

SELF-DETERMINATION AT ALL COSTS:  
EXPLAINING THE IRAN-SYRIA-HEZBOLLAH AXIS

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ABSTRACT

The alliance between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah is central to Middle East security – yet we know surprisingly little about what makes it possible. Existing accounts concentrate on material or ideational incentives to explain this alliance, without however offering a systematic explanation for its rise and endurance. Most strikingly, these accounts fail to acknowledge how different these actors are from one another, and how unlikely it is for them to form an alliance – let alone a stable one. This article traces the genealogy of this curious form of cooperation in order to shed light on the sources of converge that are strong enough to overcome their manifold divergences. It finds that shared memory of humiliation and betrayal at the hands of the US and the West more generally is the main reason for the rise and endurance of this alliance. It is an alliance that defends an absolutist conception of self-determination in order to resist US hegemony in the region, even it violates the individual self-determination of the people under their authority. Overall, the article shows that neither materialist nor ideational approaches get to the bottom of why states cooperate amongst themselves and with nonstate actors to form counter-hegemonic alliances, such as the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis – a form of counter-hegemonic non-hegemonic cooperation.

**Keywords:** Syria-Iran-Hezbollah Axis, Self-Determination, Counter-Hegemonic Cooperation, Regional Alliances, Middle East Security.  
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INTRODUCTION

What explains cooperation among Iran, Syria and Hezbollah? Although these actors are bound together in the so-called ‘axis of resistance’ (*mihwar*

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*al-muqawama*), they are far more unlike than alike – which renders their political, economic and security cooperation not obvious at all. Whilst Iran and Hezbollah embrace an Islamist ideology, following the *velayat e-faqih*, the doctrine of the Iranian revolution, Syria has traditionally presented itself as a secular state and a major guardian of Arab nationalism. Furthermore, whereas Iran and Syria are recognized members of the international community, Hezbollah is a nonstate armed group, labelled as a ‘terrorist organization’ by regional and global powers, not least the United States (US) and Israel, and often treated as an obstacle to the normalisation of relations between both Iran and Syria with the rest of the world.

This curious form of cooperation has received some attention in the existing literature, which can be divided into two main positions. The dominant view, held by realist and rationalist scholars, sees in the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance an axis of convenience. For instance, to explain why Syria sided with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), rather than its homologue Ba’athist regime in Baghdad, Ehteshami and Hinnebusch have argued that Syria’s primary aim was to balance the rising power of Iraq.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, Goodarzi insists the post-1979 alliance between Iran and Syria was ‘defensive’ in nature, and catalysed by key events such as the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.<sup>2</sup> Yet these scholars do not explain why Syria antagonised the US at the apex of its power following the end of the Cold War, by siding with one of the most isolated and anti-US regimes. Likewise, Wastnidge maintains that cooperation among Iran, Hezbollah and Syria during the post-2011 Syrian conflict has a ‘pragmatic intent: the survival of both the Asad dynasty and the Islamic Republic’.<sup>3</sup> But this interpretation understates the fact that before Summer 2011, Syria refused a bailout package from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), conditioned on its abandoning the alliance with Iran. In refusing this offer, Assad paved the way for the Saudis to deploy the Arab League as a means to put pressure on and isolate Syria, including by suspending its membership in the League, thus removing the few remaining barriers to the further delegitimization and isolation of the Asad regime.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Iran’s positioning is not easy to explain either. For why would Iran continue to support Assad as it became the lightning rod of global condemnation, further deepening its own isolation? Such behaviour does not sit well with realist interpretations.

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<sup>1</sup> EHTESHAMI and HINNEBUSCH 2002: 97-102.

<sup>2</sup> GOODARZI 2006.

<sup>3</sup> WASTNIDGE 2017: 156.

<sup>4</sup> WORRALL 2017: 177; DAHER 2019: 3.

The competing view, advanced by constructivist scholars, tends to see in the 'axis of resistance' the operation of shared religious identity (i.e. Shi'a identity). In particular, some scholars claim that it is the Alawite identity of the Asad family (in power in Syria since 1971) that brought Syria closer to the Islamic republic of Iran and Hezbollah.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the Alawites are an offshoot of the Shi'a is seen as key to explaining the endurance of their alliance.<sup>6</sup> This line of reasoning follows closely sectarian narratives, which Iran has mobilised during the war in Syria to motivate fighters and justify its intervention to the domestic audience. However, upon closer inspection, the reception of these narratives by Twelver Shi'a and Alawites across the region reveals divisions rather than affinity between the two communities.<sup>7</sup> Also, Shi'a communities in various countries use religion in different ways to define their identity and polity.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, whereas Iran and Hezbollah project their authority as an incarnation of divine rule, the Syrian regime has traditionally justified itself as a guardian of Arab nationalism, embracing secularism instead. Such divergences became a matter of debate within the Syrian elite in 2015, dividing them on the question of whether accepting a helping hand from Iran did them more harm than good.<sup>9</sup>

Although Iran, Syria and Hezbollah often deploy symbolic images testifying to the solidity of their alliance, they do not even pretend to conceal tensions among them. Yet that has not undermined their alliance. This is something that neither rationalists nor constructivists can explain on their own, or when taken together. What needs special emphasis, this article will argue, is the political context within which these three actors operate, i.e. the US domination of the Middle East after World War II.<sup>10</sup> A context

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<sup>5</sup> SLUGGLETT 2016.

<sup>6</sup> SALAMEY and OTHMAN 2011.

<sup>7</sup> HADDAD 2017.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that this split took violent forms, leading to the assassination of Rustom Ghazaleh, a high-ranking figure of the infamous intelligence services in Syria [See: Anne Bardard, 'Syria remains silent on Intelligence Official's Death' *The New York Times* (24 April 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/25/world/middleeast/syria-remains-silent-on-intelligence-officials-death.html> (accessed October 22, 2020)]; The Iranian elite seems not less divided over the Syrian issue: when Bashar al-Asad visited Iran officially in 2019, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif did not meet him – which was largely seen as an indication of an internal rift within the Iranian regime [Al-Jazeera, 'Zarif resigned over Assad's trip to Tehran: Spokesperson' *Al-Jazeera* (5 March 2019) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/03/zarif-resigned-assad-trip-tehran-spokesperson-190305092010994.html>. (accessed June 5, 2020)].

