

## Concept

# Shiite Crescent

12.24.2006

### Definition

The concept “Shiite Crescent” refers to the potential emergence of a political alliance created by Iran, which geographically stretches from Iran to Lebanon, and is composed of countries within which the Shiites play a political role.<sup>1</sup>

### Background

Iran is currently striving to expand its political influence and become a regional hegemon. In order to promote this goal, Iran is seeking to establish a political alliance that stretches from Iran to Lebanon, and is comprised of countries within which Shiism can serve as a platform for cooperation.

However, Iran’s ambitions today are different from its ideological aspirations following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, mainly due to the fact that the religious-ideological factor today is secondary to the exertion of economic, cultural, and political influence.

The collapse of Saddam Hussein’s Sunni regime in Iraq (4/03) and the establishment of a subsequent Shiite-dominated government (12/05) have been perceived as the removal of the political buffer that has prevented Shiite expansion in the region.

Iran is using several means to promote the emergence of a Shiite Crescent. These tools include the use of the Resistance Network in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority, as well as economic and moral encouragement to Shiite communities throughout the Middle East and to its allies. For example, since 2003, Iran has sought to expand its influence by increasingly promoting Hizbullah in Lebanon and by sponsoring Shiite groups in Iraq.

### Agenda of the Shiite Crescent

The agenda of the emerging Shiite crescent includes three main issues:

- **Iranian Regional Hegemony** – Teheran would like to create a greater sphere of Iranian influence across the region.<sup>2</sup> Its goal is not necessarily to realize Khomeini’s vision of ruling over the region’s Shiites, but rather to exert economic, cultural, and political influence.
- **Undermining Sunni Dominance** – The Arab Middle East has traditionally been dominated by Sunni Arab countries. Moreover, Shiite communities in the Arab countries were traditionally discriminated against.

---

<sup>1</sup> The name of this term derives from the almost parallel geographic strip historically known as the Fertile Crescent, which stretched from Iraq through Syria and Lebanon to Israel.

<sup>2</sup> Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri met with Iranian President Ahmadinejad and with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in Iran and stated: "America and the Zionist entity are trying to keep the Islamic Republic [of Iran] from exerting its spiritual influence in the region, [but] the Islamic Republic of Iran will be the leading force in the new phase [that has begun]" (*Al-Mustaqbal*, [MEMRI translation](#), 11/15/06).

- **Rejection of US and foreign involvement in the Middle East** – The actors in the Shiite Crescent would like to see a reduction of foreign influence and involvement in the region, particularly from the US.<sup>3</sup> In this context, Israel is viewed as an American “proxy” or as a colonialist enterprise and is therefore, a legitimate target of the Shiite Crescent.

## Actors in the Shiite Crescent

### Iraq

Shiites make up 65 percent of the population in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Following the collapse of the Hussein regime, Shiites promoted free elections for a new Iraqi government, in which the Shiite alliance won a majority.

Immediately following the establishment of the Shiite government, Iran officially recognized the Iraqi government and offered it financial support. In addition, there are close ties between Iran and Iraq’s religious Shiite communities.<sup>5</sup>

Iran has also cultivated its military, financial and political ties with the major Iraqi Shiite groups and their leaders, including Muqtada al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army<sup>6</sup> as well as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)<sup>7</sup>.

### Lebanon

The Shiite community in Lebanon had been conducting special relations with Shiite centers in Iran even before the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Musa al-Sadr, one of the most prominent Shiite religious leaders in Lebanon who encouraged the Shiite resurgence there, was of Iranian origin.<sup>8</sup>

After the 1979 Revolution, Iran supported and financed Shiite communities in Lebanon and initiated the establishment of Hizbullah. Iran’s financial, military and operational support for Hizbullah<sup>9</sup> is

---

<sup>3</sup> In his recent meeting with Haniyeh, Ahmadinejad was quoted as saying: “America, as the main supporter of this fake regime, is deteriorating and becoming weak, and the conspiracies of the enemies of Islam to break the resistance of the Palestinian nation will fail” ([Ynet](#), 12/09/06).

Iran’s Defense Minister, Mostafa Mohammad Najjar said: “U.S. power is on the wane.” Moreover, he said that instability, insecurity, terror and massacres of innocent people have been the bitter result of US interference in affairs of the region, particularly those in Iraq and Afghanistan” ([Albawaba](#), 11/20/06).

<sup>4</sup> Of the 26.8 million people who live in Iraq, 17.4 million of them are Shiite ([Foreign Affairs](#), 7/06). See also [CIA World Factbook on Iraq](#).

<sup>5</sup> These ties are religious, cultural, economic, political and often familial. For a complete description of these connections, see Vali Nasr, **When the Shiites Rise** ([Foreign Affairs](#), 7/06).

