

# The Nature of the Radical Axis

Yoel Guzansky

The Middle East has recently operated under the not implausible fear that a regional war is about to break out. Therefore, Israel is closely following any sign of growing closeness among the members of the radical axis, a relationship that peaked with the Damascus summit in February 2010 and the transfer of – or at least what seemed like the intention to transfer – “balance destabilizing” weapons to Hizbollah. It is therefore important to understand the extent to which the axis – Iran, Syria, Hizbollah, and Palestinian terrorist organizations – actually functions as a military alliance, as its leaders have declared. What is the extent of its cohesiveness, and under what circumstances would the members of the axis operate as a united alignment against Israel? This essay addresses these questions while investigating the nature of the axis, its strengths and weaknesses, and the practical ramifications for dealing with it.

In recent years, the Middle Eastern agenda has focused on the growing influence of Iran and concern over its influence in an expanse stretching from Iran through Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories.<sup>1</sup> The use of the term “radical axis” became a commonplace after the Second Lebanon War and joined a host of other terms – important in and of themselves – based on a religious-ethnic rationale (such as “the Shiite crescent”)<sup>2</sup> or a general conceptual framework (such as the “resistance camp”).<sup>3</sup> It is only natural that there is a certain overlap within the various definitions and the identity of the players. Despite the attractiveness of these approaches and their use to help understand the regional order, this essay seeks to examine the said confederation through the political-strategic prism, its effect on the regional balance of power, and its central manifestation: a concrete threat to the security of the State of Israel.

Yoel Guzansky, research associate at INSS

### The General Nature of Treaties

Concluding a treaty is a common phenomenon in international relations, and alongside military buildup is the preferred approach for maintaining the balance of power. States seeking to increase their power may do so by making treaties, i.e., adding the military strength of other states to their own. States bonding through a treaty do so primarily to deal with an external threat, but there may be other goals as well, such as an attempt to increase the internal legitimacy of a regime. In order to enhance their security, states will seek to establish a new treaty or strengthen an existing one, or alternately, to undermine a treaty that has come to be seen as a threat. Although the terms of treaties vary depending on the situation, the central component at the core of every significant treaty is the commitment to provide mutual support against external actors. A treaty is a promise, a future intention to cooperate under particular circumstances, with an emphasis on the military dimension of that cooperation. The military dimension is unique to treaties and sets them apart from other agreements, primarily economic and political. Moreover, the need for military cooperation against an external state is built into them, and this sets them apart from communal security organization. Nonetheless, every political structure is naturally affected by the open interactions among its members. Commerce, culture, the economy, and virtually every other interaction between states affect expectations as to other contexts as well: who will support whom, under what circumstances, and under what conditions.

In general, the conditions for the creation of a treaty are expediency, i.e., conditions that accord with the profit-loss calculation made by any state as it joins a treaty. If the treaty presumably increases a state's relative strength, the state is expected to embrace it, but only if the cost it will have to pay is lower than the profit it expects to gain. The costs of entering a treaty and the reasons states usually abandon their commitments generally concern the ratio between the limits imposed by the treaty on freedom of action and the potential boon to security. What are those costs? States can get a free ride at the expense of treaty members without being obligated by it, or conversely, become unwilling partners to a confrontation that had it not been for the treaty would not have involved them.

These observations, however, leave many lacunae unresolved. First, existing theoretical distinctions are limited to sovereign states and do not apply to relationships between states and non-state actors such as terrorist organizations. It is also difficult to study the nature of treaties because states tend not to reveal the most fundamental mutual obligations, i.e., the nature of their military cooperation. Perhaps even more important, the condition or the situation that makes the treaty operational, even if it has been explicitly defined by the sides, remains shrouded in mystery and usually becomes known only post factum. Moreover, it may be that a treaty will include what is called “silent understandings,” i.e., informal agreements that are not written into the agreement.

A treaty cannot last without material interests. Only when there is a conjunction of interests is it possible to drape it in some ideological wrapping and lend the treaty a mantle of ideas. At the same time, drawing a treaty in ideological-conceptual colors broadcasts to enemies as well as allies that there is a convergence of opinion among treaty members and that they are not motivated solely by considerations of balance of power. A treaty adds a kind of precision, a legal or moral obligation, to the political structure, especially with regard to the practical steps it is necessary to take in a given situation, based on a common strategy. As long as the treaty’s underlying circumstances prevail, the treaty will presumably last. On the other hand, any change to states’ conditions or priorities will affect the treaty’s measure of cohesion and even its very existence.

