THE GREAT SCHISM REVISITED:
THE UNDERPINNINGS OF DIVISION BETWEEN HAMAS AND HEZBOLLAH

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In order to understand the world around us, we create storylines, even metaphors to explain what is occurring around us. With the unrest in Syria, the threat posed by a nuclear Iran, even terrorism against Israel is part of a larger story that continues to unfold in front of us. I contend that the story we thought we knew is different than what is emerging. Part of its origin dates far back in history. While the historical schism between Sunni and Shia has its roots in 10 October, 680, the iteration now developing is unique with the implications leading towards World War if left unchecked. To be clear, this is not to say that World War is inevitable. Instead it is a precise sequencing of events that makes this a possibility if not examined and anticipated in advance. Such fractious reactions and consequences are not without precedence in history. Had an Austrian Archduke not boarded a carriage in Sarajevo in 1914, there might still be monarchies in Germany and Russia not to mention an empire in Istanbul. Like the effect of Versailles on the world politics that followed, the sequencing of dramatic actions can cause ripple effects that emanate for generations.

Rather than supplementing the plethora of storylines and opinions already out there, I intend to justify this assertion by scattering the pieces of the same puzzle yet again in order to construct a fresh corner that remains unexplored: one that starts within Syria and emanates outward in all directions through the lens of Hezbollah and Hamas. No one had foreseen the fullest implications of how grassroots Syrian opposition to the Assad regime could cause such a rift between Hezbollah and Hamas. Closer scrutiny however reveals that Hezbollah and Hamas, their interconnectivity between Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Iran ultimately draws in the rest of the world community as well. While the humanitarian aspect under ‘Right to Protect’ would prove justifiably enough for intervention in Syria, it is the preservation of the financial market that would ultimately demand stability by outside actors.

In this context the financial market is loosely defined as how consumer confidence reacts to highly speculative energy futures, panic-stricken spot oil prices and the subsequent demand-pull inflation that follows. Such a prospect negates any hope of positive economic momentum anticipated by mid-2012. Under these circumstances, citizens react louder as a constituency to their respective central governments for economic reasons as opposed to yet another moral outrage for their evening news. Given this broader template, World
War is understood as a desperate reaction to preserve whatever individual national interests and viability can be salvaged from the harm imposed by others. In this case such ill intent is economically, diplomatically and militarily dictated by the actions of Iran, the Syrian regime and to a lesser degree Hezbollah.

In this region political influence comes with historically ethnic and religious identity. The significance of Syria is the de-coupling effect it now has on what was once the unified animus against Israel. Iran’s support of the neighboring Shia and the Alawite regime of President Bashar el-Assad over a predominately Sunni population is no exception. Should the people prevail in the current uprising, the linkage of influence between Teheran and Hezbollah’s Lebanese Shia would be severed. Recently Hezbollah moved its weapons cache from Sunni-majority Syria into Lebanon; a country still antagonistic towards Damascus’ alleged complicity in Former PM Rafik Hariri’s assassination in 2005. Despite the ever-dragging UN investigation, the recent accusation of Hezbollah’s involvement could not have been picked at a more (in)opportune time. Hamas on the other hand has chosen a different path. By siding with the people, Hamas lost one of its largest sponsors in Teheran. Until this break, Iranian support for Hamas was paid directly through Hezbollah in Syria.

This fissure also moves back into Iraq where the original schism occurred. While the epicenter is historically Karbala, stability hinges on what occurs in Baghdad. The attempt by Shiite Prime Minister al Maliki to arrest Sunni Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi and Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq leaves a very delicate balance heading into this year. What is unmistakable is the role of Ayatollah Moqtada al Sadr: not only in terms of his clerical pedigree and eventual inheritance of ‘Grand Ayatollah’ status in Iraq but also his links to Iran’s venerated religious center in Qom. Just like the British League of Nations mandate over 80 years earlier, the artificial national identity of Iraq remains unresolved.

With the U.S. presence in Iraq recently etched into memory, the saturation of focus on Afghanistan is not what prevents re-entry of large-scale land forces into Iraq or the greater region. On the contrary, U.S. and Jordanian Special Forces are contemplating ‘Direct Action’ in order to secure chemical stockpiles – Weapons of Mass Destruction that can only accumulate by being one of seven holdout countries to the 1992 Chemical Weapons Convention. That unfortunately only addresses one of the hazards. The other hazard is Bahrain. The prospect of unrest resurfacing in Bahrain literally begs for Teheran’s orchestration. As if to mirror Syria, Bahrain’s angst is rooted in a Sunni leadership ruling over a Shia majority. Should Iran attempt to blockade passage of the world’s oil through the Straits of Hormuz, the U.S. Fifth Fleet would need the port facilities at Manama. According to U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, “We will not allow Iran to close the Strait of Hormuz.”

