/i-elefsi-tou-%E2%80%98krimmenou-apostolou%E2%80%99-ke-i-eklogi-proedrou-sto-iran/>

B. Politics - Diplomacy

I. Political ties with Iraq

Iraq today constitutes one of the major grounds of Iranian political influence in the Middle East. Although Iraq is an Arab state, both countries fought a bloody war in 1980-1988 and the former Arab Baath Sunni secular minority oppressed the Shiite Arab majority and Kurdish minority. Iran and Iraq today enjoy the best relations they ever had after Iraq ceased to be an Ottoman province (1918). The reason for this change is the fall of Saddam Hussein's government as a result of the US-British invasion of Iraq in 2003, which altered entirely the balance of political power inside Iraq. Ever since, the Iraqi Shiites, along with the Kurds, have had the leading role in Iraqi politics.

Except Iran, having Shiites ruling Sunnis in Iraq is an unprecedented breakthrough in the history of Islam in the Arab world, for Sunni Muslims have ruled the Shiites since AD 661. This development has an impact on the foreign policy of Iraq vis-à-vis Iran and the rest of the Arab world. The election of the Shiites as the ruling party in the 2006 elections was not especially welcomed by the rest of the Arab countries. In fact the prime ministers Ibrahim Jafari and Nouri al-Maliki were coldly accepted in the Arab League and relations between Iraq and the Arab states have not been restored to the level they had been before 2003.

The reason behind this negative political attitude of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and other states to the Shiites of Iraq is primarily religious and secondarily political. This religious gap is widened by the fact that Iran is the leading force of Islamism in the Middle East and exerts major influence in Baghdad. During Saddam Hussein's era, and especially after the eruption of the Iran-Iraq war, most of the current Shiite political elite members in Iraq (e.g. the Hakim and the Sadr families) spent most of their time in exile in the Shiite-ruled Iran. Today not only do they keep close ties with Tehran but they make sure that they strengthen them, viewing their co-religionists in Iran as a culturally familiar and strong pillar in the crack of dawn of their political rule in Iraq. As a result, Arab leaders view the Iraqi Shiite-led government with great caution and suspicion. This Arab attitude manifests that the role of culture and religion is predominant in politics in the Middle East.

What the Arab leaders have not considered so far, due to their strong religious sentiment, is that by distancing themselves from their fellow Arabs in Iraq, they actually accelerate and multiply the Iranian influence in Iraqi politics because by acting in that way they create a major power vacuum in the foreign, and internal, relations of Iraq, a gap which Tehran is eager and ready to fill with her own action and presence.

Indeed Tehran saw in the US overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 a development which Iran had wished, pursued and fought for in the 1980's. Removing the leader of the major neighbor-state was a double-edged knife for Tehran. Iranian policy makers saw, and still see, the US-British invasion and occupation of Iraq as the first step to consolidate US power on the western frontier of Iran, in

combination with the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, aiming to seek regime-change in Iran.

In this process, Tehran decided to counter this threat by developing a multidimensional foreign policy in Iraq, aiming to take advantage of cultural and economic diplomacy and to overcome the US military supremacy. So far developments show that the Iranian efforts have been successful. The US military presence in Iraq remains a major concern for Tehran but after eight years the Iranian government hopes to neutralize the US military threat by using soft power, i.e. by fostering political, economic and cultural bonds with Baghdad.

As a result in the last eight years the world has attested the dramatic improvement of Iran-Iraq foreign and economic relations. Tehran sees the Iraqi Shiites as the long oppressed co-religionists who have now taken the lead in the Iraqi politics. This development agrees with the Shiite Iranian worldview and geo-political aspirations in the region vis-à-vis the role of the US, Britain and Israel.

The improvement in the Iran-Iraq ties is attested in numerous joint meetings of officials. Iran has close ties with various Iraqi officials and, following Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's first official visit to Iraq in March 2008, the high-level visits from both sides to one another's capitals were on the rise in 2009.²⁰ In June 2009, Ali Dabbaq, the Iraqi Government Spokesman, underscored allegations about Iran's role in the political and military instability in Iraq, asserting that "relations between Iran and Iraq are friendly and there is no acute or fundamental problem between the two countries."²¹ In July 2009, only ten days after his Prime Minister's visit to Tehran, Iraqi National Security Advisor Muwaffaq al-Rubay'i traveled to the Iranian capital in order to "strengthen the brotherly relations between the two countries, institutionalize the security agreements with Iran and make some arrangements to carry out the two sides' policies in the region and in international organizations."²²

Iranian prestige and popularity amongst the Shiites in Iraq are obvious on various occasions, e.g. in the case of the donation from Tehran of an Iranian jetliner along with Iranian pilots to serve as Iraqi Premier Nouri al-Maliki's presidential plane.²³ On another occasion it has been allegedly claimed by US journalists in Iraq that the pictures of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have been cited in the offices of high-ranking bureaucrats in Basra and other cities in the Shiite areas of Iraq.

i. The Iraqi political system

With regard to the political scene in Iraq, Iranian officials have repeatedly dismissed allegations that Tehran is pursuing a hidden agenda in Iraq to establish an Iran-style Islamic Republic. Instead Iran keeps reiterating her readiness to support Iraq's democratically elected government.²⁴ In this

²⁰ "Larijani in Najaf to meet top Shiite cleric," March 24, 2009 <http://en.aswataliraq.info/?p=110331>; "Iran's Rafsanjani Visits Iraq," March 2, 2009 <http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=14717>.

²¹ "Baghdad Spokesman Dismisses Iran's Interference In Iraq," Fars News Agency, June 30, 2009

²² "Iraq Security Advisor In Iran To Further Improve Ties," E'temad Online, July 6, 2009. IRANTRACKER

²³ "Tehran gives Al-Maliki's government an aircraft,"

http://www.kuwaittimes.net/read_news.php?newsid=MzA5MTg0NzMx

²⁴ "Iraq President to Attend Nowruz Celebration in Iran," March 24, 2010

context, the Iranian Foreign Ministry saluted enthusiastically the Iraq parliamentary elections in March 2010.²⁵ Undoubtedly Tehran keeps a close eye on political developments in Iraq and is able to influence her main Iraqi allies in the same fashion that the US-Britain and Arab countries act with their own allies in the Iraqi politics. Iranian influence now is certainly more than the US would expect prior the 2003 war. The degree of the Iranian involvement cannot be determined for now because of lack of adequate evidence. This is an ongoing process which is largely invisible and will become more visible once there are tangible developments in the short-run.

ii. Challenges to the Iraq-Iran rapprochement

In spite of the friendly rapprochement between the two countries, there are still ongoing disputes inherited from the era prior to 2003. Iran seems eager to resolve them. Iran and Iraq are two neighbors, sharing a 1,458 km boundary dating back to the 1639 Zohab treaty between the Ottoman Sultanate and Safavid Iran. This border line has not been altered ever since but it has been the geographical framework for three disputes between the two countries.

a. The precise position of the Iran-Iraq border

There is a dispute regarding the precise position of the Iran-Iraq border. This dispute became evident in the end of 2009 when Iraq attempted to proceed to the auction of development rights to oil fields near the Iranian border. In response Tehran occupied the Iraqi Fakka oil well in Maysan province in December 2009, claiming that the seized well in fact belongs to the Islamic Republic.²⁶ The confrontation lasted for three days and once an agreement had been secured between the two governments the Iranian forces withdrew from the well. Iranian officials considered the incident as a misunderstanding, claiming that it is an issue of technical and expert nature which needs to be solved by specifying the border areas.²⁷ Thus both sides agreed to pursue diplomatic negotiations to demarcate the border more clearly. On February 21, 2010, an Iran-Iraq committee met in the southern Iranian city of Qasr-e Shirin and launched a workshop group aiming to delineate the border between the two countries.²⁸

b. Iran-Iraq War Reparations

Another issue of bilateral nature is the question of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war reparations. Iranian officials, such as Ali Larijani, the Speaker of Iran's parliament, and other members of the Iranian

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=121556§ionid=351020101>

²⁵ "Iran Hails Iraq's Election In An Official Statement," Iranian Students News Agency - IRNA, March 9, 2010.