### The Nature of the Radical Axis

The greater the degree of cohesiveness among the members of a political alignment, the greater the threat emanating from it – and vice versa. In order to examine the degree of cohesion of the radical axis and the measure of its members’ commitments to one another, the details of the agreements among them must be examined, as well as the degree of cooperation and coordination in practice between them. States are naturally not eager to reveal such details, and they tend to remain within the purview of the intelligence services. Agreements are usually not revealed, because by doing so the treaty members are liable to generate a counter-balancing alignment. States may also prefer to enter into agreements that are as vague as possible in order to prevent situations

that could raise differences of opinion and contradictory interests to the fore. Therefore, the nature of the treaty is likely to become clear only post factum, after the outbreak of a war or another change in the balance of power. Even if a formal mutual assistance obligation was made explicit, states might try to evade such a clause in a crisis if they conclude that fulfilling their obligation could damage their own vital interests. This makes it even more difficult to predict the conduct of players in crises with any kind of precision. We tend to think that the relations between the members of the radical axis, especially Iran and Syria – and notwithstanding some fundamentally different agendas – provide them with a better mechanism for coping with their international and regional isolation and the growing internal and external pressures, an improved ability to exert influence in the region, and a way to further entrench the idea of an armed struggle against Israel. Thus, what are the conditions and trends either strengthening or weakening the cohesiveness of the axis?

### Conditions Promoting Cohesion and Unity of Action

The first major condition that promotes cohesion is a lack of political options. Although the Syrians have on numerous occasions stated that they will never abandon their “strategic partnership” with Iran, even if a peace agreement with Israel is signed, the possibility of severing the destructive link between Syria on the one hand and Iran and the Palestinian terrorist organizations on the other is raised in every discussion of the potential advantages of a peace agreement. To a large extent Syria serves as the connecting link between Iran and the other members of the radical axis; severing Syria from the axis would reduce the threat to the State of Israel. Israel would find it difficult to enter into negotiations with Syria if it is not convinced that this would be one of the results of such negotiations. The more the image of a mighty Iran dominates the region, the more Syria is likely to be seen as bandwagoning.

However, the more that Syria believes that a political option is realistic, the more possible it is that conflicting interests will surface, such that “Syria is likely to change its role in the radical axis.”<sup>4</sup> Even if Iran does not object to Israel conceding Arab land, it will find it more difficult to live with Israeli-Syrian normalization. Iran is outside of the Arab-Israeli conflict, although it does whatever it can to prevent any

compromise between the sides. On the other hand, Syria is interested in realizing its national interests – above all, restoring the Golan Heights to Syrian sovereignty – by means of an agreement. Indeed, Syria is not a natural member of the radical axis: it is a secular state and unlike Iran, Hizbollah, and Hamas, it does not rule out peace with Israel. If the political option grows more remote, Syria will strengthen its ties with Iran, though – and here is the crux – the start of political negotiations with Israel, and even signing a peace treaty does not ensure cooled relations with the radical axis members. Moreover, recently Syria has indicated that a peace treaty is not as attractive an option as it once was, and even if it should materialize Syria is not prepared for full normalization.<sup>5</sup> As long as Damascus understands that a treaty with Syria is not Israel's most pressing priority, it sees no need to damage its relations with Iran. On the contrary: it hopes to raise the price of any compromise by means of this connection. Should preference therefore be given to the Israeli-Syrian channel? The questions at stake are relatively clear and a solution is relatively easy to realize, but what Israel would receive in exchange – especially with regard to negatively affecting relationships between the members of the axis – is greatly in doubt.

The second condition is the blow sustained by the bloc. The blows that have been inflicted on the radical axis in recent years – designed to weaken the members – have actually generated a greater degree of cooperation, coordination, and sharing of lessons among them. The result: “cooperation [between members of the axis] has reached unprecedented levels.”<sup>6</sup> This should come as no surprise, because cohesion among treaty members is greatly affected by the way they understand the nature of the external threat against them: the greater the perceived threat level, the more the cooperation designed to maximize security among treaty members may be expected to grow. Nonetheless, this is also dependent on the ability of the dominant player in the alignment (Iran in this case) to demand or dictate cooperative conduct to the other players. Indeed, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu claimed that Iran is trying to pressure the other partners in the axis “to provoke hostilities between them and Israel in order to provoke tensions in the region.”<sup>7</sup>

The third condition involves accelerated military buildup. Military cooperation in and of itself contributes to positive dynamics and the sides' ability to cooperate beyond the military-operational dimension. The

members of the axis are concerned with the need to rebuild capabilities and amass more power before the next round of fighting. Since the Second Lebanon War, they have been reconstructing their forces and massively rearming themselves, acquiring improved armaments, especially in the field of long range high trajectory weapons with larger and more accurate warheads than in the past, on the clear understanding of Israel's great sensitivity to an extended campaign against the civilian rear and in order to bypass IDF unequivocal advantages on the traditional battlefield.

