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IRAN'S ARC OF DOMINATION

Over the past four decades, the Iranian regime has actively sought to build its influence across the Middle East and beyond through a variety of means. Some of those means are conventional and part of normal international relations, like diplomatic engagement across the region and alignment with other regional powers, such as Russia. But the bulk of Iran's effort has been decidedly unconventional. In fact, Iran has sought to build regional dominance by supporting political and militant groups across the region, including sponsoring outright terrorist groups that have served Iranian purposes. What Iran has sought to build has been called many names: an "axis of resistance" by the Iranians and their allies; a "Shi'a Crescent" according to some. In reality, it is a network of Iranian domination of the region.

This arc reaches from Lebanon in the west across Syria and Iraq all the way to Yemen. As will be seen, efforts to build this network started long ago in Lebanon, but accelerated rapidly after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the 2011 Arab Spring,

which Iran capitalized upon to extend and solidify its influence. Coupled with the regime's radical ideological agenda, this has been the most dramatic driver of change in the region in the past decade.

Lebanon and Hezbollah

The first theater where revolutionary Iran managed to get a foothold was relatively far-flung, namely in Lebanon. There were several reasons why this tiny country of three million (in the early 1980s) became a priority for Iran. Lebanon is home to a large Shi'a Arab population, which has been the fastest growing religious community in this fragmented country. Whereas Shi'a were estimated at 17 percent in 1921, they rose to over 30 percent of the population by the late 1980s. Because positions of power were divided between the major communities in the Lebanese political system, the country lacked a strong central government. As civil unrest grew in the mid-1970s, revolutionary Iran saw an opportunity to establish a foothold in the Levant, on Israel's doorstep, by becoming the benefactor of the Shi'a community.

Tehran had to contend with the existence of a political movement among the Shi'a in Lebanon called Amal, which was under strong Syrian influence. Yet Amal's religious leaders rejected Khomeini's novel doctrine of Vilayat-e-Faqih, and the movement's more secular character was also anathema to Khomeini. As a result, Iran helped create the Lebanese Hezbollah movement, which was not only loyal to Tehran but recognized Khomeini's religious and temporal authority. Hezbollah grew in

stature and power very much as a result of significant Iranian support. Iran has bankrolled the movement with a yearly support estimated to be, on average, in the range of \$100 million to \$200 million. It has also trained thousands of Hezbollah fighters, and provided large amounts of weaponry to Hezbollah. Iran also helps fund the Al Manar TV station, a major tool for Hezbollah propaganda.

Hezbollah has, however, diversified its sources of funding and is not solely reliant on Iranian support. It has established a sophisticated, global network of organized criminal activities, in particular involving itself in the trafficking of narcotics and weapons as well as money laundering. Through the Lebanese diaspora in Latin America and West Africa, Hezbollah developed close ties with drug trafficking cartels in Colombia and Mexico, and has played an important role in helping transport drug shipments to Europe through West Africa, protecting the shipments, and laundering the proceeds back to the Latin American cartels. Aside from such large-scale trafficking, Hezbollah has been involved in all kinds of smaller criminal operations, such as credit card fraud in the United States and smuggling cigarettes into Canada.

Experts estimate that Hezbollah derives up to 30 percent of its budget from criminal activities, meaning the lion share still comes from Iran. This separate source of income helps Hezbollah derive some level of autonomy from Tehran, though the tie between them is deep and strategic – and definitely goes both ways. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's connection in Tehran was directly to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and the two went way back: in 2019, Nasrallah reminisced on Khamenei's direct

personal involvement in the creation of Hezbollah in the 1980s.²² Iran's influence is institutionalized through the presence of two Iranian representatives out of nine members in Hezbollah's highest decision-making council.²³

Hezbollah's evolution has tracked in parallel with changes in Iran's approach. Tehran at first urged Hezbollah to stay out of Lebanon's sectarian politics, but following the 1989 reconciliation accords, Tehran approved of Hezbollah's intention to take an active part in politics. The accord was, in theory, supposed to dismantle all militia groups in the country in order to restore the state's monopoly over the use of force. However, under the guise of being a "resistance movement" to Israel rather than a militia, Hezbollah was allowed to retain its armed forces.

