

OLD FAULTLINES, NEW WEST ASIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India- West Asia

More than half a century ago, when analysts talked about war in the Middle East, they referred to a single overarching and permanent tension which existed between Israel and Arab countries like Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Today, in the new Middle East — and despite the unsolved tension between Israelis and Palestinians — the defining war is a broader struggle among multiple players seeking regional hegemony.

Among these, there are fractious groups of militias, religious groups and tribal forces that exercise power in much of the region. These groups have grown vastly in the past 20 years, and many of them have been and continue to be financed and controlled by Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Iranian revolution of 1979 galvanised Islamists across the region. But the civil war in Lebanon and Islamist insurgency against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, and the eight years war between Iran and Iraq, also strengthened the hand of armed groups outside the control of governments.

As a result, contemporary West Asia has been shifting constantly between state actors (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq and Israel) and non-state actors (the militia groups and local forces) that actually controlled much of the land. At times, non-state actors like the Hezbollah of Lebanon have been more influential than the national governments.

As for the Islamic Republic of Iran, its pre-eminence in proxy wars was born out of the Iran-Iraq war. It is in opposition to the American-Saudi support for Saddam Hussein that the Iranian government decided to create its Shiite proxies and militias in the region.

Today, Iran considers itself as a model state, presenting itself as the self-appointed leader of the world's Shiite Muslims, with an emphasis on those in Iran's near abroad. In this process of self-affirmation, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and, more specifically, the Quds Force of Qassem Soleimani, played a key role. This is why, in all the conflicts managed by the Quds Force, Iranian authorities have always given priority to their national-ideological interests over regional security and stability. This could also explain why there has been a constant preoccupation with and fear of Shiite groups among the Sunni states in the region. The Saudis viewed Iran as a domestic threat from 1979 onwards.

Seeing the threat as intolerable, they began looking for a way to strike back. In the 1990s, Saudi Arabia, wishing to contain Iran's influence on the region's minority Shiite populations, sought to harden Sunni-Shiite rifts.

After the American invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam's government, Iran was convinced that the US and Saudi Arabia would install a pliant Iraqi government, so it raced to fill the post-war vacuum. Iran's leverage with Iraqi Shiite groups (Shiites are Iraq's largest demographic group) allowed it to control Baghdad politics and undermine the American-led occupation.

The Shiite success in Iraq reflects the effectiveness of IRGC doctrine regarding the construction, support, and use of sectarian political and military proxies as a central tool of Iranian policy. The late Quds Force chief, Qassem Soleimani, played a special role within Iran's hegemonic enterprise in the Middle East. With Soleimani killed and an imminent danger of an American military response to an Iranian proxy aggression, Tehran will certainly expand the model it perfected in Syria and Iraq — namely, fostering the creation of numerous smaller groups and placing them under the general umbrella of the IRGC.

However, despite the Iranian hegemonic presence in Iraq and Syria, some of its proxies, like the Lebanese Hezbollah, have been suffering from decreased resources and personnel, particularly after losing many elite commanders in the Syrian war. As for Iran's hardliners, despite increased regional tensions and harsher American sanctions, they are suspicious of any mediation by countries that are allied with the US.

At the end of the day, even an ideologically-oriented country like Iran needs a breakthrough with the Donald Trump administration if regional calm is to be restored. Maybe this is the key to understanding the geopolitics of the new Middle East.

The writer is Noor-York Chair in Islamic Studies, York University, Toronto

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