



Opinion and Analysis, Week ending 30 January 2014

1. How to solve Obama's Iran dilemma

Dennis Ross, Politico Magazine, 26 January 2014

This is what the negotiations are now about: Can the United States and its allies get the Iranians to roll back their nuclear program and infrastructure in return for a rollback of the sanctions on banking, commerce, shipping and insurance that have proven so onerous to the Iranian economy?

<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/01/iran-nuclear-deal-barack-obama-102616.html#ixzz2rZbSPIHb>

2. Goodbye, Harriet Sherwood: 3 years covering Gaza, no lessons learned"

Adam Levick, Algemeiner, 26 January 2014

Harriet Sherwood's latest 3,200 word report, [Goodbye Gaza](#), accurately reflects the *Guardian's* unwritten ideological "style guide," which seems to dictate that even the most malevolent Palestinian political actors are framed in a sympathetic light. "With a heavy heart," the strap line begins, Sherwood "pays a farewell visit to Gaza and pays tribute to the resilience, creativity and humour of its people."

<http://www.algemeiner.com/2014/01/26/goodbye-harriet-sherwood-3-years-covering-gaza-no-lessons-learned/>

3. Iran's charm offensive

Editorial, New York Times, 25 January 2014

President Rouhani's benign image and deft political skills could not erase or excuse the ugly fact that Iran remains the main ally of Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, in the destruction of Syria and its people.

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/25/opinion/irans-charm-offensive.html?emc=edit_tnt_20140124&tntemail0=y&r=0

4. Why Palestinians don't recognize Israel as a Jewish state

Bakir Oweida, Asharq Al-Awasat, 25 January 2014

By giving in to Israeli demands for its recognition as a Jewish state, Palestine would prove that it is just another entry in the Israeli record that began when the founders of Israel claimed to have established a secular state.

<http://www.aawsat.net/2014/01/article55327936>

5. Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Middle East's 30-year war

Douglas Murray, The Spectator, 25 January 2014

Why the great Sunni-Shia conflict is getting ever closer to the surface
<http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9122371/armageddon-awaits/>

6. Inside Iran: Iran's demographic problem
Ariel Ben Solomon, Jerusalem Post, 24 January 2014

Is there a correlation between Iran's nuclear program and its low fertility rate or, perhaps as well, between the vitality of Islamic civilization and its shrinking birth-rates? There is, according to David Goldman.
<http://www.meforum.org/3724/iran-demographic-problem>

7. Palestinian Authority: Israel's security partner,
Shlomi Eldar, Al-Monitor, 24 January 2014

Throughout the years, the Palestinians had one absolutely necessary condition, the violation of which could destroy the efficacious relationship between the sides. They demanded that security cooperation remained absolutely secret, with an emphasis on exchange of intelligence information that led to the arrest of suspects for activities against Israelis.
<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/palestine-israel-security-cooperation-al-qaeda-global-jihad.html>

8. The threat of the "Salafi Crescent"
Col. (res.) Dr Shaul Shay, Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies (BESA), 21 January 2014

While Israel and the West are focused on the Iranian threat, another dangerous entity is emerging in the Middle East. Attempts by al-Qaeda and other radical Sunni Islamist groups to challenge the Shia Crescent (Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon) must be viewed as a serious security threat.
http://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/threat-salafi-crescent/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=threat-salafi-crescent

1. How to solve Obama's Iran dilemma

The six-month clock on world powers' nuclear deal with Iran has finally begun to tick, but nobody seems optimistic.

Most Popular

Top Stories, Videos & Photos

1. **The states of our union, ranked from best to worst**
2. **The most judged woman in America**
3. **I spent 14 years in the NFL. Here's why I'm quitting Congress after four.**
4. **N.Y. teachers turn on Common Core**
5. **What liberals want**

President Obama puts the chance of translating this interim agreement into a comprehensive deal to ensure that Iran cannot build a nuclear weapon at less than 50 percent. The Iranian deputy foreign minister, Abbas Araqchi, believes that may be high - and

points out that nothing the Iranians have accepted is irreversible. Indeed, he says they can undo the steps they have taken, including suspending the enrichment of uranium to 20 percent, in a day. The US government, meanwhile, says that this first-step agreement offers Iran very limited sanctions relief. And with the sanctions architecture intact, the US

can quickly ratchet up the pressures on the Islamic Republic if it violates the deal or if a comprehensive deal proves unachievable.

Why are both sides so downbeat? And what will give us the best chance of producing a lasting agreement?

To begin with, the comprehensive deal will be difficult to achieve precisely because it is about rollback. The interim agreement, officially called the Joint Plan of Action, was essentially a “cap for a cap.” The Iranians cap their program in the sense that they agree not to add to the number of centrifuges or to the overall amount of enriched uranium they have accumulated at the 5 percent level (though they must reduce to zero the 20 percent enriched material they have already accumulated). The Iranians are, however, allowed to build new centrifuges to replace ones that are damaged or break down, and they may continue research on even more modern and efficient centrifuges. In return, the US promised to adopt no new sanctions for the next 6 months, while relaxing sanctions related to petrochemicals, precious metals and the Iranian automobile industry and allowing Iran to access \$4.2 billion in previously blocked funds.

Producing a cap for cap was not easy, but is far less difficult than producing a rollback for a rollback. And that is what the negotiations are now about: Can the US and its allies get the Iranians to roll back their nuclear program and infrastructure in return for a rollback of the sanctions on banking, commerce, shipping and insurance that have proven so onerous to the Iranian economy?

It should be doable in theory. After all, the US position - and that of the so-called P5+1 grouping of world powers, America’s partners in these negotiations - is that Iran can possess civil nuclear power so long as it is not in a position to break out to a nuclear weapons capability. That is what the Iranians say they are doing: They insist that they only seek civil nuclear energy and don’t want nuclear weapons. Their president, Hassan Rouhani, has even said that Iran is prepared to adopt transparency measures to assure the rest of the world of Iran’s intentions. But in practice, what theoretically sounds bridgeable may not be so easy, particularly given the legacy of distrust and the scope of the Iranian nuclear program.

Consider, at a minimum, two elements of that legacy from a US perspective. The Iranians have yet to answer the International Atomic Energy Agency’s questions about the “possible military dimensions” of their nuclear program, which involves, among other things, experimentation with nuclear trigger devices; in addition, they have now built nearly 20,000 centrifuges and accumulated approximately 5-6 bombs’ worth of enriched uranium. And a third suspicious element: Iran’s infrastructure also includes the development of a heavy-water plant that is grossly inefficient for producing electricity, but not for generating plutonium for nuclear weapons.

