

ARE THE SHIA RISING?

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In an article published in *The Washington Post* on November 29, 2006, a security adviser to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia stressed the inevitable necessity for a “massive Saudi intervention”¹ to shield the kingdom’s Sunni brethren against any Shia-supported expulsion should Iraq split up. Even though Nawaf Obaid was dismissed shortly afterwards, presumably for his boldness, his words reflected the king’s use of the term “Shia crescent” renewed during the visit of Vice President Cheney last November. Previously, Jordan’s King Abdullah and Egypt’s President Mubarak had pointed in the same direction. Moreover, “Iran’s nuclear ambitions”² prompted the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to announce plans for a nuclear-energy program last December.³ Additionally, Iranian-born experts such as Vali Nasr and Anoushiravan Ehteshami have been predicting, though critically, a “Shia rise.”⁴

With Sunni Arabs defiantly carrying pictures of Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah during last summer’s Lebanon conflict, it seems that the Twelver Shia are no longer the “forgotten Muslims.”⁵ On the contrary, the role of the region’s Shia — 70 percent of the population of the

Persian Gulf⁶ — has become more prominent in the last six years due to three interwoven developments.

The first is the strengthening of Iran’s geopolitical position after the fall of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein and its attempt to diversify its bilateral relations in the Gulf afterwards. The second is the increase in Shia awareness, precipitated by the U.S. democratization plans, in countries where major parts of the populations are followers of Ali (Shiat Ali).⁷ The third is the decline of U.S. power in Iraq, linked to Iran’s successful defiance of international pressure to halt its nuclear program, as well as its subsequent rhetorical hubris, which increasingly frightens its neighbors. However, the Sunni Arabs’ claim of a “Shia rise” is a familiar domestic political means of taking advantage of sectarian prejudices — a reference to the struggle between Ali and Muawiyya, 656-661 — in order to secure their legitimacy.⁸ Put into the historical perspective of the period following the “Islamic Revolution” of 1979, a new label had to be found that targeted Iran. Public and international diplomacy aimed at avoiding further escalation does not contradict but complement Saudi strategy.⁹

Given that the term “Shia rise” is a political means to reassure the populations against Iran, it is all the more important to assess how accurate the term actually is. Only such an examination can contribute to an understanding of both the reasons behind the propaganda and, crucially, the real weight of the alleged threat. Viewed against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict with Iran, this essay argues that the “Shia rise” lacks both the political and religious cohesiveness of what is conceived of as a monolithic Shia bloc with Iran as its driving force.¹⁰

On political grounds, several questions arise. First, to what extent was the allegation of a politicization of the Shia able to eventually become a political challenge threatening the power structure of states like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain? Second, to what extent did international relations contain the spread of Shiism? Third, what role has nationalism, understood as a nationalist ideology,¹¹ played in undermining Iran’s attempts to draw a Shia majority, for instance in Iraq, politically closer to the Islamic Republic? Finally, to what degree has trade between Iran and the region’s other countries undermined the spread of Shiism?

On religious grounds, what position have influential ayatollahs assumed since their return to Najaf in 2003, after fleeing Iraq and continuing their studies in Qom?¹² Second, to what degree will the requisites of Shia Islam to become a *marja at-taqlid* be the object of inter-Shia controversy?

The purpose of this essay is not to assess why the export of Iran’s revolution failed. On the contrary, the Gulf environment has undergone a revolutionary reshaping since 2003, justifying a re-examination of the above-mentioned questions. The term “Shia crescent” resonates region-wide these days.

Consistent with the revolution’s legacy, the Islamic Republic employs a short-term strategy of chaos, intended to bog down foreign troops and, eventually, to force them to leave the region.¹³ Yet this strategy cannot succeed, due to several constraints. First, Iranian intentions contradict the vital interests of the United States. Second, the tolerance of locals for sectarian violence is limited. Third, the willingness of Arab states and Turkey to get involved has increased rapidly. A full-fledged civil war would draw Iran into Iraq and force it to take sides between rival Shia groups.¹⁴ Finally, mounting criticism inside Iran, which took off with the local elections in December 2006, is aimed against President Ahmadinejad’s domestic failures and his confrontational stance towards the United States.¹⁵ To what extent this will have an impact on its Iraq policy remains unclear. Conversely, an Iraq with good relations with the United States, the GCC and Israel would challenge Tehran politically, as would Baghdad when competing in the oil markets.¹⁶

POLITICS

On political grounds, four factors constrain the “Shia rise”: domestic politics, international politics, nationalism and economics.

It is the domestic politics of the Gulf states, not the rhetoric of Iran’s leaders, that has critically shaped the extent of revolutionary Shii aspiration since 1979.¹⁷ A political settlement, however imperfect, between Sunni rulers and the Gulf’s Shia has been found. The examples of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain illustrate distinctive approaches that governments have taken to accommodate their Shia populations.

Saudi Arabia has successfully engaged its Shia population despite continuing religious affronts by conservative clerics, who branded them *rafida* (rejectionists).¹⁸ Having used state force to crack down on Shia riots in 1979 and 1980, and after massive internal disputes emanating from a socioeconomic crisis, the Saudi royal elite recognized in the 1990s that “accommodating the Shia opposition could easily temper a serious conflict.”¹⁹

Certainly, there was some inspiration from Iran, which had encouraged Shia to take to the streets of the Eastern Province in 1979-80. For instance, a group called the “Organization of the Islamic Revolution” had called for resistance against the rulers. However, the main aim of the majority of the protesters was “equality and recognition,”²⁰ not the overthrow of the Saudi government. It was the Shia minority’s search for more autonomy for their local communities within the framework of the Saudi state that convinced the rulers to open up channels of communication with Shia representatives. In 1993, when the rulers were under severe pressure, this allowed for an understanding between the two parties as to an enhancement of the Shia community’s rights. Immediately afterwards, the aforementioned organization, which was considered the largest of the Iranian-influenced groups, decided to dissolve itself.²¹ At that time, Iran had not been capable of competing with the Al Saud government for influence with the Shii population of the kingdom.²²

