

# Iran's Mediterranean shores\*

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## The Lebanese Shiite heritage

The Persian and Mediterranean peoples have been attracted to one another ever since the Greek-Persian wars in 499 B.C., the invasion of Persia by Alexander the Great, the Roman attempts to expand the Empire beyond the Euphrates, and finally the Arab invasion in the IX century and subsequent expansion of Islam. The mutual attraction is still obvious to any visitor of modern Iran who discovers the many similarities and interconnections.

More specifically, relations between Persia and Lebanon date back to the XVI century, when the Safavids came to power. In opposition to the Arabs who had converted the country from Zoroastrianism to Sunni Islam, Persia decided to adopt Shiism as the most appropriate way to preserve its very rich and diverse national and cultural identity. In order to do so, the new rulers sent for the *ulamas* of what was then the cradle of Shiism, the region of Jabal Amil in what is today Lebanon. The organic link thus established between the Persian population and the Shia communities of the Mediterranean coastal areas was reinforced further when the hostilities with the Ottomans led many more *ulamas* to seek refuge in Iran, where a great number of doctrinal texts were thereafter produced that are still taught in Iranian religious Seminars and Universities<sup>1</sup>. Numerous intermarriages and mutual migratory flows obviously also ensued throughout the years<sup>2</sup>.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, the French were entrusted with the protectorate on Syria, including what had

\* *This paper will indicate the manifold ancient connections linking Iran and the Mediterranean shores, and thereby try to differentiate the historical Shiite heritage from considerations of political expediency. The following analysis could therefore provide a useful additional perspective to present-day Lebanese and Israeli-Palestinian issues. It assumes that the reader will keep in mind the broader events and circumstances, past and present.*

<sup>1</sup> On the emigration of the Amili *ulama* to Iran, cf. Sabrina Mervin, *Harakai al-Islah Inda-al-shia* (The reformist movement among the Shia), Beirut, Al Nahar, p. 30-33 and the references therein indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Ali Qasir, *Lebanese-Iranian relations: cooperation, coalescing and partnership visions*, «Al-Intiqad», 13 February 2004, n. 1044.

become Lebanon. In the latter region, the new rulers singled out as their interlocutors the Christians – quite numerous although confessionally highly diversified – and the Sunnites, a development that obviously frustrated the Shiite population, under-represented and hindered in positions of influence and power<sup>3</sup>. Over time, the Shiites became however the fastest growing community, with the highest birth rate and lowest emigration rate, especially in the rural regions of Southern Lebanon, plagued by illiteracy, famine and social backwardness<sup>4</sup>.

It was only in 1975 that such a situation led to the creation by the Imam Musa Al-Sadr of the brigades of the Lebanese resistance, also known as Amal. The son of an Iranian father and a Lebanese mother, Musa al-Sadr was born in 1928 in the holy Iranian city of Qum, then educated in the Iraqi holy city of Najaf. After graduating in Law at the University of Teheran, he taught Islamic jurisprudence and logic in Qum. In 1954 he left for Najaf, where he completed more advanced Islamic studies. In 1958, he moved to Lebanon, acquired followers, finally becoming the leader of the Lebanese Shiite community. In 1963, he obtained the Lebanese citizenship, his Iranian one having been revoked because of his criticism of the Shah's repression. The main achievement of Al Sadr was to bring the Lebanese Shiite masses into politics, ensuring for them a fairer representation and improved security in Southern Lebanon, along the border with Israel. His career ended abruptly in 1978, when he disappeared in mysterious circumstances during a trip in Libya.

By then, al-Sadr had already done the spade-work for Khomeini, while the special relationship between Iran and Lebanon continued to develop. The many opponents of the Shah who fled to Lebanon in those years, besides feeding the opposition at home, also supported Palestinian freedom fighters, utilising Southern Lebanon as a convenient launching pad for attacks against Israeli settlements. Among them were the two sons of Ayatollah Khomeini, Ahmad and Mustafa, as well as many of those who would become leaders in the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979, foremost Mustafa Shamran, who became Defence Minister. Many Lebanese were also inspired by al-Sadr's ideology and engaged actively in their own national politics, most prominently among them Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah. He emerged as an Amal official in Beirut after having been a leader in the al Dawa Party, a Shiite movement promoting Islamic values and ethics, raising political awareness, combating secularism, with the additional aim to turn Iraq into an Islamic State politically linked to the Irani and Lebanese Shiites. Clashes in the Amal hierarchy occurred in 1982 when Nabil Berry, its

<sup>3</sup> Majed Halawi, *A Lebanon defied. Musa Al-Sadr and the Shi'a community*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1992, p. 49-77.

