

Iran's Role in the Radicalization of the Sunni–Shia Divide

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The war in Iraq has produced a tremendous change in the Middle East and in the Muslim world at large. For the first time in history, an Arab country is controlled by the Shia. The West does not grasp yet the full meaning of the Shia revival and the potential for deep change in many of the countries in the region and their regimes where Shiites represent the majority or an important minority.

In a concise and persuasive article, Vali Nasr examines the background to the Shia revival in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein and its implications for the larger Middle East. He stresses the role of the Iranian revolution of 1979 in mobilizing the Shia identity and pushing for specifically Shia agendas by supporting financially and politically groups such as Amal in Lebanon, al-Da'waa al-Islamiya (the Islamic Call) in Iraq, Hizb-i Wahdat (Party of Unity) in Afghanistan, and Tahrik-i Jafaria (Shia Movement) in Pakistan. The Tehran–Damascus axis is part of Iran's Shia expansionist agenda and enabled it to establish Hezbollah in Lebanon, supporting the organization throughout the 1980s and 1990s to confront the US presence in Lebanon and entrench Iranian influence among Lebanese. According to Nasr, revolutionary Iran failed to alter the balance of power between the Shia and Sunnis across the region and ultimately gave up trying to do so, while the Saudis became the defenders of Sunnism and the symbol of its resistance to Shia 'usurpers'.¹

According to this view, Saudi Arabia for its part was motivated by the desire both to control its own Shia minority and to thwart Khomeini's challenge to the Islamic legitimacy of the kingdom. Riyadh's investment in Sunni militancy did not raise much concern in the West in the 1980s and the 1990s, for during that period Iran and its brand of Shia militancy were viewed as the most dangerous face of Islam and the main threat to Western interests. The Shia were then associated with anti-Americanism, revolution, terrorism, hostage taking, and suicide bombing. Nasr considers that after Khomeini's death in 1988, Shia militancy ceased to be the ideological force that animated Islamic activism and was replaced by Sunni militancy following the 1991

Gulf War, at least partially if not primarily as a response to the Shia activism that followed the Iranian Revolution.²

Saddam's fall has radically changed that balance by empowering the Shia majority, and the Shia–Sunni competition for power has emerged as the greatest determinant of peace and stability in Iraq directly influencing the broader region from Lebanon to Pakistan. However, the Shia revival and the decline in Sunni power in Iraq had not created Sunni militancy; it has invigorated and emboldened it. The anti-Shia violence that plagues Iraq today was first manifested in South Asia and Afghanistan in the 1990s by militant groups with ties to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The bombings in Baghdad, Kerbala, Najaf and other Shia strongholds in Iraq have claimed many lives but these attacks closely resemble acts in Mashad, Karachi, Quetta, and Mazar-i Sharif since the early 1990s. The current sectarian threat in Iraq is therefore more the product of a deeply rooted rivalry in the region than the direct result of recent developments in Iraq.³

Finally, Nasr claims that today Sunni militancy and Wahhabi activism, not Shia revolutionary fervour, pose the greatest danger to US interests, because it is an ascendant, violent, ideological force that is not only anti-Shia but also virulently anti-American. He considers Shia revolutionary activism as essentially a spent force with Iran 'currently a tired dictatorship teetering on the verge of collapse'. Shiism, he claims, no longer produces the kind of ideological politics that Sunnism continues to generate. Moreover, he considers the Shia-dominated countries of Iran and Iraq are better positioned to achieve economic growth and democracy than their Sunni neighbors (with the exception of Turkey).⁴

The problem is that Nasr's article was published in the summer of 2004, before the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran, before the radicalization of Tehran's policy on the nuclear issue and the clash with the UN and the international community, and before the latest violent crisis against Israel initiated by Hamas and Hezbollah in the clear framework of an Iranian destabilization strategy of the Middle East.

The Sunni–Shia Divide

The numerous religious, political, socio-economic and sometimes ethnic conflicts between Sunni and Shia communities throughout the Muslim world impact on the behaviour of the more radical organizations and also the supportive state players, which can use these conflicts for ideological or tactical reasons to increase the solidarity with allied groups. The existence of two parallel Islamist trends, the revolutionary Iranian Shia model as opposed to the radical Sunni Wahhabi or Salafi one, affects the ideology and strategy of the

IRAN'S ROLE IN THE RADICALIZATION OF THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE 275

numerous violent groups active in the Muslim world, as clearly proved in the open terrorist war between Sunni and Shia groups in Pakistan, Afghanistan and in Iraq and these days on the issue of Hezbollah's war against Israel.

According to the Syrian poet Ali Ahmad Said Isbir:

The history of the Muslims since the inception of the Islamic State [is] a continuous endless war, with the aim of negating pluralism inside Islam on the basis of a single simple power center with its sources in a unique religion. This war has never ended: in a way or another its flames were never spent, not only among the two antagonistic groups, the Sunni and the Shia, but also among other less known and less involved ones.⁵

The Shia number around 130 million people globally, some 10 per cent of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims. The overwhelming majority of Shia (approximately 120 million) live in the area between Lebanon and Pakistan, where they constitute the majority population in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Azerbaijan, as well as the single-largest community in Lebanon, and sizeable minorities in various Gulf emirates, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan (and in neighbouring countries such as India and Tajikistan and in East Africa). From the marshes of southern Iraq to the ghettos of Karachi, the Shia have been the underdogs – oppressed and marginalized by Sunni ruling regimes and majority communities.

