

Egyptian Complicity Exposes Deep Fear of Iran

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‘People of the Arab world have longed for a leader to fight for their cause.’

The death toll in the Gaza massacre has surpassed 500. Israel has rejected an EU cease-fire and is showing no sign of halting its operations, despite growing global opposition. But for the Arab world, the strongest repercussions to this conflict will be felt in Egypt.

The Egyptian leadership has taken a hiding from the Arab street for its inaction over Israel’s assault on the Palestinians. Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran have removed all gloves by publicly accusing Egypt’s leadership of complicity in Israel’s war on Gaza.

Not that the Arab street needed reminding of who supports who in the vicious Middle Eastern cycle of conflict. The Arabs are aware, albeit repressed, of the political landscape in the region. It is common knowledge that Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia (the Arab trio) form a pro-American axis of oppressive dictators whose primary interest is containing Iran’s growing presence in the region.

Iran, on the other hand, has enlisted the support of Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, and enjoys vast public support from the Sunni Arab world because its primary concern is much aligned with the sentiments of the Arab street ... upholding the Palestinian cause and combating American presence in the region.

The ability of Hezbollah to draw tens of thousands of demonstrators to the streets of Arab capitals, including Cairo, speaks more of Egypt’s misconstrued fears than Hezbollah’s popularity. The fear of Iran is partly motivated by sectarianism, but mostly by political survival. The US and Israel have succeeded in the past eight years in creating an atmosphere of paranoia in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, portraying Iran as an evil existential threat akin to the red Russian bear.

Indeed, Iran’s Shia proselytising has triggered a sense of urgency among Sunni Arab leaders, particularly in Saudi Arabia where strict Sunni doctrine (Wahhabism) is the norm and a strong self-belief as the custodian of the Islamic faith exists. The Sunni Arab leaders would have you believe that Iran’s rise poses a threat to 1400 years of Sunni domination in the Islamic world, and therefore demands greater attention than the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Such rhetoric is designed for public consumption, whilst concealing the real fear held in the

three Arab capitals. Iran is not simply the 'Vatican for Shi'ites', but has actively sought to hijack the Palestinian cause from the Arab world. After decades of squabbling, rivalry and inaction among Arab states, the Iranians have barged through the gates, swept all aside, and have boldly declared the Palestinian cause under new management.

The Arab street – equally frustrated at watching Israel and the US strangle their world whilst their governments play to the tune – were impressed. Finally, after a long sense of helplessness, someone was coming to the aid of the Arabs. Iran didn't simply engage in empty rhetoric, as most Arab states did, but poured its energy into a deep conviction to combat Israeli reign in the Middle East.

It built the successful Hezbollah whilst Lebanon was on its knees in the 1980s. It offered Syria support when the US was bent on toppling the Assad regime. It threw its weight in Iraq to thwart American rule. And, most crucially given recent days, it gave to the Palestinians unconditionally, and supported Hamas when the Arab world abandoned it.

Perhaps for the conventional Western reader, such actions would have qualified Iran's inclusion into the "axis of evil". But the opinions of the Western public is not what concerns the pro-American Arab axis. Support for Hezbollah, Hamas, Syria's beleaguered regime and opposition to the US occupation in Iraq echoes the core sentiments of the Arab street, and inflames its anger towards the passive Arab dictators who offer empty statements of condemnation from their American-funded villas and palaces. Such popular sentiments can be easily transformed into a mobilised opposition that could overthrow current regimes.

Iran has actively fought on behalf – whether directly or indirectly – of millions of Arabs who regard Israel and wider American/British 'imperialism' of their region as the main cause for their woes. The pro-American Arab governments, US and Israel have each failed to stoke Sunni-Shi'ite tension to divert the attention of the Arab street from Israel's brutal occupation of Palestine to Iran's rising power.

The division in the Arab world and fear of Iran has been present since the Iranian revolution 30 years ago. However, little attention to Tehran was needed as Saddam Hussein played the important role of Arab gatekeeper and contained Iranian expansion. The removal of Saddam gave way to Iran's desire to become the leader of the Arab/Islamic world, and quickly drew the immediate focus of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan.

Efforts to thwart Iran's advance became frantic and ill-conceived.

Plan A – Iraq

The US occupation of Iraq failed, the country dived into civil conflict, and Iranian-backed Shi'ites gained power. Eventually, too many hands became involved in the single pie. The Saudis backed Sunni radicals in order to counter the Shi'ite rise. Unfortunately, the Sunni radicals caused further complication for the US occupation as Al-Qaida-inspired groups were just as determined to inflict harm on the US.

The other dilemma was that Syria also held considerable influence over certain fragments of the Sunni community, mainly due to the tribal and family connections that transcend the Syrian-Iraqi frontier. Therefore, any attempt by Saudi Arabia to ferment total anti-Iranian/Shia resistance amongst Sunnis was severely limited.