<sup>4</sup> David McDowal, *Lebanon, A conflict of minorities*, London Minority Rights Group no. 61, 1983, p. 3-17. For the shifts in Hezbollah's religious and political ideology, and its political program, see Joseph Elie Alagha, *The shifts in Hizbullah's ideology*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2006, p. 143.

new leader, decided to join the National Salvation Committee formed by the Lebanese president Elias Sarkis in order to deal with the Israeli occupation. Two currents resulted from it, a moderate one accepting cooperation with the government, and a radical one, the Hezbollah, which considered such a decision as a betrayal of Khomeini's ideals.

Hezbollah's 1985 manifesto listed its three main goals as «[...] putting an end to every colonial presence in Lebanon, bringing to justice the Phalangists (a Christian political party and militia) for the 'crimes perpetrated' during the civil war, and establishing an Islamic regime». Its ideology is attributable to Nasrallah's teacher, the late Sayyid Habbas al Mussawi, who was born in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon and spent eight years studying theology in Najaf (Iraq), where he was deeply influenced by the views of Ayatollah Khomeini.

### **Khomeinism and Hezbollah**

Contrary to what is generally believed in the West, Khomeini was not an opponent of the secular State, as much as a religious reformer. Historically the Shiites have always shunned politics as potentially corrupting religious integrity. They believe that at the end of time the Magdi, i.e. the twelfth Imam who went into hiding after the martyrdom of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet, will return (together with Jesus Christ) for the Last Judgement. Only then would it be possible to endow political life with religious purity. Khomeini considered such an attitude, defined as quietism, as one of the major causes of the social marginalisation of Shiites in Islamic societies. He promoted his theory in a series of lectures in 1970, and managed to achieve a position of pre-eminence as a religious leader relying on the fact that many a controversy subsisted about the right interpretation of Shiite doctrine. He gradually succeeded in modifying the *Velayat-e Faqih*, flanking the traditional submission to the reappearance of the Magdi with the establishment of an Islamic jurist to whom the custodianship of religious doctrine was entrusted. Such an alteration of the age-old Shiite separation of religion from politics resulted in momentous political consequences, not only nationally but also, as we have witnessed, worldwide.

The substance of it constitutes the bedrock for the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran establishing a *faqih* as the supreme leader of the State government. It was only subsequently that the *Velayat-e Faqih* was enshrined in the Iranian second constitution. It was only after a violent and bloody confrontation that Khomeini succeeded in imposing his views, as the 1979 revolutionary front comprised not only Islamic fundamentalists, but also a heterogeneous mix of leftist, liberal, marxist and Islamic movements loosely united only in their opposition to the Shah.

Additionally, Khomeini's reform included also the concept of *Jihad*. From its traditional meaning as the struggle to improve one's self and/or society, it came to indicate the religious duty to sacrifice one's self and possessions in the defense of the land of Islam. Khomeini was the first to legitimize martyrdom, for

both men and women, as the highest form of self-sacrifice, arguing that «[...] red death is better than black life». Consequently, during the Iran-Iraq war he did not object to sending even children across minefields, and idealizing their sacrifice.

In the footsteps of Imam Musa Al-Sadr, such theories of political mobilisation succeeded in stirring also Hezbollah out of its traditional Shiite quietism, in the pursuit of political power and the establishment of the rule of God on earth. Hezbollah's political platform of 1985 adopted for itself the definition of Islamic revolution in Lebanon, and *Velayat-e faqih* as the pillar of its ideology. It recognised Khomeini as the *Waliyy amr al Muslimin*, i.e. the Jurisconsult of the Muslims, thus vowing absolute loyalty to him, including the acceptance of martyrdom as a ticket to heaven were all desires are fulfilled, a goal that transcends the mere secular one of liberating occupied lands. In the wake of Khomeini, every day became *Ashura* (the day of mourning for the martyrdom of Imam Hussein) and every land Karbala (the city of his martyrdom). Novel calls thus emerged to inspire daily clashes with Israel. But the political context is quite different from the Iranian one.