Pakistan's Bloody Sectarian War

The Pakistani Shia community representing 15 to 20 per cent of the population, that is, about 25 million people and traditionally linked to the ulema of Najaf, stayed away from politics till the mid-1970s. The Iranian Revolution, the Iran–Iraq War, the transposition on Pakistani soil of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the Islamization policy launched by General Zia ul Haq from 1979 with the aim of transforming Pakistan into a Sunni state, all these factors contributed to a religious and political mobilization of the Shia community. The *Tebrik-e Nifaz-e Fiqh-e Jaafria* (TNFJ) later renamed *Tebrik-e Jaafria Pakistan* (TEJ), a religious movement founded in 1980, became more radical from 1985 on and under the leadership of Allama Arif Hussein al Hussein transformed itself into a political party in 1987. His assassination in 1988 marked the start of widespread sectarian violence which has continued since the early 1990s.⁶ To counter the growing political assertiveness of the Shias and their political party the TEJ, Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan's military dictator of the 1980s, encouraged and assisted Sunni extremist organizations such as the *Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan* (SSP).

The anti-Shia campaign and violence in Pakistan have been largely the work of the militant Deobandi-Wahabi, who are a minority in Pakistan, but enjoy tremendous influence because of the support of the military-intelligence establishment and the seemingly inexhaustible flow of funds from Saudi Arabia.⁷

The bloody sectarian war between Pakistan's Shiites and Sunnis caused a total of 1,784 Pakistanis casualties and another 4,279 injured persons across the country between January 1989 and 31 May 2005. And there are indications that the trends may worsen. Thus, 187 persons were killed and another 619 were injured in 19 incidents of sectarian violence in 2004. Within the first five months of 2005, 120 Pakistanis have lost their lives, and 286 have been injured in 30 incidents of sectarian violence.⁸

An aggravating feature of this sectarian violence has been the growing number of suicide bombings in or near mosques or holy shrines and mutual assassinations of major religious leaders. Thus, on 19 March 2005, fifty people were killed and over a hundred others injured during a bomb explosion near the shrine of a Shia saint at Fatehpur village in the Baluchistan province; on 27 May 2005, at least 25 people were killed and approximately a hundred others injured during a suicide bombing at the Bari Imam Shia shrine in the capital Islamabad; on 9 February 2006, forty people were killed and fifty others wounded in a suspected suicide attack on a Muharram procession of Shia Muslims in the Hangu town of North West Frontier Province.⁹

Al Qaeda groups and affiliates were directly involved in this sectarian conflict. Pakistani Sunni, Taliban and Al Qaeda combatants fought together in military campaigns in Afghanistan, most notably in the capture of Mazar-i Sharif and Bamiyan in 1997, which involved the widescale massacre of Shiites. Pakistani Sipah-i Sahabah fighters did most of the killing, nearly precipitating a war with Iran when they captured the Iranian consulate and killed eleven Iranian diplomats.¹⁰

According to Indian sources, Ramzi Yousef, now in jail in the US for his involvement in the New York World Trade Centre explosion of February 1993, Maulana Masood Azhar of the *Jaish-e-Mohammad* (JEM), Fazlur Rahman Khalil of the *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen* (HUM) and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, started their career as terrorists as members of the SSP and participated in many of its anti-Shia massacres in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. The suspicion that the arrest of Khalid Sheikh Mohammad (KSM) by the Pakistani authorities in Rawalpindi in March 2003 and his handing over to FBI was a result of the betrayal of the Hazaras (Shias) of Baluchistan provoked several deadly attacks against Shias. The massacre of the Shias in Quetta in March 2004 was in reprisal partly for their suspected collaboration with the Americans in their hunt for bin Laden and partly for the murder of Maulana Azam Tariq, the leader of the SSP, allegedly by Shia extremists.¹¹

Saudi Arabia

Already in November 1979, almost parallel to the occupation of the Mecca sanctuary by radical Sunnis under the leadership of Muhammad al-Utaybi and Abdallah al-Qahtani, Shia demonstrations in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia marked a new activism which degenerated in their first intifada, the spontaneous uprising.¹² Saudi Hezbollah, known locally as the Followers of the Line of the Imam [Khomeini] (*Ansar Khat al-Imam*), was founded in 1987 by several prominent clerics, including Sheikh Hashim al-Shukus, Sheikh Abdulrahman al-Hubail and Abduljalil al-Maa, from the Eastern Province. The organization espouses Khomeini's principle of *vilayat-e-faqih* (the rule of the Islamic jurispudent, which is the basis for the Islamic Republic's theory of the state), and most members emulate *marja'iyya* ('the source') – Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. The Followers of the Line of the Imam wholly distrust the ruling family and government. For the most part, that sentiment has translated into isolation, though it reportedly slipped into periodic violence.¹³ Interestingly, the extent of Wahhabi hostility toward the Shia is expressed by the dissemination since the beginning of the nineteenth century of a myth according to which the founder of Shiism was a Jew named Abdallah ibn Saba.¹⁴

The truck bombing in June 1996 of the Khobar Towers apartment complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, where 19 members of the US Air Force personnel were killed and hundreds of other Americans were injured, has been the main terrorist attack by Shia radicals in Saudi Arabia. According to the US indictment against the perpetrators, Iranian officials and Lebanese Hezbollah operatives were involved in the plot. The government cracked down on Saudi Hezbollah in the wake of the Khobar bombing but there are some indications Hezbollah/The Followers of the Line of the Imam may have increased their presence and influence of late by focusing on social and cultural activities to the exclusion of politics.¹⁵

