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# The Iranian Influence in Iraq Between Strategic Interests and Religious Rivalry

ECATERINA CEPOI, MARIUS LAZĂR

After 2003 there is an irrepressible attempt by Iran to lay hands on the Iraqi Shi'a representatives: Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI - known as Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq – SCIRI, before 11 May 2007), the Sadrist movement, *al-Fadhila*, *al-Da'wa al-Islamiya*, part of the Iraqi clerics, of different degrees and motivations, will enter Teheran's sphere of influence and receive financial, logistic and military resources<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, the strategy of the Shi'a groups is extremely flexible and pragmatic, being less obedient to the traditional ideological aims and trying each to construct its own space of authority and political, economic, military control in Iraq, often instrumenting to their own purpose the regional rivalries between the great powers, Iran and the USA. For Iran, Iraq is a country which links it to the secular history of confrontation and also to their multiple cultural, religious, economical interactions. After 2003 Iran's main areas of influence in Iraq are commerce, investments and religious activities<sup>2</sup>. In the field of oil exploitation, even if it supports Iraq's reintegration on the market, Iran is more interested that its neighbour would remain at a moderate production that would not affect its own exports.

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<sup>1</sup>The theme of the Iranian influence over the post-Saddam Iraq has produced an impressive literature but one which owes itself, in great measure, to the different schools of interpretation of Teheran's regional geopolitics. A great part comes from researchers and institutions from the American or British sphere of influence and thus they do not only supply expertise but also contribute to sustaining the official versions of the Western public discourse about Iran's destabilizing role in the region. As a consequence, like many other themes linked to the Middle East, the motive of the Iranian influence becomes greatly ideologized, its real comprehension being constantly perturbed by the particular lectures supplied by those who dedicate themselves to the subject. From the pertinent studies, we hereby point out a couple of significant ones: Anoushiravan EHTESHAMI, „Iran-Iraq Relations after Saddam”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2003, pp. 115-129; Geoffrey KEMP, „Iran and Iraq. The Shia Connection, Soft Power, and the Nuclear Factor”, United State Institute of Peace: *Special Report 156* (November 2005); Taremi KAMRAN, „Iranian Foreign Policy Towards Occupied Iraq, 2003-2005”, *Middle East Policy*, vol. XII, no. 4, Winter 2005, pp. 28-47; Abbas William SAMII, „The Nearest and Dearest Enemy: Iran After the Iraq War”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2005, pp. 27-51; INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, *Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?*, Middle East Report No. 38 (21 March 2005).

<sup>2</sup>„Meanwhile, at the behest of the first administration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2009), the Islamic Republic engaged in an ambitious expansion of commercial connections, media, tourism, and cross-border migration, together with major investments in power plants, schools, hotels, and the reconstruction of southern Iraqi cities such as Basra, Karbala, and Najaf. Ahmadinejad's 2008 visit to Iraq, the first for an Iranian President since 1979 was marked by the announcement of a \$1 billion credit for Iranian exports to Iraq, used mostly for infrastructural developments, with a rise in the total monetary figure of exports to \$8 billion in 2010... Iran now appeared to do what it was not able to do during the war – to implant itself across the Iraqi border, especially into the country's religious centers, though now through a vast economic and political infrastructure”, Babak RAHIMI, „Iran's Declining Influence in Iraq”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2012, pp. 27-28.

### *Iranian Strategy in Iraq after 2003*

The fall of Saddam's regime freed Iran of a difficult rival in relation to which there was a general aversion, from the elites to the popular masses, for the damages and hardships created in the war from the eighties. On the other hand, the presence of American forces in Iraq and the attempt to impose a regime faithful to the interests of the USA was constantly felt like a threat to Iran, after 2004 becoming the main target of the critics, the Western and Israel's apprehensions, especially regarding the destination of its nuclear program. As a result, Iran's strategy towards post-Saddam Iraq was, in general terms, one of building an ever more extensive network of clients, interests, economic, cultural presence, in order to more efficiently lay hands on the adhesion of the countries new elites, Shi'a ones by excellence and backing, within the limits of the possible, the movements contesting the American presence, especially some of the Sadrist factions and members of Badr Brigade (the military wing of ISCI):

"The goals of Iran's policies are to limit American dominance in the region, prevent the growth if a threat from Iraq, and use Iraq as a platform for Iranian influence on the region as a whole... Iran in a sense patronizes its neighbour to the west and sees its involvement there as entirely natural: in the short term, in order to prevent an attack against it from Iraq and to weaken the central government in Baghdad to make it easier for Iran to exert its influence there, and in the long term in order to prevent to the extent possible the development of a competing model – a moderate, secular Shiite state with democratic trappings"<sup>1</sup>.

