

The Mythical Shia Crescent

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Sometime in late 2006, America awoke to the realization that, by deposing Saddam Hussein and toppling his Ba'athist regime, it had inadvertently removed a major obstacle to Iranian dominance in the Middle East. Assessments of the associated events reached hyperbolic levels. Dire warnings of a growing Iranian hegemony began to surface. Sunni leaders such as Jordan's King Abdullah II began to warn the West of an emerging "Shia Crescent," led by Iran and encompassing Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.¹ The idea caught fire in American media and became the dominant narrative in discourse on Middle East policy.

But how realistic is this amalgamation? Is a Shia Crescent really emerging that is capable of challenging more than a millennium of Sunni domination in the Islamic world? Will Iran lead it? On the surface, the idea appears plausible. Yet, a more in-depth examination of the prospective members of this geopolitical realignment raises numerous questions. This intellectual shorthand may be blinding the United States to opportunities that could yield tangible progress on several strategic fronts in the Middle East, while providing a new ally in the global war on terrorism.

Conceptual Objections

The most frequent objection to the idea of an emerging Shia Crescent with Iran as its dominant power is the fact that Iran is Persian, while the other states in the proposed crescent are predominantly Arab. Critics of the Shia Crescent model rightly point to the continuing animosity between the Arabs and Persians that harkens back to a time before Islam, when the former were Bedouin nomads and the latter were rulers of an early empire.² It is unfortunate that this argument has dominated the debate regarding the rise of the Shia Crescent because it is the most easily dispatched; today's Iran is actively cooperating with various Arab governments and organizations throughout the region.

To counter this argument, Shia Crescent-adherents point to Iran's alliance with Shia Arab Hezbollah—a hybrid insurgency, social service organization, and political party, primarily funded and trained by Iran. Hezbollah seems well on its way to establishing a Shia theocracy in Lebanon. The Israelis were unable to dislodge it in a three-week conflict in 2006 and the Lebanese government, infiltrated by Hezbollah, seems unwilling to confront the organization with military force. Shia Crescent-advocates say that sectarianism appears to have trumped ethnicity in this emerging partnership.

Iran has also established relations with groups of Shia Arabs in Iraq, supporting militias such as Jaysh al-Mahdi and polarizing figures that include the firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. The Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (formerly known as SCIRI), the most powerful Shia political party in Iraq, was formed in the 1980s in Iran, where its leadership had taken refuge during the reign of Saddam Hussein.³ Those who warn of an emerging Shia Crescent point to these relationships as additional evidence that religious affiliation overcomes ethnic identity in modern Middle Eastern politics.

Another relationship that refutes the Persian/Arab argument is that between Syria and Iran. The Syrian-Iranian alliance began when the former supported the latter in its decade-long war with Iraq. Since then, the alliance has proved surprisingly resilient.⁴ Shia Crescent-advocates contend the shared religious identity of the governments in Iran and Syria has made this relationship extremely durable.

Supporters of an emerging Shia Crescent cite these instances as proof that religion is overcoming ethnicity in the realignment of the Middle East. One can legitimately concede that Persian Iran is working with Arab governments and organizations to further its strategic aims. When one examines each member state in the supposed crescent, however, the model begins to break down. In Lebanon, for example, the power of Hezbollah is by no means absolute, and Shia do not dominate the government. In Iraq, cultural enmity and the scars of eight years of war with Iran make an Iran-Iraq alliance unlikely. And in Syria, the government is not nearly as Shia as it might appear.

Lebanon

Hezbollah emerged in 1982, during the Lebanese civil war, in response to the Israeli invasion. It emerged from the coalition of a number of

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smaller organizations, most significantly Islamic Jihad. Its “coming out party” was the bombing of the US Marine barracks in Beirut, killing more than 200 Marines.⁵ Hezbollah has been close to Iran ever since its inception; this was especially true during the period when it trained in the Bekaa Valley with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.⁶

There is little doubt that Iranian-backed Hezbollah is a powerful force in Lebanon. It ably demonstrated its military capability in the three-week conflict with Israel in 2006. Hezbollah is also a political party, controlling 14 seats in the Lebanese Parliament (11 percent of the total 128 seats) and 21 percent of the municipalities across Lebanon.⁷ During reconstruction following the 2006 conflict, Hezbollah frequently co-opted aid from the West and distributed it through a network of hospitals, schools, and social organizations. The organization is firmly woven into the fabric of Lebanese society.⁸