The war in Iraq and the concomitant empowerment of the country's Shiites again fuelled anti-Shiite hostility. Posters on a popular web-forum stressed that 'they are the enemy, they are the enemy, they are the enemy', adding 'God damn the rafida [dissenters].' Acts of violence against Shiites have risen over recent years, uncorroborated rumours of planned or failed attacks have spread rapidly within the community. Over the past two years, incidents with an apparent sectarian connotation include the burning of Shiite mosques in Qatif and community centers in Tarut, as well as vandalism against a Shiite cemetery at Annak. Sunni-Shiite issues are taking on greater public importance in Saudi Arabia. Of particular concern for the future of Sunni-Shiite relations has been the alarming rise in the number of Saudi jihadi militants drawn to Iraq. Hostility to Shiites and their growing role in Iraq also is important as many

Saudi jihadis went to Iraq 'to kill Shiites'. The prospect of the eventual return of several hundreds of battle-tested Saudi mujahideen from Iraq raises the possibility that – like their predecessors returning from Afghanistan – they will look for a new battlefield and so pose a potential threat to the Shiite minority.¹⁶

Bahrain

The Shia Muslims of Bahrain are a disadvantaged majority, widely dispersed within the 35 islands in the Persian Gulf that make up the state. They share other Bahrainis' ethnic Arab background and Arabic language, but they have distinct religious beliefs from the minority Sunni Muslims, and the Sunni royalty that rules the country.¹⁷

During the 1980s, opposition to the regime took the form of small-scale acts of sabotage carried out by small, well-organized, groups. After the death of ruler Sheikh Isa bin Sulman al-Khalifa in March 1999, and after Shia activists provoked unrest sporadically from 1994–99, the opposition declared its willingness to cease its protests. This more conciliatory approach reduced tensions and although smaller rallies continued in recent years the new leader, Sheikh Hamad, adopted a new constitution in late December 2000. The country officially became a constitutional monarchy in 2002, and in October more than half of the eligible voters participated in the first elections since 1973, electing forty members of the Council of Deputies (the lower house of the national assembly). The new body included a dozen Shia MPs, though this is not close to a proportional representation of their group population.¹⁸

Bahrain is often seen as a bellwether of Sunni–Shiite relations, as Shiite influence in the region continues to grow. Some see it as an enclave that mimics the heavily Shiite demographics of Iraq, heavily affected by what happens in Iraq and Iran. Sunni extremists in Bahrain paint the country as the edge of a Shiite crescent controlled by Iran and threatening to menace the vastly larger predominantly Sunni Arab world.

Since December 2005, when an Iranian cleric was arrested at the airport, organized confrontations between Shiite youth and Bahraini security forces have become almost weekly events. Shiite politicians claim they only want jobs, equal opportunity and greater representation in government. But Shia demonstrators held up pictures of Iranian leaders and the leaders of the Iranian-backed militant group Hezbollah. The Unemployed Youth Movement has adopted a yellow flag that resembles Hezbollah's trademark banner, and photographs of Hezbollah leaders hang prominently on the walls of Shia family homes. Even moderate Sunnis note that the Shiite opposition itself is fighting for control more than reform.¹⁹

The Sunni–Shia violent conflict in Iraq

Al Qaeda From the September 2003 assassination of Ayatollah al-Hakim and up to his death on 8 June 2006, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi made the utmost effort to provoke the Shia of Iraq to retaliate against the Sunnis and thus trigger a civil war. This strategy, reflecting the common Wahhabi doctrine, became obvious after US authorities leaked a letter written by him in January 2004. The Shia were described as 'the most evil of mankind ... the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom'. Their crime was 'patent polytheism, worshipping at graves, and circumambulating shrines'.²⁰

Zarqawi's position contradicted bin Laden and Al Qaeda's views concerning the Shia. It should be noted that in his audio message of February 2003, bin Laden stressed the importance of the Sunnis and Shia fighting united against the Americans. He even cited Hezbollah's 1983 suicide bombing of the US Marine barracks in Beirut as the first 'American defeat' at the hands of Islamist radicals.²¹

The victorious image in the Arab and Muslim world achieved by the Shia Hezbollah movement and its leader Hassan Nasrallah after the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000 and, more recently, the exchange of prisoners (including many Palestinians) between Israel and Hezbollah in January 2004, created much resentment and criticism in Saudi jihadi-Salafi elements. Moreover, the presentation of Nasrallah as the 'New Salah al-Din' put the role of the global vanguard of Islam played by Qa'idat al-Jihad at risk for a takeover by the Hezbollah. Since the process of establishing a new government in Iraq, with a clear Shia majority, Salafi web-sites and forums have stepped up their attacks against the Shia, Iran and Shia doctrines.²²

In a video aired on Al-Jazeera, in what appears to be a response to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's call on his Shia followers to vote en masse and decree that those who boycott the elections are 'infidels', bin Laden warned against the participation in elections in Iraq: 'Anyone who participates in these elections ... has committed apostasy against Allah.' He also endorsed the killing of security people 'in Allah's name'.²³

It is of note that in the end it was bin Laden who accepted the strategy of Zarqawi and the Saudi jihadists, recognizing the predominance of the leaders who continued the fight on the ground rather than that of the nominal leadership which was hiding somewhere in Pakistan. This process took a whole year (from December 2003 to December 2004) and resulted in the nomination of Zarqawi as the 'emir' of Al Qaeda in Iraq.²⁴

However, bin Laden's attack on the Shia has been cautious, without referring directly to their leaders. Interestingly, in a book which includes most of his statements, there is not one reference to the Shia as such, let alone an attack on the Shia.²⁵

This important issue continued to trouble the relations between the Al Qaeda leadership and al-Zarqawi, as evidenced in the letter sent to the latter by Ayman al-Zawahiri in July 2005. In this major document Zawahiri acknowledges 'the extent of danger to Islam of the Twelve'er school of Shiism ... a religious school based on excess and falsehood', and 'their current reality of connivance with the Crusaders'. He admits that the 'collision between any state based on the model of prophecy with the Shia is a matter that will happen sooner or later'. The question he and 'mujahedeen circles' ask Zarqawi is 'about the correctness of this conflict with the Shia at this time. Is it something that is unavoidable? Or, is it something can be put off until the force of the mujahed movement in Iraq gets stronger?'