With the Iranians proclaiming that their nuclear infrastructure is about their dignity and independence - and that international demands are about denying them each - one can assume that they will resist an extensive rollback of their program. Yet, they will not get the extensive sanctions rollback they seek without a massive reduction in their nuclear infrastructure. While the Obama administration is not demanding zero enrichment and the complete dismantlement of Iran’s enrichment facilities, as some on Capitol Hill are calling for, it is not prepared to accept Iran as a nuclear threshold state. In other words, Iran must

not be left with a nuclear infrastructure sufficiently robust and advanced enough to break out to nuclear weapons at a time of its choice.

How far back is rolled back enough? President Obama has said publicly that Iran can't have either a heavy water plant or its enrichment facility at Fordow, and it must also reduce the number of its centrifuges - though he has maintained ambiguity on what that number would be. I am one of those who believe that the USA can accept a limited enrichment program for Iran, but I think the number of centrifuges must be small, certainly less than 10 percent of what they have now (nearly 20,000). That number, moreover, cannot include any next-generation centrifuges, which even now the Iranians are trying improve with new advances. In addition, Iran must have less than a bomb's worth of accumulated enriched uranium in the country. All that will be a bitter pill for the Islamic Republic to swallow.

Indeed, there is nothing in what Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Rouhani or Foreign Minister Javad Zariv are now saying that suggests they believe they will have to reduce their program along these lines. Their concept at this point would no doubt leave them as a nuclear threshold state. Many observers, me included, believe that has been their goal all along.

So how can Obama break the impasse? The only chance of getting Iran to give up this objective is for Iran to believe that the cost of pursuing it is simply too high. President Rouhani's desire to end Iran's isolation and the sanctions that have done such damage to its economy has largely stopped the clock on the Iranian nuclear program. Clearly, Ayatollah Khamenei has accepted enough of Rouhani's logic to support him at least to this point. It was not inducements that got us this far, but the pressure of the sanctions.

Most Popular

Top Stories, Videos & Photos

1. **The states of our union, ranked from best to worst**
2. **The most judged woman in America**
3. **I spent 14 years in the NFL. Here's why I'm quitting Congress after four.**
4. **N.Y. teachers turn on Common Core**
5. **What liberals want**

And that highlights an interesting gap between the White House and Congress. Senators like Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) and Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) believe we must keep up the pressure if we are to have any chance of getting the Iranians to agree to roll back their nuclear program. The president and Secretary of State John Kerry argue that additional pressure now - at least in the form of a new sanctions bill - would undercut Rouhani, empower the hard-liners around the supreme leader and give the Iranians an excuse to walk away from the negotiations. Some in the White House have gone so far as to say that those who support sanctions now are choosing a path of war. Not surprisingly, such rhetoric has not won the White House more adherents.

I find the argument that adopting sanctions now will end diplomacy and make war the only option to be ironic. Ironic not because I necessarily agree that the choice at this point is, in fact, that binary, or that I am convinced that additional sanctions adopted now will produce the end of diplomacy. Ironic because most of the administration's critics - and certainly the Saudis, Emiratis and Israelis - are all convinced that President Obama will not use force against the Iranian nuclear program under any circumstances.

But that is not the Obama administration's argument. The administration is saying: If you undercut our effort at diplomacy - and legislating sanctions now will do that - you leave war as the only option. That hardly suggests President Obama is retreating from his oft-repeated declaration that all options are on the table. It is true that he does not want to be left with force as the only option. Who does? But the White House's position should not give the Iranians any comfort. In effect, it is saying that if diplomacy fails, force will be inevitable because Iran cannot become a nuclear weapons state.

Adding to the irony for me is that the most likely way for the supreme leader to back Rouhani is for him to see the consequences of not doing so. Rouhani has little chance of being empowered if the supreme leader thinks Iran can have its yellow cake and eat it too. If Khamenei thinks the sanctions will collapse of their own weight or that there is no prospect for the use of force or that the United States is desperate for a deal, there is no prospect of the Iranians accepting that they must roll back their program to the point of not being a threshold state.

Some argue that the USA must insist that Iran be allowed no enrichment and dismantle the means for it. From the standpoint of strengthening the global non-proliferation regime, that would be the best outcome. But I agree with the Obama administration's opposition to this posture for two reasons: First, I suspect there is a point where the supreme leader will see the absence of a face-saving compromise, such as a US acceptance of Iran's having rights to limited enrichment, as constituting a surrender that will threaten the Islamic Republic. He has repeatedly argued against making concessions to what he calls the "arrogant powers" because it will only feed their appetite to keep pressing for concessions until they achieve their aim of wholesale regime change. Second, if diplomacy fails, the US will be far more credible in reinforcing sanctions or using force - or both - if it puts a proposal on the table that the rest of the international community will find serious and plausible. Excluding limited enrichment will deny us that plausibility; including it will allow us to unmask Iran's true intentions if diplomacy fails: They want nuclear weapons, not just civil nuclear power.

Is it possible to reconcile Congress's belief that we need to adopt sanctions with the administration's view that it will undercut diplomacy? I think so. But it will require lawmakers to accept the argument that adopting new sanctions *now* will allow the Iranians to walk away while our P5+1 partners blame us instead of them. Even the French, who tend to adopt the hardest line among the P5+1, now buy into this logic. Diplomacy is about taking away excuses, not giving them.

If Congress needs to recognize that, the administration needs to recognize the importance of being willing to add to the pressure and of working with the Hill to that end. For example, if the Iranians can create facts in anticipation that diplomacy might not work, so should we. When the Iranians are doing work on new, more advanced centrifuges - ones more powerful than their current IR-2s, which are already 4-5 times more efficient than their first-generation centrifuges - they are sending a signal to us about what they will do if diplomacy fails. The administration can match that by agreeing with key members of Congress on which new sanctions it would be prepared to adopt if there is no follow-on agreement to the Joint Plan of Action.

This is an elegant solution: Congress would not adopt the new sanctions during the life of the Joint Plan of Action, but the Hill would know that the administration is preparing the ground to increase the pressure in a meaningful way - and so would the Iranians, our partners and the international private sector, which is exploring the new business climate in Tehran. We would be giving the negotiations a chance while denying the Iranians an excuse.

A deal with the Iranians may or may not be possible, but one with Congress? That should be much easier.