²⁶ "Iran-Iraq Oil Field Standoff Continues," December 20, 2009

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB126124128139098699.html>

²⁷ "Iran Says Iraq Border Incident a Misunderstanding," The New York Times, December 22, 2009 <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2009/12/22/world/international-uk-iran-iraq-border.html?scp=8&sq=iran&st=cse>, (December 27, 2009).

parliament have claimed that Tehran intends to ask for payments from Iraq for the damage inflicted to the country during the war. The Iranian claim for the Iraqi reparations is based on Article 6 of United Nations Resolution 598.²⁹ Apparently this issue is just emerging in the Iranian political agenda and it will be used instrumentally by Tehran in the process of bargaining with Baghdad on various issues of bilateral interest. Nevertheless Iranian officials are cautious not to press intensively on the issue, thinking that such a move may lead to the opposite result, especially at a time that the Iraqi inner political scene remains very fragile.

c. The case of Kurdistan

The issue of the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan and Kurdish aspirations for establishing an independent Kurdistan encompassing the lands from Turkey, Syria and Iran where Kurds reside, is a major issue of contemporary politics with puzzling prospects and repercussions for the future geopolitical balance of power. The issue of Kurdistan is associated with the withdrawal of the Ottoman rule in the region after the First World War (1914-1918) and the inability of world powers to observe the establishment of Kurdistan as this was agreed in the treaty of Sevres (1920).³⁰ The US initiative to curb Saddam Hussein's power after the Second Gulf War (1990) led to the *de facto* formation of an autonomous Kurdistan in 1992, with its own government and parliament. The 2003 US-British invasion of Iraq led to the enhancement of the Kurdish aspirations in northern Iraq.

Contrary to the US, British and Israeli plans to enhance the Iraqi Kurdistan, the neighbouring governments in the region, including the Iraqi government in Baghdad, i.e. Iran, Syria, and Turkey, remain adamant against the establishment of an independent Kurdistan. Apparently they are concerned with the Kurdish aspirations to form a larger Kurdistan by promoting the annexation of the neighboring provinces where Kurds reside in the aforementioned countries. They have made various agreements to counter assaults of Kurdish separatist groups (PKK, PJAK and the like) in their own lands, by coordinating their efforts, including military operations and strikes inside the Iraqi Kurdistan.³¹ In July 2010 Iranian General Hossein Zolfaqari noted that Turkey has been instrumental in suppressing PJAK and thus Iran experienced no Kurdish activity on the Iran-Turkey border.³²

The Iranian policy in Kurdistan is also puzzling. Tehran is in agreement and collaboration with the other countries, especially Turkey, in order to curb the military action of the Kurdish guerrillas. The Iranians are deeply concerned with the separatist activity of Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) in the Iranian Kurdistan and they are actually fighting against such a prospect

²⁸ "Iran-Iraq Committee on Border Demarcation to Meet on Sunday," Mehr News Agency, February 20, 2010.

²⁹ "Iran Still Seeks War Reparations from Iraq, MPs Say," May 23, 2010, <http://www.aliraqi.org/forums/showthread.php?t=99189>.

³⁰ Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries* (SUNY Press, 2004), 38.

³¹ "Why Iran will continue to shell Iraq," May 7, 2009

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jun/16/iran-shelling-iraq>

³² "Tehran Urges Baghdad To Take Stricter Measures Against PJAK," Fars News Agency, July 23, 2010.

in collaboration with the Baghdad government. In June 2010, units of the Iranian military allegedly entered Iraqi Kurdistan pursuing Kurdish militant groups and shelling the border region in late May. On June 8, 2010 a platoon-sized Iranian formation, following the incursion, remained positioned on the Iraqi side of the border and built a small fortification.³³ Tehran rejected these allegations through her ambassador in Iraq.

On the other hand, it is suggested in this analysis that Tehran has also an alternative policy for Kurdistan, which Turkey and Syria are lacking, and it can be fully implemented in case the Kurds manage to establish an independent state. The Kurdistan issue is essentially not a major problem for Iran. From the countries involved in this dispute, Iran has the strongest card in order to address the Kurdistan issue. As shown in the section of the cultural diplomacy, Tehran's card is unique and deals with the cultural background of Kurds. Given that Kurds are Iranian people, their language is Iranian and they share common culture, literature, myths, legends and tradition with Iran, these are major assets which can be exclusively employed by Tehran in order to resolve the political dispute and come to terms with Kurdish leaders. Although the Kurds are predominantly are Sunnis and they promote a secular lifestyle, they share the Iranian, not the Turkish or the Arab, legacy in order to achieve the nation-making process if they establish a Kurdish state. In this case Iran can be very instrumental in stepping in and helping them out to form their own national profile, although this contradicts the Shiite Islamist ideology of the Islamic Republic. This is a policy that Tehran has adopted in the similar case of Tajikistan. In any case, Iran is culturally a more attractive option to the Kurds than Turkey or Syria and can emerge stronger simply by employing her cultural diplomacy.³⁴

As a whole with regard to the Iranian political goals in Iraq, it must be mentioned that the main goal of the Iranian policy is to achieve the withdrawal of the entire US-British forces from the country, to preserve Iraq's territorial unity and to secure the supreme role of the Shiites in Iraqi politics. Iran is not pursuing currently a policy to redraw borders or to destabilize Iraq because Iranian officials are very well aware of the fact that in this case destabilization of Iraq will become a threat to the stability of Iran *per se*.

II. Political Ties with Syria

Iran's role in Lebanon is intimately interconnected with Tehran's alliance with Damascus. This alliance has been the most durable one in the Middle East and this resilience results from the fact that both countries share long-term interests. These are dictated by geography and the border arrangement of states which were created in the aftermath of the First World War in the Middle East. Syria's capital,

³³ "Kurds say small unit of Iranian troops enters Iraq," June 1, 2010

<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE65350M20100604>

"Iranian Troops Building Fort in Iraq," June 8, 2010

<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jun/08/world/la-fg-iraq-iran-incursion-20100609>

Damascus, is only an hour's driving distance from the Lebanese border and the Israel-occupied Golan Heights. Syria's location makes her vulnerable to Israel and this fact, in combination with Syrian military weakness, are enough reasons to seek an ally through whom Syrians will be able to promote their interests further in the region. On her part, Iran views Syria as the most trustworthy ally in the region, an ally who can actually offer Tehran what the latter is lacking: a bridge, an intermediary platform through which Iran can influence developments in Lebanon, Palestine and the Eastern Mediterranean. During the Iran-Iraq War, Syria sided with Iran and was isolated by the other Arab countries, with the exception of Libya. Iran and Syria have had a strategic alliance ever since, partially due to their common animosity towards Saddam Hussein and the Shiite faith of Assad's regime. This mutual alliance seems to last, overcoming various obstacles that have threatened its stability and credibility.

Iran has been successful to create a unified public front with Syria against Israel over Palestine. In a June 2010 meeting with Syrian Speaker Abrash, Iranian President Ahmadinejad stressed out the importance of the Syria-Iran alliance with regard to Palestine. A few days later Iranian Vice President Rahimi highlighted the need for joint efforts in aiding the Palestinians. In this context, Iranian high-ranking official conduct frequent visits to Syria and vice versa. In May 2009, Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad visited his Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. The two leaders reiterated their allegiance to the Palestinian resistance, reaffirming the two countries' strategic relationship.³⁵ On the January 7, 2010 Tehran meeting between Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Ahmadinejad and the Syrian Speaker of Parliament Mahmoud al-Abrash in Tehran, Ahmadinejad stated, "Iran and Syria have a joint mission to create a new world order on the basis of justice, humanity, and belief in God."³⁶ Additionally Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani also stressed the strategic importance of Damascus for Tehran, claiming that "the Syrian government is among those governments which have strategic and age-old relations with Iran and it has close cooperation with Iran on political and other issues related to the establishment of security in the region."³⁷

The fact that Iran views Syria as the bridge between her, Lebanon and Palestine is reflected by the fact that Syria has provided shelter for Hizbullah and Hamas for years. Hizbullah's leader Hassan Nasrallah and Hamas's leader Khaled Meshaal conduct frequent meetings in Damascus. The same is true for key military officers of both groups. This became evident by the assassination of the Hizbullah senior military official Imad Mughniyah in Damascus (12 February 2008).³⁸ In late February 2010, President Ahmadinejad, accompanied by members of the Iranian parliament and government ministers, visited Syria and held talks with Assad, Palestinian leaders, and the head of Lebanese Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah. Ahmadinejad announced that Iran and Syria had agreed to lift visa requirements for travel

³⁴ View the section on cultural diplomacy.

³⁵ "Syria Alliance With Iran A Force For Stability: Assad," Reuters UK, May 5, 2009, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/usPoliticsNews/idUKTRE5446HZ20090505> (May 8, 2009); <http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/syria-iran-foreign-relations>.

³⁶ "Ahmadinejad: Iran and Syria Will Create a New World Order," January 7, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1141049.html>

³⁷ <http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/syria-iran-foreign-relations>.