Moreover, Zawahiri reminds Zarqawi that 'more than one hundred prisoners – many of whom are from the leadership who are wanted in their countries – [are] in the custody of the Iranians.' The attacks against the Shia in Iraq could compel 'the Iranians to take counter measures'. Actually, Al Qaeda 'and the Iranians need to refrain from harming each other at this time in which the Americans are targeting' them.²⁶ This is indeed evidence of a new kind of *realpolitik* on the part of Al Qaeda leadership!

However, this did not change Zarqawi's position. In his last audio message before his death he blasted Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, as the 'leader of infidelity and atheism', accused Shiite groups and government forces of being responsible for numerous attacks on Sunnis and suggested that Shiites themselves were behind the February bombing of the Shiite shrine in Samara. He also criticized the militia of the radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr for stopping the fight against American forces.²⁷

In a recent interview with Al Qaeda's media production unit on the fifth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, Ayman al-Zawahiri suggested for the first time that Zarqawi's murderous behaviour toward the Shiites had not been sanctioned by bin Laden: 'The instructions of Sheikh Osama, may God protect him, to the brothers in Iraq, chief among them Abu Musab ... were that they focus their efforts on the Americans and neutralize the rest of the powers as best they could.' Al-Zawahiri dismissed the interviewer's claim that many thought Al Qaeda initiated the Shiite-Sunni fighting, saying that 'Al Qaeda has not done anything to them [the Shiites] because Al Qaeda in Iraq is too busy with jihad against the Crusader occupation.'²⁸

The Shia

For a year and a half, from August 2003 until February 2005, Sunni attacks met with barely a response from most Shiites. The only ones accused of meting out revenge from the outset were members of the Badr Organization, allegedly responsible for the assassination of former regime officials and suspected Baath

IRAN'S ROLE IN THE RADICALIZATION OF THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE 281

party members, in addition to suspected insurgents, but for a long time these actions did not reach critical mass. However, once the Shiite parties, brought together in the United Iraqi Alliance, won a simple majority of votes in the January 2005 elections and, in alliance with the Kurdish list, gained power three months later, the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) took over the Interior Ministry, allowing the Badr Corps to infiltrate its police and commando units. Soon, Iraqis witnessed a steep rise in killings of Sunnis that could not be explained by the fight against insurgents alone.²⁹

Arab Shiites have been increasingly polarized by the Sunni suicide attacks on Shia targets, kidnappings, and disappearances which have intensified since the January 2005 elections. They are all too aware that figures like Zarqawi have threatened jihad against Shiites and have said they are not legitimate followers of Islam. Although the CPA tried to establish legal barriers to maintaining militias the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the faction of Abdul Aziz al-Hakim still have large militia elements. These are forces that Sunni groups have increasingly accused of committing atrocities against them since the spring of 2005. Sunnis feel particularly threatened by the Badr Organization, created by SCIRI and trained by the Iranian military. Sunnis assert that members of the Badr group are the ones responsible for the targeting and assassination of a number of senior Sunni clerics, many from the Muslim Scholars' Board. Some of the killings of an estimated 700 Sunnis between August and November 2005 involved men who identified themselves as Ministry of Interior (MOI) forces. US sources also noted that large number of members of the Badr Organization had joined the MOI forces, including the police and commando units, since the new government was formed in April 2003, and the lines between some MOI units and the Badr Organization had become increasingly blurred.³⁰

Moqtada al-Sadr has played a divisive role in Iraq since the first days after the fall of Saddam Hussein. He has been accused of playing a role in the murder of rival Shiite clerics like the Grand Ayatollah Abd al-Majid al-Khoi on 10 April 2003. In October 2003 al-Sadr's men attacked supporters of the moderate Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani near the Imam Hussein shrine. He attacked the US presence in Iraq almost immediately after the fall of Saddam Hussein. His Mahdi Army presented a serious threat to Coalition and government forces in Najaf, in Sadr City in Baghdad, and in other Shiite areas in the south during much of the summer and early autumn of 2004. Since the elections Sadr revived the Mahdi Army, which again began to be openly active in parts of Southern Iraq such as Basra, Amarah and Nasiriyah, and still has cells in Najaf and Qut as well. Since the autumn of 2005, his organization and other Shiite groups with similar beliefs have been accused of political assassinations and kidnappings.³¹ Some Iranian leaders appear to view Sadr as a useful potential ally with whom they might cooperate in the same way they

have worked with the leadership of the Lebanese group; Sadr's movement has parallels with Hezbollah, and Tehran may view the Hezbollah model as instructive to Iraq under current circumstances.³²

The Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigades compete with the Iraqi police for control in Iraq's largest cities, Baghdad and Basra, are well organized and gain popular support with their religious character and their ability to provide security and certain social services. Some police and army units within the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have moved away from their original training and developed independent and often problematic methods of operation.³³