Plan B – Syria

The Israel/US/Arab axis then turned its attention to Syria and Lebanon. Syria has long been viewed as Iran's right hand in the Arab world, giving Tehran a direct role in Arab affairs. Limiting Syria's power, the Arab trio believed, would ultimately constrain Iran.

Rafik al-Hariri, former Lebanese Prime Minister, was conveniently assassinated in 2005, prompting Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon and Syria's isolation from the international community. The Arab trio, along with Israel and the US, kept the heat on Damascus for subsequent years, with Assad only recently coming out of the frost courtesy of France.

The original aim was to topple the Alawite regime in Syria (a Shia offshoot sect) and replace it with a Saudi-backed Sunni leadership. Contacts were made with the arch enemy of Syria's Ba'ath rulers, the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria (not to be confused with the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt). The idea was to spark a Sunni revolt in Syria led by the Muslim Brotherhood, with the defective Abdel Halim Khaddam at its helm.

It failed. Syria's security tightened, its opposition groups were silenced, the Assad regime persevered, and Damascus came out of isolation whilst maintaining its anti-Israel stance.

Plan C – Lebanon

Lebanon had been delivered to Syria on a silver platter by the Americans after Damascus agreed to join the US-led coalition against Iraq in the first Gulf War. What ensued was 15 years of cohesive Syrian-Saudi rule over Lebanon, which brought the infamous Hariri family to power. Saudi money, via the late entrepreneur Rafik al-Hariri, would rebuild Lebanon using 1 million Syrian labourers. The Syrian-Saudi relationship brought relative calm to Lebanon, which appeased the Clinton administration who wanted Lebanon's squabbling silenced whilst he shifted the focus towards the Israeli/Palestinian front.

The only problem with this equation was Hezbollah, the only faction of Lebanon that was out of reach for the Saudis and Americans alike. Hezbollah, at the behest of Iran and Syria, maintained a threatening arsenal, and continued its campaign against Israel until South Lebanon was finally liberated in 2000.

Hezbollah was a real threat put on Israel's northern borders and exploited by Iran and Syria each time they felt a need to poke Israel or the US. Chopping off this arm would severely limit Iran's influence in the region and remove a key player that gave Syria a certain degree of flexibility in its engagements with Israel.

The Arab trio along with the United States backed an Israeli offensive that aimed to destroy Hezbollah in 2006, or at least weaken it enough to give firm control of Lebanon to America's proxies in the country.

It backfired. Hezbollah came out stronger, inflicted a significant blow to Israel's self-perception of military invincibility, strangled the pro-American Lebanese government by imposing a year-long political deadlock, and gave Syria and Iran a new-found confidence.

More importantly, Hezbollah won the praise of the Arab street, and for the first time, exposed the complicity of the Arab trio. The pro-American dictators in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan found themselves isolated in the face of overwhelming public popularity for their adversaries in Hezbollah, Syria and Iran.

Plan D (1) – Palestine

Riding on popularity and confidence after the Hezbollah victory in 2006, the Iranians/Syrians decided to make the next move. After a similar political impasse had paralysed the Palestinian territories, Hamas swept the Gaza Strip in 2007, removing Fatah from power and took absolute control of the tiny territory of 1.5 million Palestinians.

Israel was now confronted with the nightmare reality of having a Hezbollah to its north and south. For Egypt, its long-held fear that Iran's growing populism would reach the streets of Cairo was moving closer to reality. The Gaza Strip is on Egypt's doorstep, and its Hamas rulers retains deep ties to the party it evolved from ... the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. Mubarak famously remarked after Hamas' revolt in Gaza that his country now "shares a border with Iran".

The Muslim Brotherhood forms the largest opposition in Egypt, and the Mubarak leadership has struggled to keep the lid on the Brotherhood's popularity, often resorting to oppression. Just as Hezbollah swept Beirut in May 2008 to force the pro-American government to yield, and Hamas forcefully evicted Fatah from Gaza, Mubarak feared an Iranian-backed scenario would soon be played on the streets of Cairo.

Hamas in the Gaza Strip is intolerable for Egypt and Israel, yet vulnerable. Iraq borders Syria and Iran. Lebanon borders Syria. Material support could sufficiently reach Hezbollah and the Iraqis, but Hamas in Gaza is isolated. Encircled by Egypt and Israel, both countries saw an opportunity to inflict maximum damage on the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. The Israelis and Egyptians attempted to starve the Gaza Strip by imposing a stiff blockade that has all but effectively destroyed Gaza's economy and created a humanitarian disaster.

Their aim was to create enough dissent at the living conditions in the dense territory that Gazans would revolt against Hamas without the Israelis or Egyptians lifting a finger. After two years of the blockade, the revolt never came.

Plan D (2) – Gaza Today

Two days prior to Israel's 2008 Christmas War on Gaza, Tzipi Livni and Hosni Mubarak met in Cairo, which many see as an Egyptian green light to the attacks.

The timing of Israel's war also took into consideration the internal politics of key states. Israel's elections are a month away, and Livni's Kadima party trailed behind the Likud hawk, Benjamin Netanyahu. Kadima is gambling on the military offensive boosting Livni's polling.