### The Islamic charities

In a State such as Lebanon, where religious pluralism is constitutionally established, and political life organised according to religious quotas, it would be practically impossible for Hezbollah to impose an Islamic State along Ayatollah Khomeini's lines. In a potentially rich country torn apart by the many recent internecine wars, it does not present itself as a typical political party, inasmuch as, apart from promoting political ideas and spurring political action, it also provides 'social welfare'. It therefore proved possible for the religiously revisionist State of Iran to compete with the Lebanese State in providing social services, and thereby establish control over the Shiite-inhabited parts of the country.

Philanthropy became the vehicle to carry the radical aspirations of the Lebanese Shiite society. A number of Koranic verses and Islamic tradition stress that caring for the needy is a duty for every good Muslim. The principle of *zakat* implies giving a percentage of one's income to charity. However in Lebanon nowadays *zakat* is no longer collected by the clergy but instead by Hezbollah itself, with Nasrallah asserting that he derives such an authority directly from the Ayatollah Khomeini<sup>5</sup>. He admits that the funds raised in such a way are «[...] big, important and spent on *jihad*, educational, social and cultural affairs», which implies that they are spent also in the fight against the enemies of Islam, first and foremost Israel. Since most of Hezbollah's funding comes from organisations and charities controlled by the present Iranian supreme religious leader, Ali Khamenei, its presence in Lebanon, apart from exporting Khomeini's Shiite revolution, has thus also resulted in enlisting Hezbollah in the conflict against

<sup>5</sup> John B. Alterman, Karin Von Hippel (edited by), *Understanding Islamic charities*, Washington, The Crisis Press, 2007, p. 127-143.

Israel (besides involving Syria in the overall equation; but that is another story, implying inter-governemental deals rather than ideological and financial infiltration).

Among the main charities controlled by Hezbollah, the Martyrs' Foundation was set up under the direct guidance of Ayatollah Khomeini, providing support to more than 3,000 families of suicide bombers, combatants and detainees, who receive health care, education, jobs, housing subsidies and outright cash. It is said to operate with a budget of 10 million dollars, funded both by the Iranian government and Islamic *zakat*<sup>6</sup>. Another major charity in Lebanon is the Embad Committee for Islamic Charities, also known as the Khomeini Support Committee, similarly supporting families that have suffered at the hands of Israeli military. Another prominent non-governmental organisation, equally financed by Iran, is the Holy Struggle Construction Foundation which aids the reconstruction of buildings destroyed in the clashes with Israel: it has rehabilitated or built 5 hospitals, 13 clinics, 35 schools, 800 shops and department stores, 100 mosques, 8 cultural centres and 7 agricultural centres and cooperatives<sup>7</sup>.

Tellingly, after the July 2006 war with Israel, while Western countries and Saudi Arabia financed reconstruction mostly in the Sunni and Christian areas, it was the Holy Struggle Foundation that substituted for everything that the Lebanese government should have provided for in the Shiite-inhabited areas, from collecting garbage to providing running water, repairing hospitals and schools.

As for health care, the Foundation for the Wounded provides monthly cash payments to more than 15,000 injured fighters and civilians. Another charity, the Islamic Health Society<sup>8</sup>, provides free treatment to approximately 400,000 people. Education is yet another field in the hands of Hezbollah charities financed by Iran, all the more so since it is through education that Khomeini's version of religious values is inculcated the minds of the young Lebanese Shiites. The Education Development Association involves about 60,000 students to whom scholarships are granted.

### **The security and political implications**

The Islamic Republic's support to Hezbollah, however ideologically and politically motivated, has resulted in reaching a constituency of over 300,000, with some 20,000 fighters, which Teheran has encouraged to continue harassing Israel even after it withdrew from the South-of-Litani region. Whilst the effects of such Iranian anti-Israeli (and anti-U.S.) propaganda on Middle Eastern politics

<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Raad, the head of the Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc in the Lebanese Parliament has admitted that Hezbollah received funds from Iran, specifying however that they are just for «[...] healthcare, education and support to the war windows».

<sup>7</sup> Alterman, Von Hippel (edited by), cit., p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> Sabrina Tavernise, *Hezbollah's Charity wins Southern Lebanese loyalty*, «New York Times», August 6, 2006.

are there for all to see, the extent of Lebanese domestic consumption is still unclear.