According to the book published in mid-2005 by the Jordanian journalist Fuad Husayn, who spent time in prison with Zarqawi, Abu-Mus'ab thought that the US-Israeli confrontation with Iran is inevitable and could succeed in destroying Iran's infrastructure. Accordingly, Iran is preparing to retaliate by using the powerful cards in its hands. The area of the war will expand, pro-US Shia in Iraq and Afghanistan will suffer embarrassment and might reconsider their alliances, and this will provide Al Qaeda with a larger vital area from which to carry out its activities, including Lebanon.³⁴

But a document published after Zarqawi's death describes a 'bleak situation' of the Islamist insurgency in Iraq, which led Zarqawi to conceive a replacement strategy to provoke a 'delegated war' the best of which would be

... the one between the Americans and Iran, because it will have many benefits in favor of the Sunni and the resistance, such as: freeing the Sunni people in Iraq, who are [30 per cent] of the population and under the Shia Rule; drowning the Americans in another war that will engage many of their forces; the possibility of acquiring new weapons from the Iranian side, either after the fall of Iran or during the battles; to entice Iran towards helping the resistance because of its need for its help; weakening the Shia supply line.

The document ends with some operational proposals for how to provoke this war.³⁵

Lebanon

During the last year there seemed to be a possible change in Al Qaeda's and Zarqawi's strategy in relation to Iran and its proxy organization the Lebanese Hezbollah. It is possible that the rocket attack by Zarqawi's men from southern Lebanon on northern Israel in December 2005 was a first step in some kind of understanding between the two sides – Al Qaeda and Iran – which permitted the attack from a territory notably known to be under the rigorous control of Hezbollah.

IRAN'S ROLE IN THE RADICALIZATION OF THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE 283

It took two weeks for Hezbollah to deny its knowledge of the attack and to caution against the use of territory considered under its responsibility: 'There are some [operatives] in Lebanon,' said Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's deputy secretary-general. 'We don't know how many and we don't know their plans or if they intend to do [military] operations here ... [and] it's important to caution everyone not to make Lebanon an arena for settling scores.' He claimed it is indeed possible to act without Hezbollah's knowledge and that the organization is still investigating the Al Qaeda claim.³⁶

The Lebanese authorities arrested 13 Al Qaeda suspects in different parts of the country and charged them with 'establishing a gang to carry out terrorist acts, forging official and private documents and possessing unlicensed arms'. Among these Al Qaeda suspects were seven Syrians, three Lebanese, a Saudi Arabian, a Jordanian and a Palestinian. Beirut's *Daily Star* reported an alleged Al Qaeda statement that warned the Palestinians camps of Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon that they would face attacks from Al Qaeda if they did not conform to their ideology.³⁷

Interestingly, in April 2006 nine men were charged with plotting to assassinate Hezbollah's secretary-general Sheik Hassan Nasrallah. They were presented as 'Salafists who saw in Sheik Nasrallah a good Shiite target to avenge the death of Sunnis in Iraq'. Nasrallah himself declared that he would not blame Lebanon's Sunnis if the conspirators were shown to be motivated by Sunni militancy.³⁸

It is of note that several days before his death Zarqawi called for the disarmament of Lebanon's Hezbollah, according to an audio message posted on the Internet. He accused Hezbollah of serving as a 'shield protecting the Zionist enemy [Israel] against the strikes of the mujahideen in Lebanon', in a reference to Sunni Arab militants loyal to the Al Qaeda network. In reaction, a Hezbollah spokesman dismissed Zarqawi's call, accusing him of trying to 'distort the image of the resistance and its leaders', through the media.³⁹

Possibly, this *volte-face* of Zarqawi's after the attempt to operate from southern Lebanon under the benevolent neutrality of Hezbollah is a result of his intricate relationship with Iran.

On 2 June 2006, Hezbollah organized riots in Beirut protesting the broadcast of a sketch on an LBC television programme ridiculing the Shiite militia's position on disarmament, implying that Hezbollah would make any excuse to avoid laying down its weapons. The show's producer apologized, but the demonstrations did not end until Nasrallah himself appeared on Hezbollah's own al-Manar network and appealed for calm. The Hezbollah demonstrations were intended to support the group in the framework of the Lebanese National Dialogue, because Hezbollah is in no hurry to give up its weapons. Not only do the weapons support the party's 'resistance' credentials, the Shiite party also likely sees its arms as an insurance policy against the

possible entrenchment of Al Qaeda in Lebanon. Nasrallah acknowledged the danger of the 'Zarqawi phenomenon' during interviews in February and June 2006. According to this view, the presence of anti-Shiite Al Qaeda forces will only stiffen Hezbollah's resolve to retain its weapons, which it sees as essential to defending the Shiite community.⁴⁰

The Shia Crescent

According to Jordan's King Abdullah, Iran's meddling in the Iraqi elections was an attempt by Tehran 'to create a Shiite crescent from Iran to Syria and Lebanon'. Some Arab analysts don't believe this strategic project is viable. According to this view a divided Iraq may lead to a change in the regional balance of power, but not necessarily noticeably in favour of Iran while a united Iraq with a balance of power between the three communities will serve Iran better but curb its influence. In any case, there are important differences within the various Shia communities. Iraqi Shiites are Arabs and culturally closer to Iraqi Sunnis than to Persian Shiites. The Allawis are a small sect within Shia Islam, and Syria's Muslims are in any case 85 per cent Sunni. Lebanon's treacherous ethnic and religious mix is volatile at the best of times and Shiites there are as little interested in a flare-up of inter-communal violence as anyone else.⁴¹

Zaman, the Turkish Islamist newspaper, notes with some concern that Iran is now extending itself economically, militarily and religiously, even though the latter does not have the connotations of a revolution. This extension is achieved through 'centripetal' force towards Iraq with its holy Shia cities Najaf and Kerbala, with the potential to make radical changes to the Shiite theological structure, and towards Lebanon, where Hezbollah has as much potential as Iraq by taking advantage of its conflict with Israel and championing the cause of the oppressed. Significantly, the author evaluates that after the war in Lebanon Hassan Nasrallah has better chances than Sheik Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah to lead the Lebanese Shiites. The expansion of the Shiite axis towards the west finds expression in both the east and south. There's now a more concrete and politically active Shiite presence in Pakistan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. The predominantly Shiite population in Bahrain is already making its influence felt throughout the society and efforts are being made to set up organizations in Saudi Arabia.