The allegations that were brought forward in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the heated internal disputes that followed and, most important, the Riyadh bombings of May 2003 impelled the Saudi government again to adopt a double

strategy. On the one hand, the police cracked down on what were depicted as terrorists (albeit home-grown). On the other hand, Crown Prince Abdullah wisely pursued the idea of an unprecedented “National Dialogue.” To the embarrassment of the official Wahhabi clerics, the Shia community was invited to this forum and later ones.²³ The then-heir to the throne had carefully observed that the Shia had not taken advantage of a seemingly chaotic moment in Saudi politics. “*Wataniyya*” (citizenship) was the term the Shia adhered to and used to express their “allegiance to the regime.”²⁴ To some extent, there has been a process of reciprocal reassurance of the willingness to cooperate, which has led to a mutual recognition between the government and the Shia community within the domestic structure of Saudi politics.

The Shia have been engaged by the state through force, incorporation, adaptation and cooptation. In turn, the government has accepted the Shia as an actor in Saudi society and politics. It has been the resilience of “ideas of community, of collective identity and of collective interests based upon the given state structures”²⁵ — and not an imagined transnational Shia community led by Tehran — that made Riyadh the Saudi Shias’ point of reference. Whether this reconciliation is going to be a continuing paradigm of Saudi politics remains an open question.²⁶

Bahrain offers another example of an ongoing discriminatory but working accommodation of the Shia population. Bahraini Shia are pursuing the improvement of their communal rights, not the overthrow of the ruling family. Nonetheless, Bahrain’s king has not yet proved as politically far-sighted as his Saudi counterpart.

At the core of Bahrain's domestic power structure lies a monarchy, which was established during the British withdrawal from "East of Suez" in 1971. Dependent almost exclusively on a state-run economy (oil rents, financial services) and struggling with how to tackle the related region-wide socioeconomic problems (from which the 70-percent Shii majority suffers most), the government has applied sectarianism as one of the means to rule the country since 1979.²⁷ Interestingly, however, in the years before the revolution in Iran, the rulers had not taken advantage of sectarian divisions.²⁸

After the death of the kingdom's founder in 1999, his successor, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa, initiated a top-down liberalization process following the so-called "Bahraini intifada,"²⁹ which had shaken the tiny state throughout the 1990s. In order to gain more insight into the society's concerns, which had evolved into political conflict, the new emir proposed a "National Action Charter" in 2001. The public welcomed his proposal with an overwhelming majority (98 percent) at first. Subsequently, however, the appointed shura council was given power equal to that of the elected chamber. This led to a boycott of the elections in 2002 by al-Wifaq, which relies on substantial Shia support.³⁰ Nevertheless, the king closely followed "what is happening elsewhere."³¹ As in Saudi Arabia, he accepted petitions and initiated a dialogue on constitutional questions in 2004, thereby proving responsive to popular criticism, after massive anger about the insufficient progress on reform brought many Shia into the streets.³² Parallel to that, the events in Iraq shook the region and led to a deepening suspicion of Bahraini Shia, exacerbated

by their support for Hezbollah against Israel during the summer of 2006.

What is then the key to understanding the roots of a mainly peaceful Shia opposition? At first glance, the "Shia connection" could be considered a driver of Shii political activism. However, beneath the surface of Bahrain's body politic lie festering socioeconomic problems: increasing unemployment, enormous poverty and rising living costs. The protest is linked to criticism of the political system's domination by the king.³³ These purely domestic imponderables have produced the high degree of disenchantment with the economic and political status quo, and they have not been adequately addressed by the government.³⁴ Therefore, the root cause of Shia activism is not a reflection of transnational Shiism directed by Iran; rather, it is predicated on upholding communal interests in relation to the government and other strands of society.

The non-revolutionary stance of most Bahraini Shia is clearly underlined by their attitude toward national unity. They support the country's independence and the rule of the Khalifa family. Their aim is merely a larger degree of justice and equality.³⁵ In addition, neither of the influential Shia groups leans towards Iran or is directed by Tehran. Realizing that mass demonstrations by Shii youth tie together large parts of the Sunni population with the economic elite in favor of the government, a leading Shii politician attempted to counter allegations by touring Sunni *majales* in 2005: "The basic sectarian division of our society is there. . . . In the end, we are citizens, not Shiites."³⁶ Some might consider such a statement a rosy picture of Bahrain's realities; nevertheless, it reflects the political goal towards which leading Shia are striving.

Another concern for some is that Shia clerics currently hold high-ranking positions in Bahraini politics. The reason mullahs like Sheikh al Qassem, who vividly condemned a Sunni-Shii divide after the Samarra mosque bombing,³⁷ serve as political activists relates to the state's marginalization of the establishment of political organizations. As a result, politics has become organized around religious structures, which cannot be dissolved.³⁸

Furthermore, the doctrine of Bahrain's Shia emerged from the struggle between the moderate (*usuliyya*) and the conservative (*akhbaryyya*) strands in Shia belief, which ended in the late eighteenth century with the victory of the former. However, the defeated conservative school took to Bahrain, where its adherents settled. Since then, Bahraini Shia have pursued a doctrine distinctly different from that of Iran.³⁹ This is often underestimated, as Sheikh Qassem is the representative of the Iranian *marja* Khamenei in Bahrain. In any event, it is a strong factor undermining Iran's influence. Only a meaninglessly small minority follows the radical elements centered at the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights.⁴⁰

Despite questionable government attempts to curb Shia influence in the 2006 elections ("Bandargate"), which were not boycotted by al-Wiqaf, the outcome will strengthen the Shias' position. In addition to the fact that first deputy premier is a Shia, the cabinet now has an al-Wifaq member as a minister as well.⁴¹ Bahrain might be far from a model for interaction between an opposition and a government; however, the matter is exclusively dealt with as a Bahraini rather than an Iranian issue. As with the Saudi case, the accommodation should not be perceived as irreversible.⁴²

INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

The constraints of international politics have undercut Iranian Shiism. This can be shown through reference to Iran's foreign policy before and during the second Gulf War (1990-91).