<sup>10</sup> The US are not the only external power, but the most relevant in the region since 1945. Therefore this article will focus mainly on the role the US has played, directly and indirectly, in catalyzing the formation and evolution of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis.

shaped by a panoply of unholy alliances between local powers and the US, which leaves two basic options to local actors: accept or defy US domination. They can submit themselves to US control, in exchange for privileged access to capitalist markets and a protection guarantee, which the Trump administration treats as a protection racket. Or they seek to preserve their self-determination, openly defying and resisting external control, and exposing themselves to the direct and indirect consequences of the ire of the US, and their local collaborators. It is the variable response to this conditioning context that helps explain the alliance between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, this article contends. Neither materialist interest nor a common identity explains this alignment – their ideological commitment to self-determination does. Material interests and religious identity play a role to the extent that they advance the cause of self-determination for all of them, separately or jointly.

This article explains the commitment to absolute self-determination of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah as the by-product of historical traumatic memories of Western and US imperialism that these actors share individually and collectively. Memories of unfair treatment, and of a faith recurrently betrayed by the West and the US, nourishes a politics of structural mistrust towards them – the source of the ‘axis of resistance’. Failed overtures by both Syria and Iran towards the US, as discussed below, have only served to exacerbate and solidify mistrust towards them, and the West more broadly. This kind of mistrust precedes and creates the context for their anti-imperialism. Anti-imperialism is a consequence of the unrecognised claim to being recognised as ‘equal’ in international society.

This argument is developed in four parts. The first part uncovers the dialectical understanding of ‘self-determination’ in contemporary international society, pointing to permanent struggle between two visions of it: a *lax*, paternalistic conception that sees self-determination as a concession from dominant (Western) powers to postcolonial states, rather than a right that every community can claim in principle; and a *literal*, absolutist conception of self-determination as ‘full equality of rights among all states’. It then discusses how these two rival visions have shaped politics in the Middle East since 1945, and created two blocs, divided along their commitment to the first or the second understanding of self-determination; the second part discusses the origins of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance as a common response to individual traumatic encounters with the West and the US, which have determined their structural embracement of absolutist self-determination. The article then elucidates how cooperation among Iran, Syria and Hezbollah has worked in practice, especially as a collective effort to claim equal status in international society after 9/11. The article concludes with a *caveat*: the defiant commitment of Iran, Syria and Hezbol-

lah to self-determination at the international level does not entail recognizing self-determination to their citizens at the domestic level – especially those who pursue liberation from the yoke of the repressive institutions they have erected in the name of self-determination.

### 1. TWO FACES OF SELF-DETERMINATION: LAX AND LITERAL

Self-determination is commonly seen as the most powerful normative instrument of emancipation in international society, and the very principle upon which the post-imperial world that emerged out of World War II has been constructed as an international society – in principle a society of ‘sovereign equals’. However, the principle of sovereign equality, enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations (UN) in 1945, conflicts with its actual practice, betraying the preservation of hierarchies between former imperial powers and newly independent states. Understanding the dichotomy between these two visions of self-determination is crucial not simply to reconstruct the genealogy of this international norm, but most crucially to understand its dialectical operation – both historically and at present. The application of this norm is inseparable from the struggle over its meaning.

Received wisdom suggests that self-determination was introduced by US president Woodrow Wilson at the Versailles Conference of 1919, although it took almost two decades to turn into an international norm.<sup>11</sup> Yet, scholars of Historical IR and International Law have recently questioned such linear narrative. In particular, Throntveit sheds light on what he calls the ‘fable’ of Wilson’s fourteen points, noticing that Wilson never pronounced the term ‘self-determination’ in the famous speech he pronounced in Versailles, but rather referred to ‘self-governing’.<sup>12</sup> As Cassese had already noted, Wilson never meant full independence of the colonised, but rather their involvement in imperial administration.<sup>13</sup> Spanu pushes this argument further to show that self-determination may have generated expectations for the elimination of international hierarchies, but it actually served to preserve them.<sup>14</sup> This is because – she argues – ‘old states’ granted self-determination only to some ethnic or religious minorities, whilst denying it to others, thus in fact preserving external domination indirectly, through domestic hierarchies.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> MANELA 2009.

<sup>12</sup> THRONTVEIT 2011.

<sup>13</sup> CASSESE 2005: 18.

<sup>14</sup> SPANU 2019.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Tracing the historical evolution of the principle of self-determination provides a ground to understanding the colonial origins of the contemporary international system and the persistence of a 'Wilsonian' interpretation of the norm even after 1945. However, in focusing on the manipulation and selective application of self-determination by European powers and the US, these scholars do not fully exhaust the sources of this principle – more specifically, its non-Western, non-imperial origins, which is crucial to fully detect the aura of ambiguity which continues to surround it to this day.

For a start, it was Lenin that should be credited with popularising the principle of self-determination, and not Wilson, who has been credited with something he never claimed or believed in.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, self-determination was endorsed by the Second International as early as in 1896, during the London International Congress that had endorsed the principle as a 'full right of all nations'. In 1914, Lenin published the *Right of nations to self-determination* – a pamphlet in which he intervened in an ongoing Marxist debate on the 'national question'. He saw the achievement of full political independence as a first intermediate step enabling workers to claim actual independence, namely economic independence, from the domination of capitalist nations.<sup>17</sup> He intended 'self-determination' as 'complete equality of rights for all nations', whereby equality between oppressor and oppressed nations could be the first step to eliminate international economic hierarchies.<sup>18</sup> The Marxist debate on the 'national question' was however strained. Some intellectuals – among them Rosa Luxemburg – criticised Lenin's position as diverting the attention of workers from class solidarity to national solidarity. But it was Lenin's view of self-determination which eventually prevailed.

