



מרכז עזרי לחקר איראן והמפרץ הפרסי
مرکز عزری برای مطالعات ایران و خلیج پارس
The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies

The Persian Gulf Observer

Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf



האיתוללות בוחרים בהילרי קלינטון **The Ayatollahs Vote for Hillary Clinton**

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The Ayatollahs Vote for Hillary Clinton

Yossi Mansharof

According to the Iranian media, Donald Trump is "the most dangerous person in the world." If he's elected and leads to crippling sanctions against Iran, they may heat up Israel's northern border via their long arm – Hezbollah

The free world is following the complex and dramatic American presidential elections with great interest, but they are not the only ones. It turns out that the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran have a clear preference for one particular candidate to take up residence in the White House in January 2017: presumptive Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. Thus, for instance, at the end of April 2016, a media channel identified with the Revolutionary Guard published a caricature describing Trump as "the most dangerous person in the world," while a website from President Rouhani's camp explained that Clinton would be more convenient for Iran, because she will preserve the nuclear deal.

To be sure, Revolutionary Guard-affiliated paper Sabh-I Sadek repeated the traditional Iranian position that, as far as Iran is concerned, there was no difference between the candidates, since both of them are committed to Israel and its security. Nevertheless, it is easy to discern that Hillary Clinton is somewhat preferred from the Iranian perspective, despite the criticism it levels at her. In fact, there is no need to make much of an effort in order to understand why the Ayatollahs are hoping for the victory of former Secretary of State Clinton. The nuclear deal with the great powers—promoted and spearheaded by the Obama administration—granted international legitimacy to Iran's nuclear program for the first time and removed the threat of sanctions from the Islamic Republic. This, despite the fact that Iran was not required to come clean and disclose the steps it took in context of the military nuclear program it ran, according to IAEA reports, at least until 2009. Even after the nuclear deal, IAEA findings discovered published in the West link the Parchin nuclear facility to Iran's military nuclear program.

As the chairman of the Iran's Expediency Discernment Council Hashemi Rafsanjani, a political patron of President Rouhani, admitted: the deal saved the Iranian regime from a serious economic crisis. Therefore, the current Iranian interest is to stick to the Iran deal and carry it out, especially since Iran was not required to fully reveal the full extent of its nuclear program. Accordingly, Khomeini recently announced in his meetings with senior Iranian officials that Iran will adhere to the agreement, but will violate it only if and when Donald Trump carries out his threat to tear it up. "We of course will not violate the nuclear agreement," Khomeini said, "This is known to all. We are not violating it. But if the other side violates it, as one of the candidates for President in America threatens to do, we will tear the agreement to shreds. If they violate it, we will set it on fire." Khomeini Commands, Nasrallah Executes Khomeini's statement leads to the following question: in what scenario might Iran try and spark (again) a crisis between Hezbollah and Israel. It appears that this scenario is possible if Trump wins the elections, cancels the nuclear deal, and leads the Security Council into a series of crippling sanctions against Iran.

Iran is preparing for this possibility on a few levels: first, it is acting as vigorously as possible to get as many signatures as possible on a wide variety of huge contracts with Western countries—on oil, passenger aircraft, etc. Its goal is to hamstring the West with contracts it will have trouble cancelling later. Second, at the military level, Iran is constantly preparing for another conflict between Hezbollah and Israel.

In this context, as a former senior officer in Israeli Army Intelligence recently revealed, Iran is training thousands of active members of Hezbollah's intervention forces on its soil. This force is meant to try to occupy territory within Israel, with the goal of forcing the IDF to move some of its forces to the home front, thus reducing the firepower aimed at Lebanon. In addition, as reported by senior members in the Revolutionary Guard, Hezbollah fighters are training in the deserts of Iran with various long range missiles, based on the models provided by Iran to Hezbollah, in order to improve the performance of the Shi'ite organization's missile corps.

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Second Lebanon War, the Israeli media has been dealing extensively with the possibility of another war between Israel and Hezbollah and the

preparations of both sides for that eventuality. However, analyses published thus far are strangely silent about the Iranian element, even though Iran is a central player in this context. Since the end of the war, senior Israeli officials have stressed the importance of the deterrence that has been achieved with respect to Hezbollah in particular and Nasrallah in general, which prevents them from initiating another round of fighting against Israel. In this context, many have cited Nasrallah's statement at the end of the Second Lebanon War that if he had known that Israel would start a harsh war against Hezbollah in response to the abduction of its soldiers, he would not have ordered that action. However, a quick analysis of the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah shows that Nasrallah had no other choice, and that he is likely to take the same action if he gets the order from Tehran.

