

## Concept

# Moderate Axis

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## Definition

The concept “Moderate Axis” refers to an ad hoc regional cooperation among the governments of Sunni Arab states, including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and certain Persian Gulf states<sup>1</sup> who share a political agenda based on common threats and interests.

## Common Agenda

In recent months, political trends in the Middle East contributed to the consolidation of the Moderate Axis among the governments of Sunni Arab states.

The main trends and events that contributed to the formation of this informal coalition are the growing influence of Iran and the Resistance Network; Iran's nuclear program; Hamas' electoral victory in the Palestinian Authority; the war between Israel and Hizbullah; the turmoil in the Lebanese political system; and the on-going struggle against the Global Jihad.

These events created the need among the Arab rulers to cooperate in facing the challenge that rising radical Islam presents to their regimes and regional stability.

The common agenda of the Moderate Axis focuses on three primary efforts: establishing a balance of power to prevent emergence of a Shiite Crescent, fighting the efforts of the Global Jihad<sup>2</sup> to undermine internal regime stability, and resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict.

### **Balance of Power vis-à-vis the Shiite Crescent**

The collapse of Saddam Hussein's Sunni regime in Iraq (4/03) and the establishment of a subsequent Shiite government (12/05) has been perceived as the removal of a political buffer that prevented Iranian expansion in the region. Fears of the growing power of Iran and its allies,<sup>3</sup> have led the Moderate Axis to seek a balance of power to prevent the emergence of a Shiite Crescent.<sup>4</sup> In addition to increased security cooperation,<sup>5</sup> this effort is manifested in the following arenas:

- <sup>1</sup> The relevant Gulf States include Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and UAE with varying degrees of participation.
- <sup>2</sup> The concept Global Jihad refers to Islamist groups, including most prominently al-Qaeda, who use terror as a means of toppling of 'heretic' Arab regimes, struggling against the United States, Israel, and the West in general (Reuven Paz, [Middle East Review of International Affairs Vol. 6, No. 3](#), 9/02).
- <sup>3</sup> See Vali Nasr, **Los Angeles Times** (8/27/06) and Ethan Bronner, [New York Times](#) (12/10/06).
- <sup>4</sup> Jordan's King Abdullah has publicly declared that Iran's “vested interest is to have an Islamic republic of Iraq; if that happened, we've opened ourselves to a whole set of new problems that won't be limited to the borders of Iraq.” He warned of a Shi'a “crescent” stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, destabilizing Gulf countries and posing a challenge to the US ([The Guardian](#), 1/27/05).  
Saudi Arabia told the US that it might finance Iraqi Sunnis in a war against Iraq's Shiites if the US withdraws from Iraq and strongly opposed diplomatic talks between the US and Iran ([New York Times](#), 12/13/06).
- <sup>5</sup> The US has sought to increase cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Egypt, including joint maritime patrols and a regional missile-defense shield; US State Department officials visited the Gulf Cooperation Council states and Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan, to work on the region's security framework (**Wall Street Journal**, 11/24/06).

- **Regional Nuclear Power Balance** – In light of the Iranian nuclear program, actors in the Moderate Axis have advocated for either a nuclear-free Middle East or declared their intentions to also pursue nuclear programs.<sup>6</sup>
- **Bolstering the March 14 Alliance in Lebanon** – The attempt by Hizbullah to reform the Lebanese political system (12/06), perceived as an Iranian attempt to expand its regional influence through the Resistance Network,<sup>7</sup> alarms the Moderate Axis which seeks to strengthen the moderate March 14 Alliance.<sup>8</sup>
- **Stability in Iraq** – The Moderate Axis seeks to reduce the influence of Iranian-sponsored actors in the Iraqi government<sup>9</sup> by, among other things, coordinating with the US.<sup>10</sup>

### Internal Regime Stability

The Moderate Axis seeks to prevent undermining of their regimes by extremist Islamic actors that are associated either with Iran and the Shiite Crescent or with the Global Jihad:

- **Increasing Shiite political activity** – Due to some extent to Shiite political activity in Iraq and Lebanon, Shiite minorities in Sunni majority states have recently increased their political activity in an effort to increase their political influence in Sunni-dominated countries.<sup>11</sup>
- **Global Jihad** – the Global Jihad challenges the regimes of the Arab states and undermines the states' stability.<sup>12</sup> Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have all been subject to terrorist attacks recently.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Egyptian President Mubarak stated: “We need energy to fulfill the needs of future generations... and this includes the peaceful use of nuclear energy. We need no permission from anyone.” (**Agence France Presse**, 11/19/06).

At a Gulf Cooperation Council summit meeting in Riyadh (12/10/06), Arab leaders issued a statement: “The states of the region have a right to possess nuclear energy technology for peaceful purposes.” In addition, Prince Saud al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister stated: “Nuclear technology is an important technology to have for generating power, and the gulf states will need it equally” ([New York Times](#), 12/11/06)

<sup>7</sup> See ReViews #7 – Battle for Control by the Resistance Network.

<sup>8</sup> During the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Hizbullah-instigated protests against the government in Lebanon, Egyptian President Mubarak warned against “foreign powers” supporting the Lebanese Shi’a. “What I fear is that, if the protests continue and take on a sectarian form, supporters of these sects from outside Lebanon will join in and no one will be able to control it...that subjects [Lebanon] to potential destruction.” ([Boston Globe](#), 12/6/06).

Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia have attempted to bolster the March 14 Alliance in Lebanon ([Daily Star](#), 12/2/06; [ynet](#), 12/2/06; [ynet](#), 12/1/06; [Daily Star](#), 11/29/06). In addition, Amr Moussa, head of the Arab League has visited Beirut multiple times to mediate among the Lebanese factions ([Daily Star](#), 12/13/06).

<sup>9</sup> The US has sought help from Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt to work to drive a wedge between Iraqi PM Maliki and Shiite cleric Muqtada Sadr by asking moderate Sunni Iraqis to support Maliki, giving him the political strength necessary to take on Sadr’s militia ([New York Times](#), 11/28/06). Following discussions between the US and the Moderate Axis, several of Iraq’s Sunni political parties are in talks to form a coalition with Maliki ([New York Times](#), 12/12/06).

<sup>10</sup> US President Bush met with Iraqi PM Maliki and Jordan’s King Abdullah in Jordan ([IHT](#), 11/29/06); US Vice President Cheney visited Saudi Arabia ([NPR](#), 11/25/06); Condoleezza Rice met several times with foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt ([Ha’aretz](#), 12/1/06; [Ha’aretz](#), 10/4/06).

<sup>11</sup> Saudi Arabia’s Shiite minority lives in some of the state’s resource-rich areas and has increasingly sought to expand its political influence. Kuwait and Bahrain are also trying to preserve the balance between their Sunni and Shiite populations ([Wall Street Journal](#), 11/24/06).

<sup>12</sup> See the concept Global Jihad and [US State Department](#): “Global Jihad – Evolving and Adapting”.

<sup>13</sup> Examples include the suicide attacks in Jordan ([CNN](#), 11/10/06); bombings in Sinai ([CNN](#), 4/24/06); and the foiled attempt on oil facilities in Saudi Arabia ([BBC](#), 2/24/06).

## **Resolution of the Arab-Israeli Conflict**

The Moderate Axis seeks a comprehensive resolution of the Arab-Israeli Conflict as the conflict is known for instigating internal agitation. Moreover, the elections of Hamas to power in the Palestinian Authority (1/06) and their strategic alliance with Iran (12/06) alarmed the Moderate Axis as it demonstrated sets a precedent for the activities of extremist Islamic movements throughout the region which threatens regimes:<sup>14</sup>

- **Mediation role** – The Arab League has recently renewed the Arab Peace Initiative and moderate Arab countries have indicated their willingness to play a mediating role between Israel and the Palestinians.<sup>15</sup>
- **Bolstering Abu Mazen** – The Moderate Axis has collaboratively tried to support moderate PA Chairman Abu Mazen, who has declared his desire to negotiate with Israel.<sup>16</sup>
- **Quiet advances towards Israel** – The Moderate Axis has also begun discretely speaking with Israeli leaders.<sup>17</sup>

End.

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<sup>14</sup> Jordan, Egypt Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates formed an “Arab quartet” seeking to focus US attention on the Arab-Israeli peace process as a way of weakening Iran and Syria ([Financial Times](#), 11/29/06).

Jordan’s King Abdullah stated: “the priority...is the Israeli/Palestinian one because it resonates beyond the...borders of the Arab and the Muslim world...it is still the emotional core issue for our part of the world...the emotional impact that [it] has on the ground can be translated to the insecurity and the frustrations throughout the Middle East and the Arab world. For me that is the priority.” ([ABC News](#), 11/26/06).

Egyptian President Mubarak: “Any progress along the Palestinian-Israeli peace track will trigger a positive spillover on other Middle East crises; in Iraq and elsewhere” ([Agence France Presse](#), 12/6/06).

<sup>15</sup> Egypt has played a significant role as a facilitator of the Rafah border crossing agreement and has tried intervening to secure the release of captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

Jordan’s King Abdullah stated: “Jordan will make contact with Israeli [leaders] in the coming period in addition to the regular contacts we hold with the Palestinians to encourage both sides to undertake steps to could bolster mutual confidence and contribute to moving the peace process forward.” ([Ha’aretz](#), 12/18/06).

<sup>16</sup> Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan are assisting PA chairman Mahmoud Abbas in his struggle to form a unity government with Hamas ([Agence France Presse](#), 11/20/06); In addition, Egypt and Qatar attempted to intercede in Shalit deal and blamed Hamas for failure of talks ([Ha’aretz](#), 9/28/06; [Jerusalem Post](#), 9/28/06).

<sup>17</sup> Israeli FM Tzipi Livni was invited to Qatar ([Ha’aretz](#), 10/29/06); PM Olmert reportedly met with Saudi Arabian leaders ([Jerusalem Post](#), 12/2/06).

PM Olmert said Israel would “seek the assistance of those neighboring Arab states that strive for a peaceful solution to the conflict between us, including Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States...The voices emanating from those states regarding...recognition [of] Israel - including, for example, some parts in the Saudi peace initiative - are positive” ([New York Times](#), 10/16/06)

At the [opening of the Knesset](#) (10/16/06), PM Olmert also said “I am pleased a moderate axis of countries in the Arab world has been created that wants to take part in blocking Iran’s influence on the region.”