Politically, after 2005 Iran established itself as the other external agent – alongside the United States, which will influence the construction of the governments and a part of the Iraqi decisions. ISCI and Badr were its traditional allies but, after a period of distrust, even the Sadrist movement will pragmatically orient itself towards collaboration with the Iranian military and religious political authorities. The installation of Ibrahim al-Jafari as elected prime-minister in 2005 is made as a consequence to Iran's intensive activism. Teheran wants a military weakened Iran, governed more on comunitarianist criteria rather than nationalist ones, led by Shi'a elite that adhere to the Islamic values, therefore an unproblematic security environment, over which it could exercise an ever more accentuated and efficient *soft power* influence<sup>2</sup>. Contrary to the circulated scenarios, especially from 2004 to 2008, on Teheran's intentions to favour the emergence of a Shi'a enclave in Southern Iraq, which was called by the whole literature of the time a "Shi'astan"<sup>3</sup>, a fractured Iraq is not seen as an agreeable option for the Iranian leaders. The destruction of the geopolitical configuration of the Middle East would destabilize the whole regional system, including Iran, which in its turn has difficult centrifugal tendencies to manage, especially relating to the Azeri and Baluchi communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Yoel GUZANSKY, "Made in Iran": The Iranian Involvement in Iraq", *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2011, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Kayhan BAZERGAR, "Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy after Saddam", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2010, pp. 173-189.

<sup>3</sup> Babak GANJI, *A Shi'i Enclave? Iranian Policy Towards Iraq*, Conflict Studies Research Centre/Defense Academy of the UK, March 2006.

The Iranian influence in Iraq had an oscillating evolution. In the most acute moments of the 2005-2007 sectarian Iraqi war, Iran was actively involved in supporting Shi'a militias on the background of the confrontations with the Sunni insurgents and especially because of the elevated aggressiveness of the Jihadi movements and the international brigades. The provision of arms, logistical support, training Shi'a militias on Iranian territory have elevated the degree of violence but at the same time the instilled fidelity of these Shi'a paramilitary forces was seen as a local resource of control and of affecting the American interests and legitimacy<sup>1</sup>. An intense propaganda directed not only within the Shi'a environments but largely dominating the perception of the Middle Eastern populations tends to unanimously incriminate the United States and the West, in general, for the whole failure and destabilization in Iraq that followed after 2003.

However, once with the success of the American offensive of 2007-2008 that lead to the limitation of the sectarian conflict, at the decrease of the operational capacity of the Jihadi movements and, in correlation, to the loss of legitimacy of a Shi'a counter-offensive, especially a Sadrist one, Iran's authority becomes less efficient. Juggling through the multiple diverging interests, both internal and external, Nuri al-Maliki succeeds at constructing his own space of manoeuvre, committed to securing the territory and to an ever greater autonomy of his political power. The anti-Sadrist offensive from Basra in March 2008, a city that entered under an important Iranian influence, was the sign that both the central power from Bagdad does not tolerate the autonomous nuclei of power that are contrary to state interests and that the al-Maliki government imposes a limit on the ever more obvious Iranian intrusion in the internal affairs of the country and in the obstruction of the normalization of security. After 2008, the Iraqi leader takes charge of a more and more visible program and of a trans-sectarian activism with nationalist tendencies, cooling the relations with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and with the Sadrists thus limiting the field of Iranian influence.

However, it becomes more efficient after the 2010 general elections. The traditional Iraqi clients of Iran, grouped in National Iraqi Alliance – NIA (*al-Itilaf al-Watani al-Iraqi* – the new name of the former United Iraqi Alliance), but also Nuri al-Maliki, put pressure on the secular Iraqi National Movement (*al-Haraka al-Wataniya al-Iraqiyya* – more commonly known as *al-Iraqiyya* List) in order to draw out a good part of its candidates off the electoral lists under the pretext of their affiliation to the previous government. Made vulnerable by the failure of the governing period and by the disappearance of some of the authority figures like Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, the parties of NIA, especially ISCI do not manage to repeat the success of 2005 which, in subsidiary was also a sign of the estrangement of the population from the programs and the parties with a purely sectarian essence and the reconstruction, be it a fragile one, of a new national conscience.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey GRESH, "Instigating Instability: Iran's Support of Non-State Armed Groups in Iraq", *Al-Nakhlah. The Fletcher School On-Line Journal for Issues Related to Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilisation*, Spring 2006; Mounir ELKHAMRI, "Iran's Contribution to the Civil War in Iraq", *The Jamestown Foundation: Occasional Paper*, January 2007; Jacob HALPIN, "Iranian Support for Violence in Iraq: A Review of the Evidence", *British American Security Information Council: Iran Discussion Paper Series*, no. 3 (May 2007); Marisa Cochrane SULLIVAN, "Iran's Hard Power Influence in Iraq", *American Enterprise Institute: AEI Iran Tracker*, April 10, 2009; Michael KNIGHTS, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 3, issue 11-12, November 2010, pp. 12-16.