³⁸ "Bomb in Syria Kills Militant Sought as Terrorist". February 13, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/14/world/middleeast/14syria.html>

between the two countries and declared that the strategic relations between Syria, Iran, and the “Islamic Resistance” can be utilized to “solve political problems” in the region.

Support for anti-Israeli organizations is a major axis of bilateral ties. Tehran and Damascus have struck a long-term deal to support Hizbullah in Lebanon serving mutual interests in the region, such as providing joint assistance for and advocacy on the behalf of Palestinians and condemnation of Israel on various issues related to Palestine. For the religious government of Iran, Hizbullah is the spearhead of Islamic war against Israel. For the secular government of Syria the group is the best partner in Assad’s effort to keep stability in the inner political scene of Lebanon after the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005. Thus Hizbullah has become the catalyst of Syrian-Iranian strategic collaboration in Lebanon.

As far as military cooperation is concerned, the two countries conduct visible and invisible joint missions, including clandestine weapons transfers. In 2006, Iran and Syria signed a defense treaty against their common opponents, namely Israel and the United States. Iran has also allegedly supplied Syria with military equipment and paid for some of Syria’s military purchases from the two countries’ common suppliers, Russia and China. In October 2009, US soldiers discovered ammunition aboard a German cargo ship traveling from Iran to Syria. The ammunition consisted of 7.62 millimeter bullets for Kalashnikov model rifles.³⁹ On June 30, 2010, according to information which had been leaked by unnamed Israeli and US officials, Iran allegedly provided Syria with a radar system aiming to prevent Israel from launching a surprise attack against Iran’s nuclear facilities. Iran and Syria rejected these allegations.⁴⁰

Having the aforementioned in mind, it is plausible to assume that during the ongoing crisis that Assad faces in Syria, Iran’s role for the stability of the Syrian government is crucial. Given the geopolitical significance of Damascus for Tehran, Iran fully supports Assad in his struggle against his political opponents in Syria. For instance, one of the key issues that Assad faces is how to deal with the civil protests in almost all major cities of Syria. The Syrian government is lacking the know-how and expertise in dealing with civil protests. It is actually the army that is being asked to put down the protests and not a sophisticated and specially-trained police force. As a result, the casualties both amongst the protesters and the government forces are extensive. In this process Assad relies on Tehran’s knowledge and expertise in order to overcome this crisis effectively. Iran’s alliance with Syria seems to become stronger, especially after the rather ambivalent role of Ankara toward Assad and his political opponents.⁴¹

III. Political ties with Lebanon

Iran has always considered Lebanon as a strategic ally, but it was actually after the 1979 Islamic

³⁹ “Iran Used German Ship to Send Arms to Syria,” October 13, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1120516.html>

⁴⁰ Levinson, Charles, “Iran Arms Syria With Radar,” June 30, 2010 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703426004575338923106485984.html> (July 15, 2010)

⁴¹ “Syrian opposition to meet in Turkey’s Antalya,” May 25, 2011 <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=syrian-opposition-to-gather-in-antalya-2011-05-25>

Revolution that Tehran became deeply involved in Lebanese politics. Lebanon is of particular strategic importance for Iran for the following main reasons: its borders with Palestine and the animosity of both countries to Israel, and the Shiite minority of Lebanon and the access it can provide for Iran to the Mediterranean for various economic and geopolitical aims.

Bilateral relations have been quite good since the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 and the formation of the Islamic Republic. Ayyatullah Khomeini and the Iranian Shiite clergy viewed the Shiite Lebanese population as a vital partner in their endeavor to export the message of the Islamic Revolution in Lebanon and the region. Thus Tehran offered support for the Shiites in Lebanon and founded Hizbullah of Lebanon in 1982.⁴² This occurred in response to the Israeli invasion in Lebanon; Tehran deployed around 2000 men of the units of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps to serve as defense forces and to provide medical support to the Lebanese population.⁴³

The establishment of Hizbullah marked the beginning of close political and military collaboration between Iran, the Lebanese Shia and a portion of non-Muslim Lebanese political groups. The 2000 Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon boosted the prestige of Hizbullah in Lebanon and eventually this organization became an active political power, especially after the 2006 war. Overtime the group has gained substantial political power in Lebanon and won about 10% of parliamentary seats in the 2005 general election. Hizbullah and the March 8 Coalition did not improve their showing in the 2009 elections but this did not prevent the group from retaining its military power.

Iran has been accused by its opponents, such as the United States, Israel, and several European countries, of providing extensive financial assistance and military training to Hezbollah since the 1980s. The United States and Israel list Hezbollah as a terrorist entity. According to the same circles the Islamic Republic allegedly provides Hezbollah with \$200 million annually.⁴⁴

On her part, Iran has provided diplomatic and political support for Hizbullah and she has systematically downplayed its financial and military aid for the group. In July 2010, Iran's Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani praised Iran's support for Hizbullah, claiming that the group nurtures the original ideas of Islamic Jihad. He rejected the listing of Hizbullah as a terrorist group, accusing of terrorism those powers equipping Israel.⁴⁵

Due to both countries animosity towards Israel, much of Tehran's political interaction with Beirut is related to Israel and the Palestinian territories. Officials from both countries have systematically urged greater cooperation against Israel. For the Iranian officials Lebanon is the symbol of resistance against Israel and a model for other Islamic and Arab states against Israel's policies. In June 2009, Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah emphasized the commitment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and

⁴² A. Ehteshami and R. A. Hiinebusch, *Syria and Iran. Middle-Powers in a penetrated regional system* (London, 1997), 115.

⁴³ C. Le Thomas, "Le Hezbollah et la communauté chiite au Liban: une adéquation imparfaite," *Moyen-Orient 2*, (2009), 28-32 ; Country Studies: Lebanon, U.S. Library of Congress, <http://countrystudies.us/lebanon/103.htm> (June 23, 2009)

⁴⁴ Abrams, Elliott, "Lebanon's Triumph, Iran's Tragedy," *New York Times*, June 11, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/12/opinion/12abrams.html?_r=1 (June 23, 2009)

⁴⁵ "Larijani: Iran Proud of Backing Hezbollah," July 30, 2010 <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=136767§ionid=351020101> (July 30, 2010).

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei to support Lebanon in order to become a strong state without preconditions, adding that Iran is ready to support Lebanon's military if necessary.⁴⁶

Regarding the Iranian-Lebanese state-to-state relations, Iran supports the territorial integrity of Lebanon and simultaneously attempts to enhance the image and role of her allies in the domestic political scene. In December 2009 Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki claimed Iran's policy towards Beirut is to support the Lebanese people and respect all Lebanese political groups. In a meeting with Lebanese President Suleiman, Vice President for Parliamentary Affairs Muhammad-Reza Tajeddini reiterated Tehran's support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Lebanon.⁴⁷ Thus Tehran keeps contact with every political group, including the anti-Iranian political powers in Lebanon, the March 14 Coalition led by Saad al-Hariri.

The continuing Iranian influence in Lebanon is attested by the recently often visits of Iranian and Lebanese officials. In December 2009, during the ground-breaking ceremony of a new Iranian embassy building in Beirut, Mottaki urged Lebanon and Iran to strengthen bilateral ties to improve peace and security in Lebanon. In a meeting with Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, he went on to condemn foreign interference in Lebanon, highlighting the opportunity for cooperation between Iran and Lebanon. Berri emphasized the necessity for collaboration between his country and Iran.⁴⁸

Since 2008, Lebanese president Michel Suleiman has systematically encouraged bilateral relations. In 2008 he requested Iran to provide Lebanon with modern medium arms in order to enable the Lebanese army to fight terrorism and maintain national security.⁴⁹ In January 2010 he met with high-ranking Iranian officials, such as Mohammad Reza Tajeddini. In that meeting the Lebanese president praised bilateral relations and encouraged the two countries to coordinate their efforts in the United Nations Security Council, in which Lebanon is a non-permanent member for 2010-2011. In March 2010, Suleiman met with Kamal Kharrazi, the head of Iran's foreign relations strategic council.⁵⁰

In this process Lebanese governments maintain military relations with Tehran. Lebanese officials have repeatedly and openly asked for Iranian military aid; for instance Lebanese President Michel Suleiman who in November 2009 visited Iran to discuss the further expansion of security ties between the two countries. After the August 3, 2010, Israeli-Lebanese border clash -termed as the Adaisseh Incident- and the subsequent American threats to cut off funding for the [Lebanese Army](#), Lebanese President Suleiman asked Iran to sell advanced military equipment to the Lebanese Army. Hezbollah supported Suleiman's call. After a few days, Iran announced that its defense industry has the capacity to supply arms to more than 50 countries. A number of high-ranking officials in Iraq and Lebanon affirmed the intention of both countries to collaborate in this respect and the issue remains open until today.⁵¹

⁴⁶ "Hezbollah: Iran To Support Lebanon," May 30, 2009, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2009/05/20095308035507613.html>

⁴⁷ "Lebanon, Iran To Coordinate in UN Security Council," January 17, 2010, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90777/90854/6870828.html>

⁴⁸ "Nebih Berri: Lebanon Supports Iran at Int'l Circles," Fars News Agency, December 22, 2009.