2. “Goodbye, Harriet Sherwood: 3 years covering Gaza, no lessons learned.”

Harriet Sherwood’s latest 3,200 word report, *Goodbye Gaza*, accurately reflects the *Guardian*’s unwritten ideological “style guide,” which seems to dictate that even the most malevolent Palestinian political actors are framed in a sympathetic light. “With a heavy heart,” the strap line begins, Sherwood “pays a farewell visit to Gaza and pays tribute to the resilience, creativity and humour of its people.”

After a few paragraphs in which we’re introduced to her Guardian stringer, Hazem Balousha (who played a key role in Jon Donnison’s infamous fauxtopography scandal in 2012), Sherwood’s characteristic Hamas obfuscations begin in earnest:

The people of Gaza are reeling from a series of blows that have led some analysts to say that it is facing its worst crisis for more than six years, putting its 1.7 million inhabitants under intense material and psychological pressure. Israel’s continued blockade has been exacerbated by mounting hostility to Gaza’s Hamas government from the military regime in Cairo, which sees it as an extension of Egypt’s deposed Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptians have virtually cut off access to and from Gaza, and as a result Hamas is facing crippling financial problems and a new political isolation.

Power cuts, fuel shortages, price rises, job losses, Israeli air strikes, untreated sewage in the streets and the sea, internal political repression, the near-impossibility of leaving, the lack of hope or horizon – these have chipped away at the resilience and fortitude of Gazans, crushing their spirit.

First, as a [report](#) at the Algemeiner by Elder of Zion demonstrated, “the current Gaza fuel crisis started when Hamas decided in 2011 that it didn’t want fuel from Israel and instead chose to run Gaza’s power plant with Egyptian fuel, sold by smugglers at lower prices that reflected the subsidy that Egypt provides.” When the Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood lost power, the tunnels were closed and Hamas lost its source of cheap fuel. However, instead of paying market prices, Hamas cynically chose to shut down the power plants, causing a crisis as water treatment plants shut off. Qatar then offered to transfer to Hamas large amounts of fuel, which it held in storage tanks in Egypt, and Israel agreed to transport Qatari oil from Israel, after unloading it in Ashdod. However, Palestinians objected to both of these proposals.

Yet, Sherwood assigns no blame to Hamas for the Gaza fuel shortages she describes.

Further in her report, Sherwood gives a broader view of Gaza and her coverage of the region since 2010.

This was my last visit to Gaza before returning to London to live and work. I moved to Jerusalem in May 2010, to report principally on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also social and cultural issues and the regional upheavals that erupted three years ago. Since I first came here almost 10 years ago, I had been fascinated by the place, its people, its history and its compelling complexity.

I arrived eager to learn more about what is frequently called the world’s most intractable conflict, and to try to understand the powerful feelings of historical injustice on both sides. I am leaving angry about an occupation that has lasted close to half a century, weary of Israel’s grinding oppression

of the Palestinian people, cynical about the political leadership on both sides and in the international community, and pessimistic that a fair resolution will be reached.

Again, note how, other than her criticism of “political leadership on both sides,” Sherwood’s concluding assessment of the conflict singles out Israeli “occupation” and “oppression,” but leaves Hamas unscathed.

Later, reporting on the crossings between Israel and Gaza, Sherwood writes the following:

*...the vast hangar-like terminal on the Israeli side echoes to the footsteps of these few, plus a **tiny number of Palestinians**, nearly all of whom are going to or returning from business trips or hospital visits*

According to [figures](#) released regularly by COGAT, about **400 Gazans are permitted to travel (for various reasons) into Israel each day** through the Erez crossing. This number includes an estimated **100 Palestinians (and family members) who enter Israel for medical care each day** – hardly a “tiny” number.

Further along in her report, there are the following passages detailing the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza which again aptly illustrate Sherwood’s failure to hold Hamas morally accountable for their decisions:

Fourteen months after that mini-war [[Operation Pillar of Defense](#)], on this last visit, Hazem and I talked of the hope – now long faded – that swept Gaza when the Israeli army and Jewish settlers pulled out in 2005. The sense of liberation at the time, and the dream that Gazans might be free to determine their own future, and become a model of a future state of Palestine, was swiftly dashed on the rocks of Israel’s political actions and military operations, and the rise of Hamas.

Of course, Sherwood’s prose characteristically blurs cause and effect, obfuscating the plain fact that Israel’s military actions *followed* the rise of Hamas – particularly the Islamist group’s decision to focus its energies (and limited funds) not on economic development, but on the production and importation of thousands of rockets to launch attacks against Israeli communities, and on hate indoctrination of their youth against “the Zionist entity”.

Sherwood also all but ignores Hamas’ decision to spend millions of dollars on terrorist tunnels, funds which could have been spent on infrastructure projects and other vital social needs.

Indeed, the closest Sherwood comes to blaming Hamas for the plight of Palestinians in the territory is her brief mention of the “continued political enmity between Hamas and Fatah.” And, though she laments “grieving [Palestinian] mothers who expressed fervent hope that their infant sons would grow up to avenge their dead fathers or siblings by killing Jewish children,” she contextualized such a disturbing dynamic as “a profoundly depressing illustration of **the cycle of violence** here.”

Near the end of her story, Sherwood does allow one Palestinian to express criticism of the Islamist group governing the territory:

*Mkhaimer Abusada, professor of political science at Gaza’s Al Azhar university told me over sweet mint tea. “But we are very afraid. Hamas does not allow any protests, any opposition. We’re sick and tired of Hamas, but **we don’t have an alternative.**”*

Though, the despotic regime in control of Gaza does indeed limit Palestinian options, they did have the ability to make a very important decision about their future following Israel's unilateral disengagement in September 2005. In January 2006, Palestinian legislative elections were held and Hamas took 44.45 percent of the vote, whilst Fatah received 41.43 percent. One of the only "moderate" factions running, Salam Fayyad's Third Way Party, garnered a mere 2.5 percent.

Alternately, it is quite telling that when Israelis are poised to make decisions considered injurious to the peace process, *Guardian* journalists aren't nearly as circumspect in rendering moral judgments.

In the weeks leading to Israel's January 2013 national elections, Sherwood (and *Guardian* journalists across the board) were warning that the new government would represent a move far to the far right, with some even suggesting that the 33rd Israeli government would be "the most right-wing government in its history," an alleged rightward lurch which Sherwood cautioned was resulting in the state's increasing international isolation.