The success of the two political coalitions with trans-sectarian and national opening, The State of Law (*Dawlat al-Qanun* – led by Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki) and *al-Iraqiyya* (led by former Prime Minister, Iyad Allawi) was a concrete sign of the reconstruction of an “Iraqi” identity and to a new found attachment to the traditional nationalist values. Iran finds itself put in front of some pragmatic options, having a choice between supporting Iyad Allawi, a notorious client of the United States and declared enemy of Iran and of the traditional Shi’a movements and Nuri al-Maliki, a recognisable character in his intentions and more flexible to the Iranian interests. Thus, after the elections, in the lengthy period characterised by unending negotiations and alignments in order to designate the new Prime Minister and the government, Teheran became, once more, the main external actor that has succeeded in setting up the political games in Baghdad<sup>1</sup>. The Iranian leaders put pressure on the Sadrist to support al-Maliki, notwithstanding the dissensions between the two parties after 2008. The elimination of Iyad Allawi and the construction of an alliance that brings once again the Shi’a movements of NIA and the State of Law together, designating al-Maliki as prime-minister was thus the result of the negotiations and influences of Iran. Correlatively, it was a signal of the limits of the American influences, whose client, Iyad Allawi, lost power<sup>2</sup>.

### *Theological and Geopolitical Rivalry between Qom and Najaf*

The relations between Iran and Iraq are in great measure modeled by the common Shi’a dimension and the reciprocal influences exercised by the clerical institutions. Faithful to its post-1979 revolution strategy, the Islamic Republic permanently tries to pose as the leader of a universal Shi’ism, intervening in the different regional areas with a Shi’a presence in order to activate networks of clients that would resuscitate the Shi’a identity and a political or defiant activism. The come-down of the influence of the Iraqi holy centers in the Ba’thist period offered Qom an occasion to claim the title of theologian capital of the Shi’a world.

However now, after 2003, the Iraqi Shi’ism rediscovers its hegemonic vocation from the last centuries and *Hawza* of Najaf, by virtue of its localization within the most important place of Shi’a spirituality, it positions itself more and more visibly in the central space of the adhesion of the adepts and that of a resuscitated<sup>3</sup> theologian eminence. As a consequence, there is a rivalry between Qom and Najaf, whose stake greatly surpasses a simple problem of hegemonic dispute. The real stakes are, practically, the validity of the whole ideological, political and diplomatic system of the Islamic Republic. This is based on the idea that the Supreme Guide must not only be the ultimate authority that legitimizes the political power in the Iranian State but he must also be recognized as the leader of the whole Shi’a space. Evidently, this transnational

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<sup>1</sup> Michael EISENSTADT, Michael KNIGHTS, Ahmed ALLI, *Iran's Influence in Iraq. Countering Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy: Policy Focus 111 (April 2011).

<sup>2</sup> INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, *Déjà Vu All Over Again: Iraq's Escalating Political Crisis*, Middle East Report No.126 (30 July 2012), pp. 10-12.

<sup>3</sup> Augustus Richard NORTON, “Al-Najaf: Its Resurgence as a Religious and University Center”, *Middle East Policy*, vol. 18, issue 1, 2011, pp. 132-145.

authority is more of a political and ideological construction of the Iranian Republic and it enters in dispute with the traditional system of the existence of the multiple *maraji'* (plural of *marja'-e taqlid* – “source to follow”, the great ayatollahs that serve as ultimate and absolute references for the Shi'a), that assume an absolute authority over their own group of adepts but in virtue of their theological eminence and not of an institutional, official or political quality, linked to a state. Practically, it comes down to that which is called a “militarization” of the Iranian clerical institution:

“The militarization of the clerical establishment that the clericalization of the military has its origins in the 80's, when the Khomeyni inferior clerics start to actively participate in the war against Iraq and, in its turn, the forces of the Republican Guard will closely interact with clerics and the religious centers of Mashhad and Qom. During the war, Ali Khamenei, the future Supreme Leader, exemplified the military cleric type that would appear in the first lines of the front and will closely collaborate with the Republican Guard in the war effort”<sup>1</sup>.