However, even in this process roles are changing. For example, Syria in recent years has advanced from its role as a conduit for arms transfers from Iran to Hizbollah to its role as Hizbollah's direct weapons supplier. Syria is even providing training for Hizbollah operatives within its own borders.<sup>8</sup> In the past, Israel drew red lines regarding the transfer of "balance destabilizing" weapons to Hizbollah and even used various channels of communication to issue warnings to Syria. Israel estimates that the Iranians and Syrians rescinded virtually every limitation on transferring weapons to Hizbollah and Hamas. The working assumption is that every weapon system available to Iran and Syria, no matter how advanced, will sooner or later end up in Lebanon and other locations the radical axis is trying to strengthen. In addition, Iran and Syria have together deployed intelligence gathering and early warning networks on Syrian soil designed to monitor IDF activity and improve their understanding of events on Israeli territory, in its skies, and at sea. There have even been reports of the integration of certain capabilities between Syria and Iran on the one hand, and Hizbollah on the other.<sup>9</sup> The head of IDF Military Intelligence said: "There are well known locations in Iran and Syria where during tests of weapon systems it is possible to identify Iranian and Syrian officers, Hizbollah operatives, and even Hamas personnel who have all been invited to participate in the event... The financing, technology, and training come from Iran; they prefer manufacturing to take place in Syria; and the product is divided among all the axis members for use on land, in the air, and at sea."<sup>10</sup>

### Conditions Undermining Cohesion and Unity of Action

The first condition that challenges cohesion among treaty members is their fundamentally different interests. The fact that the axis connects states with different strengths and state and non-state (or semi-state)

actors may weaken the connections between members. Moreover, the axis members represent different religious and political identities. So, for example, the Syrian regime is secular and depends on an Alawi minority in a state with a Sunni majority. By contrast, the religious and fundamentalist regime in Tehran rules a state with a Shiite majority. Hizbollah recruits its supporters among Lebanese Shiites and its supreme religious authority is the spiritual leader of Iran, while Hamas is an extremist religious organization with a clear Sunni orientation, with roots in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and opposed to the Syrian regime. Iran and Syria also view the future of Iraq, Lebanon, and the Arab-Israeli peace process differently.

Aside from Hizbollah, axis members have reservations about the growing closeness with Iran, particularly because of different long term objectives and cost-benefit considerations. In addition, the fact that both Hamas and Hizbollah have greatly scaled back their activities – in part because they understand the toll their actions exact of them – may in the future spark a clash with Iranian policy (Iran being less sensitive to those considerations) and bring differences of opinion to the surface. The relationship between Iran and Hizbollah is linked not only to their convergent interests (especially regarding the armed struggle against Israel) but also to their shared ideology (the establishment of an Islamic republic in Lebanon modeled on Iran) and loyalty (though not absolute because of Hizbollah's domestic constraints) based on clear dispatcher-agent relations. On the other hand, Syria does not subscribe to the same ideology or interests. In its conduct, it attempts to maintain a balance between the various ethnic groups in Lebanon in a way that will help it preserve its status there and therefore, in the long run, strengthen Hizbollah's standing at the expense of the other power elements in Lebanon that have long been thorns in Syria's side, even if the organization responds to the demand to struggle against Israel indirectly.

The second element is the potential for limited assistance. The asymmetry of power and resources and the fact that the axis members operate in different geographical arenas impede their ability to assist one another directly in mutual buildup efforts and acquire clear collective geopolitical significance (in general, Iran's main reference arena remains the Persian Gulf while Syria's is Lebanon and the conflict with Israel). The result: even when Hamas and Hizbollah suffered severe blows rendered