Secretary Panetta also made clear that while Iran has not decided on building a nuclear weapon, they would not be allowed to either – implying the use of pre-emptive force. That does not mean the origin of such force as particularly U.S. in origin. It can also be the Israelis acting unilaterally in self-defense. Conventional wisdom used to assume that such a regional smoke screen would allow Hamas and Hezbollah to unleash a flurry of Israeli-bound missiles from Gaza and Southern Lebanon respectively but that does not appear as obvious as it once did. With Hezbollah entrenched in an unstable Lebanese base that leaves Hamas in Gaza. Hamas as mentioned earlier is no longer sponsored by Teheran. As Hamas official Ahmed Yousef mused, “What can Hamas do? I don’t think we would be able to do anything. This is between two countries…Does Iran need us? Iran is a big country…They can get revenge however they like.”

The significance of this shift is not a change of attitude for Hamas but a re-alignment along Sunni lines. Hamas, Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and fellow Sunni brethren elsewhere intends to allow Iran, Syria’s elite leaders and other isolated Shia to bear this self-inflicted brunt alone. This is as much self-preservation as flexibility. Such flexibility can be leveraged by Sunnis both economically as well as diplomatically. Rather than allowing Iran to unhinge the world economy, Saudi Arabia defied Iran’s threats by offering to make up the difference in crude oil output. This lessens the Iranian threat on the European Union, India, South Korea and others and increases Saudi hence Sunni prestige. The division does not stop there. When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad threatened to ‘wipe Israel off the map’ it was clear that the only way to do that was through a Weapon of Mass Destruction vis-à-vis nuclear weaponry. The problem with that is the terrain of Israel itself. A
nuclear weapon does not distinguish between ethnic and religious neighborhoods and territories. The fallout radius that affects Israelis also wipes out the Palestinians as well. In other words, the very land coveted by the Palestinians, led jointly by Fatah and Hamas would be denied them if Iran is literal in its intent.

While such events affect the psyche of interested countries for economic or security reasons, the interconnectivity between disruption of oil supply and world war still appears remote save one possibility. What can destabilize the situation into economic catastrophe and world war is Iranian provocation of Turkey and Egypt. There are a number of ways this can be done. What affects northern Kurdish-held Iraq also affects the manufacturing base of southern Turkey. The Kurds themselves follow both tenets of Islam. In the past, Iran has supplied Kurdish terrorists to attack Turkey. On May 29, 2007 for example, a Turkish train carrying construction supplies from Iran to Syria hit a mine allegedly laid by a Kurdish terrorist group and derailed. What police discovered was a cache of Iranian rifles and rocket launchers. Until recently, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan reached out to Teheran and Damascus, partly in order to open the trade route into Syria.16

Prime Minister Erdogan has also reached out to Sunnis. Capitalizing on the ‘Arab Spring,’ Erdogan visited Tunisia, Libya and Egypt although the latter’s Muslim Brotherhood disdained any notion of Ankara’s leadership in Sunni affairs.17 Nonetheless, the clearest indication of Turkish aspirations is its severance of relations with Israel. The ill-fated Israeli commando raid on the “Mavi Marmara” in 2010 became the watershed for this break. Where things went awry for Turkey’s leadership aspirations was Syria. By suppressing fellow Sunnis, Turkey called on Assad to resign.18 Further, Turkey’s harboring of Free Syria movement leaders and the arrest of Syrian intelligence operatives represents a reversal of what would otherwise have been the fait accompli of brokering not only across Muslim lines but with the West as well.19

Nonetheless, as Hamas and the Free Syria movement remains under the protection of Turkey, antagonism by Iran can only be accomplished with the continued complicity of Moscow and Beijing. As a NATO member and host country of the missile defense system against Iran, the two superpowers would be at least sympathetic if not indifferent to Teheran’s attempt to wriggle free of crippling sanctions. With this in mind the strategy for Iran is to exploit Turkey’s attempt to ‘be all things to all people.’ On the East, it would partner with Russia to help fellow Shia in Azerbaijan rekindle Nagorno-Karabakh. Along the South, it could push Iraq towards civil war while the Syrian regime suppresses fellow Sunnis in spite of world opinion. Teheran could propagandize Ankara as good enough to join NATO but not good enough the join the European Union. This means that internal pressure on Turkey’s regime might yield to the provisions of its constitution and draw in the military.

With the disruption of oil, the destabilizing of Turkey, Bahrain and Lebanon; the baiting of Hamas, Fatah and Egypt to fight Israel, Iran would succeed by at least bringing everyone else down to its level – save of course Russia and China. The difference is that we are in 2012 not 1914. Through vigilance and understanding the ‘corner of the puzzle,’ the ‘Gavrilo Princip’ effect will not be recreated with a suicide vest or by baiting the loyalties of those with far more and far better options. Regrettably, the key actor able to defuse all of this is Ayatollah Khamenei.20 If we agree that even political actors in clerical robes can be rational, then the repugnancy of Muslims slaughtering other Muslims in Homs, Syria cannot bear any longer the silent consent of the spiritual leader best able to sway Damascus from harming its own people.
Endnotes:


2 ibid.


Cambanis.

ibid.