Over the decades that followed, Hezbollah developed into a state within a state in Lebanon. Iranian support enabled it to strengthen its military force so that it in many ways rivaled Lebanon's official armed forces. And though its representation in parliament was always modest – in recent years it has had about a tenth of the seats – its superior organization and muscle has allowed it to have an outsize influence on Lebanese politics. This influence has also helped alter, somewhat, the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah, as observers now see Tehran deferring to Nasrallah on matters relating to Lebanese domestic politics, rather than trying to impose its own views.²⁴ There should be

22 "Nasrallah says Khamenei heavily involved in establishment of Lebanon's Hezbollah," *Al-Arabiya*, October 1, 2019. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2019/10/01/Nasrallah-says-Khamenei-heavily-involved-in-establishment-of-Lebanon-s-Hezbollah>

23 Eitan Azani, "Hezbollah, a Global Terrorist Organization," Hearing of the House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation, September 2006. (<https://ict.org.il/hezbollah-a-global-terrorist-organization/>)

24 "Becoming Hezbollah: The Party's Evolution and Changing Roles," Brandeis University Crown Center, January 27, 2023. <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/crown-conversations/cc-16.html>

no doubt about the closeness of the relationship, however. Iran's former Ambassador to Lebanon, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, who helped create Hezbollah, once stated that Hezbollah is "part of the Iranian rulership; a central component of the Iranian military and security establishment."²⁵

As will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters, the Syrian civil war changed matters dramatically for Hezbollah, as the organization was forced to make a rather unpopular choice. It threw its weight behind Bashar al-Assad's regime, and even deployed troops into the Syrian civil war to defend Assad and thus its own lifeline to Iran. While this damaged Hezbollah's reputation and standing in the Arab world, it underscored the centrality of its link to Tehran, which similarly saw the impending demise of Assad as a potentially catastrophic blow to Iranian interests, and specifically to the building of its arc of domination across the region. Along with Iran's own Quds force, Russian support, and a multitude of Iraqi Shi'a militias, Hezbollah played a key role in averting the collapse of Assad's regime, thus handing Iran a major victory in the geopolitical struggles of the past decade.

The Syrian Lynchpin

The Syrian and Iranian regimes may at first sight appear unlikely bedfellows. Syria's Assad regime has its ideological roots in Arab socialism, and its leadership is decidedly secular. The Alawi (also known as Nusayri) sect to which Assad belongs, and which has an outsize influence over the regime, belongs to Shi'a Islam only technically, since they consider Imam Ali an incarnation of God.

25 Azani, "Hezbollah's Global Reach."

In practice, Alawism is a syncretistic and mystical belief that has little in common with Iran's Twelver Shi'a Islam. Being non-Sunni, however, they have a common hostility toward extremist Sunni and Salafi versions of Islam.

While this has brought Damascus and Tehran closer in recent years, it was not much of an issue when the relationship between the two began to develop in the 1980s. Instead, the relationship was built on common threat perceptions and common enemies. These common enemies were Iraq, Israel and the United States. Iran's opposition to Iraq is self-explanatory given Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in September 1980. Syria and Iraq were both ruled by different wings of the same but notoriously fractious Baath Party, and the enmity between these wings explains the growing rift between Damascus and Baghdad that coincided with the war between Iran and Iraq. Indeed, in July 1979, Saddam Hussein had conducted a massive purge of his ruling Baath Party, blaming the Syrian Baath Party of orchestrating a coup against him. To all appearances, this was a way to remove his detractors within the Iraqi elite and assert power. This led Syria, as virtually the only Arab state, to support Iran during the Iran-Iraq war.

As for Israel, Syria had always been a leading force in the anti-Israel Arab coalition, and the Iranian revolutionaries' enmity to Israel brought the two further together. As a Soviet-supported regime, Assad stood in opposition to the United States, which was Israel's main supporter – but his opposition to the U.S. was by no means as deeply ideologically rooted as it was in Iran. Still, these common perspectives on regional matters brought Damascus and Iran together, at first as a relationship of near-equals, in spite of Iran's much larger size. During the 1980s, Damascus and

Tehran cooperated on regional issues but did not see eye to eye on everything. In Lebanon, they at first supported different protégés among Lebanon's Shi'a, but following the 1989 accords, Syria and Iran managed to join forces, and solidify the cooperation between the Hezbollah and Amal factions.