As we know now, the *Guardian* got it wrong and, in fact, a more centrist government emerged from the elections, one which has engaged in serious peace negotiations with the Palestinians – though their warnings and castigations about the injurious effects of Israeli "provocations" such as building homes in eastern Jerusalem continues.

Alternately, there seems to be no degree of Palestinian pathos which elicits similarly ominous warnings by Sherwood, or others at the *Guardian*, about the inevitable negative consequences of freely choosing such dangerous paths. When free of Israeli occupation, and given the freedom to vote in relatively fair elections, a plurality of Palestinian voters cast their lot with an extremist movement – ostracized by the West – which oppresses women, gays, religious minorities and political opponents, and openly calls for Israel's destruction and the mass murder of Jews.

Palestinians will never learn the most intuitive lessons from their self-destructive embrace of extremism – and other similarly dangerous political decisions – as long as they're continually denied moral agency by assorted liberal racists, faux humanitarians and activist journalists like Harriet Sherwood.

3. Iran's charm offensive

President Hassan Rouhani of Iran made his debut this week at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where he expanded on his government's charm offensive by wooing investors and reassuring political leaders of his determination to complete a comprehensive nuclear deal with the major powers. But his benign image and deft political skills could not erase or excuse the ugly fact that Iran remains the main ally of Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, in the destruction of Syria and its people.

Mr. Rouhani, who took office in August, is eager to fulfill his promises of improving Iran's relations with the world and reviving an economy devastated by international sanctions and his predecessor's mismanagement. He quickly reached an interim deal with the major powers that curbs significant aspects of Iran's nuclear program.

When [the deal took effect](#) on Monday, United Nations inspectors confirmed that Iran had begun suspending most advanced uranium-fuel enrichment and taken other agreed-upon steps. In exchange, Iran received what the United States called "limited, targeted and reversible sanctions relief for a six-month period." At Davos, Mr. Rouhani clearly was looking to speed the day when all sanctions are lifted and Iran can achieve the economic growth and

international acceptance that has been lost since the 1979 Islamic revolution. At a meeting with top oil executives, he and his oil minister promised to have a new, attractive investment model for oil contracts by September that could help win back business from Western interests.

For now, it is essential that broad sanctions, including restrictions on Iran's access to the international financial system, remain in place until a comprehensive nuclear agreement is reached. The United States insists that they will remain in place, though it may not be easy to prevent an erosion of the penalties. Investors are eager to jump back into the Iranian market, as are many governments.

Over the long term, Iran's full reintegration into the international system will depend on more than just adherence to the interim nuclear deal and completion of a final agreement. It must also be seen as contributing to stability in other ways, including ending the hostility toward Israel. Mr. Rouhani said he sought "constructive engagement" with Iran's neighbors. But that goal is belied by Iran's support for the Syrian government, a government that has bombed civilians and obstructed humanitarian aid. Iran, which uses Syria as a buffer between it and Israel, has encouraged Hezbollah to fight on his behalf.

Iran's support of Mr. Assad is all the more unsettling because Mr. Rouhani was rubbing shoulders with the world's elite just as a stormy peace conference on Syria was playing out elsewhere in Switzerland. Instead of just bemoaning the civil war as a "major catastrophe" and dismissing all the anti-Assad forces as "terrorists," he could have given credibility to his "constructive engagement" policy by temporarily suspending arms to Syria while peace talks are underway and negotiating a face-saving way for Mr. Assad to leave power.

The United States has tried to keep the nuclear and Syria issues separate, and there is logic to that. If the nuclear deal were the vehicle to resolve every dispute the West has with Iran, it would likely fail. But the Syrian civil war is a major catastrophe, and Iran has considerable leverage to help bring it to an end.

4. Why Palestinians don't recognize Israel as a Jewish state

What would happen if Palestine officially recognized Israel as a Jewish state? Would it turn the Arab and Islamic worlds upside down? Or would the mother of all wars erupt, scorching the planet with nuclear weapons? Only God knows the answer to the second question. Many people do share the conviction that the end of the world is drawing near, providing as evidence a plethora of indicators foretelling the impending eruption of a nuclear Third World War.

Not everyone has to believe in this hypothesis, so it's best we leave the realms of the unknown and return to reality.

The response of the Arab and Islamic worlds to Palestine officially recognizing Israel as a Jewish state - if there is any response at all - would probably result in nothing more than some street protests and some loud shouting. Some angry Arabs might put on a show of force; some will issue statements denouncing the decision, or they might publish articles or poems threatening Israel and Palestinian officials with future acts of revenge.

I doubt any such reactions would affect Palestine's hypothetical decision to recognize Israel as a Jewish state.

Would it be an exaggeration to say that Israeli politicians - from the founding generation to today's shifty prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu - have built their policies on the assumption that if Palestinians rejected taking part in any peace process or political settlement it would thereby absolve Israel in the world's eyes? History shows that Israel has always met Palestinian overtures with manoeuvres. Tel Aviv's duplicity has hinged on the international community's submission to Israeli arrogance, as much as it has on capitalizing on a Palestinian deference borne out of an entrenched fear of provoking Israel.

Once again, Israel has played a crafty trick by asking the Palestinian Authority to recognize it as a Jewish state, in a bid to spark reactions in Palestine and across the Arab world, as well as among other Muslims who support the Palestinian cause. This, of course, would play into Israel's hands, since it is not serious about achieving true peace.

It has been said (and will be said again) that such a recognition on the part of the Palestinian Authority would open the door for Tel Aviv to expel Palestinians from Israel into Jordan, as an "alternative homeland." Although that expression has been repeated since the Six-Day War of 1967, it has proven empty and meaningless. To begin with, Israel originally failed to send Palestinians to Jordan because its backers in major world capitals did not allow it to do so. With transformations taking place around the world, how could Israel get the permission to evacuate Palestinians from their country? Even more, how could anyone assume that 1.5 million Palestinians, who have been standing firm since the establishment of Israel, lack the determination to stand their ground and just quietly flee to Jordan in the face of Israeli violence and threats of ethnic cleansing?

On the other hand, little is said about the Palestine Liberation Organization officially recognizing the state of Israel according to the pre-1967 borders. Moreover, the Palestinian side accepting an Israeli demand is in itself a condemnation of Israel, rather than a redefining act for Palestine. After all, Palestine remains a place where believers of all the heavenly religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - can live in peace.