Iran did not side with the Shia majority of Iraq. On the contrary, after Khomeini's death in 1989, and having to face the miserable state of affairs the country was left in, the new president redefined the national interest. Rafsanjani's principal accomplishment in foreign policy was to water down the ideological pursuit of the export of the revolution and apply a more pragmatic approach. Simultaneously, the United Nations, the European Union and the Arab League condemned Iraq's aggression of August 1990. Although Saddam appealed to Arabism and the *ummah*, the decisions of most Arab leaders (except for Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan and Yemen) went against him, and a coalition of international forces was established.⁴³ Probably attracted by the dictator's anti-imperialistic rhetoric and his call for jihad, some more revolutionary elements within Iran's diverse power structure demanded support for the Iraqi leader. However, the new leader, Rafsanjani, firmly resisted all of these attempts and assumed a distanced position in the conflict for two reasons. First, he considered resuming diplomatic ties essential for the new "Era of Reconstruction." He hoped to improve relations with the Gulf States and with Western countries interested in investing. Second, acknowledging the multi-ethnicity of the Islamic Republic itself, he saw too many risks for Iran should Iraq's territory split up.⁴⁴ Iran's international interdependency propelled Rafsanjani to make a decision that left little room for calculations on Shia

grounds. Enhancing the country's economic performance after the recent devastating war was predicated on a redefined national interest.

NATIONALISM

Nationalism has proved capable of outweighing religion where the Shias' loyalty to the state is concerned. From 1981 to 1988, Shii Iraqi soldiers fought a remorseless war against Iran. Then, after the 1992 Gulf War, Iran remained neutral while the Iraqi Shia rose up against Saddam and were massacred.

These two events illustrate the strength of nationalism. It divided Iran and Iraq decisively and is entrenched in the memories of both countries.⁴⁵ During the war between Iran and Iraq, the latter's nationalism appealed more to Shia Iraqi soldiers than did Iran's revolutionary rhetoric. In 1982, the battle of Basra showed where the Iraq Shias' loyalty lay. Their loyalty to Iraqi Arabism was strengthened even more when Iraq went on the defensive after 1982. Alluding to their allegiance to Arabism (*uruba*) and stressing the unity of all Iraqis, "going so far as to claim Saddam Hussein's direct descent from Caliph Ali,"⁴⁶ nationalism managed to outweigh Shiism. Interestingly, Iraq's attempts to subvert the Shii Arabs of Iran's southern province of Khuzestan also failed. *Mihan* (motherland), a term that had been abandoned since the shah used it, was now brought to the fore and married to Shiism.⁴⁷

Secondly, in the aftermath of the Kuwait war of 1991, Hussein's rule was called into question by Shia (and Kurds alike). They rose against him and were brutally crushed, before the eyes of the United States and, more important here, of Iran. In this respect, Vali Nasr has claimed

that the legacy drawn from the experience of the war — i.e., the attraction of nationalism on both sides of the Shatt al-Arab — "pales before the memory of the anti-Shiite pogrom in Iraq that followed the failed uprising in 1991."⁴⁸ He underscores his argument by saying that "several waves of Shiite immigration" from the 1970s to the 1990s have made "Iraqi nationalism ... porous to Shiite identity,"⁴⁹ which could be seen between 2003 and 2006. Two points have to be raised against these assertions.

Concerning the Shia uprisings of March 1991 in Basra, Najaf, Kerbala, Kazimayn, Nasiriyya and Amara, there is no doubt that the Iranian government, while applying formal diplomatic language, blamed its neighbor publicly for the ongoing massacre. The reprisal left between 30,000 and 60,000 Shia dead, saw the bombing of holy cities like Najaf and Kerbala and included humiliating the old Ayatollah al-Khoi, who was forced to speak on television next to Saddam.⁵⁰ However, in the guise of "non-interference in internal affairs," Iran did not deploy troops to save the lives of its Shia coreligionists in Iraq (even if SCIRI units moved into Iraq).⁵¹ The events meant that there were "some 100,000 Iraqi Arab Shiites [... taking] refuge in Iran."⁵² Nonetheless, a forced stay in a foreign country does not necessarily lead to a positive picture of that state. Furthermore, the new president of the Islamic Republic did not apply an ideological perspective to foreign policy, placing economic recovery above Shiism.⁵³

In addition, concerning the porosity of Iraqi nationalism in the aftermath of Saddam's downfall, two points have to be made. First, the acceptance of Iranian influence is explainable less by the common bond of being Shia than by the com-

plete breakdown of the state. Since the “state, both coercively and administratively, is still largely irrelevant to helping the Iraqi people,”⁵⁴ there is no organization that can provide the Iraqis with either security or a sufficient supply of goods like electricity and water.