The Iranian military exercise in late August 2006, codenamed 'Zulfikar Coup', was intended as a warning to US and British forces in the Middle East that they should not enter Iran under any circumstances. However, notes *Zaman*, it's evident from the row between the Shiite and Sunni worlds that the coup did not only target the Western occupiers.⁴²

Abd al-Rahman al-Rashed, an Arab journalist, argues that the most likely target of Iran's nuclear weapons is the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. 'It

IRAN'S ROLE IN THE RADICALIZATION OF THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE 285

is incomprehensible that Iran will bomb Israel, which has a shield of missiles, tremendous firepower and nuclear weapons artillery sufficient to eradicate every city in Iran,' he wrote. 'This means that if this destructive weapon is used, the only option for a target is the Arab Gulf.'⁴³

From an Iranian perspective, Tehran indeed would like this crescent since for 25 years it harboured, organized, trained and armed Iraqi Shia groups opposed to Saddam Hussein. The integration of Iraq into the alliance between Tehran, Damascus and Beirut will also influence the balance of power, provide more political, financial and military support and greater strategic depth to Syria. The alliance is also likely to provide more support for Islamic groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. However, Iranian leaders hold that the regime in Syria is not a Shiite regime, and its foreign policy is not geared to serving Shiite interests. Rather, the current regime in Syria ascribes to Arab nationalism and its primary foreign policy goal is furthering Arab interests as defined by Damascus. For Iran, the alliance with Damascus is based on opposition to the US and Israel and has nothing to do with Shiites. Therefore, while the Middle East is not going to witness a 'Shiite crescent', the coming to power of a Shiite-dominated government in Iraq will have important consequences in support of Shiite political rights: an Iran-Iraq alliance against the GCC (the Gulf Cooperative Council), and strengthening the position of Syria and Islamic groups *vis-à-vis* Israel.⁴⁴

The effects of 'the second Lebanese War'

This author has evaluated that the escalation on Israel's borders in June-July 2006 was set off by actors supported by Iran – that is, Hamas, Hezbollah and Syria – and meant to take the pressure off Iran by triggering a major military clash in the Middle East, which will divert international attention from Iran's nuclear programme. At the same time it served the major strategic interests of the other three actors. Specifically, the Hezbollah intervention in the conflict at this moment, prepared strategically by Iran during the last six years by arming it with long-range artillery and rockets, was meant to give a clear signal to the US, the West and Israel of what would happen if serious international sanctions would be decided against Iran or if Iran's nuclear facilities would be destroyed by a US or Israeli attack.⁴⁵

Actually, Israel's indecisive strategy during the war and Hezbollah's resistance on the ground during the three weeks of the Israeli military offensive has strengthened Hezbollah's image and standing in the Arab and Muslim world. While the main Sunni regimes of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan indirectly supported Israel's attempt to quell Hezbollah, the Arab masses in these countries, including movements like the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, supported the Shia Lebanese radical movement. Hassan Nasrallah

came to be considered a new Salah al-Din who regained lost Arab and Muslim honour, a highly significant element of Arab and Islamic culture, and Hezbollah, a model for the Islamist warfare.

In July 2006, the Saudi Salman al-Awdah issued a *fatwa* in support of Hezbollah and even considered this support a duty, despite the disagreements with Hezbollah. His position was strongly opposed by scholars of global jihad. One of them accused al-Awdah of creating an internal plot (*fitnah*) among the Muslims by supporting the apostate Shia movement.⁴⁶

In a message broadcast on Al-Jazeera on 27 July 2006, bin Laden's deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri said Al Qaeda would not stand by while '[Israeli] shells burn our brothers' in Lebanon and Gaza. He called on Muslims to join forces and fight what he called the 'Zionist-crusader war' against Muslim nations.⁴⁷

According to Reuven Paz, Zawahiri's message circulated in Jihadi forums sparked a hot debate among the Sunni jihadists. One of the salient analyses on the subject was published by the Egyptian Sayf al-Din al-Kinani on the website Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) under the title 'The Puzzle of the Oppressed and the Red Lines'. In it Zawahiri's message was interpreted as the necessity for Muslims to fight for Palestine and Lebanon, while only Sunnis are considered true Muslims. As Shiites are not Muslims according to this view, their fight against Israel is not regarded as jihad and serves only foreign interests. One of the leading clerics of the Saudi Salafi clerics, Abdallah bin Jaberin, renewed his April 2002 popular fatwa against Hezbollah.⁴⁸ Another Salafi scholar, Khubab bin Marwan al-Hamad, stated on the Nur al-Islam website that the Jewish attack against the Lebanese Muslims was part of a test by Allah as a result of their disbelief and corrupted culture adopted from the West. However, for him too, any support for Hezbollah and the Shia was prohibited, as a result of their long series of sins.