by Israel, Iranian (and Syrian) support came in the form of verbal expressions of solidarity, in more extreme anti-Israeli rhetoric, and in an attempt to increase weapons shipments by sea, air, and land. The axis, as a cohesive bloc, did not mobilize to help either Hamas in Operation Cast Lead or Hizbollah in the Second Lebanon War. Axis members also chose not to respond after the attack on the Syrian nuclear facility and the assassinations of Mahmoud Suleiman and Imad Mughniyeh on Syrian soil, all attributed to Israel. This points both to the axis members' limited ability to help one another in a crisis and to differing considerations underlying their decision making processes. The boastful declarations of "unity of purpose" and "shared fate," although somewhat reflective of the axis members' ideology, are of lesser weight than narrow national interests and the limited ability to help. Even if in the next campaign members seek to coordinate moves more than they have in the past, the help will mostly consist of weapons transfers, financial aid, training, and instruction. The probability that in a future confrontation we will see expeditionary forces is low, particularly because of the geographical constraint; it is likely – and then, only as a symbolic step – only under the most extreme of circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

The third element is internal weakness. The rift between the regime and the public in Iran and within the Iranian regime itself, evident after the presidential elections in June 2009, has so far been successfully contained by the revolutionary regime, but it damaged Iran's image of power and revealed its weaknesses – perhaps its primary weakness. The internal crisis has necessitated the channeling of energy and resources inwards, and has the potential to damage Iran's attractiveness in its allies' eyes. In addition, it may be that the Iranian regime, also in need of a significant amount of internal legitimacy for its actions, will find it hard to enlist support for continued funneling of national resources to Hizbollah to the same degree as in the past (assistance estimated to be \$100-200 million a year),<sup>12</sup> and will be much more vulnerable to criticism than before. Over time, the Iranian regime as well as the Syrian, also suffering from significant economic weakness, will continue to experience basic problems at home, and these are expected to worsen with time. These will require significant attention at the expense of promoting certain external goals. In the long term, this may generate even more weakness – if only at the cognitive level – of the axis.



The fourth element is entrenchment within the power structure. The fact that Hamas is the only governing force in a political locale and that Hizbollah is the factor that tips the scales in the Lebanese government has so far not generated any change in their principles or basic goals. However, it forces them to consider aspects of accountability that are likely at least to limit their freedom of action and increase their need to show some caution in the use of military force. In the long term, these actors may be synonymous with the political entity (that is already the situation in the Gaza Strip), which may make it easier to gain legitimacy to use force against them. In addition, these terrorist organizations, especially Hizbollah, have more and more been adopting the patterns of regular armies, and this too, from a purely military perspective, makes it easier to attack them in a war. The military actions against Lebanon and Gaza made Hizbollah and Hamas – always poised between maintaining rule and continuing the armed struggle – decide to maintain the peace for now. The assessment is that another round of fighting is contrary to their interests and is liable to erode the gains they made on the local arena in recent years. Their interests include maintaining the weapon of resistance; taking over government institutions; for Hizbollah, changing the local world order in favor of the Shiites; continuing the struggle against Israel as a means of justifying their own existence; and only finally extending assistance to axis partners. The organizations find themselves in a dilemma that will only worsen (this is especially true of Hizbollah), pitting loyalty to the homeland against loyalty to Iran and Syria, and this may bring to the surface disagreements over political and operational issues and further damage the axis' unity of action.

### Confrontation Scenarios

Axis members presumably have no interest in an extensive confrontation in the near future, given the toll it would take of them and their desire to reconstruct their forces before the next campaign. In addition, some are undergoing internal processes of entrenchment in the power structure and suffer from inherent weakness, while others lack legitimacy. What then could still go wrong? A possible trigger for a confrontation is linked to the ongoing systematic transfer of high quality arms to Hizbollah. So far these shipments have not been viewed as a *casus belli*, but it may be that transporting other weapons would lead to a different response on Israel's

part. In other words, there could be processes of buildup so significant that any event, even a tactical one, might touch off a regional firestorm. Another scenario concerns Hizbollah's revenge for the assassinations of senior organization official Imad Mughniyeh. Were such an operation, which has so far not occurred, to be considered successful by the organization, an IDF response could take place in Lebanon.

The concern about a confrontation between Israel and axis members has thus not disappeared, especially in a scenario in which Iranian nuclear facilities are attacked. It is highly probable that such an event would generate, if not automatically, a response against Israel by Hizbollah and perhaps also other axis elements. Among all the members of the axis, the connection between Iran and Hizbollah is the strongest. Iran established the organization in order to entrench an Islamic model in the form of a revolutionary regime in Lebanon. Iran is a source of inspiration for Hizbollah, the source of most of its arms, training for its personnel, and ongoing funding for its activities. Moreover, Hizbollah views the supreme leader of Iran as its supreme spiritual authority, maintains frequent direct contact with leaders of the regime in Tehran, consults with them over both fundamental and routine issues, and coordinates its activity with them.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, a response by Hizbollah in the event of an attack on an Iranian nuclear facility, even if its likelihood is high, is also increasingly dependent on the organization's other considerations. These are linked to sustaining possible blows to its status in Lebanon and Iran's ability to impose its will on Hizbollah, to the organization's expectations of the backing it can count on from Iran in a crisis, and to the circumstances that would prevail at that time: the severity of the attack on Iran and its effect on the regime's stability, the identity of the attacker, and above all, Iran's interest in preserving the power of the radical Shiite stronghold it has constructed on the shores of the Mediterranean.