⁴⁹ "Lebanon Asks Iran to Supply its Army with Midsize Weapons," November 26, 2008, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/lebanon-asks-iran-to-supply-its-army-with-midsize-weapons-1.258310>.

⁵⁰ "Iran, Lebanon to Promote Bilateral Relations," Fars News Agency, March 24, 2010.

⁵¹ "Beirut wants Iran to equip Lebanon Army," August 24, 2010, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/139949.html>.

President Ahmadinejad's visit sent a strong message to Israel, the US and the EU. Ahmadinejad's statement that 'the people of South Lebanon will determine the future of the region' in combination with his presence next to the border with Israel was an effort to make the Iranian influence in Lebanon and the region clear to Tel Aviv. It is evident from the above analysis that overtime the role of Iran in Lebanon is becoming more direct, imminent and enhanced at the expense of the US and Israeli interests both inside and outside Lebanon. Iranian officials are very patient regarding the steps they need to take every time in Lebanon. Yet they know that there is a power vacuum in the country and at a time when the Middle East witnesses the gradual decrease of US influence, Iran poses as the major challenge to the US interests in Lebanon.

C. Economy

I. Economic ties with Iraq

Due to her geographical proximity with Iraq, Tehran has always, even during the time of the Baathist rule, considered her neighbor as a vital economic partner, eyeing the Iraqi consumerist lifestyle and market as a suitable place for Iranian investment and exports. In a July 2010 meeting between the Iranian First Vice President's Deputy Ali Aqa-Mohammadi and the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, there was a discussion about the development of bilateral economic ties. They highlighted their commitment to remove barriers to trade. Maliki said that his government is committed to expanding its collaboration with Iran in the fields of electricity and oil production. He further encouraged private Iranian firms to involve further in Iraq's economy.⁵²

i. Trade

Geographic proximity ensures low transfer cost for bilateral trade and the low prices of Iranian products of good quality has boosted Tehran's economic expansion in Iraq. After the fall of Saddam Hussein bilateral trade relations, based on 2010 estimates, have been boosted in an unprecedented manner, reaching a record of \$8 billion (2010), rising from \$1,5 billion (2006).⁵³

Iran has signed new trade agreements with Iraq and the increase in the bilateral trade is mostly due to the dramatic increase of Iranian exports to Iraq. The latter is the most important non-oil export market of Tehran with almost 30% of Iran's non-oil exports going to Iraq, including construction materials, petrochemicals, medical and industrial equipment. By contrast, Iraq's exports to Iran are less-refined products (agriculture, leather and sulfur) and insignificant in size, for instance amounting to \$37 million (2007).⁵⁴

Bilateral trade between provinces is a major dimension of Iran-Iraq economic relations. Tehran and Baghdad have established various border terminals and constructed a large number of roads to facilitate trade across the border. In July 2009, the two countries signed a MOU to restrict governmental barriers to trade. Also an Iraqi official, Abdul Zahra Kabian of Maysan province, stated that economic cooperation between Iran's Khuzestan province and Iraq's Maysan province is of mutual fundamental significance and invited Iranian companies to invest in his province based on

⁵² "Iran, Iraq to Boost Economic Ties," July 26, 2010 http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=223680

⁵³ "Iran Exports to Iraq to Pass \$8bln in 2010: Official," April 25, 2010 <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE63O11U20100425>; <http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/iraq-iran-foreign-relations>

⁵⁴ Chon, Gina, "Iran's Cheap Goods Stifle Iraq Economy," March 18, 2009 http://online.wsj.com/article/NA_WSJ_PUB:SB123732669334561799.html.

Iran-Iraq cultural ties.⁵⁵

Iran adopts the same policy of improving trade relations in the case of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region and Iran's Kurdistan province. According to Kurdish officials last April, the bilateral trade between the region and Iran could reach the level of \$4 billion in 2010.⁵⁶ Iranian officials have repeatedly stressed the significance of Iraqi Kurdistan for bilateral trade ties and the reconstruction of Iraq. They have also expressed their readiness to cooperate in this process. Actually they systematically organize various exhibitions aiming to develop economic and trade relations and promote further investment in the Iraqi Kurdistan.⁵⁷

Iran has supported the creation of a joint free trade zone with Iraq for developing trade and attracting foreign investment in the industrial sector. Iraqi officials are ardent supporters of such an initiative.⁵⁸ In April 2010, the Basra Investment Commission, a city located 10 miles from the Iranian border, approved the creation of a free trade zone with Iran. According to the approved proposal, a private firm will invest \$16 million in the next 25 years in this zone.⁵⁹ In order to facilitate bilateral trade Iran has opened branches of Iranian banks in Baghdad and has established a taskforce for the development of bilateral trade with Iraq.⁶⁰ In November 2010 Iraqi banks have welcomed the prospect of setting up shops in the Arvand Free Zone.⁶¹

⁵⁵ "Iran, Iraq Ink MoU To Boost Trade," July 28, 2009; <http://english.trib.ir/news/political/item/46604-iran-iraq-ink-mou-to-boost-trade>; "Iraq Welcomes Iranian Investment," July 23, 2009; <http://www.iriqcc.ir/EN/shownews.asp?ID=99&name=>

⁵⁶ "Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan to Boost Trade Exchanges," April 19, 2010;

http://pukmedia.com/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2426:iran-iraqi-kurdistan-to-boost-trade-exchanges-&Itemid=393

⁵⁷ "Envoy Stresses Iran's Readiness to Aid Iraq With Reconstruction," May 12, 2010; <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8902221375>

⁵⁸ "Iran, Iraq to Set Up Joint Free Trade Zone," March 8, 2010;

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8812171508>

⁵⁹ "Basra Approves Free Trade-zone with Iran," Iraq Business News, April 14, 2010

<http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/?p=2472>.

⁶⁰ Some of these banks are under US sanctions for their support of Iran's nuclear program. "Iranian Reveals Plans To Expand Role In Iraq," January 29, 2007; <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/29/world/middleeast/29iranians.html>

⁶¹ "Iraq to open bank branches in Iran" <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/150103.html>

ii. Energy

Iran has heavily invested in Iraq's energy sector as a means of boosting bilateral economic collaboration. Particularly in the field of electricity, Tehran has provided electricity for many Iraqi cities, towns and villages.⁶² In 2009 Iranian energy exports to Iraq amounted to \$ 1 billion, 40% of which was electricity products.⁶³

In the oil sector, Iran focuses on the development of oilfields along the Iran-Iraq border. In September 2009 both countries signed an MOU to invest and explore their commonly-held oilfields.⁶⁴ In January 2010 Iran signed a \$500-\$600 million contract with Iraq to export 19,000 barrels of Iranian diesel daily to her neighbor throughout 2010.⁶⁵ Iran is also active in the refined petroleum sector of Iraq, selling her refined petroleum products to Baghdad, which amount to 30% of the 2009 Iranian energy exports (\$ 1 billion) to Iraq.