The Palestinian Authority will not expose this deceptive Israeli mentality by exposing its racism during this age of the globalization. By giving in to Israeli demands for its recognition as a Jewish state, Palestine would prove that it is just another entry in the Israeli record that began when the founders of Israel claimed to have established a secular state.

Have the Palestinians figured out this trick? They most certainly have, but they fear provoking their longstanding enemy with a surprise move. It is therefore no wonder that Palestinian territories continue to shrink while Israeli settlements expand, thanks to John Kerry's initiative, just the latest in a series started by William Rogers in 1970.

5. Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Middle East's 30-year war

Syria has fallen apart. Major cities in Iraq have fallen to al-Qa'eda. Egypt may have stabilised slightly after a counter-coup. But Lebanon is starting once again to fragment. Beneath all these facts - beneath all the explosions, exhortations and blood - certain themes are emerging.

Some years ago, before the Arab 'Spring' ever sprung, I remember asking one top security official about the region. What, I wondered, was their single biggest fear? The answer was striking and precise: 'That the region will clarify.' That is a fear which now appears to be coming true.

The Middle East is not simply falling apart. It is taking a different shape, along very clear lines - far older ones than those the western powers rudely imposed on the region nearly a century ago. Across the whole continent those borders are in the process of cracking and breaking. But while that happens the region's two most ambitious centres of power - the house of Saud and the Ayatollahs in Iran - find themselves fighting each other not just for influence but even, perhaps, for survival.

The way in which what is going on in the Middle East has become a religious war has long been obvious. Just take this radio exchange, caught at the ground level earlier this month, between two foreign fighters in Syria, the first from al-Qa'eda's Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [ISIS], the second from the Free Syrian army [FSA]. 'You apostate infidels,' says the first. 'We've declared you to be "apostates", you heretics. You don't know Allah or His Prophet, you creature. What kind of Islam do you follow?' To which the FSA fighter responds, 'Why did you come here? Go fight Israel, brother.' Only to be told, 'Fighting apostates like you people takes precedence over fighting the Jews and the Christians. All imams concur on that.'

The religious propulsion of many of the fighters who have flooded into Syria in the three years of its civil war - 400 or more from Britain alone - is beyond doubt. From the outset this has been a confrontation inflamed by religious sectarianism. In the first stages of the Syrian conflict the Shia militia of Hezbollah were sent by their masters in Iran to fight on the side of Iran's ally Bashar al-Assad. But those of a different political and religious orientation made their own moves against this. Across Britain and Europe, not to mention the wider Middle East, many thousands of young men listened to the call of religious leaders like the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz al-Asheik and Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who last year declared that Hezbollah is in fact not the 'army of God', as its name almost suggests, but rather the 'army of Satan.' Sheikh Qaradawi declared that 'every Muslim trained to fight and capable of doing that [must] make himself available' for jihad in Syria.

It is perhaps inevitable that with the amount of regional influence at stake, and the quantity of natural resources, there would be numerous powers involved in trying to dictate the Syrian endgame. But as the country's civil war has ground on and the region as a whole has started to fall into a maelstrom, there is not a party or country that has not been shocked by one particular new reality. That is the fact that what has hitherto been the most important global player has decided to take a back seat. When two major Iraqi cities fell to al-Qa'eda forces last week, the American Secretary of State, John Kerry, expressed concern but stressed that for the Iraqi government this was now 'their fight'.

One of the cities was Fallujah, the site of the bloodiest battle of the Iraq war, where 10,000 British and American troops fought to depose the Islamists. It is now back under jihadi control, with the black flag of al-Qa'eda proudly flying - and the West does not want to know. Although there are Syrian cities also now under al-Qa'eda control, the US and its allies remain unmoved over acting in that country either.

To an extent, what is happening in the Middle East is what happens when America and the West suddenly lose interest. But for the US, the reasons for that new lack of interest are obvious. With America soon predicted to attain energy independence, why should the country continue to involve itself deeply in a region which has cost it so much in blood, treasure and international reputation? Why should the US 5th Fleet continue to attempt to maintain regional security in a continent whose regional resources are increasingly rewarding mainly the Communist Party of China?

For the UK and other lesser western powers, declining involvement in the region is neither a moral nor an interest-based decision. It is simply a decision based on the fact - as the last decade has proved - that we no longer have either the cash or the commitment to effect any decent outcome in the region.

If this remains a reality which is too rarely admitted here at home, it was long ago scented in the winds of the region. And as the new reality dawned, it was inevitable that the various factions in Syria's civil war would reach out to anybody in the region who shared their broadest goals. Vice versa, the regional powers ended up looking for anybody who could plausibly assist them with the means and methods to reach their own ends. And so it is that a Middle Eastern proxy-war which had already reached as far as Washington DC has found its way right back to the very doorsteps of the countries that were propelling it. And how a war of religion also become a war of good old-fashioned statecraft.

From the outset of the Syrian uprising, it was inevitable that Iran would weigh in on the side of its client in Damascus. Indeed, so desperate were the mullahs in Tehran to do everything they could to protect their own interests that they even put up with protests at home from people starved of basic supplies complaining about their own government pouring millions into Syria's civil war.

But the next step was just as predictable. Saudi Arabia, which fears Iranian influence spreading any further than it has already throughout the region, began to back the opposition. Starting cautiously, in recent months that caution has retreated and Saudi is now supporting groups as close to al-Qa'eda-linked forces as to make little difference. Desperate measures, certainly. But for the Saudi leadership these are desperate times. Though it is a battle that has been brewing for decades.

There has always been the ongoing tension of Bahrain, which is under Saudi domination but which Iran seeks for itself. But then there is the quieter battle for influence in the Gulf states, which, while interventionist at times, quiver before the clashing of these bigger beasts. It was only as Syria fell apart and the regional powers were pulled inexorably into a more open battle, that the cold war between Iran and Saudi found its hot battleground.

There are those who think that the region as a whole may be starting to go through something similar to what Europe went through in the early 17th century during the Thirty Years' War, when Protestant and Catholic states battled it out. This is a conflict which is not only bigger than al-Qa'eda and similar groups, but far bigger than any of us. It is one which will re-align not only the Middle East, but the religion of Islam.

There is a significant likelihood - as intra-Muslim sectarian tension has had fallout even in Britain and Europe - that this could be the case. Or perhaps the region is going to descend into a complex miasma of slaughter as surely as Europe did a century ago. Either way there will be a need for a Treaty of Westphalia-style solution - a redrawing of boundaries in a region where boundaries have been bursting for decades.