A further scenario is also linked to Iran. US National Security Advisor Jim Jones warned of the possibility that because of the stricter sanctions against it Iran might try to distract the international community by making a preemptive strike against Israel using Hizbollah or Hamas as its proxy.<sup>14</sup> Such a scenario is of course not out of the question, but from Iran's perspective there is great importance in maintaining Hizbollah's weapons, especially its line of surface-to-surface missiles and the roles these weapons play as a deterrent to Israel. One cannot rule out the

possibility of a scenario involving the Palestinian arena, including a flare-up between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip with Hizbollah attempting to open a second front by firing rockets at Israel. A reverse scenario is also possible: Hamas joining in the fighting and opening a southern front alongside Hizbollah and possibly even Syria.

What would be Syria's response to an attack on Iran? From Syria's perspective, the Alawi regime remaining in place after the dust settles would constitute success. Therefore, it is likely that Syria would seek to avoid any involvement that is liable to hurt it, and therefore it would probably try to stay below the threshold of war for as long as possible. It is unclear what kind of leverage Iran has with regard to Syria, but Iran too would be served by Syria remaining a future radical stronghold, so it would likewise attempt to minimize harm to Syria.

Why then, despite its basic weaknesses, is the radical axis perceived as a threat? The first reason is Iran's determination to advance its nuclear program. Iranian nuclear capabilities would generate a fundamental geo-strategic change in the Middle East and would significantly strengthen the axis and the growing confidence of its constituent members. The second reason is the buildup of axis forces, resulting inter alia in Hizbollah's being many times stronger than it was on the eve of the Second Lebanon War and the recognition in Israel that as time passes, the cost to the civilian rear in any future confrontation with axis members, whether singly but especially as a united front, would rise exponentially compared to what it was in previous encounters. Third is the sense of threat in the region that stems from the religious-ethnic hostility and the constant fear within the Sunni Arab world of Shiite Iran, which increased when Saddam Hussein was toppled and Iraqi leadership was assumed by a Shiite majority (many identify the Alawi sect, upon which the Syrian minority rule is based, with the Shiites). The threat emanating from the axis rises in direct proportion to the manner in which its members present their achievements (and the effect that this has on the so-called Arab street) even if these do not fully correlate with reality. The fear of the axis is enhanced also because of the leadership vacuum in the Arab world, the weakness of the Arab regimes – first and foremost Egypt, and the fact that the members of the pragmatic camp suffer from dissent within their ranks and lack a clear, unified strategy to block the radical axis.

### The Syrian Role

An improvement in Syria's international and regional standing is linked in part to the Obama administration in the United States and the Sarkozy government in France, the international stamp of approval Israel gave Asad by conducting "proximity talks" with him in 2008 via the Turks, and the desire of all parties to drive a wedge between Syria and Iran. It is not impossible that the measured detente between Syria and the West is cause for concern in Iran: it raises Syria's value within the axis and positions Syria in a preferred spot over Iran. Syria's influence with Hizbollah has also increased because of its greater military cooperation with the organization and its growing influence on Lebanon's internal arena.

The United States and France, and in their wake also Saudi Arabia and other nations, have to a great extent retracted their former policy of ostracizing and isolating Damascus and started to relate to Syria as a key state with the capability of affecting the stability of Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories, even as Syria made the improvement in relations conditional on various terms. In general, the connection between Tehran and Damascus is supposed to serve as a counterweight to pro-Western Arab nations and Israel and lift them out of their relative regional isolation and grant the regimes more legitimacy from abroad and at home. Therefore, the attempts to forge closer relations with Syria, even if they cannot sever the link with Iran, introduce additional variables into the equation that the Syrian leadership must deal with, to the extreme displeasure of Iran. Even more than starting negotiations with Israel, they have the potential to sow suspicion and distrust between Syria and Iran and dissipate mutual obligations that may exist between them.