In the gas sector Iran is in the process of implementing a complex policy, aiming to promote the transfer of its natural gas reserves in the foreseeable future. Tehran is considering the option to export its domestically produced natural gas to Europe by using Iraq's extensive infrastructure. Tehran's energy planning and ambitions include the formation of an Iran-Iraq-Syria-Mediterranean Sea pipeline. Currently Iranian officials are in the process of examining the prospects of feasibility of such an endeavor with their respective counterparts in other countries.⁶⁶ Additionally, Iran and Iraq formed a working group in July 2010 dealing with Iranian gas transfers and aiming to examine the prospects of natural gas delivery to Iraq. The hope of Iranian officials is to be able to supply Iraq with its required gas in the next two years. Officials from the Iranian Gas Export Company are leading the talks. Although Iraq has an estimated 110 trillion cubic feet of proven natural gas reserves, since the 2003 Iraqi War Iraqi domestic gas production has fallen considerably.⁶⁷

Apparently Tehran's energy ambitions in Iraq are high but, in order to achieve their goals in this process, Iranian officials need to address the problem of US sanctions targeting the Iranian energy sector since last July. These sanctions aim to prevent any foreign entity from investing more than \$20 million in the Iranian energy sector, selling gasoline or refinery-related services or equipment to Iran at a value of \$1 million per shipment or more than \$5 million over a 12-month period. Nevertheless, the close ties between the current Iraqi government and Tehran could actually pose serious problem to the US sanctions against Iran. Iraqi officials are convinced that the US sanctions against Iran could damage Baghdad's effort for the reconstruction and development of

⁶² Evans, Michael, "Iranian Builders Win Contracts In City That Shias Helps To Wreck," February 20, 2009; http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article5769328.ece

⁶³ "A Report on Iran-Iraq Economic Interactions: Iran to Boost Non-oil Exports to Iraq to 7.5 bln," May 23, 2010 http://www.mojnews.com/en/Miscellaneous/ViewContents.aspx?Contract=cms_Contents_I_News&r=50668.

⁶⁴ "Iran, Iraq Adopt Three Methods To Invest In Joint Oilfields," September 13, 2009; <http://payvand.com/news/09/sep/1142.html>

⁶⁵ "Iran to Sell Diesel to Iraq - Agency," January 25, 2010 http://televisionwashington.com/floater_article1.aspx?lang=en&t=1&id=17400 (January 25, 2010);

⁶⁶ "Iran Trying Different Routes For Gas Exports To Europe," July 13, 2010; <http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/iraq-iran-foreign-relations>

⁶⁷ "Iran, Iraq Commence New Gas Talks," July 28, 2010 <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=136512§ionid=351020102>

their country.⁶⁸ According to anonymous Iranian sources, Iranian officials are in the process of countering these sanctions and overcome obstacles exploiting the close cultural between Tehran and Baghdad and the mutual interest in boosting bilateral economic ties further.

iii. Construction

Iran is very active in the construction sector of Iraq, having a strong share in Iraq's reconstruction after the 2003 war. Tehran exports 8,000 tons of cement to Iraq daily; additionally Iranian firms have undertaken multiple construction projects, such as schools and power station construction, worthy almost \$ 380 million.⁶⁹ Last year Iranian firms undertook a \$ 1.5 billion project involving the construction of 5,000 houses and three hotels in the city of Basra.⁷⁰

iv. Transportation

In regard to transportation, Iran's automobile sector is booming and the Iranian government boosts its role by signing various contracts with Iraq and Syria and other countries in Latin America and Africa. Iran's automobile companies export 40,000 automobiles annually. Moreover, in June 2010 the Iranian Oghab Afshan Industrial and Manufacturing Company signed a contract to manufacture 300 buses and export them to Iraq.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Van Heuvelen, Ben, and Ben Lando, "Iraqi Oil and Gas Moves Could Violate U.S. Sanctions on Iran," Iraq Oil Report, July 16, 2010
<http://www.iraqoilreport.com/politics/oil-policy/iraqi-oil-and-gas-moves-could-violate-u-s-sanctions-on-iran-4826/> (July 28, 2010)

⁶⁹ "Iran Exports to Iraq to Pass \$8bln in 2010: Official," April 25, 2010
<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE63O11U20100425> (July 28, 2010)

⁷⁰ Michael Evans, "Iranian Builders Win Contracts In City That Shias Helps To Wreck," February 20, 2010;
http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article5769328.ece

⁷¹ "Iran Exports to Iraq to Pass \$8bln in 2010: Official," Reuters, April 25, 2010

<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE63O11U20100425> (July 28, 2010);

"Iran to Export 300 Buses to Iraq," June 14, 2010; <http://www.iraqdirectory.com/DisplayNews.aspx?id=12986>

II. Economic ties with Syria

As already mentioned, Iran has always seen Syria as her most strategic ally in the second half of the 20th century. Yet this relationship has been transformed to a prominent economic alliance only in the last decade, resulting mainly from the geopolitical developments in the region and the fact that Syria has also been under major US sanctions. Iran has pursued the policy of economic involvement in Syria as a means of boosting further the traditionally strong political ties with Damascus. Since January 2010 the annual trade between Iran and Syria has valued at \$330 million. Iran is the strong partner in this trade balance with imports from Syria reaching \$16 million of the total.

The Islamic Republic has over \$1.6 billion worth of technical and engineering projects active in the country.⁷² For instance, the Iranian automobile company Saipa is jointly controlled by Syria (15%) and Iran (85%) and produces compact automobiles for the Syrian and Iranian markets. The production of the Saipa 141 began in the Syrian city Homs in July 2009.⁷³ In April 2010 the Iran-Syria 12th Joint High Commission meeting explored the prospects of new agreements in regard to water supply to Syria, the export of Iran's natural gas to Syria through Turkey, export of polymeric and petrochemical products media cooperation and customs. Both sides encouraged endeavors to augment bilateral trade to \$5 billion. A 17-article agreement was signed at the meeting aiming to boost cooperation in trade, investment, planning and statistics, industries, air, naval and rail transportation, communication and information technology, health, agriculture, [and] tourism.⁷⁴

In the energy sector Iran participates in the construction of a joint oil refinery worthy \$2.6 billions along with companies from the Middle East, Malaysia and Venezuela. This refinery will be able to refine 140,000 barrels a day. Tehran aims to refine more of its own crude oil and be stronger regarding refined oil imports, including gasoline.⁷⁵

The ongoing industrial projects between Syria and Iran worth \$1.3 billion and this is expected to rise to \$ 4.3 billions in the future. In this process Iranian specialists have inaugurated car production lines, cement production plants, electricity power plants, water channels, and silos in Syria.⁷⁶ It is also estimated that more than 36 Iranian companies are operating in Syria currently. With regard to the banking ties, Iran succeeded in 2008 to open a joint bank in Damascus with a \$30 million initial capital.⁷⁷ In particular the Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS) and Bank Saderat Iran (BSI) will set up a joint venture bank in Syria, the Syrian Iranian Commercial Bank. The banks will each hold 25% of the \$1.5bn (\$32mn) capital of the new bank. Other partners and shareholders will control the rest. 27% will be

⁷² "Tehran-Damascus Sign Economic MOU," January 12, 2010; http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=211992.

⁷³ <http://www.irantracker.org/global-business-in-iran/projects/syria-iran-production-saipa-automobile>

⁷⁴ "Tehran, Damascus Agree on Establishment of Regional Economic Bloc," IRNA, April 30, 2010; "Iran, Syria Sign Cooperation Pact," Iranian Labor News Agency, May 1, 2010.

⁷⁵ "Syrian Energy Chief Plays Up 'Enormous' Oil And Gas Potential," International Oil Daily, September 24, 2008.

⁷⁶ "Iran Mulling \$3Bill. Investment in Syria," Mehr News, August 18, 2008

⁷⁷ "Iran, Syria Agree To Establish Joint Bank," Fars News July 11, 2008; <http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/syria-iran-foreign-relations>

issued in stock. According to a MOU signed in Damascus on May 25, 2010, Iran will own 60% of the bank.⁷⁸

As in the case of Iraq, Tehran sees Syria as the key partner in her effort to establish a major Iranian gas pipeline route (Iran-Iraq-Syria-Mediterranean Sea pipeline) to Europe through the Eastern Mediterranean, thus bypassing Turkey and Russia as intermediaries in this process.⁷⁹ The Iranian endeavour is ongoing and, under certain circumstances, such as Turkey's support for Iran's energy policy, can pose a challenge to the other pipeline routes which are sponsored by the US and Russia.

III. Economic ties with Lebanon

In the last four decades the economic relations between Iran and Lebanon are of multiple nature, for they involve state-to-state cooperation, state (Iran)-to-non-state parties and groups (AMAL, Hizbullah) ties as well as Religious Foundation-to-Religious Foundation support.

Due to social and religious reasons, Iran has been involved in funding and investment in Lebanon since the time of Muhamad Reza Shah Pahlavi. In 1969 Imam Musa Sadr arrived in Lebanon with Iranian state encouragement, aiming to upgrade the social status of the marginalized Shiites in South Lebanon and Beirut. The establishment of the Movement of the Disinherited (1974) and AMAL (1975) by Sadr was associated with funding and donations mainly from Iran and Syria.