Hezbollah is not, however, the most powerful military force in Lebanon. The Lebanese army consists of 20 mechanized, airborne, and commando brigades and regiments, equipped with Russian, French, and British equipment. All told, it can field some 70,000 soldiers. The Lebanese military also has a navy with 27 boats, mainly of British and French origin, and an air force that has five British fighters and about 40 helicopters of French, British, and American manufacture.⁹ This military is capable of independent operations within Lebanon. For example, in 2007, the Lebanese military dealt a series of crushing blows to al Qaeda-linked Fatah al-Islam near the Palestinian refugee camp, Nahr el-Bared.¹⁰

By comparison, Hezbollah’s full-time strength is only 1,000 guerilla fighters equipped with long-range rockets and antitank, antiship, and anti-aircraft missiles. In emergencies, between 5,000 and 10,000 reserve fighters can be mobilized.¹¹ Hezbollah has no navy or air force. While Hezbollah was able to launch katyusha rockets into Israel until the last day of the 2006 war, there is reason to believe that it lost much of its military capability. Israeli and independent observers claim that as many as 500 to 600 Hezbollah fighters may have been killed.¹² Attesting even more to the weakness of the organization, as part of the peace accords, Hezbollah permitted the Lebanese military to enter the south of Lebanon, a move it had consistently opposed since the end of the Lebanese civil war.¹³

Nor is Hezbollah the most powerful political force in Lebanon. Following the June 2005 elections, the anti-Syrian coalition *Tayyar al-Mustaqbal* (Future Tide) gained control of the government with 72 parliamentary seats.¹⁴ This coalition was instrumental in the so-called Cedar Revolution of March 2005, which eventually forced the Syrian military to withdraw from Lebanon, ending 30 years of occupation. The protest the group organized was able to bring as many as a million people from across Lebanese society into the

streets.¹⁵ Hezbollah's counterprotests only mustered approximately 200,000 individuals.¹⁶

Probably the most compelling argument against Lebanese membership in the Shia Crescent is demographic. Only between 30 and 40 percent of the Lebanese population is Shia. Lebanon is 39 percent Christian; the remaining population consists of Sunnis, Alawi, Druze, and other minority sects. Ninety-five percent of the population is Arab, with many identifying themselves not as Arab but Phoenician.¹⁷ More importantly, the Shia population does not act as a single, monolithic block in Lebanese politics.

While the Iranian-backed Hezbollah is a powerful force in Lebanese society, it is not the dominant force. With the departure of Syria in 2005 combined with the manpower and materiel losses sustained during the conflict with Israel in 2006, the group's power has noticeably receded. It is extremely doubtful that Iran will be able to exert anything approaching hegemonic control over Lebanon anytime in the near future.

Iraq

SCIRI and its armed wing, the Badr Corps, did hide in Iran during the reign of Saddam Hussein.¹⁸ It is also true that Muqtada al-Sadr and elements of his militia, Jaysh al-Mahdi, are backed by Iran.¹⁹ The fact that all of these players in Iraqi politics try to downplay this connection, however, speaks volumes about the average Iraqi's perception of Iran.

Iran and Iraq fought a brutal war from 1980 to 1988. The war escalated dramatically because it was a proxy war between the United States and Soviet Union and due to the fact it was fought with tactics reminiscent of World War I. A half million or more Iranians and at least 200,000 Iraqis died. At least 1.5 million Iraqis were injured.²⁰ These years of hardship, death, and anti-Iranian propaganda did much to shape the attitude of Iraqis, regardless of sect, toward their neighbors.

One need only tour the historic sites of Iraq to be reminded of the residual enmity Iraqis harbor for Iranians. The Swords of Qadisiyyah monument in the center of Baghdad, until recently featured 50-foot replicas of Saddam's hands holding crossed sabers and was also decorated with the helmets of hundreds of dead Iranians.²¹ The al-Faw Palace that is now home to a senior Coalition headquarters is named after the bloody 1988 battle on the al-Faw Peninsula that resulted in the death of more than 50,000 Iraqis.²² Reminders of this bloody war between Iraq and Iran can be found throughout Iraq.