Using Iran's immense resources and his position of Supreme Guide, Khamenei succeeded to attach a theological prestige to his image but at the level of the world Shi'a community, including Iran, the most followed theological authority is the ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. The control that he exercises over the holy centres of Najaf and Karbala, the same as the fundamental influence over the Iraqi Shi'a field to which amounts his capacity of managing the behaviour of his adepts in the whole Shi'a space, make al-Sistani a rival of the Iranian clerical and political elites. Adept of a pious positions, in a declared rupture with the *velayet-e-faqih* principle and with the idea of the direct implication of the clerics in politics he thus appears as an implicit challenge to the validity of the doctrinaire fundamentals of the Iranian Republic on which the whole legitimacy of the political, social and value systems is built.

Najaf and Qom thus become the landmarks of the two attitudes and two modalities of interpreting tradition and this way induce such adjacent collective behaviours, inclusively regarding the political sphere. One of Iran's fundamental strategies after the fall of Saddam is that of trying to weaken the authority of the great Iraqi ayatollahs as much as possible and to attract the holy centres of Iraq in Iran's sphere of influence<sup>2</sup>. If it is still difficult to mould the position of these great ayatollahs in relation with the Iranian interests, on the other side Iran is massively represented in the Iraqi Shi'a public space. Firstly, from an economical point of view: Iran is the most important real-estate, commercial, hotel etc. investor. The Shi'a religious ceremonies and the importance of pilgrimage bring on millions of adepts annually to Najaf, Karbala, Kadhimiyya, Samarra, Kufa; the greatest part of the foreign worshippers come from Iran. The Iranian clerics open agencies in the holy Iraqi cities in an obvious attempt to compete with local ayatollahs and to use Iran's financial resources in order

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<sup>1</sup> Babak RAHIMI, “Iran's Declining Influence...”, p. 39; Elliot HEN-TOV, Nathan GONZALES, “The Militarization of Post-Khomeyni Iran: Praetorianism 2.0”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2011, pp. 45-59.

<sup>2</sup> “Iran and Iraq: Battle of the Ayatollahs”, *United Press International*, June 7, 2012, Internet, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/Special/2012/06/07/Iran-and-Iraq-Battle-of-the-ayatollahs/UPI-32751339085850/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2012/06/07/Iran-and-Iraq-Battle-of-the-ayatollahs/UPI-32751339085850/) (accessed: 16 April 2013).

to gain influence and prestige<sup>1</sup>. One of the repeating rumours of the last year refer to Iran's explicit intention to control the emergence of a future *marja'* in Iraq that would succeed al-Sistani after his disappearance. The name that comes up is that of the Iranian ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, member of the Iranian judicial institution that has opened multiple agencies in Iraq, including in Najaf<sup>2</sup>.

### *Iran and the Geopolitical Myth of a "Shi'a Crescent"*

One of the new fashionable geopolitical concepts of the recent literature dedicated to the re-islamization phenomena and the discourse and politics of the Middle East is that of the "Shi'a Crescent". The term has made career after 2005, especially on the background of the ascension of political Shi'ism in Iraq and that of the militant one in Lebanon – linked here especially to the military success of Hezbollah in relation to Israel. In fact, it is formulated for the first time by king Abdallah II of Jordan in December 2004, giving way to a rising anxiety of the Sunni leaders and society in the face of that which was considered to be a fast and threatening rise of Shi'ism in Iraq and the region but especially the possible instrumentalization of Iran:

"If the pro-Iranian parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government, a new crescent of new Shi'a movements and government will rise, spanning from Iran to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, modifying the traditional power equilibrium between the two important Islamic sects, rising new challenges for the interests of the United States and their allies"<sup>3</sup>.

The fear was fueled, at the time, by the electoral success of the Iraqi Shi'a parties and thus the political legitimacy of some actors that claim their identity from Shi'ism, appearing to take Iraq out of the space of the States with Sunni elites, that value solidarity, even at an inter-Arab rhetorical level.

In fact, it corresponded not only to a rhetorical anguish but was the true expression of a regional re-positioning in face of the geopolitical mutations after 2004 in the Middle East, marked by the come-back to power in Teheran of the conservative group, with the new president Ahmadinejad caught in the emerging mix of messianic and imperative militant references with the new ascension to power of the Iraqi Shi'a and the increase in power of the political and military Lebanese Hezbollah<sup>4</sup>. As a consequence, a great part of the states that attach themselves, in different degrees, to their Sunni identity (Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, Morocco) will tighten their collaboration and participate, in multiple and different forms to