Hezbollah was founded in 1982 with Iranian assistance, and over the years it has provided its proxy with a great deal of logistical, financial, and military aid as part of the project of exporting the Islamic revolution. A short time after its founding, senior members of Hezbollah swore fealty to Khomeini upon meeting him in Tehran, and expressed their complete obedience to the regime of sage of Islamic jurisprudence, the foundation of the religious worldview of the Islamic regime in Iran.

As Nasrallah admitted in a past speech, apparently from the late 1980s, the Lebanese Shi'ite organization is symbiotically tied with Iran in an unbreakable connection, and it acts to establish a new regional Islamic order led by the Islamic republic, out of obedience to the religious ruler at its head. Other Hezbollah leaders have repeated this many times, including the Deputy Secretary General of the organization Naim Qassem in a lecture he gave in Tehran in 2015.

Since its establishment, Hezbollah has been in close contact with the "Lebanese column," a Revolutionary Guard unit stationed in Lebanon. Thus did Iran help Hezbollah gradually establish a state within a state in Lebanon and set up an entire infrastructure of various services for the local Shi'ite public, from kindergartens to charity funds and poorhouses, through which Hezbollah removes any potential Shi'ite rival in the struggle for leadership of the Shi'ite community in Lebanon.



Deterrence at the Wrong Address

Since the end of the Second Lebanon War, and given the Iranian dominance of Hezbollah's strategic decision-making process, the Shi'ite organization has lost two crucial elements that allowed it to offset Iran's exclusive influence on its character: in 2010, the Lebanese Ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah—for many years the spiritual leader and father of the Hezbollah who succeeded in blocking Iran's ambition to establish an Islamic republic in Lebanon, as part of a power struggle with Khomeini—passed away. In addition, ever since the outbreak of internal fighting in Syria in 2011, President Bashar Assad has become significantly weakened. Assad was a crucial component in building up Hezbollah's forces, and now Hezbollah's buildup is far more dependent on Iran.

The bloody, ongoing fighting in Syria poses a difficult test of loyalty to Hezbollah. As revealed in interviews to the Iranian media, Iranian parliament members sent to Beirut by Supreme Leader Khomeini to join the struggle to protect Assad were at first rebuffed by Nasrallah. According to those same testimonies, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah told them that it is a lost battle and that Assad's fate is sealed.

In response, Khomeini told Nasrallah that he must obey his orders and enter the fighting against his will. Nasrallah had no choice but to carry out the order. Ever since then, Hezbollah has been subject to much criticism on the part of Lebanese society in general and the Shi'ite community in particular, as its increasing involvement in the crisis has led to numerous terrorist attacks, in which many Lebanese paid with their lives. Yet the decision to involve Hezbollah in the Syrian crisis was made in Tehran, not Beirut.

According to one theory on the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War, presented by MEMRI President Yigal Carmon, Iran was behind the abduction of the soldiers and the heating up of the Lebanon-Israel border on July 12, 2006. Tehran's goal was to prevent the discussion scheduled to take place for the first time in the UN Security Council regarding the imposition of sanctions against Iran, due to the latter's efforts to create a nuclear weapon. This diversionary operation succeeded, and the Security Council focused its attention on the war that broke out. However, in the end the sanctions were imposed in December 2006.

If this theory is correct, Israel's attempt to deter Hezbollah directly is impotent and essentially insignificant, because the chief actor in the organization's decision-making process is in Tehran. Israel is thus aiming at the wrong target, both literally and figuratively.

During the decade that has passed since the war, Iran has managed, to an extent, to maintain its position as an "uninvolved actor" in the sporadic exchanges of fire between Israel and Hezbollah—even though it has continued to arm the Shi'ite organization with thousands of rockets since the end of the war, in contravention of Resolution 1701 of the Security Council, as a senior official in Khomeini's office openly admitted.

We can sum up by saying that Iran, which still enjoys the position of a side player in the ongoing struggle between Israel and Hezbollah, may again try and heat up Israel's northern border if President Trump cancels the nuclear agreement and mounts a campaign of crippling sanctions against Iran. The odds of this are unclear right now, but Iran is already preparing for the possibility.

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