After 1979 the Islamic republic of Iran supported financially both the Lebanese government and non-state groups, especially the Shiite political and paramilitary organization Hizbullah. The continuous Iranian funding and support of Hizbullah aimed to boost the social role of Shiite in the Lebanese society and to enable them to acquire more political power in the Lebanese politics and government.⁸⁰ In 2006 after Hizbullah war with Israel Iran shipped money to Hizbullah to contribute to its reconstruction activities in Lebanon. Moreover Iran dispatched its own reconstruction groups in Lebanon in order to rebuild roads, mosques, and the like.⁸¹

Regarding state-to-state relations, after the 2006 war Tehran changed her policy of diplomatically concealing her support and economic dealings in Lebanon and they have openly undertaken the task of massive investment there. In March 2009 the two countries signed five agreements in a joint economic commission in order to increase their economic cooperation. Iran has promoted economic cooperation with Lebanon in various economic fields. Bilateral trade has increased from \$78.4 million (2006) to \$180 million (2009). According to 2009 statistics, Lebanese exports to the Islamic Republic were almost \$85 million (some 47% of the total).⁸²

⁷⁸ "Iran, Syria to Set Up Joint Bank," May 26, 2010; <http://arabnews.com/economy/article58117.ece>

⁷⁹ "Iran Trying Different Routes For Gas Exports To Europe," Fars News Agency, July 13, 2010; <http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/syria-iran-foreign-relations>

⁸⁰ Rafei, Raed, "Lebanon And Iran Expected To Talk Weapons," LA Times Blog, November 24, 2008; <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2008/11/iran-lebanese-p.html>

⁸¹ "Iran Sending Funds To Hezbollah," November 2, 2006; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6112036.stm>

⁸² "Iran, Lebanon Sign Economic MoU," Tehran Times, June 3, 2010 http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=220676.

In June 2010, Iranian and Lebanese officials signed a MOU to continue holding committee meetings every four months, examining economic relations. The agreement was completed after a follow-up meeting of the sixth joint economic commission between the two countries. Iranian officials have expressed their wish to remove visas for the officials of Iran and Lebanon and their willingness to carry out various projects in Lebanon in the sectors of banking, commercial fairs, transportation and education. Lebanon was further encouraged to remove diplomatic and government visas for the officials of the two countries.⁸³

Regarding the banking sector, officials from Iran's Saderat Bank and the Lebanese central bank discussed in Beirut in May 2010 the further development of economic relations between the two countries. The Lebanese Central Bank Governor Riad Salame supported the prospect of increasing the capitalization of Saderat Bank's branches in Lebanon. Iran discussed also ways to utilize \$100 million in loans which Tehran granted to Lebanon.⁸⁴

A late development of specific importance is the effort of Iran to invest in the technological infrastructure of Lebanon regarding the research, exploration and exploitation of the energy reserves of Lebanon in the Mediterranean Sea. Lebanon does not have the know-how in this process and the need to acquire it is urgent due to the geopolitical circumstances and the fact that Israel, Turkey and Cyprus are already active in this process. In October 2010 Lebanese Energy Minister Gebran Bassil met with his Iranian counterpart Majid Namjou, agreeing to proceed further.⁸⁵

This initiative on Iran's part reflects the willingness of Iran to expand her energy policy to the Eastern Mediterranean and become a major player in the mid-term regarding the energy reserves in the region. By having a major role, Iranian officials aim to influence geopolitical developments in a vital region for Iran due to the Jerusalem Iranian aspirations.

Regarding state-to-party relations and religious foundations-to-religious foundations ties, Tehran keeps supporting Hizbullah openly in a spiritual way and after 2006 Tehran proclaimed for the first time openly her financial support for Hizbullah with regard to economic and development projects related to the reconstruction of South Lebanon and Beirut. This was a turning point in the economic diplomacy of Tehran toward Hizbullah; Iran has ever since boosted her open economic involvement with regard to Hizbullah.

This economic investment is interconnected with political and social projects and due to the sensitive balance of power in Lebanese politics, Tehran has adopted the policy of shipping these funds through the traditional Shiite channels of almsgiving conducted by various religious foundations based in Iran, Lebanon and other countries. The assets are being transferred to Lebanon through bank accounts of various individuals and even in suitcases when necessary. These funds then are distributed by employees of the foundations to Hizbullah and various branches of the Lebanese government and are spent for the construction of hospitals, roads, houses, financial support of families in need and other purposes. For

⁸³ "Iran Exports to Iraq to Pass \$8bln in 2010: Official," April 25, 2010 <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE63011U20100425>.

⁸⁴ "Lebanese, Iranian Bank Officials Discuss Issues of Interest," IRNA, May 29, 2010; <http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/lebanon-iran-foreign-relations>

instance prior to the June 2009 Lebanese elections, Iran promised Hizbullah \$600 million in aid.⁸⁶

As a result Tehran, based on the Shiite tradition of communication channels, has promoted a wide channel of bilingual (Arabic and Persian) employees in Lebanon who, some of them undercover, work for the economic support of the Shiites in Lebanon. This extensive network of communications, intelligence and social welfare employees is the major means of Iranian influence in the Lebanese society and politics today. Tehran hopes that this network will form a legacy for further Iranian influence in Lebanon and the region as a whole in the foreseeable future.

⁸⁵ "Iran ready to help Lebanon's economy," October 7, 2010 <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/145600.html>

⁸⁶ "Iran Offers \$600 Million In Election Financial Aid," Tabnak, March 19, 2009 www.tabnak.ir;
<http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/lebanon-iran-foreign-relations>

D. Iranian Cultural Diplomacy

On many occasions Iranian officials have stressed out the significance of culture as a means of handling crises and in general promoting state foreign policy. On September 25, 2010 President Ahmadinejad stated, “The extensive cohesion among the nations and the commonalities and deep historical and cultural connections prevent differences among the nations of the region disabling the foes from breaking ties.”⁸⁷ Undoubtedly the Islamic Republic considers cultural diplomacy as pivotal in her foreign policy efforts.

The term ‘culture’ for the Iranians is primarily a synonym of ‘Islam’ and then of ‘Iran.’ No doubt the national sentiment is very strong among the political elite of the country and owes much to the Pahlevis educational policy prior to 1979. Iranians feel as Iranians and they are proud of their glorious past. Yet the establishment of the Islamic Republic consists of politicians who view themselves first as Muslims and then as Iranians. Their ethnic origin is important in their worldview but the concept of Islam is stronger. This concept is in accordance with Islamic teachings as these were re-established in the political and communal life of Iranians by Ayyatullah Khomeini and the teachings of the Islamic Revolution (1979).

This has strong repercussions for the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. Whilst the Pahlevis formed their foreign policy based on nationalism and Pan-Iranism, the Islamic Republic promotes religion and Islam. The Shah employed the concept of nation in order to boost Iranian influence amongst the Persian speaking nations of the region and those Arab-speaking and Turkish-speaking countries which also share Iranian cultural tradition with Iran. However, at the time of nation-states in the region this policy failed to materialize Iranian expansion in the Middle East because of the simultaneous development of Pan-Arabism and Pan-Turkism, which actually opposed Pan-Iranism openly and restricted Iranian influence. The concept of Islam which the Islamic Revolution brought in the political arena meant to have a different outcome for the Iranian foreign policy in the subsequent years.

Indeed the concept of Islam, contrary to nationalism, seems to be stronger and to have improved the results of Iranian diplomacy in the region. The notion of Islamic community (‘Umma), the global Islamic concept that all people are equal before God, the spiritual dimension of Islamic politics vis-à-vis western capitalism and materialism, and primarily the prospect of a happy afterlife in combination with the apparent economic-social deficiencies and political failures of Middle Eastern nation-states have brought Islam to the foreground of political thought in the last decades. This situation, in combination with the power vacuum caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the diminishing US influence in the region, have made Islam highly popular amongst Muslims in many nation-states. The Islamic Republic works hectically to fill this power vacuum by promoting Islam as the key-concept in forming the political and social life of all Muslims in the region.

In their foreign Iranian policy makers have adopted the central Islamic principle of twofold

⁸⁷ “President in his second talk with the American students,” September 25, 2010,

division of the world in the *Realm of Islam* (World of Muslims) and the *Realm of War* (World of Non-Muslims). According to Islamic teachings, the *Realm of Islam* is sacred and cannot be violated by the powers of the *Realm of War*. When this happens, then Muslims must defend their Realm and conduct Jihad in both forms, military and spiritual. Iranians view Western technological, economic and political domination in the region as violation of the 'Umma.