In contrast, Nasr refers to Ayatollah Taskhiri, a refugee from Iraq who stayed in Iran and now serves as an adviser to Khamenei and who provides the south of Iraq with several “construction projects and medical facilities” after having invested “tens of millions of dollars.”⁵⁵ To Nasr, this is a clear indicator of Iran’s growing influence in the region. Indeed, in the short term the Iranian impact will increase due to this development. Its long-term meaning, however, will not be a deeply entrenched Iranian influence because it is not perceived as brotherly Shii support, but rather as help based on Iraqi economic weakness — and Iranian strategic interest. Therefore, “it cannot be assumed Iraq’s Shiite community will remain friendly and grateful indefinitely.”⁵⁶

Secondly, this porosity was neither reflected in the elections nor in the statements of leading Iraqi politicians. The Iraqis did not respond to the implicit offer to introduce a constitution similar to that of Iran; rather, they explicitly opposed such a notion when voting in 2005 and 2006. As a leading figure of the Dawa party said, his party called for “an Islamic — not a religious — state.”⁵⁷ In addition, the newly elected politicians have publicly rejected being patronized and have openly complained about the involvement of Iranian paramilitary militias in Iraqi affairs.⁵⁸ This occurred even after the resumption of diplomatic ties in September 2004. As the tribe-based bearers of Arab Iraqi national-

ism reaching back to the 1918-20 rebellions, the Shia have developed a long-standing commitment to Iraq. As an Iraqi state official put it recently: “The Shia in Iraq are Arabs not Persians. . . . What the Arabs should do is embrace the Shia government of Iraq and try to make it a counterbalance to Iran.”⁵⁹

Iranian influence does exist in Iraq, though it is not founded on the basis of a common belief. Rather, it is the political weakness of one state that allows for interference by another state for its own self-interest, notwithstanding the fact that this is underpinned by Shiism. The answer from the weaker party, however, will be based on nationalism. As Geoffrey Kemp has put it: “The risk Iran runs if it meddles too blatantly in Iraq. . . is the backlash it could create with many Iraqis. While Iran and Iraq share many cultural and religious bonds, there are still significant differences, the most popular of which is the Persian-Arab divide. Deeper engagement might have the effect of stoking these differences and creating a sense of outside interference among Iraqis.”⁶⁰ Iraqi as well as Iranian nationalism is “framed in terms of religion”,⁶¹ however, nationalism can serve as a means of political rejection in the case of extended intrusion — notwithstanding Shiism.

ECONOMICS

The limited extent to which Iran has been able to do business with regional countries has undercut the influence of Shiism. Iran’s trade with the region was marginal in 2006. Imports from European Union countries amounted to 40.4 percent. Adding to that the 10 percent imported from Japan and China, it becomes clear that the main countries delivering goods to

Iran are nonregional. The only exception was the United Arab Emirates, whose imports reached some 15.7 percent in 2006. However, the geopolitical differences (Abu Musa and the Tunbs) looming behind these numbers are capable of damaging relations instantly. Iran's export numbers are even more telling. The EU, together with Japan, China, South Africa and South Korea, accounted for two-thirds (67.8 percent) of Iran's imports.⁶²

Certainly, inter-Arab trade has also remained at 10 percent since 2000, and the same can be said about South America. In the case of Iran, one of the main reasons is the fact that non-oil-related exports stand at insignificant levels.⁶³ Most rulers of the region prefer to trade with OECD countries for two reasons: they believe that security-related benefits derive from trade (e.g., Saudi Arabia) and that such business relations result in substantial economic growth. For Iran, this means that its Shiism is undermined by both economic considerations and political concerns, which together lead to a minimizing of regional cooperation.

RELIGION

Two things undermine the spread of a cohesive, transnational Shii structure supporting Iranian dominance. The first is a rejection by the majority of Iraqis of the rule of the jurispudent. The second involves the differences emanating from the complicated structure of the *marjaiyyat*.

Rule by the Islamic Judge

The majority of lay and learned Shii exiles returning from Iran in 2003, as well as the Shii-dominated parties in Iraq, have rejected the idea of establishing a theo-

cratic state similar to Iran. Although Khomeini had been unexpectedly successful in launching his "Islamic Revolution," many substantial critiques of his *velayat e-faqih* (rule by an Islamic jurispudent) had been uttered by conservative Shia.⁶⁵ In addition, from early on, the export of the revolution was questioned even by Iranian clerics. Today 13 out of 14 Iranian grand ayatollahs oppose Khomeini's *velayat e-faqih*.⁶⁶

On the one hand, those clerics who had stayed in Iraq adhered to political quietism towards Baghdad and criticized Khomeini for politicizing religion and stripping it of its transcendental character.⁶⁷ On the other hand, those clerics who were expelled by Saddam, or had fled the "Republic of Fear" in advance, experienced the theocratic original firsthand. Besides the fact that many of the Iraqi refugees were "bitter over their treatment"⁶⁸ in Iran, the experience of seeing the "rule of the jurispudent" evolve into a theocratic dictatorship has shaped the attitudes of many of them. Khomeini's grandson himself, Ayatollah Seyyed Hassan Khomeini, put forward a direct critique of Iran's theocracy after the fall of Saddam.⁶⁹

Against Khomeini's deeply enshrined fear of democratic rule, the majority of Iraq's leading clerics invoked the "ideals of elections, representation of the people, ... and the rule of law..."⁷⁰ What drove the clerics, with either substantial experience in Qom or the experience of Saddam's suppression of Iraq's Shia, not to embrace the more familiar view of Khomeini, but to put their weight behind the U.S. democratization plan? At first glance, the contention seems to be compelling; by "accepting the principle of popular sovereignty,"⁷¹ as Sistani did publicly, they ensured that the

Shia gained a powerful position in determining the country's future. However, the passion with which the ayatollahs pursued the introduction of democracy into Mesopotamia cannot be accounted for only by a desire for power. Rather, as Juan Cole has pointed out, "They survived the dictatorship of Saddam and Khomeini alike, becoming disillusioned both with secularism and with authoritarian theocracy."⁷² It is precisely this double historical misfortune that led to the emergence of an Iraqi development of its own. A broad majority of Iraqi clergy, therefore, view Iranian influence with great suspicion, since the manipulation of Iraq's Shia apparently serves Iran's own interest.⁷³