<sup>1</sup> Sam DAGHER, "Devotion and Money Tie Iranians to Iraqi City", *New York Times*, May 30, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Tim ARANGO, "Iran Presses for Official to Be Next Leader of Shiites", *The New York Times*, May 11, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> In Robin WRIGHT, Peter BAKER, "Iraq, Jordan See Threat To Election From Iran. Leaders Warn Against Forming Religious State", *Washington Post*, December 8, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Fouad AJAMI, Majid KHADDOURI, Vali NASR, Richard HAAS: *The Emerging Shiia Crescent Symposium: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Middle East*, <http://www.cfr.org/religion-and-politics/emerging-Shiia-crescent-symposium-implications-us-policy-middle-east-rush-transcript-federal-news-service-inc/p10866> (accessed: 16 April, 2013).

the blockage of that which is considered, in this period, an imbalance of a traditional geopolitical reality, that of a Sunni predominance in the Middle East<sup>1</sup>. This activism is at the same time exercised in the diplomatic, political, economic, security and religious areas and accounts for the rising sectarianism of the relations between the states in the region in the second half of the decade, which is at the same time a reflection and a cause of the intensification of inter-confessional violence in Iraq.

One of the particular characteristics of the Muslim space is that the confessional reference of the political elites constitutes a factor that can essentially condition the internal and international political behavior of a country in the region. Iran and Saudi Arabia are the classical landmarks of the way in which the Shi'a and Sunni Islamic identities (in the Wahhabi-Salafi variant) are the fundamental reference that structures the political and institutional systems as well as the diplomatic strategies and alliances. The classical geopolitical rivalries are thus dubbed with an essentially ideological dimension and this sets a particular characteristic of the Middle Eastern space. Especially after the 70's, Riyadh has tried to make itself known as a leader of an Islamic front of Sunni orientation, thus proposing an intentional Islamic lecture of the particular problems in the different Muslim spaces. In its turn, after 1979, Teheran was essentially marked by the vocation of a Shi'a political messianism, trying to provoke mutations and revolution in the whole region, especially supporting the identity and the political and cultural resurrection of the Shi'a communities, most of them being situated in countries with Sunni governance. Evidently, ideology is not the exclusive criterion that conditions the internal and international behavior but there also is a complicated dialectics with the motivations that are attributed to a realist perception and pragmatism of the powers in function.

However, after 2001 one can see an irresistible tendency, both in the West and in the Arab-Muslim world, to absolutize the cultural interpretations and to reify, often in a simplistic way, the confessional identities. In Sunni Islam, salafism is the most visible expression of this temptation of lecturing the whole field of individual, public, political manifestations from the perspective of religious references. In its turn, Shi'ism, especially in Iran, is utilized as norms from which the legislation, the political system and the social codes are constructed. More so, the transformation of Shi'ism into a defiant, military and combative ideology, after the Iranian Revolution lead to its receiving as not only a theological and sociological rival, as it was up to that moment but also a geopolitical one, because such an ascension to power of the Shi'a elites would have affected an Arab order marked by a historical supremacy of Sunnism. What stands in the center of the Sunni-Shi'a tension is not only a religious challenge as especially a power rivalry: for the elites or the groups that dispute or try to preserve this power (political, economic, symbolic etc.) the confessional identity becomes an *asabiyya*, a common space of solidarity and partitioning – or of attempting to gain – some privileges. In the 80's, the classical example was Hezbollah, the expression of a rise of identity consciousness of the Lebanese Shi'a community, traditionally excluded from the important political functions. Now, after 2003, Iraq becomes the main space toward which the geopolitical scenarios of each of the great regional actors is focalized because the ongoing process of national and state reconstruction offers the occasion of an active Iranian, Saudi Arabian, Turkish implication or that of the Jihadi networks, in shaping the evolution of Iraq depending on their own references and strategies.

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<sup>1</sup> Rannie AMIRI, "The Shi'a Crescent Revisited", *Counterpunch*, February 19-21, 2010.



As a consequence, the declaration of Abdallah II formulated a classical perception, that according to which Iran is still marked by the hegemonic project over a geopolitical ensemble defined by the common Shi'a identity that groups communities from Iraq, Bahrain, The Persian Gulf and Lebanon. The ascension of political and militant Shi'ism in Iraq took the country out of the Sunni anti-Iranian block, after it spearheaded this group for a long time, especially in the 80's when it was the avant-garde of the states defined by a Sunni-Arabic identity. At the same time, in Lebanon, Hezbollah not only survived the 1990 Taïf accord which stipulated the disarming of all the militias and private armies but became the main political force and gained immense prestige, both nationally and regionally through the fact that it poses as the new avant-garde of anti-Israeli military resistance.