The relationship gained further ground in the mid-2000s, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq. While that did away with Saddam Hussein, it led both Assad and Khamenei to fear American designs on them, and soon after Syria was forced to withdraw its forces from Lebanon after a popular revolt there dubbed the "Cedar Revolution." Israel's war with Hezbollah in 2006 further brought Tehran and Damascus together, with the balance between them shifting in Iran's favor. This tilt grew even stronger after the Arab Spring revolts of 2011, with the ascendancy of Sunni extremism and ISIS across the region. Iran bet the farm on saving the Assad regime from collapsing. At a time when most in the Sunni Arab world, Turkey and the West anticipated a rapid collapse of the regime, Iran pulled out all stops to invest heavily in maintaining Assad in power. Not staying at that, it was reportedly IRGC Quds Forces commander Qassem Soleimani who, in July 2015, convinced Russia that Assad would fall unless Moscow stepped in to back up the Iranian effort to bolster the regime.²⁶

In recent years, Tehran had capitalized on the U.S. debacle in Iraq to build friendly forces in Iraqi government and politics, and succeeded in building a logistical link linking Iran to Syria and Lebanon across Iraq. Losing Syria would have obliterated

26 Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow," Reuters, October 6, 2015. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>)

this strategic accomplishment in Iran's efforts to establish its regional domination.

Instead, Iran doubled down and achieved a major victory. Not only did it sustain Assad in power, but it gained enormous influence inside Syria. This influence is first and foremost military, as Iran deployed Shi'a militias, Hezbollah, the Quds force, and regular IRGC forces into the Syrian civil war. According to one estimate, Iran has over 130 military sites in Syria that it controls directly or indirectly, with over 100,000 forces belonging to more than seventy different militia groups.²⁷ To this should be added Iran's growing influence over Syria's regular army, particularly the fourth division commanded by Maher al-Assad, the President's brother, as well as Syrian intelligence.

Iran's influence does not end with military and security affairs, but extends to an attempt to fundamentally remake the demographic structure of Syria. As is well-known, the civil war resulted in a massive outflow of primarily Sunni Syrians. This is no coincidence, as it was the Sunnis that coalesced into the bulk of the opposition to the Assad regime. Jointly, the Syrian and Iranian regimes have embarked on an effort to shift Syria's demography through suppressing Sunni identity and bolstering the Shi'a, through a variety of means that, in the long term, will make Syria a very different country than it was before 2011. To begin with, Iran has encouraged Shi'a militiamen from other countries – Iraq, Afghanistan or Pakistan – who fought in Syria to bring their families, settling in homes formerly belonging to

27 Ido Yahel, "Iran in Syria: From Expansion to Entrenchment," Moshe Dayan Center, Tel Aviv Notes, June 17, 2021. (<https://dayan.org/content/iran-syria-expansion-entrenchment>); Middle East Media Monitoring Institute, "Report By London-Based Saudi Magazine Details Names, Numbers, Locations Of Iran-Backed Militias In Syria, Particularly Near Israeli Border," November 9, 2023. (<https://www.memri.org/jtm/report-london-based-saudi-magazine-details-names-numbers-locations-iran-backed-militias-syria>)

Sunni Syrians. In addition, Iran has launched a major campaign to convert Sunnis in Syria to the Shi'a sect, through a mixture of missionary activity, humanitarian assistance, and outright intimidation. The extent of the success of this venture remains to be determined, but the scope of the effort is monumental.

While the secular Assad regime has little interest in Tehran's theology, Iran saved the regime, and as long as its own lifestyle is not in danger, the regime appears to care little whether the price of staying in power is a "Shi'ification" of Syria. Iran may have invested up to \$100 billion in Syria since the beginning of the civil war, and appears, for now, to have successfully turned Syria into a vassal state.²⁸

Making Iraq Subservient

Forming the two largest countries with Shi'a Muslim majorities, Iran and Iraq have been closely interlinked for centuries. The Iranian city of Qom and the Iraqi city of Najaf are the two central sites of Shi'a learning, and pilgrims from Iran have plowed the roads leading to the main Shi'a holy sites which are in Iraq. More recently, of course, the two countries' modern history has been plagued by the nearly decade-long Iran-Iraq war, which was truly a formative experience for the Iranian regime.