Viewing the situation against this background, Nasr claims that Iraqi exiles in Iran "gravitated toward Iraqi ayatollahs, ... who oversaw the establishment of Iraqi religious organisations in Tehran and Qom."⁷⁴ In particular, those clerics who returned after March 2003 "have created an important axis of cooperation between Qom and Najaf." Furthermore, "senior clerics in Najaf have kept scrupulously quiet about Iranian politics."⁷⁵ Nasr acknowledges the authority of Sistani, who succeeded al-Khoi as the head of Iraq's 1000-year-old Shii seminary (*hawza*) in Najaf in 1992, saying it might be true that he remains widely apolitical; however, Sistani made publicly clear whose paradigm post-Saddam Iraq was to avoid: "Even if I must be wiped out, I will not let the experience of Iran be repeated in Iraq."⁷⁶ Of course, this might not be an explicit criticism of Iranian politics, but the implication is obvious. It is exactly for uttering such an opinion that Sistani has to face severe criticism from Qom. Implicitly underlying these differences is the fact that

Qom had been neither a serious Shii competitor until the 1920s nor the seat of a marja (Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi) until 1946.⁷⁷ Saddam's rule provided Qom with a certain predominance, which was put into question after 2003. Consequently, from this perspective, it appears to be difficult to discern an "axis of cooperation"⁷⁸ between Najaf and Qom.

The Absolute Source of Imitation

The hurdles of high standards for being promoted to the *marja at taqlid al mutlaq* (the absolute source of imitation) are accompanied by the necessity of acceptance by lay and learned Shia. The significance of the marja at taqlid in Shiism emanates from the believers' obligation to strictly obey his fatwas, as had been formulated by Ayatollah Tabatabai Yazdi (d. 1919). However, the intricate procedure of becoming such a marja has led to heated discussions and bitter rivalries among the various protagonists. Since the death of Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi in 1962, no agreement has been found on his succession. As in the mid-1970s, today several marjas share the marjaiyyat. Consequently, a unifying bond has been undermined by power-related and structural Shii controversies since that time.⁷⁹

There is no formal procedure for being accepted as a marja. The crucial conditions on which the promotion to this capacity are predicated are an overarching knowledge of jurisprudence (*alamiyya*) demonstrated by teaching and publishing, and an outstanding piety (*salahiyya*). One basically grows into the position of the most capable mujtahid over decades. An informal consensus of his fellows and the mass of lay believers over time evolves into an overarching agreement.⁸⁰ This compli-

cated way of finding acceptance, which has its genesis in the deliberate competition among the mujtahids, has meant that several marjas have existed next to each other. A majority of some 80 percent of Shii believers is thought to adhere to Grand Ayatollah Sistani, which provides him with a high degree of social and economic influence due to the associated religious tax payments. The remaining 20 percent follow other marjas: Mudarrasi, Hakim, Pakistani and Fayyad in Najaf; Khamenei, Lankarani, Safi, Sanei, Ardebili, Shobeiri, Khorasani, Tabrizi, Bahjat, Hamedani, Shirazi and Rowhani in Qom; and Fadlallah in Lebanon.⁸¹

What political implications does this Shii procedure have? First, established before nation-states came into existence in the Middle East, it exposes power struggles within Shii communities to external influences, thereby undermining the position of certain political players and in turn deepening as well as reflecting transnational Shii rivalries. Second, it subdivides Shii identity according to the respective nation-states and in turn could perpetuate the tendency towards multiple marjas since they too are "affected by the power that derives from the logic of an emerging state-based nationalism."⁸² Third, building upon national Shiism and a national marja preference, especially within struggling nation-states like Iraq, the process can play upon sectarian identity, which then yields a high degree of political power through the masses of followers who are involved. Examples from Lebanon, Iran and Iraq illustrate the dynamic underlying this process.

After the death of the Iranian marja Araki in 1994 (Khoi 1992, Golpaygani 1993), Khamenei sought to promote his

ambition to be considered Iran's outstanding mujtahid, albeit lacking the religious authority of Khomeini, but willing to fulfill the doctrinal vacuum politically. He feared fatwas issued by higher-ranking mujtahids who would then have undermined his legitimacy as the highest jurisprudent. In addition, the consequences of such a mujtahid leaning towards the opposition could have had severe repercussions. Khamenei's ambitions were supported by official clerics (e.g., the Association of Seminary Theologians in Qom). However, reputable Shia clerics in Iraq, Lebanon and Iran were bypassed.⁸³ In Lebanon, marja Fadlallah, who was born in Najaf and was a former student of Grand Ayatollah al Khoi, objected to Khamenei's promotion because of his lack of knowledge on Shii subjects. Conversely, those mujtahids allowed to give their vote preferred the Iranian-born Sistani, who resided in Iraq.⁸⁴ All of this had no immediate political consequences for Khamenei and did not prevent his organizational coup; however, it enshrined existing inter-Shia differences. Since Iran "might suffer irreparable harm" if a cleric had been chosen who would then have had to familiarize himself with the political scene, political experience was now considered "far more important" for qualifying as a marja.⁸⁵

Furthermore, concerning the relationship between Khamenei and Sistani in the region's current politics, the jealousy of the former prevails. Although Sistani's impact on Iranian Shia is limited, his reputation is acknowledged throughout the region and is a barrier to others' aspirations to gain influence in Iraq. Iran's influence will decrease even more, should the rumors (1998-99, 2006) concerning Khamenei's illness turn out to be true.⁸⁶ Should he be

followed by one of the more radical mujtahids — for instance, Mezbah-Yazdi — Iran’s Shia would continue to lose influence.

Finally, Sistani plays a major role in shaping Iraqi politics.⁸⁷ The source of his power is not his active involvement, even though he occasionally gives guidance on matters such as elections. Rather, as mentioned earlier, despite his quietism, some 80 percent of Iraq’s Shia follow him due to his immense reputation as a marja — and because the Iraqi state cannot deliver on its responsibilities. For instance, he supported lay Shia financially, as in the past, when a massive bombing went off in February 2007. Thereby, he balances more radical Shii leaders like the young, and theologically far less qualified, Muqtada al-Sadr.