However, in reality, as it was partially demonstrated in the years following the apparition of the concept, the idea of a possible emergence of this unifies Shi'a front in the Middle East was a simple theoretical construction nullified by the complexity of the rapports between Shi'a actors. Rather, it is one of the multiple geopolitical representations and mental lecturing environments of the regional realities, concretely, the way in which political leaders or specialists perceive Iran's intentions. "The Shi'a Crescent" has proved to be an imaginary concept firstly because it did not take in account the multitude of divergent projects and strategies developed by the different Shi'a groups in Iraq and in the rest of the Shi'a space, which not only that did not all align within the sphere of a possible Iranian hegemony but were even in rivalry or rupture with Teheran<sup>1</sup>. The Shi'a space represents an extremely heterogenous environment and it is illegitimate to reify it as such; it is rather the case of a simple generic interpretation that must not ignore the fact the Shi'a populations are dependent on – and they construct their multiple particular identities depending on other important references: ethnic, national, geographic, historical, ideological etc. The Shi'a condition is here just one of the identity trademarks that structure the specific individuality of Shi'a persons or groups from different areas. It assures the participation to a system of common values, norms, behavior and a cultural and religious adhesion but does not absolutely condition the adepts to the extent of neutralizing the influence of the environment of which they are a product of. As a consequence, if Shi'a is attached to the confessional identity, it is doubled by the other identity references with which it combines in multiple, particular aspects. One of the temptations and important mistakes in the analysis of the Middle Eastern issues is the very one of essentializations, of seeking *patterns* that would offer theoretical cohesion to the analysis and that would explain the behavior of political and social actors. In reality, these are extremely personalized and individualized, making generalization and especially predictability difficult, in the measure in which the attitude of the decision makers or leaders is often marked by motivations that are specific to a particular psychology of the region's population.

Therefore, there is no "one" Shi'ism but numerous particular manifestations of groups of individuals that assume this confessional identity to different degrees. This functions inclusively at the level of political and militant Shi'ism, which accounts for the multiple crevices and rivalries between leaders, parties, Shi'a groups within and amongst national communities. The Iranian state building that influenced the Iranian Shi'ism, even from the Safavid period and especially after 1979 will grant it a specific

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<sup>1</sup> Laurence LOUER, "Déconstruire le croissant chiite", *Revue internationale et stratégique*, vol. 4, no. 76, 2009, pp. 45-54.

national color which the Islamic Republic will harden through the construction of a system of political, social, ethical and institutional norms inferred from the Shi'a doctrine. More so, the fusion of the state supreme authority with the status of *marja' iyya*, as the Supreme Guide in the Islamic Republic resulted from Khomeyni's wish to link the destiny of the Shi'a communities, governed by their fidelity towards the *marja' iyya*, to Iran's claim of being recognized as a state that represents and defends the interests of all Shi'a. This very nationalization which will offer it a specific national coloring, will affect the capacity of the Iranian leaders to make themselves known as leaders of a universal Shi'ism. Substituting the *marja'* authority with that of Supreme Guide subsequently leads to the fact that the attachment towards the supreme Iranian clerical authority means fidelity towards the political system and the particular interests of the Iranian Republic. It is a fundamental reason for which many Shi'a, from different countries, do not direct their fidelity towards Khamenei but rather towards politically independent *maraji'* like al-Sistani, which does not reflect the particular national interests of state, as is the case of the Supreme Guide. In Iran, the accentuated politicization of Shi'ism has led to the distancing of a part of the population from this official variant which became a public ideology and which gives birth, through its imperative character and multiple conditionings that it imposes, to an ever greater sentiment of rejection<sup>1</sup>. In addition to this, the *marja' iyya* institution, in its traditional form, has decayed in Iran while the Supreme Guide poses as the supreme authority, not only the political but also the theological one. Once with the disappearance of the great ayatollahs Javad Tabrizi in 2006 and Fadhel Lankarani in 2007 there are no more important and influent *maraji'* in Iran that would attract the fidelity of adepts from outside the country<sup>2</sup>. It is more than significant that Ali al-Sistani has more adherents in Iran than Khamenei himself.

In the 80's, Iran succeeded to draw into its sphere of influence – or to support the shaping of militant and activist groups and movements in a great part of the Shiia space, which often take the form of transnational networks, on the model of the traditional ones, developed around the great *maraji'*. They plead for a cultural, political and identity rebirth of the affiliated Shi'a communities that were up until that moment within regimes of Sunni majority that imposed limits or refused them access to political power or to full liberty of manifestation because of this confessional alterity. In Iraq, it is the case of the parties and movements like *al-Da'wa*, the Shirazist movement, SCIRI etc. In Lebanon, Hezbollah was both an expression of ascension of the Lebanese Shi'ism which was in political minority for centuries and was excluded from the repartition of state resources and an intention of the Iranian political and military leaders to construct a faithful structure through which to intervene in the Levant on the background of the war with Iraq. Also with Iranian support, the Shirazist movement and its military expression, The Islamic Action Organization was implemented and built its resources in the Persian Gulf area (Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Oman) succeeding, for the first time, to produce a theological, cultural and institutional rebirth of the local Shi'a communities<sup>3</sup>. All of these were the main vectors of disseminating

<sup>1</sup> Olivier ROY, "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran", *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 53, no 2, 1999, pp. 201-216.