But for the time being, a distinct and timeless stand-off between two regional powers, with religious excuses and religiously affiliated proxies will in all probability remain the main driver of this conflict. Certainly the sides remain fundamentally irreconcilable. As one of Saudi Arabia's most important figures, Prince Turki al-Faisal, said on a recent visit to London, 'Saudi Arabia is the custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and the birthplace of Islam. As such, it is the eminent leader of the wider Muslim

world. Iran portrays itself as the leader of not just the minority Shiite world, but of all Muslim revolutionaries interested in standing up to the West.'

Prince Turki decried Iran's 'meddling' and its 'destabilising efforts in the countries with Shia majorities - Iraq and Bahrain - as well as in those countries with significant minority Shia communities such as Kuwait, Lebanon and Yemen.' As he said, 'Saudi Arabia will oppose any and all of Iran's actions in other countries, because it is Saudi Arabia's position that Iran has no right to meddle in other nations' internal affairs, especially those of Arab states.'

Saudi officials more recently called for the Iranian leadership to be summoned to the International Criminal Court in The Hague for war crimes. Then, just the month before last, as the P5+1 countries eased sanctions on Iran after arriving at an interim deal in Geneva, Saudi saw its greatest fear - a nuclear Iran - grow more likely. And in the immediate aftermath of the Geneva deal, Saudi sources darkly warned of the country now taking Iranian matters 'into their own hands'. There are rumours that the Saudis would buy nuclear bombs 'off the shelf' from their friends in Pakistan if Iran ever reaches anything like the nuclear threshold. In that case, this Westphalian solution could be prefaced with a mushroom cloud.

An unlikely scenario, perhaps. But this stand-off between Iran and Saudi has been full of unlikely scenarios. It is only two years ago that the Iranians attempted to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington. The plan was thwarted only because the two suspects - an Iranian-American and an officer from Iran's Quds Force - unwittingly connected with an informant from US Drug Enforcement Administration. Of course Iranian officials denied the assassination plot, but America's attorney general, Eric Holder, announced at a press conference in Washington that the plot had been 'directed and approved by elements of the Iranian government and, specifically, senior members of the Quds force which is an integral part of the Iranian government.'

The war between Saudi and Iran has already reached America's shores. It has been devastatingly fought out across Syria's wasted land. In fact the only place where it has yet to strike meaningfully is on the soil of the main protagonists. If what has been happening so far looks bloody, it is the work of an Armageddon-ist to consider what will happen when those gloves come off. In a region replete with bitter rivalries and irreconcilable ambitions, that will be perhaps the ultimate clarification.

6. Inside Iran: Iran's demographic problem

Is there a correlation between Iran's nuclear program and its low fertility rate or, perhaps as well, between the vitality of Islamic civilization and its shrinking birth-rates? There is, according to David Goldman, a fellow at the right-wing, US-based think tank the Middle East Forum, and a long-time writer for Asia Times Online under the moniker Spengler. The author of *How Civilizations Die: (And Why Islam Is Dying Too)*, Goldman, an economist by training, explains the impact demographic fluctuations have on the greater strategic balance of power between states and civilizations.

In an interview with *The Jerusalem Post* during a recent visit to Israel to promote the launch of the Hebrew version of his book, Goldman explained how he has followed demographic literature and the changes in Muslim demography.

Positive demographics are a result of societies that are forward-looking and self-confident, he said.

"A lack of desire for children is typically a symptom of civilizational decline," and the Muslim world is currently witnessing such a phenomenon, he avers.

Europe is going through a similar phase and there are obvious parallels with the Muslim world, he says, pointing out that when "traditional societies encounter the modern world and lose self-confidence, traditional behaviour such as religion, childbearing, and other cultural patterns change radically. In Iran this occurred in one generation, while in Turkey it took two."

Iran's estimated birth-rate is around 1.86 children per woman for 2013, below the replacement rate of two births per woman, according to the CIA World Factbook. However, many demographers think Iran's fertility rate is even lower, at around 1.6 to 1.7.

A fertility rate higher than 2.1 births per woman indicates population growth.

Contraception is also widely used in Iran, having been previously promoted by the leader of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in the 1980s – although in 2012, Tehran scrapped its birth control program after Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the Islamic Republic should aim for a population of 150 million to 200 million.

Other Middle Eastern states' birth-rates have also been declining.

According to the CIA World Factbook 2013 estimates, Turkey had a birth-rate of 2.1 children per woman, Tunisia 2.01, Morocco 2.17, Saudi Arabia 2.21, Kuwait 2.56, Syria 2.77, Algeria 2.78, Egypt 2.9, Jordan 3.32, and Iraq 3.5.

According to a 2009 UN report titled "Fertility Prospects in the Arab Region," carried out by John Casterline of Ohio State University, a sharp decline in birth-rates is charted, especially since the 1980s.

For example, from 1950-1955, the Algerian fertility rate was 7.3, Egypt 6.4, Tunisia 6.9, Iraq and Syria 7.3, Jordan 7.4, and Morocco, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia at 7.2.

Under the rule of the shah, before the 1979 revolution, Iran became the first Muslim country to achieve universal literacy. The higher the literacy and education, the lower the birthrates tend to be, said Goldman, adding that Turkey is suffering from a similar trend. By the middle of this century, a third of Iranians will be older than 60, compared to only 7 percent today, and the cost of caring for elderly dependents will crush Iran's economy, he says.

Iran is undergoing economic and demographic decline, explains Goldman, and in order to carry out the regime's regional and global expansionist ambitions, it needs more resources, which could be easier to obtain under the umbrella of nuclear weapons.

Goldman compares Iran's predicament to that of the former Soviet Union.

From the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the country's leadership began to act more aggressively – perhaps because they understood that it was the last chance to push for power amid an economic and demographic decline, Goldman explains.

In Iran, mosque attendance is low, just as church attendance is in England, he states.

"The best predictor of the number of children in industrial societies is religious observance," he says.

Asked about initiatives by some countries to counter birth rate decline by offering government subsidies, Goldman responded, "Subsidies have some effect, but the main reason to have children is not economic, but emotional."

Regarding Israel and the Palestinians, he points out that from the river to the sea, not including Gaza, the birthrate for Arab Muslims and Jews is around 3. However, the trends are going in opposite directions, with Jewish fertility increasing and Arab fertility decreasing.

"In fact," says Goldman, "the situation is worse for the Palestinians," because the official data provided by the Palestinian Authority is inflated.