Although almost entirely neglected in the historical reconstructions of the norm, Lenin's vision has had a profound impact on national liberation movements, especially those national movements that embraced a Marxist-proletarian ideology to conduct their anti-imperialist struggle. Among them, there was the Syrian Ba'ath party, especially in its origins,<sup>19</sup> as well as the communist parties in Iran and Lebanon that contested what they saw as a self-determination interrupted by the interference of the US and European powers in their domestic affairs. Furthermore, the Leninist legacy

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<sup>16</sup> Beyond an intra-Marxist debate, Antonio Cassese is among the few who credits Lenin with his contribution to the definition of 'self-determination', although only in passing (CASSESE 2005: 18).

<sup>17</sup> LENIN 1972.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: 451.

<sup>19</sup> KAYLANI 1972.

of self-determination is crucial to understanding the struggle of Kurdish movements in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria for national independence, as it is to explaining the rise of Shi'ite Islamist actors in Iran and Lebanon in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading to the rise of the Islamic Republic in Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>20</sup> This is a point that AbuKhalil emphasises when arguing that 'Hezbollah is 'an Islamic adaptation to the era of Leninist revolutionary organizations'.<sup>21</sup>

The two rival interpretations of 'self-determination' put forth by Lenin and Wilson transcend the two historical figures who first introduced them, shaping the contours of an ideological – Marxist vs. Liberal – battle. Nonetheless, the opposition between the two is key to explain the dialectic of external interventions and anti-imperialist resistance in the post-colonial world – especially in a Middle East largely dominated by the US since the end of World War III.

From a Middle Eastern perspective, the reception of 'self-determination' as an international norm by the newly independent states or communities claiming an autonomous space in the new world order conflicted with the application of the norm – especially as it was enforced by the US since the start of the Cold War. The US have continuously mobilized a lax, paternalistic interpretation of 'self-determination', rendering it conditional upon the previous fulfilment of specific, liberal criteria that national movements and political actors had to satisfy before being recognized, from above, as legitimate state-makers, and gain or maintain access to international society. Although the idea of self-determination that many of these movements embraced entailed that 'sovereignty' or 'independence' was something they could claim and obtain from below, in practice it was something that was conceded to them from above.<sup>22</sup>

To render this practice a moral course of action, the US imposed criteria of 'normalcy' or 'normal behaviour' as a pre-requisite to access international society – in practice a means to control and maintain international order as free from ideas and ideologies that could hinder the imperial ambitions of the US. As Glanville notices, the international moral scrutiny of people in power, distinguishing between 'responsible' and 'irresponsible' governments or regimes, has been a particularly powerful rhetorical instrument to render the sovereignty of the new post-colonial states after 1945 constantly subject to external control by dominant countries.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> DABASHI 2012.

<sup>21</sup> ABUKHALIL 1991: 394.

<sup>22</sup> CALCULLI 2020.

<sup>23</sup> GLANVILLE 2011.

In the Middle East, these conflicting understandings of self-determination have paved the way for the creation of two antagonist sub-regional blocs of states in a region largely dominated by the US since 1945. It has given rise to binary formations of (state and nonstate) actors, critical for the architecture of regional security. There are on the one hand those who have accepted a 'Wilsonian' idea of self-determination and have *de facto* ceded part of their sovereignty to the US in exchange for US protection. On the other, there are those who have embraced a 'Leninist' idea of self-determination and have demanded to be treated as 'sovereign equals', thus refusing to kneel to Western powers, in particular the US.

*Submission and defiance: The formation of rival sub-regional blocs in the Middle East*

These competing formations do not constitute actual systems of alliance, but rather groups of states (and, sometimes, nonstate actors) that coalesce in their commitment to *accept* or *reject* collaboration with the US and become part of their imperial strategy in the region.<sup>24</sup> They consist of sub-regional blocs that align with support or opposition to the idea of the Middle East as an *exclusive* sphere of US interest.<sup>25</sup> One bloc accepts external control of their economy and military capabilities, the other bloc defends an idea of sovereignty as 'non-interference'. These are ideological choices that drive the international behaviour of these states, and confront them with the perennial desire of subsequent US administrations to bring the Middle East under their imperial control.

For instance, Saudi Arabia and other monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) depend almost exclusively on US protection. Their dependency goes back to the discovery of oil in the Arabian Peninsula, when the US replaced the British empire and penetrated the Gulf via ARAMCO (Arabian-American Company), the famous American-Saudi company (that became entirely Saudi in 1988). As Vitalis shows, ARAMCO was not simply a 'company' but the major agent of (external) state-building in Saudi Arabia.<sup>26</sup> Since the 1980s onwards, the US further penetrated the Gulf via USCENCOM (US Central Command), which was responsible for constructing military and naval infrastructures in the Gulf, but more substantially paved the way for the entry of US private firms in the

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<sup>24</sup> This also explains why regional agreements from the League of Arab States to more recent agreements, have produced little outcome.

<sup>25</sup> CALCULLI 2019.

<sup>26</sup> VITALIS 2007.



Gulf.<sup>27</sup> The US extraterritoriality in the Gulf is not simply virtual, but materially visible in the presence of almost 40,000 US troops (a number that excludes troops stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan) and the US fifth fleet.<sup>28</sup> The number of American troops have in fact increased overtime, whilst their longstanding presence in the region suggests that the US is an integral part of the power configuration of the region, not just an external hegemon.

States and nonstate actors that reject this project have instead tried to use their diplomatic and rhetorical power to pressure the US to live up to its own principles, namely its rejection of imperial domination. They use the international arena to shame the US for violating international law it claims to defend, as is the case with the violation by the US of the international agreement on the Iran nuclear programme, the 'Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action' adopted in October 2015. However, the actions of the defenders of a literal understanding of self-determination cannot be reduced to mere anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism, but are grounded in what they see as their legitimate international right. It is against this context that we can understand the formation and functioning of the 'axis of resistance'. This alliance is a framework for regional cooperation among defenders of independent rule against an alternative framework of regional cooperation: an imperial, hierarchical framework dominated by the US and grounded in a transactional exchange of security and loyalty between the US and its regional collaborators – namely the Gulf states, Jordan, Israel, post-1979 Egypt,<sup>29</sup> and pro-US groups in post-2003 Iraq and Lebanon.