In this process the issue of Palestine is central and forms the cornerstone of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic in the Middle East. The Iranian president's recent Lebanon visit and his presence in the Lebanese-Israeli border, the construction of the effigy of the Dome of the Rock in the Lebanese side of the border (with the Iranian flag on top of it), the planned stoning of Israel (imitating the stoning of the Column of Satan in Mecca) and his speeches in border villages reflect a major aspect of Iranian cultural diplomacy amongst the Arabs today.

The central doctrine of Iranian foreign policy is to awake Islamic forces in every Islamic country in order to contribute to the expulsion of western influence and ultimately to the restoration of a centralized Islamic state in the form of a Caliphate or Sultanate. Yet there are mainly two obstacles in this process.

The first one is secular governments ruling states in the Middle East. The political elites of these states view the role of Islam in politics as a threat to their own rule and thus they resist such a prospect. Iran keeps a diplomatic and friendly approach toward other regional governments, trying in the meantime to provide them with arguments and evidence in order to manifest Iran's model of political Islam. In a number of secular states, some of them with Shiite populations (Lebanon, Iraq, Syria), albeit secular in terms of system of government, the Iranian message seems to be attractive. In these cases Iran combines political ideology with geopolitical collaboration in order to foster alliances. Officially Iran is not after the destruction of secular ruling systems. On the contrary, Tehran is trying to familiarize those systems and societies with the traditional model of political Islam in order to convince them about the merit of such a system. In some other cases the Iranian foreign policy seems to be unpopular (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt). A key factor in this process is the form of traditional Islam that the secular states embrace. In most cases this tradition does not agree with the Shiite worldview.

The form of Islamic tradition is the second obstacle that Iran faces in order to convey her message to other fellow Muslims. Iran is Shiite (15% of the global Muslim population) whilst the majority of the Middle Eastern states adhere to the Sunni version of Islam. Although doctrinally there is no difference between the two branches of Islam, there are many peculiarities regarding the cults and religious tradition that each branch has developed over time.

Indeed the Sunni-Shiite dichotomy of Islam has proven to be a major obstacle for Iran in her effort to spread Islamism, probably the same situation that Pan-Iranism faced with regard to Pan-Arabism and Pan-Turkism during the Pahlevis. Ayyatullah Khomeini foresaw this issue and openly proclaimed that Shiite and Sunni Muslims must unite under the common cause of expelling non-Muslim domination from the 'Umma. The Iranian government today claims the same. Yet the majority of Sunni

Muslims are not convinced and the gap remains.

Facing this situation Iran has adopted a realistic policy: to expand Iranian influence actively in countries with Shiite population and to keep a low profile in Sunni countries, emphasizing the common elements between Shiite and Sunnis and underscoring the differences, depending on the circumstances every time. In another case Tehran is instrumental in developing her cultural foreign policy based on the ethnic element.

Regarding the first category, which includes Iraq and Lebanon, as well as Syria under some conditions, the Islamic Republic highlights the common destiny of the Shiites in Iran and in these countries. Given that they share the same version of Shiite Islam, i.e. they are Twelvers, Iranian foreign policy is instrumental in being popular amongst the Shiites of Iraq and Lebanon. By maintaining cultural offices in the capitals and major cities of these countries, Tehran can actually conduct cultural diplomacy by organizing seminars, conferences, university studies and students exchange, scientific collaboration, religious gatherings, lunches and dinners, donations to needy families, establishment of hospitals, commemorations of Shiite religious festivals, enabling the young generation of Arabs to visit Iran and vice versa in the important Shiite sacred places and so on. These cultural offices are run by the Iranian government or by religious foundation under the direction of Great Ayyatullahs both inside and outside Iran. The state cultural offices include the Cultural Centres run by cultural attaches and funded by the Council for the Spread of Islam, under the guidance of the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayyatullah Ali Khamenei.

Another category of cultural agencies are the branches of the Iranian religious foundations (bonyads: the foundation of Martyrs - Bonyad-e Shohada, The Foundation of the Oppressed - Bonyad-e Mustazafin) which are active in Iraq and Lebanon and their action deals with more social and emergent projects, such as the (re)construction of hospitals, educational centres, buildings of social welfare, distribution of food and other species of basic need in periods of crises. The private foundations which are led by the Great Ayyatullahs in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon are essentially independent institutions and act in accordance with the Shiite principles of charity and Muslim unity. Their tasks are more or less the same with the tasks of the bonyads, differing only in the character of the administration, i.e. they function in a more personal and direct basis, resulting from the leading figure and charismatic persona of a Great Ayyatullah each time, e.g. in Iraq the Foundation of Ayyatullah Ali Sistani, of the Hakim Family, the Sadr family. What is interesting in the aforementioned bodies is that, depending on the circumstances, they can be interconnected in terms of Muslim allegiance and unity in order to be competitive in a period of crisis.

The Shiites pay much attention to the role of religion in their lives. They have their own messianic scheme, awaiting for the re-emergence of the occulted Twelfth Apostle, Mahdi during the Day of Judgment. Given that the Shiites have always lived under political oppression, the fact that Iran has been the leading Muslim power in abolishing this scheme of oppression and conducting a war against oppressors makes the Islamic Republic's image and message appealing to these populations. The religious concept is more developed than the national one amongst the Iraqi and the Lebanese Shiite

Arabs. In this process nationalism is not important; it is religion that counts. Thus they are able to have a communal feeling with Iranian Shiites and vice versa. This ideological and spiritual orientation along with the common religious cults and daily religious concept of life has a major impact on the political, social, economic and cultural developments in Lebanon and Iraq. Tehran is able to observe these developments and whenever necessary to boost Shiite unity further.

Hence by conducting this policy in Iraq and Lebanon Tehran can actually boost further the religious feeling and concept of people over the nationalistic one which secular governments have created in the last few decades. Iran is in the process of boosting its cultural presence in Iraq and Lebanon, promoting religious and cultural unity with the Shiites there. For Iranian Shiites, Iraq is the land of the sacred places in the Shiite tradition, that of Najaf and Karbala.

With regard to the ethnic aspect of Iranian cultural foreign policy, Tehran is notably active in the case of Kurds. There is an intimate cultural and ethnic Kurdish-Iranian relationship, for the Kurds form a branch of the Iranian ethnic group family. Their language is Indo-European and a branch of the Iranian languages and they share with Iran pre-Islamic common features in their literature, history, oral tradition and religion. For instance, the Kurds celebrate the Persian New Year (Nowruz). In March 2010, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad invited Iraqi President Jalal Talabani to attend Tehran's Iranian New Year celebrations.⁸⁸ While in Tehran for the festivities, Talabani met with Ahmadinejad, with the Iranian leader noting that "Iran-Iraq relations have been deeply rooted and there have been close ties between the two nations throughout history." Talabani echoed the remarks, highlighting in perfect Persian the ties of friendship and brotherhood between Iraq and Iran.⁸⁹ Iran views the Kurds as Iranians and the latter have this cultural and emotional link with Iran in spite of their special national feeling.

The case of Syrian-Iranian cultural relations is a different one. The basic cultural dogma of Iran in Syria is that of friendship and cultural familiarization of the two peoples. Iran views Syria as a Sunni country where almost 13% of her population are Shiites of various orientations. Yet the ruling Assad family are Alawites, a branch of the Shiite version of Islam. They are ideologically close to the Twelver Shiites of Tehran and this plays a major role in the rapprochement between Tehran and Damascus. Iranian politicians and religious leaders view Alawites as Shiites. Given that Syria is a predominantly secular Sunni country, the backbone of Iranian cultural foreign policy has secular dimensions and focuses on the promotion of Persian language and culture in Syria, university students' academic exchange, familiarization of the Syrian public with the Iranian cinema and the like.⁹⁰ These subjects are promoted through specially designed seminars, conferences and cultural gatherings organized by the office of the Iranian Cultural Attache in Damascus.

In general, cultural bilateral relations are positive but they are not as much active as those with Iraq and Lebanon. Culture is not the main factor for the close relations between the two countries but it contributes to the already positive context of bilateral relations which is actually formed by the

⁸⁸ "Iraq President to Attend Nowruz Celebration in Iran," Press TV, March 24, 2010
<http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=121556§ionid=351020101>

⁸⁹ "Iraq President Meets Ahmadinejad," Mehr News Agency, March 27, 2010

⁹⁰ "The Iranian Children's 2nd Friendship Week in Syria 2010," <http://www.kanoonintl.com/?p=4128>

geopolitical interests of both countries.⁹¹

Through culture Iran aims to influence the public mind in favour of the Islamic Republic in the aforementioned countries and boost her political and economic aims further. Culture for Iran acts as unity factor relying on the balance of every local culture with the wider and overall Islamic culture. Wherever the Shiite profile of the Islamic Republic is not compatible with the cultural features of another Muslim country the Iranian foreign policy highlights those more general features that unite Muslims. In some secular states or societies where the ethnic and secular element is more spread than Islam in the communal concept of people (e.g. the Kurds), Iran emphasizes the common ethnic elements. Modern Iran is the inheritor to a huge cultural Perso-Islamic legacy which is the most influential cultural framework in the Middle East and is attested widely amongst Arab states and Turkey in combination with local cultural contexts. Thus Iran today poses as the strongest local cultural power in the region. It is suggested in this paper that the effects of the Iranian cultural diplomacy are visible and will become further obvious in the foreseeable future.