Paz evaluates that by the end of the war the vast majority of jihadis considered that the sacred principle of *Al-Wala' wal-Bara'* (loyalty and rejection) prevented any form of support for Hezbollah, Nasrallah, or Iran, even though the Shia movement was fighting the Jews, protected Hamas and the Palestinian Jihad and caused the image of Israeli defeat. Hezbollah was widely nicknamed *Hizb al-Shaytan* (Party of the Devil) and Hassan Nasrallah was named only Hassan Nasr, in order not to add Allah to his name. In many ways, it looks as if the victorious image of Hezbollah has created even more anti-Shia rage among the Sunni Jihadis.⁴⁹

The Kuwaiti jihadi-Salafi cleric Sheikh Hamed al-'Ali has led the attack against the Shia and negated any possibility of support to the Hizb al-Shaytan. In a fatwa published in August 2006, he attacked the 'Iranian organized campaign to destroy the Muslims' as 'a Safawi imperialist racist conspiracy similar to [the one] in Iraq'. In another fatwa published after the cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah, he claimed that the Israeli-Hezbollah war

IRAN'S ROLE IN THE RADICALIZATION OF THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE 287

created a chaos that will be solved only by a much broader war with Iran. Iran's policy was presented as a 'Safawi/Irani project more dangerous than the Zio-Crusader one'. He actually called for a jihad 'against Iran ... in addition to [the jihad against] the Jews and the Christians'.⁵⁰

On the background of the Arab opposition to Hezbollah, led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the conservative Iranian daily *Jombouri-ye Eslami* published a scornful editorial blasting the heads of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as well as the head muftis. The paper accused these muftis of betraying Islam by serving the pro-Western Sunni Arab kings, as well as the US and the Western infidels.

According to the analysis of a liberal Saudi observer one of the more interesting results of the Israel-Hezbollah war has been the sidelining of the global jihadi movement and the broader Salafi currents that sustain it, which despite their rhetoric were reduced to mere spectators as Hezbollah, once again, dealt a serious blow to Israeli prestige. While some analysts interpreted Ayman al-Zawahiri's latest message as an olive branch to Iran, Hezbollah and Shia militants more broadly, it in fact was not a departure from the terror network's stance on sectarian relations in Islam, according to the same Saudi journalist. In any case, Al Qaeda is increasingly a marginal component of the Salafi-jihadi movement, and its ideological influence on the new generation of radicals is nowhere near as strong as is often assumed.⁵¹

Hezbollah's success has indeed faced the Sunni Islamist movements with a challenge. The fact that the small Shia organization managed to inflict upon Israel what the Sunni Arab armies have failed to do could be seen as a proof that true Islam is the one practised by the Shia, those very Shia whom the Sunni jihadists in Iraq and their spiritual mentors label as infidels or apostates. The Sunni Islamists must therefore demonstrate that Sunnis too can fight the Israelis. At the least they must make sure that Hezbollah is not seen as fighting Israel alone, while the Sunnis let it down, and that they are not inferior to the Shia in defending Islam and Arab honour.⁵²

Arab observers argue that galvanized by Hezbollah's stand, by Hamas' undiminished capacity to launch rockets into Israel, by the Shia Islamists' electoral achievements in Iraq, the Palestinian authority and Egypt, by Iran's defiance of the West and of Israel and by Iran's nuclear potential, Arab opinion appears now to tilt back towards the old rejectionist approach, which seeks Israel's elimination and considers it achievable. That is seen as a serious threat not only to Israel, but also the Arab regimes. However, because Hezbollah has successfully downplayed its Shia identity and its obedience to vilayat al-faqih Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's role behind Hezbollah and its increasing influence in the Middle East are carefully hidden.⁵³

In a speech on 19 November 2006, Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hezbollah (who is also the personal representative of Iran's spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Lebanon),⁵⁴ called on his followers to take to the

streets and to topple the Lebanese government of Fuad Siniora. A daily newspaper close to Hezbollah promised that if the government did not fall within 40 days, it would receive a 'decisive blow' that would topple it. Senior figures in the '14 March Forces' warned that Lebanon was on the verge of a political *putsch*, and that it was Syria and Iran that had ordered Hezbollah to create the crisis. Against the backdrop of this crisis, the Christian Lebanese Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayel was assassinated on 21 November.⁵⁵

As in the case of the recent war in Lebanon, the timing of the current crisis serves the interests of Iran, which is facing a UN Security Council discussion on proposed sanctions against it. On November 8, 2006, the conservative Iranian daily newspaper *Kayhan* cited Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, stating that in light of the new strategic order that has emerged in the Middle East, the Shiites in Lebanon must receive the largest representation in the Lebanese government institutions because 'they constitute 40% of the [Lebanese] population, and occupy 40% of the Lebanese territory. They are the most united [group in Lebanon], and their security-military forces have become the most significant forces in that part of the Arab region.' For his part, the Shia Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Beri declared during a meeting with Iranian President Ahmadinejad in Tehran that 'the Arab states must take special steps to thwart the enemies' plot of [instigating] strife [and] the Islamic Republic of Iran has a leading and essential role in this regard.'⁵⁶

The sit-down demonstration in the heart of Beirut, which was declared by Nasrallah on 30 November 2006, continued during the first week of December. On the background of rioting and clashes between supporters of the opposition and supporters of the 14 March Forces, the term 'intifada' has begun to be used for the Beirut demonstration. The Lebanese National Opposition issued a communiqué calling for participation in a mass rally on Sunday, 10 December 'to prepare for new forms and ways of protest and nonviolent expression'. The Iranian newspaper *Sobb-e Sadeq*, the mouthpiece of Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei, claimed that Hezbollah's success 'in holding early elections or changing the composition of the political [structure] of the Lebanese government will mean ... the defeat of Western policy and the Zionist regime in Lebanon'.⁵⁷