By rendering sovereignty and independence conditional upon alignment with their own rules and standards of behaviour, the US and other European powers have conjured up a high moral ground from which to stigmatize movements and political actors that claim self-determination to realize their own vision of political order. These groups are stigmatized as 'deviant' and thus placed outside the boundaries of international society.<sup>30</sup> But those at the receiving end of the stigma have often engaged in a struggle to defend an alternative interpretation of 'self-determination', in

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<sup>27</sup> KHALILI 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Associated Press, 'A look at foreign military bases across the Persian Gulf' (September 4, 2019), <https://apnews.com/e676e805b77347108068afc160313e2d> (accessed May 31, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> i.e. after the Camp David agreement, the peace deal that Egypt signed with Israel, procuring Egypt a US military aid of \$ 2 billion per year, yet entailing Egypt's renunciation of regional leadership (CLARKE 1997)

<sup>30</sup> On stigma and deviant behavior see in particular: ADLER-NISSEN 2014; ZARAKOL 2014.

the terms posed by Lenin as ‘complete equality of rights for all nations’. They have interiorised the non-recognition of their status by the West and the US more specifically. But they see the US and other dominant powers as violators of their right to self-determination – *pariah* states that cannot be trusted. They thus reject the self-proclaimed moral standing of the US, and endeavour to build an order that defies US hegemony to enhance their autonomy as sovereign nations.

## 2. BORN OUT OF MISTRUST: THE ORIGIN OF THE ‘IRAN-SYRIA-HEZBOLLAH’ AXIS

To understand the origins of cooperation between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, we first need to trace the historical roots of their adversarial relation with the West throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. As discussed above, this is a form of cooperation that emerges from structural mistrust, bred from stigmatisation and a sense of misrecognition. Mistrust is deeply rooted in memories of Western imperialism and US interventions in the Middle East. These memories are not simply remembrances of past injuries, but events that have informed the constitution and evolution of the modern polities of Iran, Syria and Lebanon and the way they have been integrated into the contemporary international system.

In Iran, resentment towards the West goes back to the British occupation of the country in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. British attempts to control the Iranian economy triggered various waves of social mobilisation. The ‘Tobacco riots’ of 1891 came as a reaction to the concession that Nasir al-Din Shah had granted to Great Britain for a full monopoly over the Iranian Tobacco industry, and paved the way for the ‘Constitutional Revolution’ (1905-1909), with the aim of protecting Iran from British attempts to subjugate the country – both economically and politically.<sup>31</sup> Yet, the most upsetting memory of Western imperialism was the *coup d’état* that the CIA and the British Foreign Office orchestrated – codenamed ‘operation AJAX’ – to oust the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953.<sup>32</sup> The Iranian society has interiorised these episodes as national traumas. The Shi’a clergy, the nationalists and the communists of Iran, in spite of their ideological divergencies, developed throughout the 1960s and 1970s a common resentment against the US, especially as the latter supported the authoritarian regime of Shah Pahlavi, and sponsored a series of unpopular economic reforms in the country that improv-

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<sup>31</sup> ABRAHAMIAN 1979.

<sup>32</sup> BEHROOZ 2001.

erished the middle class. Iranian intellectuals referred to these dynamics as ‘Westoxication’ or ‘Americatoxication’, comparing Western imperial intrusion to a ‘disease’ from which the country had to liberate itself from.<sup>33</sup> These vividly felt memories paved the way for the 1979 Revolution. The establishment of the Islamic Republic was embedded in this culture of defensive anti-imperialism and its popularity was grounded first and foremost in its mission to liberate not only the Iranian people, but all the ‘downtrodden’ (*mustazafin*) from ‘external oppressors’ (*mustakberin*).<sup>34</sup> The binary between oppressed and oppressors lies at the core of Khomeini’s *velayat e-faqih* and informed Iranian foreign policy for years to come. Iran presented itself to the world as a champion of an Islamic vision of world order, competing with Western liberalism, otherwise associated with mere imperial domination. This is explicit in article 152 of the Iranian Constitution:

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is founded on the basis of ending any type of domination, safeguarding the complete independence and integrity of the territory, defending the rights of all Muslims, practicing nonalignment with respect to the dominating powers and maintaining mutual peaceful relationships with non-belligerent nations.

Although Iran has made several attempts to normalise relations with the US and the West after the death of Khomeini in 1989, a refusal to surrender to US diktats and the urge to be treated as a ‘sovereign equal’ has remained paramount in Iran’s approach to the international society: it is in fact a *condicio sine qua non* for Iran to enter in dialogue with the West. It has been a silver lining in Iranian foreign policy under Rafsanjani and Khatami. Khatami in particular tried to reintegrate Iran in multilateral institutions, especially the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Conference, but always with the aim of containing US presence in West Asia.<sup>35</sup> This is a line which has been developed by Rohani and especially his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Javad Zarif. Zarif’s foreign policy reasserts the specificity of Iran as part of the Islamic world and distance from the West, which is not in contradiction with Iran being part of an international community of ‘sovereign equals’, as it will be shown more in detail in the next session.

Syria’s relation to the West, and the US more specifically, has also been traumatic. Emerged from an armed revolution against the French Man-

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<sup>33</sup> DEYLAMI 2011.

<sup>34</sup> AKBARZADEH 2016.