<sup>2</sup> Mehdi KHALAJI, "The Iranian Clergy's Silence", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 10, 2010, pp. 42-55, <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/the-iranian-clergys-silence> (accessed: 16 April, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Laurence LOUER, *Chiisme et politique au Moyen-Orient*, Autrement, Paris, 2008, pp. 54-57.

and promoting Teheran's ideology after the Iranian Islamic revolution and an attempt to provoke new revolutionary processes.

Once the "revolutionary export" period had ended, together with that of reorienting Iran towards a strategy based on defending its state interests, of equilibrium and normalization of the regional rapports with the neighbors within the Persian Gulf Area and the Arab world, the utility of some of these networks became obsolete. In their turn, they will be traversed by multiple crisis and internal rivalries, often linked to discussion their dependency on Iran. The attachment towards the national identity of these groups was an important factor that led to the distancing of some of the leaders and adepts, in the measure in which they did not find themselves in Teheran's interests. If it recognizes the Supreme Iranian Guide as a theologian authority regarding political directives, Hezbollah will prefer ayatollah Fadlallah as a *marja'*<sup>1</sup>, a Lebanese attached to the Lebanese national identity. At the end of the 80's, a part of the Iraqi Shi'a parties distance themselves from their former Iranian protectors or fraction in those that still recognize the authority of the Iranian republic (usually clerics) and those that remain attached to the Iraqi identity (most of them being laymen). Even the rapports of the Shirazist movements with Iran experience a gradual cooling. After they were the main agents of promoting the Iranian interests and resuscitating the political and revolutionary activism in the Gulf, the Shirazist leaders and militants will be gradually considered as an obstacle in the way of normalizing the rapports with the Gulf<sup>2</sup> regimes by the new moderate Iranian elites and especially Rafsanjani and those around him. Iran's support will be moderated and on the background of the pressure and restrictions initiated by the Gulf States, a part of the Shirazists will choose to limit their activism and visibility and another one will reform in other areas, especially in Syria. The historical leader of the movement, Mohammad al-Shirazi, who refused to recognize the religious preeminence of Khamenei, will be subjected to forceful domicile at his Qom residence, where he will die in 2001<sup>3</sup>. In fact, in the 90's Iran preferred to recruit and to establish new networks in the rest of the Shi'a regions, formed by pro-Iranian party members of the local Shi'a parties and movements, some being younger generation partisans, some recruited from the exiled that were present in Iran. These will be generically designated under the term Hezbollah, different from their Lebanese homologue, which represents just one of its particular forms. The new networks will be much more discrete and integrated – as possible, in the local political and public field of their countries of residence but operated as agents of influence and action in the name of Iranian state interests. The rapture is now established within the Shi'a groups, between those that remained faithful to Teheran (Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq - SCIRI, The Lebanese Hezbollah, and different factions of *al-Da'wa*) and those distanced from Iran or even opposed to it.

The disappearance of the Saddam regime puts Iran before the chance to control the political and religious field of the neighboring country, for the first time, after centuries of tensions and rivalries. However, if Teheran tries to produce a new alignment of the local movements and communities from Iraq and the region to its own interests, their

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<sup>1</sup> Abbas William SAMII, "A Stable Structure on Shifting Sands: Assessing the Hizbullah-Iran-Syria Relationship", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2008, pp. 32-53.

<sup>2</sup> Rodger SHANAHAN, "Bad Moon Not Rising: The Myth of the Gulf Shi'a Crescent", *The Lowy Institute for International Policy Analysis*, September 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Afsar HALEH, "Ayatollah al-Shirazi. Liberal Shiia cleric suppressed by Iranian hardliners", *The Guardian*, January 5, 2002.