Since Shah Abbas' XVI century Isfahan, Iranian literature, art, mentality and way of life have been quite akin to the Western ones. Any tourist can see for himself that, even nowadays, Iranians are more concerned with their day-to-day practical chores than with ideological considerations or the international standing of the country. Nor does the anti-American propaganda seem to bear the desired results, not only because the younger generations are attracted to the American lifestyle, but also because of the strong ties existing with the two million Iranian *émigrés* in the Usa, the contacts with whom are reinforced by continuous travel, telephone contacts, and TV and radio stations broadcasting in Farsi, which extol the advantages of living abroad. Almost every Iranian middle class family has relatives living in the West, which they describe as their 'separate family'. That definition is in itself a metaphor of how deep is the wound that has separated Iran from the West.

As events in the wake of last year's presidential election seem to have borne out, the supreme authority of Ayatollah Khamenei appears to rely nowadays more on the consolidation of Iran as an international power than on domestic social cohesion; even though a vicious circle may have been set in motion. It remains to be seen whether, even in Lebanon, the Shiite lower and middle classes have really been taken in by Khomeini's radically innovative ideology, or whether they have only instrumentally yielded to the Hezbollah's ability to distribute aid. Moreover, because of the constitutional complexity of Lebanon, Hezbollah's hand may have been only marginally reinforced with respect to the Christian, Sunnite and the other religious and ethnic national minorities.

### **Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**

Unlike Syria or Lebanon, Iran has no outstanding direct issue with Israel. In fact, historically, Shah Reza Pahlevi even developed a special relationship with it. Persian society still hosts one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world, not a common occurrence regionally where, with the creation of Israel, most prosperous Jewish communities have moved either to the new State or to the West. Although the Jewish population in Iran has decreased from approximately 100,000 to 30,000, it remains quite well integrated in the vibrant and diversified national social fabric.

Quite a different situation exists with respect to Iran's influence in the Israeli-Palestinian equation. Since the creation of Israel, Iran's relations with it have always been ambivalent. It was only after the Islamic revolution that Teheran emerged as one of its most implacable political enemies. In fact, one of Khomeini's main accusations against Shah Reza was that he cooperated with one of the evils that the West had exported to the Middle East, second only to Western lifestyle. As already indicated, contrary to the situation existing in the Arab world, such an attitude has shallow roots in Iran. To this very day, the Islamic regime

carefully draws a line between its adamant negation of the holocaust and its denunciation of Zionism and the protection of the Iranian Jewish community that has lived for centuries in the country, especially in larger cities.

Apart from the implications of Khomeini's ideology that are still deeply rooted first and foremost in the mind of the current supreme regime leader Ali Khamenei, the underlying aspiration transpires to become before the entire Muslim world the leading advocate of the Palestinian cause and of the liberation of Jerusalem, the third holiest site of Islam. With the stepping back of Arab governments from direct confrontation in favour of a comprehensive regional settlement, Iran has gradually emerged as the most steadfast supporter of Hamas' intransigent attitude within the Palestinian Authority, in opposition to El Fatah. In 2006, when it came to power in Gaza, and the United States and Eu cut off their funding to it and persuaded Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan to follow suit, Iran took the opportunity to publicly pledge a 50-million dollars aid to Hamas<sup>9</sup>.

The components of the relationship are however quite distinct, ideologically and structurally, from those that exist between Teheran and Hezbollah. Especially because Hamas is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine. Outwardly, the Iranian regime therefore keeps a more detached attitude towards Hamas, at times boasting about their financial largesse to Hamas and maintaining at other times that Hamas is an independent organisation. The Israeli government has instead tried to prove that it keeps receiving from Teheran not only funds but also weapons. The issue is politically quite complex and the truth probably lies somewhere in between. On the one hand, Iran has an interest in financing Hamas, because it combats a common enemy. On the other hand, Hamas is a Sunni organisation, as such in need to preserve a degree of autonomy from Shia Iran.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian issues, Teheran's aspiration has quite evidently transpired to become the standard-bearer of Muslim intransigence, together with its ambition to stand out as the hegemonic regional actor. A tall order for a would-be Shiite nuclear power in a fragile Sunni neighbourhood. As a matter of fact, Teheran may find it increasingly counterproductive to support Hamas openly, as the Arab States may become increasingly inclined to pressure it to reconcile with Fatah and reunite the Palestinian Authority, thereby boosting to the negotiation prospects (the resulting multi-sided game could paradoxically assist Teheran in extricating itself from the corner in which it has painted itself).