<sup>35</sup> ALAM 2000: 1631.

date, independent Syria embraced Arab nationalism and self-determination since 1946. The Ba'ath party, founded in 1947 by Salah al-Din al-Bitar and Michel Aflaq, emerged in its early days as the guardian of these principles and considered itself as part of an internationalist proletarian revolutionary struggle against 'injustice'. Whereas the experience of the French occupation of Syria during the mandate still represents a traumatic memory, mistrust towards the West is anchored on two key American attempts to impose US control over Syria: the first was Colonel Husni Az-Zaim's CIA-sponsored coup in 1949; the second was the so-called "American conspiracy", a series of clandestine attempts by the Eisenhower administration throughout 1957, aimed at bringing down the Syrian regime led by President Shukri Quwatly (a close ally of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser) and substitute it with a pro-American one. Long dismissed by the US as 'Syria's paranoia', these undercover operations, orchestrated by the American Embassy in Damascus, have been revealed in detail by American historians in the early 1990s, when key files documenting how the US operated in the Middle East during the 1950s were declassified.<sup>36</sup> These documents shed light on the flagrant inconsistency between the American overt support for 'self-determination' and covert pursuit of neo-colonial policy. It is not a surprise that they have nurtured mistrust and resentment in the region.<sup>37</sup>

The 1957 coup against Quwatly was eventually aborted, but remained engraved in the memories of the Syrian regime. Although often exploited by the Asad family to justify various waves of state repression against the population (including during the 2011 uprisings), in the name 'defending the country from foreign conspiracy', these memories have given shape to Syria's structural mistrust towards the West. The end the Cold War consolidated this mistrust. As Soviet Union imploded, Syria sought rapprochement with the US, by participating in the US-led coalition against Iraq in the First Gulf War (1990-1991), supporting the US-sponsored Arab-Israeli peace process, and implementing a series of liberal economic reforms to attract foreign direct investments.<sup>38</sup> However, as Gani explains, after the end of the Gulf War, the US adopted an ambiguous policy of containment toward Syria, and did not live up to the promise of rewarding Syria economically for its support to the war against Saddam Hussein.<sup>39</sup> As this rapprochement did not come to pass, Syria became vulnerable to

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<sup>36</sup> LITTLE 1990; LESCH 1992.

<sup>37</sup> U. MAKDISI 2011.

<sup>38</sup> HINNEBUSCH 1995; PERTHES 2001.

<sup>39</sup> GANI 2014.

financial and economic shocks that hit the region throughout the 1990s. In addition, Hafiz al-Asad had to pay a political price for his decision to align with the US, transitioning from a socialist to a liberal economy, whilst at the same time failing to improve the quality of life of ordinary Syrians. This provoked popular protests and erosion of loyalty from those groups of the Syrian population that had once supported the regime for championing anti-imperialism.<sup>40</sup> The regime made a U-turn, denouncing the US for their malign ambiguity and bad faith – as a power not to be trusted, but defied.

Like the Iranian regime, the Asad family has tried to assert its autonomy from the West. But unlike Iran, whose autonomy is grounded in its Islamic identity, Syria has been constructed by its Ba’athist elite as a secular state, along the lines of the European model of statehood. Thus, to affirm its distance and autonomy from the West, the regime defends its peculiar historical experience. For instance, during his inaugural speech as President of Syria in 2000, Bashar al-Asad rebutted against Western stigmatization of Syria’s lack of democracy, by accusing the West of lack of ‘democratic thinking’.<sup>41</sup> He said:

Western democracy [...] is the outcome of a long history that resulted in customs and traditions which distinguish the current culture of Western societies. In order to apply what they have we have to live their history with all its social signification. As this is, obviously, impossible. We need to have our democratic experience which is special to us, which stems from our history, culture, civilization and which is a response to the needs of our society and the requirements of our reality. In this case our experience will be strong and able to stand the test of time no matter how difficult that might be.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, the trauma of Western imperialism is key to understanding the rise and development of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah emerged in 1982 during the Lebanese civil war. But its origin actually predates its official formation. Its inception is bound to the well-known marginalisation of the Shi’a community since the invention of Lebanon during the French mandate. Much has been written about the formation and evolution of the confessional political system which Lebanon adopted since its independence, as a quota system based on power-sharing among Christians,

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<sup>40</sup> HINNEBUSCH 2011.

<sup>41</sup> The transcription of the speech can be found at this link: <https://al-bab.com/documents-section/president-bashar-al-assad-inaugural-address> (accessed April 3, 2020).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Sunnis and Shi'ites. Yet, what remains understudied is how international powers, after independence, have nurtured and manipulated the sectarian system of Lebanon from outside to maintain hierarchies among confessional groups inside. Such manipulation of domestic hierarchies, tailored to preserve the Christian Maronite community in an elitist position, was meant specifically to maintain a pro-Western elite in a position of power to guarantee the continuation of Western imperial control after the demise of empires. To this end, the identity of Lebanon's statehood had to be exclusive, and not inclusive, of those groups of the populations which instead had embraced 'self-determination' in order to forge the state according to the ideology and principles propelled by Arab nationalism or Islamic doctrines.<sup>43</sup> In particular, the rise of Hezbollah in 1982 was a response to the Israeli invasion and occupation of South Lebanon,<sup>44</sup> which took place in coordination with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), established in south Lebanon, and the major powers of the Multinational Force in Lebanon (MNF).<sup>45</sup> Hezbollah emerged as the antithesis to the imposition by the US and France of a domestic order in Lebanon – via the election of the Christian far-right leader of the 'Kataeb' armed militia, Bashir Jemayel, as president of Lebanon in 1982 – which would have deprived the Lebanese of their right to self-determination.<sup>46</sup> It is important to note that Hezbollah in its *risala al-maftuha* ('Open Letter'), its founding manifesto, makes explicit reference to the right to 'self-determination', as a universal principle that was being denied to some communities of the Middle East by the US and France, defined as 'hypocrites',<sup>47</sup> for they had embraced self-determination:

We revolted to free our land, to throw out the colonialists and the invaders from it, so that we can exercise our right of self-determination.<sup>48</sup>

According to the post-1975 silent agreement between the US, Israel and the Kataeb, the Shi'a population in the South was indeed dispensable to Israel's ambition to occupy and annex South Lebanon, satisfying at once Israel's ambition to expand territorially and Jemayel's ambition to overcome the sectarian system and remake Lebanon as a purely 'Christian state'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> CALCULLI 2018: 47-48.