Under the Shah, relations had been complicated but manageable. This changed with Saddam Hussein's onslaught and the eight years of vicious warfare that ensued. Iraq continued to be a major focus for the leaders of the Iranian regime long after

28 Rauf Baker, "Tehran's Shiification of Syria; Iran's Hegemonic Drive," *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2023. (<https://www.meforum.org/middle-east-quarterly/pdfs/63851.pdf>); Amatzia Baram, "Iran's stakes in Syria," GIS Reports, October 28, 2021 (<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/iran-syria/>).

the war, as they continued to see Iraq as a most direct threat against Iran. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 at first generated enormous fears in Iran, coming so soon after the U.S. defeated the Taliban in Afghanistan and established a military presence in that country. This “sandwiching” between U.S. forces – who now practically encircled Iran – led Tehran to fear that it could be attacked next. This prospect was not entirely unrealistic, given the presence of influential forces in the Bush Administration that wanted to do just that. But the U.S. Iraq war did not go according to plan, and the missteps of the U.S. opened an opportunity for Iran to step in and work not only to counter the U.S. presence in Iraq, but to assert its own influence in the vacuum created by the United States.

In this regard, the U.S. decision to dismantle the Iraqi military under the guise of “de-Baathification” in one stroke gutted the key state institutions of the country, leaving a giant vacuum that the U.S. itself was unable to fill. While the decision was justifiable on ethical grounds given the past brutality of the Baathist regime, it instantly created several hundred thousand adversaries for the United States, and kickstarted the process of building a Sunni resistance to the U.S. occupation.

The U.S. leadership also made a serious miscalculation regarding the Iraqi Shi’a. Seeing Sunni extremism personified by Al Qaeda as the most direct threat to America, and viewing Saudi Arabia increasingly as a liability because of its sponsorship of Salafi groups worldwide, thinkers in the Bush Administration conceived of the oppressed Shi’a majority in Iraq as the centerpiece of a new American strategy for the Middle East. The Iraqi Shi’a were expected to be agents of democratization not only in

Iraq itself but across the region, and thus a pro-American Iraq run by its Shi'a majority would be the new lynchpin of America's presence in the region.

This theory ignored that Iran would have much greater leverage on Iraq and particularly the Iraqi Shi'a following the demise of the Baath party. Most Iraqi Shi'a leaders had been in exile in Iran (perhaps 200,000 had sought refuge there) and though there were differences in outlook between many Iraqi groups and Tehran, Iran was incomparably better networked and had a staying power and understanding of Iraqi realities that America simply could not compete with. It put America in the strange situation that the community, and leaders, that the U.S. sought to make the vehicle for its influence in the region were the same that its main regional adversary, Iran, had close affinities with and, in some cases, had sponsored for years. Thus, Iran developed a network of politicians it supported, providing Iran with an influence on the Iraqi parliament and in turn, influence over the formation of governments.

While Iran, as in Syria, has sought to breed support across sectarian lines by cultural and humanitarian efforts, at the end of the day the core of Iran's policy – just like it does at home – rests on violence and suppression. From the outset, Iran has trained, funded and organized a variety of primarily Shi'a Arab militias in Iraq, which played a direct role in violence against American forces in Iraq. Iranian arms factories produced roadside bombs known as Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFP) that were delivered by the thousands to insurgents led and trained by the IRGC Quds force and Lebanese Hezbollah. Iran also provided a host of other weapons, including armor-penetrating sniper rifles purchased

from Austria, to Iraqi insurgents. All in all, British and American officials estimate that Iran was responsible for over 1,000 American deaths in Iraq and a much larger number of wounded. Similarly in Afghanistan, Iran and the Taliban temporarily overcame their sectarian differences against their common enemy, allowing the IRGC Quds Force to train Taliban fighters, and even to pay them a prize for every American soldier they killed.²⁹

These Iranian-supported militias in Iraq also form a significant part of the so-called Popular Mobilization Forces, created in 2014 as an attempt to coordinate the militias fighting against the Islamic State. Some of these militias are loyal to Iran's rivals such as Ayatollah Al-Sistani and Moqtada al-Sadr, and all are nominally loyal to the government of Iraq. In reality, however, these militias operate autonomously and those under Iran's influence follow the instructions of the IRGC rather than the Iraqi government.