### **Tentative conclusions**

Never before in recent decades has the political situation in the Middle East been so fluid. A wide-ranging reshuffling of the cards seems to be happening, under the two-pronged influence of the Iranian assertiveness and the American

<sup>9</sup> *Iran supports Hamas, but Hamas is not Iranian Puppet.* Interviewee: Karim Sadjadpour, Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Interviewer: Bernard Gwertzman, Consulting Editor, CFR. org, January 8, 2009.

intervention in Iraq. The war-weariness of the relevant populations may have eaten away at the age-old political intricacies, just as the globalisation in communications erodes traditional ideological confrontations. The radicalisation of increasingly frustrated jobless younger generations seems to play in the hands of al Qaida and other jihadists, thereby weakening the political aspirations of Hamas and Hezbollah and their influence in national affairs.

'People power' may have finally reached the sclerotised Middle Eastern scene. The Iranian domestic situation itself, after the presidential elections, has become somewhat unpredictable and may remain fluid for some time to come. Lebanon is living with Hezbollah poised as the indispensable linchpin in a government of national unity. Ethnically diversified Syria (where many Hamas leaders have found refuge), cannot sustain the role of a spoiler any longer. Hashemite Jordan must preserve its delicate internal balance. The Palestinians themselves will have to overcome their divisions and run new elections. Israel is straddled with a coalition government, apparently stuck with an uncompromising negotiating attitude. In other words, the various local political strands seem no longer able to sustain the strain, to the point where they can either tear apart or assemble in a more coherent fabric, in the longer-term interests of all concerned. Every Middle Eastern country is aware of their intervening collective interdependence. The vocal defiance and nuclear adventurism of the Iranian regime, possibly mostly meant for domestic consumption, heightens the concern of its Arab neighbours about its regional hegemonic ambitions.

In comparison with the extremist perversion of Iranian Shiism, even the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia's wahabism may have been somewhat restored, while Egypt pursues a restoration of its political role as a regional pivot. Iraq's federal future remains to be seen, but no automatic solidarity can be assumed to exist with the Iranian Shiites (which is what Moktad al-Sadr's prudent attitude, and his self-imposed exile in Iran, and the resulting Shia support to Allaoui in the latest elections seem to confirm). Religion as a key to power could be on the wane. Even in Iran, the *mullahs* seem to have fallen prey to the paramilitary factions of the *pasdaran* and *basisi*. To top it all, after many years when it benefited from a widespread international solidarity, the Palestinian movement appears isolated, ostracised, embargoed even by Cairo, and left to its own devices. Hamas itself may eventually have to revert to the Muslim Brotherhood mainstream whence it originated, and shed its liberation-movement attitude in favour of a more prominent civilian role, as Fatah's Prime Minister Salam Fayyad is attempting in the West Bank. Which would mean reabsorbing its military wing and reintegrating the Palestinian Authority, thereby depriving Iran from a foothold in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The time may have finally come when Middle-eastern things could move away from conflict-management to crisis-management and conflict resolution. There are still many cracks that Teheran can exploit, but its aims have been widely exposed and proclaimed. Which in itself could produce a salutary



backlash. The appearance of such a political outsider in the region's shifting equations constitutes an unknown factor for all to reckon with, however differently. And may even (who knows?) provide the sort of additional common denominator that they all have so far sorely needed. Otherwise, contrary to Teheran's proclaimed goal, its assertiveness in the absence of a coordinated Arab response would ironically only reinforce the Us role, and the Western presence, in the whole region.

External prodding and mediation (with proximity talks or shuttle diplomacy) will remain indispensable, if only to dilute any residual sterile posturing, and promote accommodation if not outright reconciliation. Already, Turkey finds unsolicited openings for a restoration of its past regional influence. Even the so-far frustrated Quartet, comprising the Us and Russia alongside the Un and the Eu, could become the vehicle for a much more extensive international involvement, in the role of mediator and eventual guarantor of a resumption of the negotiating prospects, needed to enlist the concurrence of the Arab States, within or without the Arab League.

Since the two issues feed upon each other, putting pressure on Iran in order to contain its intimidation effects should go hand in hand with renewed converging diplomatic efforts to restore the vision of an end-game between Israel and the Palestinians. And thereby restore to the region its historical role as the crossroads, inherently multiethnic and inter-confessional, of various civilisations. Where tribal allegiances do not conflict with State responsibilities, and human and economic exchanges are promoted by adequate political mentalities, that are more essential than any other infrastructural network.

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