<sup>44</sup> DAHER 2019.

<sup>45</sup> CALCULLI 2014.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> ALAGHA 2011: 60.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*: 42.

<sup>49</sup> CALCULLI 2018: 51-78.

In another section of the *risala*, Hezbollah more explicitly explains the origin of its mistrust toward the US, seen as a deceitful power:

They try to defile our reputation and spread lies... in a hypocritical attempt to sow a wedge between us and other oppressed. All of this in order to diminish our great achievements in confronting America and its allies. Through its local collaborators, the US has tried to persuade the people, that those who crushed their arrogance in Lebanon and frustrated their conspiracy against the oppressed (*mustad'afin*) were nothing but a bunch of bigots and terrorists who have nothing to do except detonate liquor stores, gambling venues, instruments of diversion, and the like [i.e. all things that lead to debaucheries (*al-fawahish*)].<sup>50</sup>

What emerges here is the resentment of Hezbollah for Western misrecognition and dismissal of its own preference for an 'Islamic state', and a particular mistrust towards the deceitful techniques of the US to deny their claim and turn them into an outcasts of international society.

#### *Common traumas and cooperation*

How could these individual traumas coalesce into a shared platform for sub-regional cooperation? The foundation of what has come to be known as the 'axis the resistance' goes back to the 1980s, when Syria decided to side with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). The war was started by Saddam Hussein in the attempt to undermine the viability of the Islamic Republic proclaimed a year earlier.

Syria's support for Iran has been seen as a form of balancing against Iraq and an attempt to maintain its regional position.<sup>51</sup> Although this calculation might have played a role, what commonly goes unrecognised is Syria's interpretation of Iraq's aggression against Iran. Hafiz al-Asad saw it as a sign of surrender to the American imperial strategy in the Middle East. The US were indeed eager to regain control over Iran, which they had fully lost when the Shah was exiled and the Islamic Republic established in 1979.<sup>52</sup> Relatedly, the US were keen to use Saddam as a proxy to destroy Khomeini's Islamist regime. In siding with Iran, Asad stressed that the Islamic Republic had transformed Iran from an ally of Israel into a supporter of the Arab anti-imperialist struggle and commitment to the liberation of Palestine.<sup>53</sup> As Sun explains, Asad was particularly concerned with Iraq's

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<sup>50</sup> ALAGHA 2011: 60.

<sup>51</sup> SEALE 1989: 353-358; DARWICH 2019: 82-83.

<sup>52</sup> Iran was the major ally of the US in the Middle East before 1979.

<sup>53</sup> SEALE 1989: 356-358.

alignment with the Gulf monarchies – a move that he interpreted as departure from Arabism and joining of the pro-US regional bloc.<sup>54</sup> This came at a moment in which the Asad regime was facing a major domestic challenge posed by the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, which Saudi Arabia had indirectly supported throughout the 1970s.<sup>55</sup> The challenge culminated in a major revolt organized by the Brotherhood in the city of Hama in 1982. Notoriously, the Asad regime met this revolt with a punitive 27-day siege which left between 10.000 and 20.000 dead. Whereas the regime was eager to defend its own right to self-determination internationally, it was ready to deny it to the Syrian Brotherhood. But once again, Asad interpreted Saudi secret support to the Brotherhood as a ‘conspiracy’ of the pro-US bloc in the region to assault Syria’s independent rule.<sup>56</sup>

The Iran-Syria alignment of the 1980s did become suddenly a fully-fledged alliance. The relation between them was actually complicated by the rise of Hezbollah in Lebanon. During the Lebanese civil war, Syria supported the other Lebanese Shi’a militia AMAL, and saw Hezbollah as a fanatic religious actor. The Asad regime fought directly and indirectly with Hezbollah during and after the war, but decided to give it limited support after 1992 as a proxy to balance Israel at its Lebanese border.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the relation between the Iranian and Syrian regime was suspended during the 1990s, as both were independently pursuing rapprochement with the US and the West. Such endeavour failed, especially as the US was not ready to meet what Iran and Syria once again demanded: to be treated as ‘equal’ international partners.

In pursuing such endeavour, Syria did not learn any lesson from Iraq. Indeed, the First Gulf War, to which Syria participated on the side of the US, could have been an indication for the Asad regime that the US, after the end of the Cold War, was all the more eager to eliminate all obstacles to the completion of its imperial strategy in the region. Whereas the Saddam regime had aligned itself with the US in the 1980s, and waged an expensive war with Iran, hoping to improve its international position, it did not even receive the promised compensation for its war effort. When Saddam decided to invade Kuwait in response to what he perceived as unfair treatment, the US moved quickly to ‘internationalise’ a local dispute, and inflicted a harsh punishment on Iraq, putting the country under embargo, until the

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<sup>54</sup> SUN 2009.

<sup>55</sup> SUNAYAMA 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Speech by Hafez al-Asad, 1982, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uqlhql8c2To> (accessed March 4, 2020).

<sup>57</sup> NORTON 2007.