Iraqi society, including Iraqi Shi'ites, are by no means uniformly pro-Iranian. In fact, Iraqi views on Iran have fluctuated considerably in the past two decades – being at the highest when Iran stepped in to confront the Islamic State, and at its lowest when Iran has appeared to intervene with a heavy hand in Iraqi politics. One survey has favorable views of Iran fluctuating from 26 to 86 percent over this period.³⁰ While common Shi'a identity and opposition to Sunni extremism bind Iran and Iraq together, the presence, and rise, of Iraqi nationalism is an important factor undermining Iranian influence. Still, there is a consensus that no

29 Richard Kemp and Chris Driver-Williams, "Killing Americans and their Allies: Iran's Continuing War against the United States and the West," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2015. (<https://jcpa.org/pdf/Kemp.pdf>)

30 Jessica Watkins, "Iran in Iraq," LSE Middle East Center, Papers Series no. 27, 2020, p. 12. (https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/105768/4/Iran_in_Iraq.pdf)

Iraqi leader can come to power without the tacit acceptance of Tehran. Iraq has on several occasions seen protest movements directed in part against Iran, opposing Iranian influence on the country's government. This happened in 2011, for example, but much larger demonstrations that were often explicitly anti-Iranian took place in late 2019. Responding to these demonstrations that threatened the pro-Iranian government in the country, the Iran-aligned militias stepped in (allegedly with little coordination with the Iraqi government) and repressed the demonstrations with force, including killing scores of protestors. These militias also used the general chaos to attack the American embassy in Baghdad, prompting the U.S. to retaliate by killing the legendary Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, who allegedly orchestrated the attack on the Embassy, near Baghdad airport in January 2020.

Killing this charismatic and legendary commander of Iran's regional power projects was a strong blow to Iran, but did not change the fact that Iran remains firmly entrenched in Iraq, and has proven willing to engage in significant repression of anti-Iranian forces in Iraq to maintain this influence.

Yemen: Iran's Underestimated Role

The latest addition to the Iranian axis of domination is Yemen, where the Iranian regime has thrown its weight behind the Ansar Allah group, more widely known as the Houthi movement. The impact of this relationship was frontline news in early 2024, when Houthi forces targeted civilian shipping that it deemed associated with Israel in the Red Sea, leading the U.S. and UK to respond with airstrikes.

The Houthis draw support from among the Zaidi community, who account for around a third to two fifths of Yemen's population. The Zaidis are nominally an offshoot of Shi'ism, although they are a separate branch from the Twelver Shi'a of Iran. In this sense, Iran's approach to them is similar to its relationship with the Alawis in Syria. Being nominally Shi'a and opposed to Sunni powers like Saudi Arabia is enough for Iran to embrace the movement in its quest for regional domination.

Surprisingly, the U.S. government and major analytical organizations like the Rand Corporation long took a rather cautious, if not skeptical approach, to the Iranian influence over the Houthi movement. Iranian support has been seen as opportunistic and rather recent.³¹ However, considerable evidence suggests the Iranian link to the Houthis is in fact organic and deep-seated.³²

The Houthi movement originates with Badraddin al-Houthi, a preacher from the Sa'ada province of northern Yemen. The Houthi family belongs to a branch of the Zaidi Shi'a known as the Jarudi, which agree with the twelver Shi'a that only Ali's lineage had the right to succeed the prophet. In other words, like the twelver Shi'a, Jarudi Zaidis consider the first successor Caliphs to be illegitimate. This, at the outset, created a theological alignment with Iranian Shi'a. Badruddin al-Houthi and his sons were immediate cheerleaders for the Iranian revolution, not least because it showed a level of political activism that they viewed as more common among the Zaidis than among the twelver Shi'a.

31 Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*, Santa Monica: RAND, 2010. Also State Department reports published wikileaks.