It is also neatly timed during the US presidential transition to avoid any concrete intervention from Washington. Barack Obama, whilst maintaining the US' bias towards Israel, has hinted at placing peace as a priority and negotiating with Iran. Whilst he has assured Israel that its security is high on his agenda, Obama has also shown a willingness to diverge from the Likudnik view of what is required to ensure such a security.

Obama wants to shift American focus away from the Middle East to the Indian subcontinent and resolve the conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He is aware that in order to accomplish such a foreign policy shift, the Middle East tension needs to be defused. He wants to negotiate with Iran and Syria to ensure a smooth, trouble-free withdrawal of his forces from Iraq. He wants to allay fears of a military confrontation with Iran, which he hopes will eventually lead the Iranians to restrain Hezbollah and Hamas, bringing sustained calm and

security to Israel.

The Likudniks don't share a similar approach on securing Israel. The hawks believe the display of brutal power will eventually bring them security, despite the fact that 60 years of this policy has only brought Israel greater insecurity.

The war is also partly aimed at complicating any plan Obama had to restore an atmosphere of calm and dialogue in the Middle East. The Israeli war has effectively re-ignited inter-Arab tension, ended Syria-Israeli talks, emboldened groups like Hamas, Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and given Iran greater determination to pursue a hardline policy (Iranian elections are also scheduled for mid-2009). This serves the Likudniks' purpose of maintaining an atmosphere of tension and resentment, which assists them in pursuing a militaristic approach to the region.

Egypt's aim, along with Saudi Arabia, is currently in line with the Likudniks and hawks in Washington. They view Iran as an existential threat that needs to be contained at any cost. Both countries are adamant in preventing a Hezbollah-like situation in Gaza, and aim to dislodge Hamas from power whilst it is still weak.

The Reality

Egypt and Saudi Arabia's blind obsession with Iran has only created greater resentment and determination among the Arab street to have such leaderships removed. The open and direct accusation of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah that Egypt is an accomplice in Israel's war is indeed new territory in inter-Arab rivalry.

Despite existing tension, Arabs have tended not to publicly shame each other, and maintain their disputes behind closed doors. However, Hezbollah's public condemnation of Egypt is as much transparent as Mubarak's open complicity in attempting to destroy Hamas.

Whilst Arab satellite networks broadcast strewn Palestinian bodies and wailing mothers for their lost children, Egypt sends its troops to the Gaza border to prevent the Palestinians from breaking through the Rafah crossing, the only border crossing between Egypt and Gaza.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit continues to blame Hamas for the fighting, publicly repeating the words of the Israeli press office that the Islamic militants must end its rocket attacks for a cease-fire to work. And in revealing the real reason behind Egypt's position, Aboul Gheit throughout the course of the conflict has directed his criticism at Iran.

Egypt has brought its complicity in Israel's attacks out in the open, and Hezbollah has responded in kind.

The only obvious impression one gets from this conflict is the widening gap between the policies of the Arab trio and the mood of its people. Cairo and Riyadh will stop at no cost to contain Iran, even if it involves a deal with the devil.

However, it's their deal with the devil that is only endangering the stability of Egypt and Saudi Arabia and strengthening Iran. The further Cairo and Riyadh move in their quest to weaken Iran, the further away they're moving from their people. The Arab world, with the exception from Lebanon and Iraq, has not bought the Sunni-Shia sectarian propaganda. This

has been reinforced by the call of Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, Muhammed Mahdi Akef, that he has no problem with Iran spreading Shi'ite Islam in the Arab world.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia are driven by their fear that Iran's populism in its role in the Arab/Israeli conflict, coupled by its fervent Shi'ite Islam and historic rivalries between Persia and Arabia, will ultimately instigate revolts that will topple Mubarak and the Saud family.

The Arab trio have a right to such a fear, it is indeed incredibly plausible. However, the power-corrupt dictators of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan have failed to understand Iran's power in the Arab world. Iran is rising to its heights because it is winning the support of the Arab people. This year, Iranian elections will not only be played out on its own territory, but indeed in elections in Iraq and Lebanon (both also scheduled for this year). The role of Iran will play key factors in both elections, testing Iran's popularity among the Arab public. The pro-Iranian camps in Lebanon and Iraq may have just received a polls boost courtesy of Egypt and Saudi conspicuous silence on Israel's war on Gaza.

The people of the Arab world have longed for a leader to fight for their cause, and Iran has stepped up to the challenge. Moving closer to the US and aligning with Israel's war on the Palestinians is not the path that will secure the dictators of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Instead, reverting to the popular sentiments of the Arab world, and embracing the leadership role on Arab affairs in Palestine and Iraq is what is required to combat Iran and its proxies.

In the view of many Sunni Arabs, it's the Shi'ites that's leading the charge to Palestine, not the Sunni Arab states. By dealing with the devil, the leaders of Egypt and Saudi Arabia have only succeeded in increasing opposition to their rule, and endangered their seats on the throne.

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