US decided to invade it again in 2003 and eliminate the regime with the aim of transforming Iraq into another US post in the region.<sup>58</sup>

*Defiant against all odds: the rise of the 'axis of resistance'*

The US invasion of Iraq was a catalyst for the transformation of the relations between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah from a brittle alignment into a structured alliance. This is because the removal of the Iraqi regime was not an isolated event, but part of a plan to accelerate the full incorporation of the Middle East into the exclusive US sphere of influence. At the start of the invasion of Iraq, Bush declared in a 2003 speech to the National Endowment for Democracy that:

Iraqi democracy will succeed – and that success will send forth news, from Damascus to Tehran – that freedom can be the future of every nation.<sup>59</sup>

Notoriously, the Bush administration had invaded Iraq in the framework of the broader 'war on terror', the US response to the al-Qaeda's attacks of 11 September 2001. But the major targets of the US 'war on terror' were in fact those regimes that contested the US ambition to control the region, when they had no responsibility for the 9/11 attacks. At the same time, some eccentric figures within the complex Saudi regime, who actually directly financed the al-Qaeda attack, were dealt with informally, without putting the US-Saudi alliance at risk.<sup>60</sup>

The emotional tones of the 'war on terror' gave the Bush administration an unprecedented opportunity to mobilise the politics of stigma against its rivals, in preparation for subsequent legal, political and military measures. Iran, Syria and later Hezbollah (in addition to Libya and North Korea) were defined altogether as the 'axis of evil'. The US implemented a series of measures against these actors, with the aim of putting them under diplomatic siege and force them to surrender. For instance, in 2003 the US Congress passed a law – the 'Syrian Accountability Act and Lebanese restoration act' (SALSRA) – calling Syria a 'sponsor of terrorism' in Lebanon and imposing sanctions on Damascus. Although such pressure paved the way for ending Syria's informal occupation of Lebanon in 2005, which

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<sup>58</sup> ALI 2004; DODGE 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Bush speech held during the celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy United States Chamber of Commerce, Washington, DC, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>. (accessed May 14, 2020).

<sup>60</sup> Al-Jazeera, FBI 'Mistakenly Reveals Saudi Official Linked' to 9/11 Attackers, Al-Jazeera (13 May 2020), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/13/fbi-mistakenly-reveals-saudi-official-linked-to-9-11>.

in fact liberated many Lebanese citizens from the yoke of Damascus's brutal domination, the nature and timing of SALSRA cannot be detached from the US neo-imperial post-9/11 strategy.<sup>61</sup> SALSRA was a domestic US law that, without the endorsement of the international community, transformed Syria's longstanding occupation of Lebanon into an 'urgent' moral and security issue. In the same year, the US State Department issued a list of terrorist organizations, putting Hezbollah in the 'A-team' of the list, i.e. the most threatening to US national security.<sup>62</sup> Strikingly, al-Qaeda was included in the 'B-team' *only*, in spite of its recognised responsibility in the 9/11 attacks. Finally, the US put the spotlight on the Iran Nuclear programme. Although it was not a novelty for the US, the Iran Nuclear issue was re-securitized and became again a priority of the Bush administration, preparing the ground for a potential invasion of the country. As Tarock argues, the Bush neoconservative circle was motivated by the desire

to replace the present regime with a 'Washington friendly' one. To that end, Iran has been put under pressure on two fronts: keeping the military option on the table, and launching anti-Iran propaganda worldwide, particularly in the USA.<sup>63</sup>

In coordination with the US 'new' strategy in the region, Washington's regional collaborators launched a regional campaign to stigmatize and securitize the 'axis of resistance'. The King of Jordan labelled Iran, Syria and Hezbollah as 'Shi'a crescent'. This formulation put the emphasis on the religious identity of the three actors, and coalesced with a series of Saudi attempts to blame the Shi'a of the region of conspiring to overthrow the monarchs of the Gulf. The path was clear for new wave of sectarian tensions to ignite in the region.

It is in response to such coordinated pressure that the 'axis of resistance' (*mihwar al-muqawama*) came into being – a clear attempt to subvert their designation by the US as being part of the 'axis of evil'. The term appeared for the first time on the Libyan newspaper *al-zahf al-akhdar*, which saw 'resistance to US hegemony' as the only common denominator among the members of Bush's 'axis of evil'. The term was later popularized by Iran and adopted by Iran, Syria and Hezbollah to define their alliance. All in all, rather than coming out of an active decision to coalesce into a coherent alliance, the 'axis of resistance' was rather 'constructed' by its political archenemies. Instead of accepting the stigma, Iran, Syria and Hezbollah decided to join forces and engage in counter-stigmatization from a common, structured platform.

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<sup>61</sup> K. MAKDISI 2011.

<sup>62</sup> EL HUSSEINI 2010.

<sup>63</sup> TAROCK 2006: 662.

The first important moment in which the emerging alliance was put to the test was the Israeli-Lebanon war in 2006. Framed as part of the ‘global war on terror’, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in July 2006 resulted, once again, from the condensation of already securitized issues into an urgent, immediate threat. The longstanding presence of Hezbollah in South Lebanon turned into an urgent national security matter, although no significant change of the security status at the Israeli-Lebanese border could justify the aggression. During the war, Hezbollah received sustained support from Iran via Syria. The coordination among the three members of the ‘axis of resistance’ was crucial to supply Hezbollah with military equipment and non-military aid (food and medicines) which contributed to change the fate of the war. After 33 days, Israel was forced to withdraw, giving Hezbollah the opportunity to declare a ‘victory’.

The 2006 war was a milestone in the consolidation of the ‘axis of resistance’, revealing the combination of strategic contingency and ideological affinity guiding the logic of the ‘resistance’. Such logic transcended the individual identities of the three actors, but formed the basis of their sustained cooperation. Incidentally, it is in these terms that Hezbollah’s ‘new’ manifesto of 2009 clarified the terms of the alliance:

Syria has recorded a distinctive and steadfast stance in its struggle against the Israeli enemy. This came through its support of regional resistance movements amidst their most difficult of circumstances [...]. Iran is a central and important state in the Islamic world and it is the main supporter of the causes of the *umma* [...] Hizbullah considers Islamic Iran to be a focal nation in the Islamic world.<sup>64</sup>

The second crucial test for the ‘axis of resistance’ has been the Syrian war erupted in 2011. Since the start of the peaceful anti-regime protests occurred in Syria between February and March 2011, the axis has shown unity in diminishing the genuine nature of popular protests, rather denouncing an ‘assault’ on Syrian self-determination and sovereignty and the indirect intrusion of the US and their Middle Eastern allies in Syria. The credibility of such allegations was rather poor, especially as Iran and Hezbollah had been thus far vocal in supporting anti-regime protests in Tunisia or Egypt, and their readiness to call out a ‘foreign conspiracy’ in Syria was largely perceived as opportunistic double standard. Yet, the war in Syria has testified to the solidity of the alliance.