This enmity has a very real impact on the tumultuous politics of Iraq today. A recurrent battle cry of both al Qaeda in Iraq and Sunni insurgent groups is that the current government in Baghdad is a puppet of Iran.²³ This warning resonates with the broader Iraqi populace. Much of the reason that

Muqtada al-Sadr's political party, the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS), is so popular with Iraqis is that, unlike SCIRI, its members did not hide in Iran during Saddam's reign.²⁴ When Coalition forces revealed that Sadr had fled to Iran in the wake of the 2007 "surge," his supporters desperately scrambled to refute the claim.²⁵ Even the OMS-affiliated spokesman from the Iraqi Foreign Ministry denied that al-Sadr was in Iran.²⁶

In March 2007, despite four years of aggressive post-war public relations, 67 percent of Iraqis still felt Iran was a negative force in their country. Seventy-one percent believed Iran was "actively engaged in encouraging sectarian violence within the nation."²⁷ Even Shia Iraqis are uncomfortable with the cultural influence Iran is having on their newly open society.²⁸

Yes, Iraq is predominantly Shia, and toppling Saddam Hussein did remove a threat to the Iranian nation. But the Iraqi people are far from ready to call Iran their ally.

Syria

Surely, the strong, surprisingly durable alliance between Iran and Syria is proof of an emerging Shia Crescent. Advocates cite this relationship, purportedly based on the shared religious identity of the Shia governments, as evidence of the emerging political order for a new Middle East. A closer examination, however, reveals some serious flaws in this argument. It is not Shia solidarity but Syrian calculation that keeps this alliance alive. A more detailed analysis of this relationship reveals some intriguing strategic opportunities for the United States to exploit in its effort to influence the political-calculus in the broader Middle East. To understand why the Shia Crescent argument falls apart in Syria, one must first examine a remote event in the history of Islam and how it impacted the emergence of the current government.

Shia by Choice

Five years into the Iraq war, most Americans believe they are fairly well-versed in the history of the schism between Shia and Sunni Islam. A bit of a tutorial is, however, in order. In the mid-seventh century, a dispute arose regarding succession of the Caliph, ruler of the Islamic empire. Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, was initially denied the office in favor of Uthman, the third Caliph. Ali's supporters, the *Ali shi'atu Ali* (or Shia) protested until, in 656 A.D., he finally assumed the throne. The Shia evolved into an even more powerful political movement in 680 A.D., when Ali's son and successor, Hasayn, was murdered in Karbala, Iraq. That event, still observed as Ashoura, would polarize the Islamic world for more than 1,300 years.²⁹

As Shia Islam spread across the Middle East in the first half of the eighth century, it collided with a tiny sect that is today known as Alawi, named after Prince Ali. The sect was a mix of Phoenician paganism, Greek astrology, eastern reincarnationism, and Christianity. Members incorporated Shia Islam into their belief system by deifying Ali, along with the Prophet Muhammad and Salman of Persia, to form a trinity reminiscent of the triune monotheism of Christianity. The Alawites continued to observe many Christian festivals such as Palm Sunday and Easter, celebrated observances with bread and wine, and held other pre-Islamic beliefs.³⁰ The result was not Shia or Sunni, Islamic or Christian. It was Alawite.

The Alawites were branded heretics by the rest of Islam and suffered centuries of persecution. To survive, they ensconced themselves deep in the mountains of northwest Syria. They also hid their beliefs and holy scriptures, revealing them only to the faithful, to protect them from the scrutiny of mainstream Islam. To this day, some Alawi beliefs are still known to no one outside of the sect's tiny enclaves.³¹

Syria fell into the French sphere of influence after World War I. The new colonial officials tried to forge a more inclusive, secular government in Syria by encouraging minority sects to fill government and military positions. The Alawites were coaxed out of their mountain sanctuaries through placement in the Syrian military. Over decades, the sect slowly began to dominate the military.³²

While the Syrian military gradually became Alawite, a menagerie of regimes controlled Damascus. Following the departure of the French in 1947, a number of weak governments tried to maintain control of the fractious political system. Finally, in desperation, a Syrian delegation asked Egypt to step in and take control of the country. This effort, too, soon fell apart. The effort did, however, bring the Ba'ath Party, with its socialist, Arab-nationalist ideology, to Syria. The Alawites and many other minorities, wary of their history, flocked to Arabism as an antidote to religious persecution. But Ba'athism proved to be only another backdrop against which political turmoil would continue.