US Secretary of State John Kerry said during a speech at the Saban Center in December that Israel needs to heed the "demographic time bomb" of Palestinian population growth. Goldman refutes the validity of this argument.

"The argument that there is an urgent reason to do something right now is simply false – there is no urgency," he asserts. "Palestinian Arabs have the highest living standards and upward mobility of any Arabs in the world except for some in the Gulf states."

Another important factor, he says, is that aging populations are less warlike than younger ones. The Good Friday agreement in Ireland was reached in 1998, and it was helped by a population decrease, he notes. Asked about how this knowledge could benefit US policy, he says, "The US needs to abandon the illusion that it can stabilize most of the Muslim world."

There is going to be "a long period of chaos, and the best we can do is prevent it from hurting us."

Goldman says he agrees with Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Great Britain, who said that the concept of individual rights comes even before democracy. In Western society, this is a concept derived from the Jewish idea that human beings have inalienable rights. "No such concept exists in Islam," he says.

Egypt, he says, is a "banana republic without the bananas," and is "in danger of a humanitarian disaster and social collapse."

The best-case scenario is that the Gulf states subsidize the country.

As for Syria, he believes there are two evil sides, and that a partition of the country would be best. The Russians would probably agree to some formulation where an Alawite state would be formed, he adds.

Concerning the Kurds, he says, "A Kurdish state is inevitable, and it is in the interest of the US to encourage it to be pro-American."

Regarding US politics, Goldman thinks the problem with Republican foreign policy is that it continues to "bet so much on president George W. Bush's freedom agenda" of spreading democracy throughout the Muslim world, and it "is difficult for many to back out of it."

The best policy at the moment? "Manage the chaos in the region."

7. Palestinian Authority: Israel's security partner,

This is the second time within a year that the Israeli Shin Bet has uncovered an al-Qaeda terror cell on the West Bank that planned to execute a terror attack in Israel. News regarding the recent arrest of the cell was released only this week on Jan. 22. According to the Shin Bet, the cell that was captured received orders from Ayman al-Zawahri, Osama bin Laden's heir as al-Qaeda leader. Two members of the cell are residents of east Jerusalem and the third one lives in Jenin. The three planned attacks on the US Embassy in Tel Aviv, on Israel's Convention Center in Jerusalem and on buses in the area. Members of the earlier al-Qaeda cell organized in the West Bank were killed in a joint Shin Bet-IDF (Israel Defence Forces) operation about a year ago, in the Yatta village in the southern Hebron Hills

The emergence of world jihad cells in the West Bank is of great concern also to Palestinian security forces, and the battle against them is a joint interest of both parties. The implications of a mega terrorist attack against Israel from the West Bank is clearly apparent to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and his security forces. The authority is fighting with considerable effort to prevent organized terror on the part of known organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as well as organizations of world jihad cells that have recently emerged on its territory.

As a result of the Oslo Accords, Israel and the Palestinians cooperate on security issues. This cooperation has known ups and downs through the years, and was completely cut off during the second intifada. After PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat's death and the election of Abbas to replace him, the new Palestinian Authority chairman instructed his security advisers Mahmoud Dahlan and Jibril Rajoub to gradually restore the security coordination with the Israelis. And this was not an easy decision.

Abbas was strongly criticized by many Fatah members for this move. They viewed - and some still feel this way - this cooperation as one-sided exploitation by Israel, which penetrates Palestinian territories from time to time, in violation of basic understandings between the sides, to arrest suspects. Abbas had advocated ending the armed uprising against the Israelis and preferred the negotiation route, even before he was appointed to the role of chairman. Thus, he did not put a halt to the work of the security teams, which averted in this manner dozens of terrorist acts against Israelis in recent years.

Another player in this security coordination are the Americans, who provide encouragement, professional assistance and actual resources for the training of Palestinian forces in bases in Amman and the Palestinian Authority. Palestinian police units, named "Dayton Forces" after Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton, head of the American security assistance project, beefed up the police forces in the territories about seven years ago. Simultaneously with training policemen, it was decided that to increase the efficiency of the forces on the ground after the second intifada it was also necessary to conduct effective intelligence work to thwart attacks. Dayton initiated renewal of the intelligence cooperation between the sides, at first only partially because of the credibility crisis in the wake of the second intifada. Later on, however, this cooperation became an everyday matter based on common interests.

Throughout the years, the Palestinians had one absolutely necessary condition, the violation of which could destroy the efficacious relationship between the sides. They demanded that security cooperation remained absolutely secret, with an emphasis on exchange of intelligence information that led to the arrest of suspects for activities against Israelis. The authority's security men did not want to be perceived by the West Bank population as Israeli collaborators - one of the most severe accusations in Palestinian society. The role of Palestinians in the joint operations remained secret. Sometimes, Israel would transfer incriminating information to the Palestinians about a suspect or suspects in terror organizations, and they would perform the arrest. In cases in which suspects were viewed as

being “ticking bombs,” the Palestinians stood aside and special IDF forces entered to arrest them.

Occasionally, the Palestinians claimed that Israel's cooperation with them was not transparent and not fair; they said that in many cases, Israel hid sensitive information from them and surprised them with unilateral actions. Nevertheless, security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority has been successful since the end of the second intifada. Even during the days when mutual accusations and harsh confrontations are taking place between the political leaderships, and even when accusations are heard in Israel that there is no partner and no one on which to rely on the other side - it emerges that with regard to the security issue, each of the two sides has a partner, and each of them has someone on whom it can rely.

If the Israeli public were aware of even some of the operational successes of the cooperation with the Palestinians - despite the obligatory mantle of secrecy - then public opinion might very well be less skeptical regarding Mahmoud Abbas' diplomatic intentions. Meanwhile, the fact is that Israel does have an appropriate, functioning security partner - while that diplomatic partner is subject to insults, scorn and scathing criticism among the Israeli leadership. Day-to-day follow-up of world jihad cell organizations in the West Bank is a joint interest of Israelis and Palestinians. The security cooperation to date proves that when there is a shared goal, there is someone to talk to and someone to rely on. And perhaps it behooves us to implement this lesson in the diplomatic circuit as well.

8. The threat of the “Salafi Crescent”

There is a notion that a hegemonic Iran is attempting to dominate the crescent-shaped part of the Middle East where the majority population is Shiite or contains a strong Shiite minority, through an array of Shiite proxies: Iraq, Alawite-dominated Syria, and the powerful Shiite militia Hizballah in Lebanon.

