



## Iran Isn't Just Nuclear Weapons

March 18, 2015



**Ephraim Kam** assess Iran's growing regional influence thanks to the success of proxy forces such as Shiite militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen. He argues that even with a nuclear agreement, Iran has strengthened its influence in the Arab world thanks to the lack of a strong Arab balancing force, and that this increased power makes Iranian behavior a continued strategic concern, with or without a nuclear accord.

### By Ephraim Kam

Naturally, for many governments, the most disturbing aspect of Iranian policy is its ambition to possess nuclear arms. Israel is concerned about the direct threat Iranian nuclear arms would pose. Other nations are afraid of a more aggressive Iran if and when it acquires nuclear weapons, while others are worried that Iranian nuclear arms would exacerbate the instability in the Middle East and start a nuclear arms race. But without detracting from the nuclear threat, it deserves to examine another aspect of Iran's conduct, one that already worries various governments both in the Middle East and beyond: Iran's ability to exploit the turmoil in the Arab world to increase its presence and influence in various parts of the Middle East.

A lot has been written about the growing involvement and influence of Iran in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. Indeed, the state of affairs in Iraq and Syria still poses serious challenges to Iran. Iraq is home to groups, especially Sunnis, vehemently opposed to Iran's influence in their country, and many Shiites are also leery of depending on Iran. The instability and violence in Iraq is negatively affecting Iran's allies, especially the Shiite militias in Iraq. The situation in Syria grew even more complicated with the appearance of jihadist organizations there, now in control of parts of Syrian territory at a time when the Assad's regime survivability is far from ensured. Above all, the rise of the Islamic State organization has created new difficulties for Iran, both in terms of its threat to the future of the Assad regime and its control of Syria and in terms of the threat to the Shiite militias in Iraq, its government and stability.

Yet alongside ISIS's danger to Iranian interests in the three countries important to it – Iraq, Syria and Lebanon – these threats have helped strengthen Iran's influence in the region. Western and Arab governments currently realize that Iran has an important role to play in stabilizing the situation in Syria and Iraq and the war against ISIS. Iran's gain from this recognition was immediate: the U.S. administration already

expressed its interest in cooperating with Iran to stop ISIS should Iran show a constructive approach, and though there hasn't been any real cooperation to date, there is partial coordination. And in the meantime, western governments have suspended their efforts to topple Assad's regime, and CIA Director even said that the US did not want to see the Assad regime's collapse, to be replaced by ISIS.

Iran's involvement in Syria represents yet another aspect of special interest to Israel. Since the establishment of Hizbollah in 1982, Iran has focused on building a forward front against Israel in southern Lebanon. After the withdrawal of Israel's troops from Lebanon in May 2000, Iran and Syria – in addition to drilling and training Hizbollah fighters – built for Hizbollah a huge rocket arsenal aimed exclusively at Israel. From Iran's perspective, this was its own first line of deterrence and attack against Israel. Until quite recently, Iran was not directly involved in the Golan Heights front because this came under Syria's purview. Now that Assad's regime is foundering, part of the Syrian Golan Heights are controlled by jihadist organizations, and Syria is playing host to hundreds of Revolutionary Guards, the time has come for Iran to try to construct a second front against Israel in the Golan.

And so Iran's military presence in Syria, which started out as an attempt to help the Assad regime, has expanded into an effort to increase its capability to attack Israel also from the Golan. The Iranian general killed near Quneitra in January 2015, along with some senior Hizbollah members, wasn't there to have a picnic. He was scouting the area to build an infrastructure for qualitative terrorist attacks against Israel from the Syrian part of the Golan, thereby erecting another front against Israel, together with Hizbollah, whenever it is needed. Thus Iran, for the first time, is trying to create a direct connection between the two fronts for deploying Hizbollah against Israel: in southern Lebanon and in the Golan.

Iran is also renewing its efforts in the Palestinian arena, considered always an important target. After more than two years of chilly relations between Iran and Hamas, mostly because of the organization's reservations about the bloodbath Assad's regime is perpetrating in Syria, there has recently been a rapprochement. Protective Edge, the recent Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip, changed the status of Hamas, which suddenly grew desperate for money and needed to replenish its weapons caches. The result: in recent months, senior Hamas personnel have been making their pilgrimage to Tehran to renew Iranian aid. Moreover, senior Iranians have recently declared that Iran must strengthen its military power in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and arm the Palestinians to help them confront Israel.

Several elements are helping Iran build its strongholds of influence in the region, including some located hundreds of miles from its borders. First, attaining hegemony in the region is a central strategic goal of Iran's security concept. Iran believes that the size of its territory and population, its geo-strategic location, long history, leading position in the Shiite camp, economic potential, military capabilities, and – in future – nuclear capabilities are the foundation for its ambition to become the most influential regional power in the Middle East. Its ability to provide money and arms to governments and organizations in the region helps to promote this goal. Second, the turmoil rocking the region in the last four years is helping Iran as the Arab world lacks a major leader and central leadership, and most of the important regimes are either neutralized or busy with their own internal problems. Thus, the vacuum created

in the region provides Iran with new opportunities, without it having any real regional rivals.

Third, the United States has played an important role in Iran's successes. In 2003, the United States broke the Iraqi system, removing the only regional power that could contain Iran, and allowing the Iraqi Shiites to change their position from an oppressed majority to a leading majority, thereby opening Iraq's doors to the Iranians. The Obama administration has allowed Iran to help Assad's regime survive and is not responding to Iran's military presence in Syria or Iraq. The United States has three close allies – Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia – urging a stop to Iran's growing power, but all three find themselves embroiled with the administration, which is doing nothing to curb Iran. As The Washington Post's editorial said on February 5, 2015, the United States is not trying to stop Iran's efforts to attain hegemony like previous administrations did, and Obama is apparently willing to give Iran a foothold in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and beyond.

There seems to be an expectation in the U.S. administration that if an agreement on the nuclear issue can be concluded with Iran then it will be possible to expand the dialogue with Tehran, leading to regional cooperation. This assumption is liable to prove erroneous, at least as long as the current regime rules Iran. Iran would very much like an agreement on the nuclear question in order to lift the sanctions against it. But Iran, at least the radical wing of the regime, is very suspicious of the United States, and is therefore not interested in any dialogue or cooperation beyond what is strictly necessary to achieve a nuclear agreement. Iran's regional objectives are diametrically opposed to those of the United States, even if they have some interests in common. Moreover, Iran's most important strategic objective in achieving hegemony is ousting the U.S. military presence from the region and curtailing the influence of the United States. This objective will continue to direct Iran also in the future, and the building of strongholds of influence in the region is designed to advance this goal.

Iran's success in establishing an array of strongholds of influence – through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, with two of them (in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip) on the Mediterranean Sea and a third at the entrance to the Red Sea and just south of Saudi Arabia – is a new development. It is supported by local allies and the presence of the Revolutionary Guards in some of these strongholds, and will serve Iran's attempt to establish its hegemony in parts of the Middle East. This development is already worrisome in some of the region's nations, especially Israel, Saudi Arabia and perhaps Egypt, in part because there is no regional or international player to stop Iran or counterbalance it. One may assume that if Iran remains a nuclear threshold nation – certainly if it develops nuclear arms – and the sanctions are lifted, Iran's ability to exert pressures on regional players and its scope for maneuvering in the region will grow, thus multiplying the threat it poses.

**Col. (ret.) Dr. Ephraim Kam** is a Senior Research Associate at *The Institute for National Security Studies* in Tel-Aviv.