This is mainly because, since July 2011, the Syrian uprising was disfigured and hijacked by both the pro-US and anti-US regional formations, and witnessed a major involvement of foreign powers in support to one

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<sup>64</sup> ALAGHA 2011: 33.

or the other camp. The axis' early outcry against a 'foreign conspiracy' became a self-fulfilling prophecy when foreign fighters joined the conflict in Syria and their links with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Israel, and Western countries became visible. The gradual internationalisation of the war in Syria strengthened the mutual commitment of the 'axis of resistance'. A milestone in the consolidation of the axis was the battle of al-Qusayr in May 2013, when Hezbollah and Iran decided to shift from giving informal strategic and military support to the Assad regime to officialising their participation in the Syrian conflict.

The solidity of the axis is evident in both the extent of the military support to Syria by Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), but also in their capacity to speak with one voice. The international rhetorical strategy of the 'axis of resistance' has been articulated around three major points, aiming at making their involvement in Syria appear as a 'defensive war'. *First*, Hezbollah and Iran's presence in Syria has been presented as part of an 'alliance duty', and in opposition to US undercover involvement in the country with special corps and proxy militias. For instance, during the negotiations between Iran and the Obama administration over the Nuclear Deal, Iran insisted and obtained the Syrian war to be left out of the negotiation table, for its involvement in Syria was part of its commitment to an ally.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, in response to a series of accusations by the Trump administration that Iran's presence in Syria was illegitimate and dangerous, the IRGC replied that their presence was not in violation of Syria's sovereignty, unlike America's special corps and military bases in the North-Eastern part of the country. 'We were invited in Syria. What about you?' – they said.<sup>66</sup> *Second*, Iran and Hezbollah's involvement has been presented as part of a major endeavour to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. This mantra has informed the common strategy of the 'axis' since the start of the Syrian war. The Assad regime, in particular, successfully obtained to inscribe a commitment by all parties to the 'sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic' in the final communiqué of the first meeting of the UN-sponsored Action Group for Syria held in Montreux (Switzerland) in June 2012.<sup>67</sup> Reference to this communiqué has been central in all subsequent

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<sup>65</sup> HOKAYEM 2014: 51-52.

<sup>66</sup> Newsweek, Iran Tells, Iran Tells U.S.: We Were Invited to Iraq and Syria, What About You? (25 March 2018) <https://www.newsweek.com/iran-tells-us-we-were-invited-iraq-syria-what-about-you-945166> (Accessed June 10, 2020).

<sup>67</sup> Final communiqué of the Action Group for Syria (30 June 2012) – A/66/865 S/2012/522, [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SY\\_120630\\_Final%20Communique%20of%20the%20Action%20Group%20for%20Syria.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SY_120630_Final%20Communique%20of%20the%20Action%20Group%20for%20Syria.pdf) (Accessed April 13, 2020).

negotiations, and has constituted a major counter-argument to the US and Israel's proposal for the federalisation or partition of Syria – denounced by Iran, Syria and Hezbollah as a neo-colonial 'balkanization' of the country.<sup>68</sup> *Third*, the involvement of the 'axis of resistance' in the Syrian war has been presented as a 'war on terror', or a war against *takfiri* groups', i.e. Islamist groups that, like the 'Islamic State', fight against other Muslims, considering them as 'apostates'. Claiming to be fighting the common 'global war on terror' (rather than being the sources of terror), Iran and Hezbollah have forced Washington to recognise – at least implicitly – their role in the Levant.<sup>69</sup> This has, however, not prevented them from waging a brutal campaign to delegitimise and dehumanise the Syrian uprising, so to undercut any claim of basic individual self-determination to Syrian citizens, paradoxically in the name of the same principle.

## CONCLUSION

Cooperation between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah is a form of existential cooperation – cooperation for survival among actors that have been stigmatised for their refusal to submit to foreign domination. They are treated as 'outcasts' because they have refused to submit themselves to US rule and become part of their imperial strategy in the Middle East. The US and its local and international allies have used rhetorical, economic, political and military means to break the resistance of these actors, and replace them with puppets that embrace US imperial policy in the Middle East. So far, the US have failed in fully achieving their chief goal. US policy has caused instead growing solidarity and consolidation of resistance among these three actors who now form the so-called 'axis of resistance'.

There are obvious tensions and divisions among Iran, Syria and Hezbollah but what holds them together is their shared historical traumatic experiences at the hands of imperial policies of Western powers and a realization that close cooperation amongst them is vital to the survival of each. They translate their resistance as commitment to absolute collective self-determination which is something that the US cannot deny in principle. But this does not mean individual self-determination for human individuals

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<sup>68</sup> The Syrian Observer, *US, Israel Consider 'Balkanization' of Syria: Coalition Source* (13 July 2015), [https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/29543/us\\_israel\\_consider\\_balkanization\\_of\\_syria\\_coalition\\_source.html](https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/29543/us_israel_consider_balkanization_of_syria_coalition_source.html) (Accessed April 13, 2020).

<sup>69</sup> Zack Beauchamp, 'The US and Iran are tacitly cooperating in Iraq', *Vox*, 17 November 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2018/11/20/17996024/the-us-and-iran-are-tacitly-cooperating-in-iraq> (Accessed June 5, 2020).

under the control of these three actors. In fact, they violate systematically the basic rights and freedoms of their own people. They want self-determination to acquire an equal standing internationally, but use the same principle to deny the self-determination of their own people, and rebuff international concern and indignation about its violation. Self-determination cuts both ways, and it is the Achilles heel of the survival of these actors, individually and collectively. It is here that external pressure should be exercised to achieve the individual self-determination of people without surrendering their collective self-determination and becoming a subject of US imperial policy in the Middle East and beyond.

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