32 See Oved Lobel, *Becoming Ansar Allah: How the Islamic Revolution Conquered Yemen*, European Eye on Radicalization, Report no. 20, March 2021. (<https://kyleorton1991.files.wordpress.com/2024/01/ansar-allah-iran-report-oved-lobel.pdf>)

One Houthi leader explained to a researcher that there may be minor theological differences between the (Jarudis) Zaidis and the twelvers, but that “politically we are identical.”³³

Badrudhin and his son Huseyn spent time in Iran in the early 1980s and subsequently traveled frequently there, as well as to Lebanon, where they built relations with Lebanese Hezbollah. They helped create a youth organization called “Believing Youth” in the early 1990s, and thousands of young Yemenis went through the group’s summer camps. In addition, the Houthis sent forty students a year to Iranian seminaries in Qom from 1994 to 2014.³⁴ Houthi literature disseminated at camps featured Hezbollah luminaries such as Hassan Nasrallah, and this slide in the direction of Iranian-promoted theology and political ideology led to criticism from traditional Zaidi authorities that the Houthis had become surrogates for Iranian twelver Shi’a beliefs.

Thus, from the 1980s onward, there is clear evidence that Iran was copying the Hezbollah model in Yemen, gradually building a pro-Iranian constituency in this strategic country on the approaches to the Suez Canal, and flanking its rival Saudi Arabia from the south.

This movement, building during the 1990s, was then activated in the early 2000s following the 9/11 attacks and America’s greater engagement with the broader region. Yemen’s president Ali Abdullah Saleh sided firmly with the United States. After Huseyn al-Houthi, son of Badrudhin, returned in the late 1990s

33 Mahdi Khalaji, “Yemen’s Zaidis: A Window for Iranian Influence,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch 2364, February 2, 2015. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-zaidis-window-iranian-influence>)

34 Michael Knights, Adnan al-Garbani, and Casey Coombs, “The Houthi Jihad Council: Command and Control in ‘the Other Hezbollah,’” CTC Sentinel, October 2022. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/5910>)

from exile in Iran and Sudan (which at the time was a center of IRGC operations)³⁵ a schism within the movement occurred. Al-Houthi created a militant faction that utilized the motto used by the Houthi movement today: “God is Great! Death to America! Death to Israel! A Curse on the Jews! Victory to Islam!” As is clear from this slogan, al-Houthi’s political movement focuses a lot on the broader pan-Islamist agenda promoted by the Iranian regime, rather than local concerns. In particular, the obsession with the Jews and Israel, visible then as it is now, has little connection to Yemeni realities. Even the timing of the war between the Houthis and Yemen, beginning in 2004, connects to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Iran’s efforts to counter American presence in the region.

The Houthis and the Yemeni government would fight intermittently from 2004 to 2011. Following the Arab Upheavals of 2011, however, Yemen’s situation deteriorated and from 2014 transitioned into a protracted and bloody civil war that has dragged in neighboring powers. Iran rapidly expanded its support for the Houthis, and after the Houthis began making incursions into Saudi territory, Saudi and Emirati forces stepped in to decimate the Houthis and strengthen the official government of Yemen. The intervention nevertheless failed, not least because Iran continuously raised the stakes. Once the Houthis captured the capital Sana’a, and not least the main port infrastructure on Yemen’s west coast, Iran was able to greatly expand its delivery of weapons to the Houthis, enabling them to consolidate control over the rump Yemeni state. In other words, Iran engineered a scenario very similar to the one in Lebanon.

35 Amira Mohammad Abdulhalim, “Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Influence in Africa: Intensive Interventions and Challenges,” *Journal of Iranian Studies*, vol. 2 no. 6, 2018.

Conclusions

The Iranian arc of domination has developed immensely in the past two decades. The 2003 Iraq war enabled Iran to assert influence over that country, whereas the Arab Upheavals of 2011 paved the way for Iranian control over Syria and the Houthi government in Yemen. This put all Middle East powers on notice, and all are reacting to this bid for hegemony on behalf of the most populous power in the region, to that one that is developing nuclear weapons. Others therefore have vacillated between confronting and appeasing Iran. During the Trump administration in particular, there was a sense that America had the backs of countries seeking to block Iran's expansionist agenda. With the Biden Administration and the return of officials that had advocated for the Iran nuclear deal, several Gulf states instead moved toward seeking some form of reduction of tensions with Iran. But the basic outlines of the key geopolitical confrontation in the region remains: Iran is the driving force, and others are reacting to it.