Considerations that stress influential clerical families like the al-Sadr,⁸⁸ who are supposed to have a say in all three countries mentioned, do not take into account two points. First, the influence of these families is diminished by the lack of leadership ability in the young successor. Second, the impact of their ancestors’ legacy is diminished by Shii doctrine: their fatwas have no meaning after their death. However, this is not to underestimate the prolonged influence of outstanding ayatollahs on people’s memories.

The inherent idea of competition among the mujtahids in the context of modern nation-states reinforces rivalries among Shii-dominated countries and gradually creates forms of nationalist Shiism. Khomeini’s politicization of religious discourse carries unpredictable weight. In view of the sheer mass of followers that Sistani has, it remains to be seen whether Iran’s resources are capable

of outweighing the current marjaiyyat structure, as Khalaji contends.

CONCLUSION

This assessment of the term “Shia Crescent” leads to several insights, all of which advocate the idea that a “broad Shiite revival,”⁸⁹ spreading throughout the Middle East, should be viewed with skepticism. First, Shii populations are shaped by local social, political and economic conditions. External influence has not managed to successfully compete with the respective states’ national interests. Second, international relations and the pursuit of national interests have severely restrained the extension of a transnational movement based on a common belief system. Third, nationalism has had a firmer grip on Shia loyalty than common beliefs, thereby undercutting politically exploited aspirations. Iran’s minimal trade with neighboring countries does not contribute to a strengthening of Iranian influence either. Apparently, what Shiism is missing is the necessary “substructure”⁹⁰ to facilitate its effective extension. Moreover, the historical experiences of Iraqi clerics under both Khomeini and Saddam have shaped their denial of the velayat e-faqih. Finally, the marja at-taqlid turns out to highlight rivalries between nation-states with a Shii-dominated population due to the unique selection process.

Just as there was “no natural harmony between the working classes”⁹¹ of communist China and the Soviet Union in the 1970s, it appears that the answer to the core question of “whether Shiism should be a set of fixed religious values or a flexible identity shaped by the particular circumstances and environments in which Shiis live”⁹¹ appears to lean toward the latter conclusion.

To what extent do these explanations help to reveal the real weight of the purported threat and the reasons behind the propaganda? To begin with, the factual strength emanating from the alleged “Shia Crescent” is minimal, since the conditions on which its influence is predicated are weak. Rather, the nuclear context, which frames all of these discussions, is a multi-layered political problem and not a religious issue. This, in turn, allows for a political understanding. By now it can be said — contrary to Ehteshami’s allegation — the “Shia Crescent” will not shake “the very foundations of the political orders that were resurrected atop the old Ottoman territories early last century.”⁹³ This does not mean that Cole’s arguments merit less attention.

Still, the perception of a “Shia Crescent” is distinctly different and serves a certain policy. As can be seen in the case of Saudi Arabia, this perceived threat is taken advantage of for political reasons, partly “coded” in a rivalry.⁹⁴ With the kingdom indirectly pressuring the United States to defend Iraq’s Sunnis, this serves the purpose of halting a premature withdrawal of U.S.

troops from the region — a fear that also grips Pakistan’s Musharraf. This attitude reflects both a continued incapacity for self-defense and a deeply entrenched fear of abandonment by a former ally — as happened to the shah of Iran in 1979.⁹⁵ Already under intense “domestic pressure,” the Saudis are very well aware of the recent past (1990-91) and, subsequently, the fact that their legitimacy is at stake. “As the economic powerhouse of the Middle East, the birthplace of Islam and the de facto leader of the world’s Sunni community, . . . Saudi Arabia has both the means and the religious responsibility to intervene.”⁹⁶

The real issues behind the “Shia Crescent” concern the unresolved geopolitical arrangements in the region, stretching over almost three decades. The sectarian argument, well-known and frequently utilized, serves as a means to reassure Sunni rulers of the legitimacy of their actions. Important external players could take decisive steps to undermine the perpetuation of this status quo.

¹ Nawaf Obaid, “Stepping into Iraq: Saudi Arabia Will Protect Sunnis If the U.S. Leaves” 11/29/2006, in www.washingtonpost.com.

² Shahram Chubin, *Iran’s Nuclear Ambitions* (Carnegie Endowment Center, 2006).

³ Hassan Fattah, “Arab Nations Plan to Start Joint Nuclear Energy Program,” 12/11/2006, in www.nytimes.com.

⁴ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, “The Middle East: Between Ideology and Geo-politics,” in Mary Buckley and Robert Singh, (eds), *The Bush Doctrine and the War on Terrorism* (Routledge, 2006), p. 112; Vali Nasr, “When the Shiites Rise,” in *Foreign Affairs* 85:4, 2006, pp. 58-74. See also *The Shia Revival* (Norton, 2006). Rumors that the Shia could get hold of the oil-rich Eastern province of Saudi Arabia and southern Iraq and recurring U.S. demands (1975, 2003) to occupy the Saudi oil fields, fuel regional anxieties. Paul Aarts, “Events Versus Trends: The Role of Energy and Security in Sustaining the U.S.-Saudi Relationship,” in Idem and Gerd Nonneman, (eds), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs* (Hurst, 2006) pp. 400-1.

⁵ Graham Fuller and Rend Francke, *The Arab Shia: The Forgotten Muslims* (St. Martin’s Press, 1999). The main feature of Twelver Shia belief is the *imamiyya* (imamate), i.e., the recognition of the line of the 12 imams. Neither the Zayidis nor the Alawis belong to the Twelver Shia.

⁶ Nasr, “Shiites,” p. 59; however, it must be said that the Shia comprise only of 10-15 percent of the Muslim world’s population.

⁷ Mai Yamani, “Middle East — the Shia: Arcs and Crescents,” in *World Today* 62:12, 2006, p. 8.