The Alawites, now firmly in control of the military, finally stepped in and seized control of the nation. A coup in 1966 brought the first of several Alawite military officers into power. He was quickly swept aside in 1970 by Alawite air force officer Hafez al-Assad, who was finally able to bring stability to Syria.³³ As Daniel Pipes wrote in 1990, "An Alawi ruling Syria is like an untouchable becoming maharajah in India or a Jew becoming tsar in Russia—an unprecedented development shocking to the majority population which had monopolized power for so many centuries."³⁴

As Assad began to shore up his regime, a new threat was undermining his success. The Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Salifist movement with origins in

Egypt, was growing in popularity. The movement sought to restore the world dominance of Islam by establishing Sharia law as the foundation upon which Syria would exist. The Muslim Brotherhood found immediate popularity with the majority Sunni population in Syria. The new Alawite government was an easy target for its charges of apostasy; both Sunnis and Shia had historically seen Alawi as heretical.³⁵ Moreover, the Alawites, while the largest religious minority in Syria, still only constituted 11 percent, or 1.8 million, of the Syrian population. They were extremely vulnerable in a country of 10.8 million Sunnis.³⁶

In an effort to counter the growing threat of Sunni fundamentalism, the Alawites maneuvered to have their faith legitimized. This effort culminated in a 1973 fatwa by the Lebanese cleric Imam Sayyed Moussa as-Sadr, which declared Alawi a sect of Shia Islam.³⁷ The fatwa, however, was not sufficient to defuse the growing tension.

A decade of sectarian violence culminated in the atrocity at the village of Hama in 1982. Between 10,000 and 30,000 Sunnis were murdered, their town was plowed under, and at the entrance to the city, a large statue of Hafez al-Assad was erected. The Syrian government did not try to deny or hide this slaughter. It was an iron-fisted message to the Sunni majority throughout Syria that the Alawite were in control and dissent would not be tolerated.³⁸

Strategic Alliances

The Alawites have survived for more than a millennium by being sensitive to the tides of history. The Alawite regime is only too aware of the growing Shia and Sunni fundamentalism; the regional dominance of either could mean more persecution for their people. The Syrian regime has adopted a two-part strategy to deal with this dilemma: combat the two strains of fundamentalism while simultaneously fostering acceptance of Alawi as a part of mainstream Islam. It is in the furthering of this particular strategy that Syria's alliance with Iran should be contemplated.

Hafez al-Assad saw Sunni-dominated Iraq as a threat because many of its Sunni tribes sat astride the Iraqi-Syrian border. So, when Iraq was embroiled in war with Iran, Assad believed the time was right to cripple his stronger neighbor and align himself with Iran. Later, when Saddam Hussein was again under attack, this time from the US-led Coalition, Syria eagerly participated in the dismantling of Iraq's army.

While Assad dealt decisively with the political Salifism of the Muslim Brotherhood at Hama, the 1990s witnessed the rise of Salifist jihadism. This new strain of Salifism merged the Muslim Brotherhood's desire for a return to governance by Sharia law with the terrorist tactics of Hezbollah and Hamas. Its goals were to drive all infidels from the Middle East and topple

apostate regimes and replace them with Islamic states. Following the crack-down on the Sunni at Hama, Assad began to develop a more tolerant form of Sunni Islam for Syria. The regime backed moderate forces such as the Grand Mufti of Damascus, Sheikh Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassoun, whose modernist Sunni movement ordains women and advocates the uncovering of women in mosques.³⁹ This effort has proved largely ineffective, however, in stemming the spread of the new Sunni extremism.

The Alawites are equally reviled by Shia fundamentalists. The 1973 fatwa legitimizing their faith did little to cool this enmity. Assad engendered yet more hostility by backing the secular Amal movement rather than the fundamentalist Hezbollah in the Lebanese civil war. Syria's alliance with Iran did provide Shia fundamentalists with a momentary pause from hostilities. When Hezbollah began to emerge as the dominant force in Lebanon, however, Assad was obliged to oppose his new allies and again exert military dominance over the country in an effort to counter the group's growing power.⁴⁰

The Alawites initiated a number of other steps in addition to the 1973 fatwa to enhance their Shia credentials and "Islamize" the regime. Since the fatwa, a steady stream of Alawite students has traveled to the religious schools in Qom, Iran. Hafez al-Assad also built a number of Alawi mosques in Syria despite the Alawites' traditional aversion to public places of worship. Posters have appeared throughout Syria showing Assad worshipping at Mecca and his late son, Basil, participating in Muslim pilgrim garb.⁴¹ The policy of Islamizing the regime has continued since Hafez al-Assad's death in 2000 and the assumption of power by his son, Bashar. If continuing jihadist hatred is any measure, however, the strategy of Islamizing the Syrian regime has been an abject failure. For example, as recently as June 2006, Syrian officials narrowly thwarted a jihadist terrorist attack in Damascus aimed at destabilizing the regime.⁴²