Despite all of this, the growing closeness between Syria and the West and the jumpstarting of the political process will not – at least initially – sever the close bond between Iran and Syria. The fact is that even as Syria has moved from being an isolated, ostracized state (all the while reaping significant dividends) to becoming a sought-after partner, it has to date not altered its negative activities.<sup>15</sup> The US administration thus renewed the sanctions on Syria and intensified the rhetoric against it regarding the arms transfers, even alongside the intelligence dialogue about Iraq and an attempt to revive the negotiations with Israel.

Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, its difficult economic situation, the lack of clarity surrounding America's Syria policy, the blows it sustained from Israel, and its sense of the reduced chances of the political option have all to a great extent pushed Syria into Iran's waiting arms and generated stronger cohesion between Syria and the other axis elements. Though the growing closeness to the West and the pragmatic Arab states has the potential to sow suspicion between axis members, Asad's behavior implies that he is not interested in doing so, especially not at the expense of his relations with Iran and Hizbollah. It is only natural that the Syrians would find it hard to exchange time-tested ties for promises of some settlement or form of assistance. Changing Syria's role in the axis, with an emphasis on increased military-operative support for Hizbollah, heightens its ability to influence the terrorist organization and enhances its relative weight within the axis.

### The Iranian Role

The central phenomenon in regional politics of recent years is the growing strength of Iran. This has made many players try to curb its influence on various arenas. Their success will determine to a large extent whether Iran's ascent will have been more than a fleeting phenomenon. The attempt to construct a moderate Arab front (that embodies fewer symptoms of a security dilemma and more of an outlook of competing interests) has the potential for changing the regional balance of force to Iran's detriment. It has already brought together players who never cooperated in the past to coordinate their moves and even work jointly. Thus, it has been hinted more than once that Israel is cooperating quietly with various Arab states because of the shared sense of threat and the desire to weaken Iran and its allies.

At present, the axis serves as a component in Iran's security doctrine, which itself is the material "strategic hinterland" for the other components. Iran is interested in presenting itself as leading radical forces in order to invest its image with greater gravitas. It views the other members of the axis first and foremost as a means to advance its regional ambitions. If Iran weakens, Syria's tendency to behave negatively will also weaken, and Hizbollah is likely to lose its primary supporter, something that would certainly affect its considerations. Even the Palestinian problem is likely to become easier to resolve if Hamas' support base is swept

out from under its feet. In all likelihood, there would not be a change in the ideology or conceptual foundations of the axis members, but the axis would no longer constitute the same threat. Even if the ideological justification does not disappear, the material support and the ability to maintain the axis in its present format over time would weaken.

Iran is the pivot upon which this political alignment is based and from which it draws its strength. Weakening it would make it easier to resolve most of the conflicts in the arena, from Lebanon to Iraq – conflicts Iran is stoking and from which it draws its strength. Were Iran to weaken (whether as the result of internal processes of change or because of the use of military force), the axis would not be long for this world, certainly not in its current format. Moreover, Iran's weakening would reduce its attractiveness to axis members and weaken the axis so that it no longer represents a threat of the magnitude it is today.

### Conclusion

The policy of any state depends on many considerations, among them, though not necessarily the decisive, is the making of treaties with other nations. Therefore, the practical circumstances and the understanding of risks and benefits accruing to each nation when it is time to fulfill the treaty obligations are major factors that must be considered. Moreover, each state is exposed to certain restraining factors, both internal and external, and each state is expected to assess them rather than operate reflexively. Therefore, if there will be mutual assistance within any political alignment, it also depends on the following:

- a. Timing and circumstances. The members of the axis will, as a matter of course, be more disposed to act as a united alignment if the essential security interests of all are simultaneously at risk. The axis members reported on military coordination between the United States and Israel and the intentions of both to attack them, but these reports seems to be nothing more than an attempt to close ranks by means of propaganda.
- b. The identity of the attacker and the target of the attack. The more the asset under attack is important to treaty members, the more the pressure to act rises. An attack on Iran carries more weight than an attack on Hamas. The identity of the attacker also matters: the United States is judged differently than Israel. It is likely that the organizations

would feel freer, militarily and in other ways, to act against Israel than against the United States.

- c. The severity of the attack. The nature of the response would also depend on the implications of the attack: the difference between a substantial attack against Iran and the interception of a weapons shipment on the Syrian-Lebanese border is obvious. Nonetheless, an attack that would significantly weaken a player may render that player less attractive to its allies; it could make it imprudent for them to come to its assistance and they may therefore decide to distance themselves.
- d. The initiative versus response. Because of the nature of the axis, it is more likely that its members would tend to act, certainly together, only after an attack on one or all of them at once and less as a result of a joint military initiative.