However, it should be noted that the Shiite society and politics are very distinct between Iran and Iraq due to the Arab attributes of the Shiites in Iraq. Therefore, it is doubtful if Shiites in Iraq will be willing to adopt Khomeinism; see Yitzhak Nakash, **The Shi'is of Iraq**, Princeton University Press (2003).

<sup>6</sup> Senior US intelligence official: “There seems to have been a strategic decision taken...by Damascus, Tehran [and] Hizbullah, to provide more support to Sadr to increase pressure on the US” ([New York Times](#), 11/28/06).

Muqtada al-Sadr traveled to Iran where he said his Mahdi Army would defend the Islamic Republic of Iran if it was attacked ([Christian Science Monitor](#), 1/30/06). In addition, 300 Mahdi Army fighters went to Lebanon to receive training from and fight with Hizbullah ([New York Times](#), 11/28/06).

<sup>7</sup> SCIRI’s militia, the Badr Brigades, has even been trained and equipped by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Sadr was appointed as the first head of the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council in Lebanon and aligned himself with Amal’s armed wing.

<sup>9</sup> Hizbullah was founded in 1982 under the influence of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and Imam Khomeini.

widely understood as the promotion of Iranian goals of expanding its regional influence and advancing the agenda of the Shiite crescent.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Hizbullah's perceived victory in its war against Israel (7-8/06) was translated into enhanced political status for Iran in Lebanon and throughout the region.

Hizbullah attempted to capitalize on this by demanding a reform of the Lebanese political system (12/06) which would benefit the Lebanese Shiite community by giving Hizbullah's coalition effective veto power over any government decision.<sup>11</sup>

## **Syria**

Former Syrian president, Hafez Assad, had legitimized his regime by means of a fatwa issued by Musa al-Sadr, the Iranian -Lebanese Shiite cleric (see above), which pronounced the Alawites,<sup>12</sup> the sect to which Assad belonged, as part of the Shi'a. His successor and son, Bashar Assad, uses the same argument to legitimize his regime.

However, despite the "Shiite" element in Syria, the strategic alliance with Iran and Hizbullah emanates primarily from political (and not ideological) reasons. For example, Syria's cooperation with Iran and Hizbullah serves Syria's aspiration to retain influence over Lebanon.<sup>13</sup>

## **Strategic Alliance with Palestinian Resistance Organizations**

Although the Palestinian resistance organizations – Hamas,<sup>14</sup> PIJ, PRC, etc. – are Sunni, these organizations ally with the Shiite Crescent around the Israeli issue.

Iran and Hizbullah have provided financing, weapons, training and other support to these organizations, while Iran has tried to focus attention on Israel as the source of oppression against Muslims in the Middle East.

---

Since then, and especially in the recent war against Israel (7-8/06), most of Hizbullah's weapons and rockets were supplied by Iran. Iranian advisers trained Hizbullah and helped them build fortified positions throughout southern Lebanon. ([Foreign Affairs](#), 11/06).

<sup>10</sup> See [Economist](#), 12/7/06.

<sup>11</sup> On Al-Manar TV, Hizbullah Secretary-General Sheik Hassan Nasrallah stated: "The government's failure is the result of its being a one camp's government. In Lebanon, in its ethnic and multicolored composition, one camp cannot rule. This government has proved that it is unable to meet its obligations and has failed, and therefore we call for a unity government" ([Ynet](#), 11/30/06).

After five Shiite ministers resigned from the Lebanese government, Hizbullah instigated a wide program of street protests demanding more seats for its coalition ([Ynet](#), 11/11/06; [New York Times](#), 11/12/06).

<sup>12</sup> Most Muslim scholars do not consider Alawites as belonging to Islam.

<sup>13</sup> See [Economist](#), 11/22/06.

<sup>14</sup> Iranian President Ahmadinejad and Hamas Political Bureau Head Khaled Mashal agreed on cooperation between Iran, the Palestinian Authority and Hizbullah, and Iranian financial support to Palestinians. ([Ha'aretz](#), 2/05/06). Mashal stated that although Hamas and Hizbullah operate in two different arenas, "We are partners in the resistance plan" ([Ynet](#), 11/14/06).

In Tehran, PM Ismail Haniyeh stated that Iran provides the Palestinians with "strategic depth" in their fight against Israel. He added that Hamas would never recognize Israel or accept past Israeli-Palestinian agreements ([Ha'aretz](#), 12/10/06). Haniyeh told Khamenei that he would "continue in the path of Imam Khomeini; you have always supported the Palestinian people" ([Ynet](#), 12/10/06). Ahmadinejad told Haniyeh: "The Iranian nation will stand shoulder to shoulder with the Palestinian people until Jerusalem is liberated" ([Ynet](#), 12/09/06).

Iran also seeks regional legitimacy and prestige as the custodian of the Palestinian cause. Syria too has provided refuge for the leaders of Palestinian terrorist organizations and has intensively involved itself in Palestinian politics.

End.