From Bashar al-Assad's perspective, the emerging order in the Middle East does not appear to be a stable Shia Crescent, but an approaching tidal wave of Shia and Sunni extremism. Despite its best efforts, the Assad regime has been unable to "rebrand" itself as Islamic. Complicating this task was the defeat of Saddam Hussein that paved the way for resurgent Shia fundamentalism in Iraq. The US-led initiative that forced the Syrian military out of Lebanon also handed the country to the Shia fundamentalist group, Hezbollah, which promptly bolstered its reputation in the Islamic world by shaming the Israeli Defense Force. Sunni jihadists are pouring through Damascus on their way to join the conflict in Iraq. And now a Sunni terrorist threat is developing inside Syria. These events and actions are symptomatic of dangerous times for the Assad regime.

Intriguing Opportunities

The fear of a Shia Crescent rising to dominance in the Middle East has prevented the United States from seizing an excellent opportunity to regain its standing in the Islamic world. America's leadership nearly declared Syria a member of the "axis of evil" in 2002 and has since treated it as a provisional member of that group. The US Ambassador to Syria, Margaret Scobey, was withdrawn from Damascus in 2005 in protest over the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.⁴³ The George W. Bush Administration has been increasingly indignant about the way in which Syria has "failed to provide support to Iraq's new government and [has] in many ways actively undermined it."⁴⁴ These actions proceed from a misconception of Syria's actions as part of a conspiracy hatched in Tehran—to forge a Shia Crescent that will challenge Sunni Islam for control in the Middle East.

When one looks at the Middle East through Bashar al-Assad's eyes, Syria's actions look less like obedience to Iran and more like simple acts of survival. Examining Syria's actions from that perspective reveals opportunities the United States might exploit. If America can thaw relations with Damascus and gain the cooperation of Bashar al-Assad, it could dramatically change the political calculus in the Middle East.

This is not as far-fetched as it might sound. Bashar al-Assad is not rabidly antiwestern. He speaks fluent English and his wife, Asama, was born in Britain and educated in the West. Based on his demeanor and background, western governments were hopeful he would bring reform when he came to power, but tired with the pace of change.⁴⁵ Still, Assad has made a great deal of progress in opening his economy to the West and, despite the threats to his regime, has modestly increased political freedom.⁴⁶ Such actions may be an attempt to demonstrate a desire for increased interaction with western nations. The biggest hurdle any country has to overcome in developing cooperation with Syria is psychological; this alternative requires a nation to disregard the idea of a growing Iranian hegemony and the accompanying emergence of a Shia Crescent.

Hezbollah

Syria has maintained a constant presence in Lebanon since 1976. Why? After all, the occupation is expensive, both in resources that Syria does not have and with regard to the international legitimacy that the regime needs to strengthen itself from internal threats. The occupation in the early 1980s brought Syria into open conflict with not only Israel, but with some of the Shia militant groups in Lebanon. Even after international pressure forced the majority of the Syrian military to leave Lebanon, they continued to maintain a small military presence.⁴⁷

Shia Crescent-adherents have a ready answer to the “why” question. They rely on the explanation that Syria’s involvement and continued presence in Lebanon is a method to support Hezbollah in its bid for dominance of the Lebanese government and its desire to establish a Shia theocracy. According to supporters of this philosophy, Syria provides arms to Hezbollah and occupies portions of the country in an effort to aid in establishing the next member of the Shia Crescent.

As this article has already illustrated, however, a fundamentalist Shia theocracy in Lebanon is decidedly not in the Alawite regime’s interest (nor is it likely). To fully understand why Syria is so deeply entrenched in Lebanon, it is first necessary to understand Syria’s relationship with Israel. The newly independent Syrian state was handily defeated by Israel in 1948. This was but the first of a quarter-century’s worth of humiliating defeats, culminating in the 1973 war. A conflict that witnessed Israel’s capture of the Golan Heights, territory it occupies to this day. Lebanon has been the scene of Syria’s battleground with Israel ever since; the two nations clashed there repeatedly in the 1980s.⁴⁸ Hence, Syria’s support for Hezbollah is motivated much more by its desire to defeat Israel than any thought of handing Iran a possible victory. That Hezbollah actually relied on Syria’s support to defeat Israeli forces in 2006 and become the standard-bearer for the Islamic world is as much a concern in Damascus as it is in the West.