But Iranian interests in Lebanon go far beyond supporting the 'resistance' against Israel. The recent events in the region confirm that Iran is using Hezbollah as a tool to increase its regional power and counter Western interests. The popularity of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon is not based mainly on Hezbollah's military capability, but rather on Iran's economic support through public service institutions and charities. Without those economic mechanisms, Hezbollah's guerrillas could not have become a political force in the country.⁵⁸

IRAN'S ROLE IN THE RADICALIZATION OF THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE 289

Some analysts evaluated before the war that Hezbollah could transform Lebanon through a democratic process into an Islamic Shiite republic. In an article published following the war in Lebanon, the Jordanian-American reformist intellectual and researcher Dr Shaker al-Nabulsi warned of Hezbollah's intent to set up such a republic based on the principles of the current Iranian regime. Al-Nabulsi said the greatest concern relates to the possibility of Hezbollah's ideology spreading through the entire Arab world in such a way that there would no longer be a need to 'export' Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution. The danger to democracy and freedom lies in a possible triumph of Hezbollah ideology rather than in the group's military accomplishments, he said.⁵⁹

Conclusion

It is interesting to note that even from the autumn of 2002 Iran and its allies Syria and Hezbollah had accepted the inevitability of US intervention in Iraq and planned for the emergence of a post-Saddam era in which the United States would figuratively sink in the region's sands; Iran and its allies would exploit their historical and religious ties to Iraqi Shiites while at the same time call for Sunni/Shia unity in the face of Western aggression. They seemed to believe that, given the difficulties US forces would inevitably encounter in post-war Iraq, the Bush administration would be neither willing nor able to take forceful responsive action against them in the short term. For this reason they decided not to open a second front at Israel's northern border at the height of the lethal Palestinian intifada.⁶⁰ For the same reason Iran strongly opposed Nasrallah's short-lived proposal at the beginning of February 2003 for an 'Iraqi national accord' between Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi opposition that should 'set principles for national reconciliation and a mechanism for holding free and fair elections that bring to power a government enjoying the support of the Iraqis'.⁶¹

Mohsen Rezai, secretary of the powerful Iranian Expediency Council recently acknowledged the role of the US in helping Iran to become the regional superpower:

America's arrival in the region presented Iran with an historic opportunity. The kind of service that the Americans, with all their hatred, have done us - no superpower has ever done anything similar. America destroyed all our enemies in the region. It destroyed the Taliban. It destroyed Mr. Saddam Hussein. It imprisoned the hypocrites [*Mojahedin-e Kbalq*] in France. It did all this in order to confront us face to face, and in order to place us under siege. But the American teeth got

so stuck in the soil of Iraq and Afghanistan that if they manage to drag themselves back to Washington in one piece, they should thank God. Therefore, America presents us with an opportunity rather than a threat – not because it intended to, but because its estimates were wrong.⁶²

Through its ties with Hezbollah, Iran has also managed to fill the power vacuum left by Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon. At the same time, Iran has taken advantage of the cut in international funding to the Hamas-dominated Palestinian Authority to make up its economic shortfall, thus gaining an even firmer foothold in the Palestinian territories. Iran therefore might finally see some of the long-awaited fruits of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and project its power throughout the Middle East. The political losers include the leaderships of the Arab Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan among others. The Middle East could also see the marginalization of Saudi Arabia as the religious leader of the Muslim world; sectarian conflicts, between Shiites and Sunnis, are bound to increase, as witnessed every day in Iraq.⁶³

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad represents on the regional level the 'Second Islamic Revolution' which strives to export the revolution beyond Iran's borders while he sees himself as walking in the path of the architect of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, who made the export of the revolution one of the fundamental elements of his vision.⁶⁴

In a recent article Nasr finally admits things have changed, and quickly: Ahmadinejad, the militant president, confidently rallies the Third World under the banner of anti-Americanism, and the Iranian regime is bold and assertive. Not only has Iran an important role in Afghanistan and Iraq, says Nasr, but lately it has managed to influence developments in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories: 'Egypt and Jordan fear that Iran will overshadow them regionally, while Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf monarchs – all of whom are Sunnis ruling over sizeable numbers of Shiites – worry about the spread of an aggressive Iranian hegemony over their domains.'⁶⁵

According to a more optimistic view, as presented by the US analyst Martin Indyk, the foundations for a 'new Middle East' may emerge from the ashes of the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Indyk evaluates that there is the possibility of a 'tacit alliance' developing between Israel and the Sunni Arab leaders of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Palestinians and Lebanon. 'A common interest has emerged from the conflict,' he said at a talk at the University of Sydney Conservatorium. 'We are beginning to see scared leaders.' Sunni fears had been raised by the potential growth of a Shiite axis, dedicated to waging war with Israel, that included Iran, Iraq, Syria and the Hezbollah in Lebanon: 'Many Sunni leaders are concerned and now seem to be emerging with an opposing view which argues that peace with Israel is the way forward for the Arab world.'⁶⁶

IRAN'S ROLE IN THE RADICALIZATION OF THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE 291

The challenge for Ahmadinejad is how to prevent the emergence of this anti-Iranian American-Israeli-Arab alliance. Nasr evaluates that his rhetoric suggests that he does not understand 'the complexity of the challenges facing Iran, or the delicate touch that is needed if Iran is to realize its interests. This may be good news, or not.'⁶⁷

At present at least, it seems that Iran is leading the game in the growing conflict between Shia and Sunni Islam, at a state level as well as that of radical terrorist movements and groups.

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