Yet, the growing involvement of Sunni Salafi *jihadis* in Iraq (since 2003), among the rebels in Syria (since 2011), and in Lebanon has created a “Salafi Crescent.” This reflects a Sunni ambition to establish a caliphate controlling much of the Middle East and form the Islamic State “from Diyala [in eastern Iraq] to Beirut.” Al-Qaeda’s hatred of the Shiites was expressed by its founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who called them “the insurmountable obstacle, the prowling serpent...the enemy lying in wait” and ordered his followers to “fight them.”

Al-Qaeda in Iraq

Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a jihadist group of predominantly Sunni fighters, rose to prominence after the US-led invasion of Iraq. The ensuing insurgency provided the group with fertile ground to wage a guerrilla war against coalition forces and their domestic supporters. In the face of successful US counterterrorism efforts and the Sunni tribal awakening, AQI's violent campaign has diminished since the peak years of 2006-2007, though the group remains a threat to stability in Iraq and the broader Levant. Since the withdrawal of US forces in late 2011, AQI has accelerated the pace of attacks on predominantly Shiite targets in an attempt to reignite conflict between Iraq's Sunni minority and the Shiite-led government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

Meanwhile, AQI has expanded its reach into neighbouring Syria. In April 2013, AQI announced that it was changing its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and

that the Syrian group Jabhat Nusra would join it. Jabhat Nusra's leaders objected, however, and the two groups have remained independent.

Much of the violence in Iraq is blamed on ISIS, which has launched a vicious bombing campaign in Iraq as part of an anti-Shiite insurgency that claimed more than 8,000 lives in 2013. On January 3, ISIS asserted control over the western Iraqi city of Fallujah, declaring it an Islamic state. The capture of Fallujah came amid a campaign of violence across the western desert province of Anbar, in which local tribes, Iraqi security forces, and al-Qaeda-affiliated militants have been locked in fighting. The ISIS fighters have steadily asserted their control over Anbar's desert regions for months, and resisted assaults by both Iraqi government forces and local tribal leaders to maintain control of all of Fallujah, and perhaps as much as half of Ramadi, Anbar's capital.

The sectarian tensions between Iraq's Sunnis and the Shiite-led government have been further inflamed by the war in Syria. Al-Qaeda's growing influence in Syria has given terrorists control over the desert territories spanning both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border, enabling them to readily transfer weapons and fighters between the two arenas.

Al-Qaeda in Syria

Syria has become a magnet for al-Qaeda and other jihadi recruits, as the Assad regime has been an ally of Iran since the 1980s. Al-Qaeda's direct involvement in Syria includes ISIS, Abdullah Azzam Brigades, al-Qaeda-affiliated Fatah al-Islam, and Jordanian Salafi jihadists. Highlighting the widening regional Sunni-Shiite schism, influential Sunni Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi called on all those who can perform jihad to head to Syria to fight the Alawites and Shi'ites, who are "worse than Christians and Jews."

Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's leader, called upon Syrians to "rise against the criminal Alawite regime" of Bashar Assad. In June 2013, between 30 and 60 Shiite civilians were killed by rebel forces in Hatla, a village near Iraq that was invaded by thousands of foreign-backed jihadists this week. Rebel fighters denounced the "pug-nosed" Shiite "dogs" and burned dozens of homes.

ISIS has been active in Syria since 2012, fighting to control major outposts and the provincial capital of al-Raqqa in northern Syria. The group is fighting both Assad's forces and the secular Syrian rebels who once had viewed the group as an ally in the fight to topple the embattled leader. Fierce fighting between ISIS and Syrian rebel groups was reported in December 2013 in a dozen locations, with ISIS taking control of the strategic Idlib province town of Saraqeb, which sits on the Aleppo-Damascus highway.

Jabhat Nusra, Syria's homegrown Salafi-jihadist group, has important links to al-Qaeda affiliates and demonstrates a higher level of effectiveness than many other rebel groups. The group has shown sensitivity to popular perception and is gaining support within Syria. The emergence of indigenous Salafi jihadist groups such as Jabhat Nusra is far more dangerous to the long-term stability of the Syrian state than foreign jihadist groups, as they represent a metamorphosis of a Salafi-jihadist ideology into a domestic platform that can achieve popular resonance.

Al-Qaeda in Lebanon

Lebanon has been roiled by tensions and clashes over both Hizballah's strong military support for Assad and a number of rebel-supporting Sunni communities. Car bombings, rocket attacks, and kidnappings have targeted both parties, and armed clashes have been frequent. Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah has publicly justified Hizballah's involvement in Syria to stop al-Qaeda-style Sunni radicals, or takfiri, in their tracks. He sees Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq as part of the same battlefield.

On January 4, ISIS claimed credit for a suicide car bombing that took at least four lives and wounded dozens in a Hizballah-controlled suburb of Beirut, marking the first attack by the group in Lebanon. The group warned that the bombing was the start of a campaign against the "wicked criminals" of Hizballah for its role in helping the Syrian regime."

Another al-Qaeda affiliate, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, claimed responsibility for November's suicide bombing of the Iranian Embassy in Beirut. Group leader Majid al-Majid blasted Nasrallah's characterization of killed Syrian regime members as martyrs as "an insult to millions of Muslims." He didn't hesitate to threaten all of Lebanon should Hizballah continue to support the Assad regime, and hinted that his organization would plan an attack on Lebanese tourists, should the state continue to strengthen Hizballah and its leaders. Al-Majid was captured by the Lebanese security service, and on January 4 died in custody.

Conclusion

In the last decades an Iran-dominated Shia Crescent was considered the main threat to Israeli and regional security. The growing involvement of Salafi jihad in the region has produced a new threat. The latest operations of al-Qaeda and its affiliates in the three countries of the Shia Crescent – Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon – highlight the group's growing regional influence and ambitions.

The Sunni jihadist groups might destabilize the whole area and transform it into an unstable, ungovernable conflict zone. Such an uncontrolled region would become a safe haven for Islamic terror groups and training centre for militants from the Sinai, Arabian Peninsula, and elsewhere, and a platform to launch jihad against Israel and moderate Arab countries in the region. A positive outcome of this scenario, however, will be the decline in Iranian influence in the region.

South African Zionist Federation

Tel : (011) 645-2505

Fax: (011) 640-6758

E-mail: froma@beyachad.co.za

Website: <http://sazionfed.co.za>

PBO NUMBER: 930014277