The current situation does, however, provide for opportunity. Bashar al-Assad is worried that Hezbollah’s power in Lebanon is growing. This could spell trouble; initially, for the 50,000 Alawites living inside Lebanon.⁴⁹ Long-term, it may threaten the Alawite regime in Damascus. The United States, with appropriate incentive, might be able to forge an agreement in which Lebanon is permitted to remain independent, while Syria aids in the dismantling or demilitarizing of Hezbollah. The key for Syria, of course, will be its security concerns vis-à-vis Israel and the Alawite minority in Lebanon.

Iraq

What of Syria’s alleged support for Sunni insurgents in Iraq? The United States has repeatedly charged Syria with harboring insurgent leaders and permitting foreign fighters and weapons to transit its borders en route to Sunni insurgent groups inside Iraq. Why would Syria support such actions? Sunni Salifists have vowed to destroy Syria’s Alawite regime, yet Syria is feeding weapons and suicide bombers to the current champion of Salifist jihadism, al Qaeda in Iraq. Syria tried to destroy Iraq’s Sunni-led army during the first Gulf War, yet Assad is now harboring many of these same leaders, giving them safe havens from which to wage their insurgency against the US-led Coalition.⁵⁰

For those who proclaim a rising Shia Crescent, such activities demonstrate a blatant support for Iran. The logic for such an argument goes something like this; Iran wants the United States to leave so that it can exert hegemonic control over Iraq. Support for al Qaeda in Iraq and the Sunni insurgency increases the level of chaos in Iraq and thus hastens the US military's departure. With the US military out of the way, Syria will then "turn off the tap" to Sunni insurgents and permit Iranian-backed Shia militias to seize control and establish the long-sought Shia theocracy.

A closer examination of Syria, however, produces an alternate explanation for its behavior. Bashar al-Assad does not want a Shia theocracy in Iraq any more than he does in Lebanon. But the rising tide of Sunni fundamentalism in the Middle East has left the Alawite regime vulnerable to the Sunni majority. Assad's government lacks the political capital to crack down on Sunni insurgents hiding inside Syria. Likewise, it would further jeopardize Assad's already shaky claim of Islam-based legitimacy if his military went about airports and bus stations, rounding up any supposed mujahedeen en route to fight the infidels in Iraq. Assad probably believes that it is to his advantage for the mujahedeen to transit his country rather than direct their attention against him.

Here, too, from an American perspective, there is room for opportunity. It is a fact that Assad does not want the presence of Sunni insurgents inside his borders any more than the United States does. America may be able to forge some face-saving deal for Assad while removing Syria as a safe haven and supply route for al Qaeda in Iraq and Sunni insurgents. Perhaps, by prior agreement, the US military could play the role of the "bad guy." Assad reveals to the Coalition where various insurgent leaders are hiding, and the Coalition discreetly moves against them. Additionally, Assad might provide information related to when, where, and how the foreign fighters and weapons are entering Iraq, permitting authorities to intercept them at the border. From Assad's point of view the Alawites will be glad to rid themselves of these threats.

Iran

Finally, there is the political support that Syria provides Iran on an international basis. Shia Crescent-adherents explain that this is resultant of Shia solidarity trumping Syria's "Arab-ness." This rationale, however, strains credibility when one remembers that the paint on the Alawites' new Shia coat is barely dry. It is much more likely that this alliance is the result of Hafez al-Assad's pragmatic realism of a quarter-century ago. Syria has aligned itself with Iran because Iran is the only country that will tolerate it. Equally important, Syria is the only country that embraces Iran. The Sunni Arab regimes of the Middle East have openly disavowed the Persian Shia theocracy in Iran even more so than the Alawite minority government in Syria.

This is where a greater understanding of Syria, beyond the intellectual shorthand of the Shia Crescent, offers the optimal opportunity for the West. Syria is Iran's only supporter in the region. If the United States can co-opt Assad with security guarantees that relieve him of his dependence on Iran, he might become America's most effective interlocutor on any number of pressing issues with Iran.

Conclusion

Bashar al-Assad's position is exceedingly precarious. No matter which faction is victorious, Sunni Salifists or Shia fundamentalists, he loses. If Sunnis succeed in toppling Assad's government, the world can expect another parade of Sunni regimes similar in longevity to those following World War II. If Iran is successful in subverting Iraq and Hezbollah continues to consolidate its power in Lebanon, Assad's regime will exist only at the pleasure of the Iranian Ayatollah. Rather than a member government in an emerging Shia Crescent, the Alawite regime in Syria is a shrinking island in a rising sea of Islamic fundamentalism. Bashar al-Assad is clamoring to stay dry. Perhaps it is time the United States threw him a life preserver.

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