⁹¹ K. Barzegar, "Iran's foreign Policy towards Iraq and Syria," *Turkish Polish Quarterly*, Fall 2007, 6.

E. Future prospects

Apparently the Iranian foreign policy in the region is particularly active in every field of diplomatic relations. The systematic and multiple character of Iranian influence and collaboration with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon makes Iran the only country in the region which has developed such a diverse activity. Moreover the Iranian activity in these countries is not accidental but it takes place according to a plan with specific goals. These features could term the ongoing Iranian activity as an effort to create and sustain an 'axis.'

The term 'Islamic' also reflects the cultural and ideological dimension of this alliance. Although Syria, Lebanon and Iraq are secular states, there is a tendency by their leaders to promote an Islamic agenda in their foreign policy and there is a growing popularity of political Islam, especially in Iraq and Lebanon, where Iran's allies are Twelver Shiites. In Syria the secular Assad family is of Allawite Shiite orientation and this makes Assad's policy culturally inclining to Iran, although Damascus distances herself from the actual connection between religion and politics. Even the case of Damascus who attempts to secure her interests and state integrity in the region, the role of Islam as a unifying ideology is accepted by Syria in practice as a means of increasing her geopolitical influence in the region.

The main aims of this axis are: to react to the penetration of western powers in the region by generating power beyond their (Tehran and her allies') borders responding to Western trans-state forces in the region; to fill the existing power vacuum after the 2006 War between Israel and Hezbollah and eventually to influence the Arab-Israeli peace process and developments in the political and security sector in Palestine. By promoting these goals Iran aims to contribute to the resolution of the Palestinian problem on its own preferred terms and to the boosting of the Iranian economic interests in the region. The axis has already been formed on an elementary basis but it needs further enhancement.

The Islamic Axis's interests are against Israeli and US interests in the Middle East. By supporting her allies Iran poses as the major challenge to American policy in the region and acts in a similar fashion with her allies, as Washington does in the case of supporting Israel. Inevitably the results of the formation of the Islamic Axis are against the competitors of Iran in the region such the Sunni Arab states of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

The formation of the Islamic Axis is in its early and formative period. The geopolitical balance and the unfolding power vacuum in the region seem to favor the development of this alliance, unless the US-Israeli factor takes drastic measures to stop the enhancement of the axis. What is striking regarding its formation is that Iran invests on soft power (economy and culture) in order to expand her alliances by influencing the public mind in every country. The use of soft power results from the fact that Iranian leaders are aware of the power of culture in the Islamic world and they consider US presence in the region as a declining one. Thus they are not in a hurry to implement their plans. They do it gradually and in accordance with geopolitical developments each time. By acting gradually they avoid any undesirable, to them, sideline effects and losses.

This type of soft power diplomacy on the part of Iran creates nervousness in Washington because soft power can actually counter US military supremacy by alienating the public in various Middle Eastern countries from the US and her allies. This presupposes long-term planning, investment and efforts, which Tehran seems to have. Iran has an advantage which the US is lacking: Tehran operates in a familiar geographical and cultural environment, being part of it. By contrast, Washington is obliged to act in an alien environment in every respect. Iranian strategists are certain that the US will not be able to invest and operate in the region for long; thus they attempt to form a post-American Middle East, taking advantage of the existing power vacuum. Like the Iranian nuclear programme, the formation of the Islamic Axis is the operational backbone in Iranian plans.

A major ideological and geopolitical goal of Tehran is the Palestinian issue. The formation of the Islamic Axis is expected to influence further developments in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. There are already contacts and a kind of close collaboration between Hamas, Hizbullah and Damascus regarding developments in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The stabilization of the Islamic Axis could also include Hamas in Palestine once geopolitical developments favor such a prospect. The Syrian-Israeli peace process manifests the limited goals of Syrian foreign policy and the ability of Damascus to pursue a policy corresponding to national interests and the external balance of power. The Syrian-Iranian alliance has contributed to a moderation of Iranian policy to the peace process. While in principle being against an unjust peace, Iran puts her national interests in preserving the Syrian alliance ahead of ideology. It is argued by some experts that undoubtedly this alliance has countered successfully Israeli efforts for regional supremacy and has contributed to regional stability by drawing the attention of Israel to the risks of putting land over peace.

Yet Iran's role in this process seems to be challenged by a country which until recently pursued a totally anti-Iran foreign policy in the region. The rise of Islamism in Turkey and the apparent consolidation of Islamists in domestic politics have given the formerly secular Ankara the possibility to re-orientate her foreign policy horizons, choosing Islam as the cornerstone of her regional strategy. In this process Palestine has a central role and Ankara plans to invest much on the Palestinian issue.

The role of Turkey has caused skepticism in Tehran about their role in Mesopotamia and the Levant. Turkey is trying to enter the picture by applying her own, mainly economic, heavyweight presence in Syria. Hence Turkey demands her own share in the regional developments and to act as the Sunni leading Islamist power in the Middle East. The main advantage of Turkey is her booming economy but it seems that Ankara is lacking the cultural and geopolitical power that Iran enjoys after 30 years of expanding influence in the region. In spite of the concern in some Iranian military circles,⁹² Iranian policy makers view the boosting of Turkish-Syrian relations as an ephemeral development and consider the Iranian-Syrian alliance as a strategic one. Besides, Iranians view the Iranian-Turkish relations being in a transitional stage. Both countries have mutual interests in the case of Kurdistan, and they seem ready to

⁹² In July 2010, the former commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, stated that although Turkey and Syria "are to some extent close to [Iran]... they are not considered as Iran's allies in real terms." "Iran Has No Strategic Regional Ally: Ex-IRGC Chief," Tehran Times, July 15, 2010 http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=223000 (July 15, 2010)

cooperate in this process. By contrast both countries are the leading powers in the Islamic world and they are expected to act in an antagonistic context in the mid-term, depending on the wider regional developments. The role of the Islamic Axis in this process will be of central significance for the fruition or not of Iranian plans. Given that Turkey is in a formative period, Turkish foreign policy is not expected to influence the role of the Islamic Axis at the expense of Iran.

The formation of a strong alliance between Iraq, Syria and Lebanon has been in the agenda of Tehran since 1979. Yet geopolitical developments delayed the formation of the axis. Ironically enough the formation of the Islamic Axis was accelerated by the mistakes of the G.W. Bush's foreign policy in Iraq in 2003. The fall of Saddam Hussein's government unleashed all those anti-Saddam powers and created the context for a rapid rise of Iran as a regional superpower. Tehran's regional policy is based on long-term planning. Depending on the situation every time, Iranians are ready to accelerate the implementation of their plans or to delay it. So far the formation of the Islamic Axis has found fertile ground, overcoming past obstacles and posing a direct response to the US doctrine of the Axis of Evil. Although the Obama policy in the Middle East seems to have partially altered the aforementioned US doctrine in the region, the Islamic Axis of Tehran is an ongoing process, having the prospects of bearing fruits in the foreseeable future.

Το ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ (ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ) ιδρύθηκε το 1988 και λειτουργεί ως ένα ανεξάρτητο, μη κερδοσκοπικού χαρακτήρα ερευνητικό και επιμορφωτικό ίδρυμα. Μέσω του πολυετούς έργου του έχει αναδειχθεί σε σημαντικό φορέα πληροφόρησης, μελέτης και σχεδιασμού θεμάτων εξωτερικής πολιτικής, και θεωρείται ένα από τα πιο έγκριτα σε διεθνές επίπεδο κέντρα μελετών της Ελλάδας στον τομέα των Ευρωπαϊκών υποθέσεων και των διεθνών σχέσεων.

Το ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ δεν εκφράζει, ούτε εκπροσωπεί συγκεκριμένες πολιτικές απόψεις. Επιχειρεί μόνο να λειτουργήσει ως θήμα ελεύθερου διαλόγου και ως κέντρο παραγωγής και ανταλλαγής ιδεών.

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