From the analysis thus far it appears that what we have here is not a case of a treaty, certainly not a defense treaty in the classical sense of the term. There is no evidence of a formal defense agreement between Syria and Iran, the two major players, and even if a formal agreement were signed (such as the December 2009 agreement) it is likely that it does not define clear conditions for them to embark on a military operation. Nonetheless, there is cooperation in practice in order to establish facts on the ground and generate an even closer partnership between them in the future.<sup>17</sup> It is not inconceivable that as time passes cooperation will expand, cohesion will grow, and the negative role played by axis members will be enhanced.

In addition to the psychological effect, the threat inherent in the radical axis stems in part from the fact that now, more than in the past, its members are setting aside traditional ideological and political divides in favor of strengthening the military component of their interrelations. The uniqueness of the axis and the measure of the threat emanating from it are paradoxically linked to the fact that it has managed to bind together players with different centers of gravity, different ideological backgrounds, and different geographical arenas. Moreover, as time passes without any significant weakening of the moving force (Iran) or the removal of a central member (e.g., Syria), the members see no reason – especially not in a strategically volatile environment – to abandon the military bonds between them.



On the basis of statements made over the last year by axis members, one may sense that the level of coordination and cooperation between them has risen and that there is even a measure of mutual guarantee between them. For example, senior Syrian officials have declared that should Israel again attack Hizbollah in Lebanon, "Damascus will not sit on the sidelines,"<sup>18</sup> while Iranian officials have announced that Iran would "respond with all measures and its entire force" should Israel attack Syria.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, statements made by leaders of the Palestinian terrorist organizations have made it clear that axis members are more committed now than they have been in the past to preserving their mutual interests,<sup>20</sup> and even to go to one another's defense under certain circumstances.<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to assess which consideration will emerge as decisive for axis members should one or more be attacked. In such a scenario, it is conceivable that they would act differently than they have in the past; therefore, one cannot rule out their coming to one another's aid. Like any political alignment, the radical axis too is by nature dynamic and given to change. The measure of cohesion depends on the extent that a convergence of interests prevails at any given moment in time. Even if coming to one another's aid is possible only in particular circumstances and members of the radical axis have not defended one another in the past, it does not mean they will not do so in the future. The possibility of coordinated joint offensive initiatives or axis members taking advantage of fighting between Israel and another member to open a second or third front cannot be excluded.

At present, the axis meets the needs of its members, which understand their limitations and therefore have reduced expectations with regard to mutual assistance. Moreover, the axis is predicated on a vague alignment of partners who do not share the same ideology or set of long term objectives. While it has increased its military capabilities, it suffers from a limited ability to furnish assistance, fundamental problems, and internal constraints that make it difficult to act as a united alignment. It is only natural that the measure of its cohesion depends greatly on the conduct of external players that have the ability to affect the preferences of the primary players. Thus, the advantage of the axis amounts to its ability to coordinate policies and maintain an armed struggle by means of proxies.

The threat inherent in the axis is liable to grow if Iran has nuclear capabilities. This could contribute to the growth of membership in the

axis; also, disagreements that now seem essential are liable to be more easily jettisoned in favor of adopting a more assertive and extreme stance than in the past. Should Iran cross the nuclear threshold, the conduct of the other axis members may seem more like bandwagoning with power based on a desire to share the spoils. At such a time, Iran will also find it easier to dictate a more assertive policy to its allies, one that is more in line with its interests; there might be less room for competing considerations and the ability of external players to drive a wedge between axis members and extricate one member or another. This would have far reaching ramifications on the manner in which wars are conducted and peace is made in the Middle East.