⁸ A member of the historically influential Al Shaykh family made this point very clear at the height of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict in 2006. BBC Monitoring Global Newline — Middle East Political, 08/15/2006, “Saudi writer says Shii ideology lies behind crises in Iraq and Lebanon” (www.monitor.bbc.co.uk). See Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (I.B. Tauris, 1982), pp. 1-51 (ch. 1 “Shiism and Sunnism: Conflict and Concord”).

⁹ The king of Saudi Arabia undercuts Iranian influence when he brings together Hamas and Fatah in Makkah or talks (as does the crown prince) of a preventable Sunni-Shia divide in January and February 2007.

¹⁰ This is not to say that the historical ties that have undoubtedly been in place between Iraqi and Saudi Sunnis have no meaning at all. But, they are taken advantage of by the Saudi leaders.

¹¹ Anthony Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (Duckworth, 1983), p. 21.

¹² Juan Cole, *The Ayatollahs and Democracy in Iraq* (Amsterdam University Press, 2006) (ISIM Paper 7).

¹³ Chubin, *Ambitions*, chs. 1, 6. There are indications that Ahmadinejad’s strategy of chaos is inspired by his religious mentor, Grand Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi. Under the shah, he had been the mastermind behind the “Hojatiye”-movement which intended to accelerate the return of the hidden Imam by creating chaos. See Rainer Hermann, “Herrschende Gelehrte: Ein Besuch bei den Ajatollahs Hossein Ali Montazeri und Mohsen Gharavian in Ghom,” in *FAZ* 1/16/2007.

¹⁴ Charles Tripp, “After Saddam,” in *Survival* 44:4 (2002), p. 33.

¹⁵ The author is aware that this is not a serious change in “[T]he paranoid Style in Iranian Politics.” See Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (University of California Press, 1993), ch. 5. At his year’s anniversary of the revolution Ahmadinejad made pledges to Khamenei highlighting the leader’s authority. See Najmeh Bozorgmehr/Gareth Smyth, “Iran’s ‘Coalition of the concerned’ confronts Ahmadi-Nejad,” 1/18/2007, in www.ft.com/cms/s/ccdefc8e-a672-11db-937-0000779e2340.html — this might be linked to his “nuclear stance,” explicitly underlined by his utterance “I have a connection with God.” (MEMRI Special Dispatch Series, No. 1328, 10/19/2006, p. 2).

¹⁶ Geoffrey Kemp, “Iran and Iraq: The Shia Connection, Soft Power, and the Nuclear Factor,” in *United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 156*, November 2006, p. 6 (www.usip.org).

¹⁷ This essay acknowledges the multiple causes for the persistence of many Arab regimes, while it would be beyond its scope to elaborate on all of them. See Joseph Kostiner (ed.), *Middle East Monarchies* (Rienner, 2000); Fred Halliday, *The Fates of Monarchy in the Middle East*, in idem, *Nation and Religion in the Middle East* (Rienner, 2000), pp. 91-107.

¹⁸ Good examples are the Saudi clerics Abdul Rahman al-Barak and Abdallah al-Jibreen condemning the Shiites on their websites. See www.ibn.jebreen.com/?action=FatwaView&fid=4174.

¹⁹ Aarts, “Events,” p. 252.

²⁰ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 105. See also Fuad Ibrahim, *The Shiite Opposition in the Eastern Province from Revolution to Accomodation*, Ph.D. thesis, (University of London, 2004).

²¹ Aarts, “Events,” p. 242.

²² Charles Tripp/Shahram Chubin, *Iran and Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 63.

²³ Stephane Lacroix, “Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia’s New ‘Islam Liberal’ Reformists,” in *Middle East Journal* 58:3 (2004), p. 363.

²⁴ Rasheed, *Contesting*, p. 212.

²⁵ Charles Tripp, “States, Elites and the Management of Change,” in Hassan Hakimian/Ziba Moshaver (eds.), *The State and Global Change* (Routledge, 2001), p. 217.

²⁶ Rasheed, *Contesting*, p. 212.

²⁷ Fred Wehrey, “Bahrain: Elections and Managing Sectarianism,” in *Arab Reform Bulletin* 10:4 (2006), p. 3.

²⁸ “Bahrain’s Sectarian Challenge,” in *Middle East Report* No. 40, May 6, 2005, p. 14 (www.merip.org).

²⁹ Katja Niethammer, “Voices in Parliament, Debates in Majalis, and Banners on Streets: Avenues of Political Participation in Bahrain,” *European University Institute* (Mediterranean Programme Series), *Working Papers* No. 2006/27, pp. 2-3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³¹ Halliday, *Fates*, p. 92. See also: Anoush Ehteshami, “Reform from above: Participation in the Oil Monarchies,” in *International Affairs* 79:1 (2003), pp. 53-75.

³² Niethammer, *Voices*, p. 18.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁴ Robert Lowe/Claire Spencer, (eds.), *Iran, its Neighbours and the Regional Crisis* (Chatham House, 2006), p. 37.

³⁵ "Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge," p. 16.

³⁶ Ali Salman on May 9, 2005 quoted in Niethammer, *Voices*, p. 19.

³⁷ "Makkak Imam urges Iraqis to cool their Guns," 2/25/2006, in www.arabnews.com.

³⁸ "Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge," p. 13.

³⁹ Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shiite Islam* (I.B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 58-77. In contrast, the report on "Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge" contends that the majority of Bahrainis are nowadays *usulis*.

⁴⁰ Niethammer, *Voices*, pp. 10, 20.

⁴¹ "Bahrain Names Shia Deputy Premier," 12/12/2006, in www.bbc.co.uk.

⁴² Niethammer, *Voices*, p. 23.

⁴³ Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Middle East Regional System," in *Idem/Anoush Ehteshami* (eds.), *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Rienner, 2002), p. 49.

⁴⁴ Nasr ("Shiites," p. 59) ignores this theme when he stresses that 90 percent of Iran's population are Shia. See Wilfried Buchta, *Die Iranische Shia und die Islamische Einheit* (Deutsches-Orient Institut, 1997), p. 338.