### Notes

- 1 As a result of Shiite dominance in Iraq and attempts to forge closer relations with Iran and Syria on the part of nations such as Qatar and Turkey, these players can also be seen as radical or semi-radical.
- 2 See., e.g., Uzi Rabi, "The 'Shiite Crescent': An Iranian Vision and Arab Worry" in Uzi Rabi, ed., *Iranian Time* (Tel Aviv: United Kibbutz Movement Press, 2008).
- 3 Michael Milstein, *Muqawama: The Challenge of Resistance to Israel's National Security Concept* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2009, Memorandum No. 102), [http://www.inss.org.il/upload/\(FILE\)1262848400.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1262848400.pdf).
- 4 The head of the research division of Israel's Military Intelligence made a similar assessment in the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, *Haaretz*, May 5, 2010.
- 5 Asad to senior American officials: "Even if there is a peace agreement with Israel, Syria will only be prepared for a ceasefire and having an embassy in Damascus," *Haaretz*, March 3, 2010. Elsewhere Asad stated: "The price of resistance is not higher than the price of peace," *Reuters*, March 28, 2010.
- 6 The head of Military Intelligence at the Institute for National Security Studies annual conference "Security Challenges of the 21st Century," December 15, 2009.
- 7 *Haaretz*, May 11, 2010.
- 8 *The Times* recently reported that it has satellite pictures proving that Hizbollah is freely moving many weapons, including surface-to-surface missiles, from a base in Adara, Syria to Lebanon. According to the report, the source of the weapons at the facility is either Syria or Iran and "Hizbollah forces are authorized to operate the facility freely," *Times Online*, May 28, 2010.
- 9 *Jane's Defence Weekly*, March 31, 2010; Charles Levinson, "Iran Arms Syria with Radar," *Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 2010.

- 10 See note 6.
- 11 A similar assessment was made by the Deputy Chief of Staff, Brig. Gen. Benny Gantz, at the Institute for National Security Studies "State of the Nation" conference, May 17, 2010.
- 12 During the Second Lebanon War and because of the economic situation in Iran, internal criticism, albeit limited, was leveled against the regime over the question of why these funds were not used to benefit the citizens of Iran. Regarding the scope of Iranian assistance to Hizbollah, see the Defense Intelligence Agency, Unclassified Report on Military Power in Iran, April 2010, [http://media.washingtontimes.com/media/docs/2010/Apr/20/Iran\\_Military\\_Report.pdf](http://media.washingtontimes.com/media/docs/2010/Apr/20/Iran_Military_Report.pdf).
- 13 Ephraim Kam, "The Ayatollah, Hizbollah, and Hassan Nasrallah," *Strategic Assessment* 9, no. 2 (2006), <http://www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=100>.
- 14 *Haaretz*, February 25, 2010.
- 15 In May 2010, President Obama decided to extend the sanctions against Syria by another year, and the administration has so far suspended its appointment of a new ambassador to Syria; the last ambassador was recalled five years ago in the wake of the murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.
- 17 The GOC Northern Command stressed the significant growth in Iranian involvement in Lebanon as a lesson from the Second Lebanon War and after the death of Imad Mughniyeh, and the expansion of the negative role played by Syria as well as the assistance it extends to Hizbollah, which has also grown greatly in scope since the Second Lebanon War. See "Security Responses to a Changing Threat," conference at the Institute for National Security Studies, January 24, 2010.
- 18 On May 30, 2010, *al-Seyassah* (Kuwait) reported that at the three-way summit in Damascus (on February 25, 2010) Syrian president Bashar Asad told Iranian president Ahmadinejad and Hizbollah director general Hassan Nasrallah that he views Hizbollah as an integral part of the Syrian army and will supply it with any equipment it requires while maintaining the independence of the organization. According to this report, Asad has dedicated two military bases to Hizbollah, one in the town of Adara, near Damascus, and the other near the resort town of Ludan, on the Syrian-Lebanese border, and even promised that in case of an attack against Lebanon, Syria would send Hizbollah 5,000 of its special forces, including missile and aerial defense experts who would act under Hizbollah command. MEMRI, June 2, 2010.
- 19 *Haaretz*, April 30, 2010.
- 20 Deputy Director General Naim Qasim of Hizbollah: "We are proud to belong to the Iranian-Syrian axis." He noted that his organization reacts with pride to the accusation of belonging to the Iranian-Syrian axis, but also said that there is no axis, rather a coordination of positions among Iran, Syria, and

the resistance organizations in Lebanon and Palestine. See *al-Wattan* (Saudi Arabia), March 31, 2010.

- 21 Islamic Jihad director general Ramadan Sallah, regarding an attack on Iran, said that Ahmadinejad's meetings with Bashar Asad, Hassan Nasrallah, and the leaders of the Palestinian factions show that an attack on any element among them is tantamount to an attack on all, *al-Hayat* (London), March 25, 2010. Hizbollah deputy director general Naim Qasim claimed that Israel would pay a steep price for an attack against Iran: "Israel and the United States cannot simply bomb Iran and expect things to be business as usual. Any attack against Iran is liable to ignite the entire region," *Reuters*, March 18, 2010.