⁴⁵ See Faleh Jabar, "The War Generation in Iraq," in Lawrence Potter/Gary Sick (eds.), *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, 2004, pp. 121-140; Farideh Farhi, "The Antinomies of Iran's War Generation," in *ibid.*, pp. 101-120.

⁴⁶ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 246-7.

⁴⁷ Buchta, *Iranische Shia*, pp. 338-9.

⁴⁸ Nasr, "Shiites," p. 61.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, S. 62.

⁵⁰ Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, p. 141.

⁵¹ Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising and the Arab World* (Norton, 1993).

⁵² Nasr, "Shiites," p. 62. Following Ali Babakhan it was 50-100,000 Iraqis deported to Iran. "The Deportation of Shiis during the Iran-Iraq War," in Faleh Abdul-Jabar (ed.), *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq* (Saqi, 2002), pp. 183-210.

⁵³ Buchta, *Iranische Shia*, p. 337.

⁵⁴ The written testimony of Toby Dodge, "Securing America's Interests in Iraq." Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 1/25/2007, in www.iiss.org/index.asp?pgid=17719&mtype=print.

⁵⁵ Nasr, "Shiites," p. 62.

⁵⁶ Kemp, "Iran," p. 2.

⁵⁷ These are the words of the Damascus-based head of the Dawah party, al-Mahsin from December 2002. Quoted in Cole, *Ayatollahs*, p. 9.

⁵⁸ Shii Iraqi defiance is reflected in expressions like: We are not "Iranian stooges." Hassan Hemeid, "The Iranian Iraq," in www.weeklyalahram.org/weekly Nr. 826, 12/28/06 - 1/3/2007. Even stronger by an Iraqi minister (quoted in Kemp, "Iran," p. 9): "We can send the death to Tehran's streets, like they do to us."

⁵⁹ Quoted in Roula Khalaf, "Resurgent Iran lays down a challenge to Arab leaders," in *Financial Times* 1/1/2007.

⁶⁰ Kemp, "Iran," p. 10.

⁶¹ Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 204. This explains why nationalism can be termed "the dominant political ideology in the Middle East." *Ibid.*, p. 200. See also Sami Zubaida, "Islam and Nationalism: Continuities and Contradictions," in *Nations and Nationalism* 10:4 (2004), pp. 407-420.

⁶² On economic data of the Arab world and Iran see www.bfai.de, fco.gov.uk.

⁶³ Halliday, *Middle East*, p. 280. For evidence of the 10 percent trade thesis, see "Regional Economies must open up for attracting global investment," 1/12/2007, in www.dohabank.com.qa/engSite/default.asp?catid=628.

⁶⁴ Halliday, *Middle East*, pp. 280-3.

⁶⁵ Norman Calder, "Accommodation and Revolution in Imami Shii Jurisprudence: Khumayni and the Classical Tradition," in *Middle Eastern Studies* 18:1 (1982), pp. 3-20.

⁶⁶ Buchta, *Iranische Schia*, p. 329; idem, *Who Rules Iran?* (Brookings Institution, 2000), p. 54. The exception is Montazeri.

⁶⁷ Buchta, *Iranische Schia*, p. 334.

⁶⁸ Laith Kubba, "Iraqi Shii Politics," in Potter/Sick, *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, p. 145.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Cole, *Ayatollahs*, p. 24.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁷² Ibid., p. 25.

⁷³ Kubba, "Shii Politics," p. 148.

⁷⁴ Nasr, "Shiites," p. 62.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

⁷⁶ Cole, *Ayatollahs*, p. 8.

⁷⁷ Wilfried Buchta, *Schiiten* (Hugendubel, 2004), p. 47

⁷⁸ Nasr, "Shiites," p. 63. Which is firmly rejected by Kubba ("Shii politics," p. 145), Kemp ("Iran," p. 3).

⁷⁹ Buchta, *Schiiten*, pp. 46-48.

⁸⁰ Werner Ende, "Der Schiitische Islam," in Werner Ende/Udo Steinbach, *Der Islam in der Gegenwart* (Beck, 2005), pp. 80-81.

⁸¹ Mehdi Khalaji, "The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism," in *Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus* Nr. 59, September 2006, p. 7.

⁸² Tripp, "States," p. 217. Khalaji (*Last Marja*, p. 34) speaks of a process which evolves into a "localization" of the marjaiyya.

⁸³ David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran* (Rienner, 2001), p. 20.

⁸⁴ Buchta, *Iranische Schia*, p. 335. Nasr (*Shiites*, p. 59) makes no mention of these differences.

⁸⁵ Saskia Gieling, "The Marjaiyya in Iran and the Nomination of Khamanei in December 1994," in *Middle Eastern Studies* 33:4 (1997), pp. 777-787.

⁸⁶ Johannes Reissner, "Iran: Wahlschlappe und Sanktionen," *SWP Aktuell* 2, January 2007, p. 2.

⁸⁷ Khalaji, *Last Marja*, pp. 17-8.

⁸⁸ Ende, "Der Schiitische Islam," p. 83; Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Cornell University Press, 1986).

⁸⁹ Nasr, "Shiites," p. 58.

⁹⁰ Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Politics of Identity in the Middle East," in Louise Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 169.

⁹¹ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (Palgrave, 2002), p. 238.

⁹² Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shia in the Modern World* (Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 162. Fielding-Smith puts it: "... the ideological orientation of Shia communities has reflected the conditions of the countries they find themselves in, and their negotiations to better their situation..." "The Shia Crescent: Myth or Reality?" 7/28/2006, in www.opendemocracy.net.

⁹³ Ehteshami, "Middle East," p. 112.

⁹⁴ Mshari Al-Zaydi, "Sectarianism and Forms of Politics," in www.asharqalawsat.com/English/news.asp?section=2&id=7614, 1/11/2007. See for the ideological rivalry Chubin/Tripp, *Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations*, ch. 3.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

⁹⁶ Obaid, "Stepping into Iraq."