loyalty is not unanimous and the old ruptures towards Iran persist. Thus, the duality of the 90's between pro and anti-Iranians still remains functional after 2003. Iran still has allies in the region that even though are integrated in the national political or social field of the respective countries, with all their interdependencies and conditioning, manifest solidarity with the Iranian political and strategic aims. Such is the case of SCIRI – ISCI in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the National Islamic Alliance – the Shi'a Islamist party in Kuwait, member of the Parliament after 2009<sup>1</sup>. In Saudi Arabia, where the Shi'a community is especially present in the petroleum province al-Hasa, it has a second status and its specific identity manifestations are forbidden or very limited, the main agent of Iran being the Hedjaz Hezbollah, a clandestine group with reduced numbers that opposes the Saudi power<sup>2</sup>. Instead, the Shirazist movement has radically slid from its traditional positions of the 80's as a pro-Iranian movement within the Persian Gulf area by excellence, towards an attitude of rejection of the Iranian claims of being recognized as a leader of Shi'ism or to control the Shi'a communities within the region. The Shirazists are presently influential in Saudi Arabia, where they are the main Shi'a political force led by the cleric Hassan al-Saffar, the leader of The Shi'a Islamic Movement for Reform<sup>3</sup>.

One of the important causes of Iran's incapacity to control a unitary Shi'a front in the region is the nationalization or localization of the Shi'a movements and parties<sup>4</sup>. The Shi'a identity, in essence a transnational and universal one, is at the same time permanently conditioned by its affiliations and national loyalties. This nationalization of the political Shi'ism is an indicial equation in the majority of the areas populated by Shi'a communities and it represents, as we have argued above, the very essence of the Iranian Islamic Republic. Thus, attached to the interests and particular realities of the countries in which they manifest, several Shi'a movements are estranged from Iran and sustain rather pragmatic rapports with it in the measure in which they consider that they can instrument its<sup>5</sup> resources and influence to their own gains. This is the case of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert HATEM, Derek GILDEA, "Kuwaiti Shi'a: Government Policies, Societal Cleavages, and the Non-Factor of Iran", *IMES Capstone Paper Series*, The George Washington University, May 2011, <http://www.gwu.edu/~imes/research/2011Capstones/Gildea%20Hatem.pdf> (accessed: 16 April, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Toby MATTHIESEN, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads", *Middle East Report Online*, May 6, 2009, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero050609> (accessed: 16 April, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, *The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia*, Middle East Report No. 45, 19 September 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Laurence LOUER, "The Limits of Iranian Influence Among Gulf Shi'a", *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Vol. 2, Issue 5, May 15, 2009, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Vol2Iss5-Art5.pdf> (accessed: 16 April, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> "As for Iran's regional ambitions, and its alleged leadership of a 'Shi'i crescent', these are not expressed or implemented in a sectarian Shi'i fashion. Iranian foreign policy aims to advance Iranian national interests as much as to promote any sectarian Shi'i agenda. Furthermore, the growing importance of the Shi'i Arabs of Iraq poses a threat as much as it presents an opportunity to Iran. It is as likely that the Shi'i Arabs of Iraq will rival Iran for the leadership of Shi'i communities in the Persian Gulf as it is that the Iraqi Shi'i Arabs will join with Iran as part of a pan-Shi'i alliance. The 'Shi'i crescent' is therefore largely a myth that masks important, but malleable state interests. By rejecting this myth, the United States can see the Shi'ah in the Middle East for what they are: varied communities with as much dividing them as uniting them, potential partners in some places and aspiring adversaries in others... Tehran prefers an undivided but weak Shi'i dominated Iraq rather than an Iraq divided into

the Sadrist movement, which is programmatically anchored in a nationalist message which only aligned to Teheran by conjunction on the background of the American offensive and the al-Maliki government. Muqtada al-Sadr and his movement never identified with the Iranian interests in Iraq but cannot ignore the fundamental weight that Iran has gained on the Iraqi political and economic scene. This is a marriage of interest which goes on as long as the two partners consider that they are useful to each other in their own strategies. Even SCIRI, Iran's traditional client in Iraq had to mark a distance, even if a public one, towards that which was already considered as an all too visible, embarrassing dependency on Teheran. In May 2007, SCIRI decides to change its name to ISCI and especially decides to recognize the *marja'iyya* of al-Sistani in a sign that, at least religiously, the party does not trace itself in the person of the Iranian Supreme Guide, Ali Khamenei anymore.

As a consequence, the scenario of a "Shi'a Crescent", understood as the emergence of a unified and coherent political, religious and militant front in the Shi'a populated regions that would execute Iran's interests and policies has embodied a simple theoretical projection that exaggerated the translation of the distrust of the Sunni political or religious environments. In reality, the Shi'a landscape of the Middle East is fractured and the groups, parties, elites and populations that assume a Shi'a identity and act on behalf of it are partially overlapped in a network of multiple dependencies, based on the particularities of each country. That which can be essentially observed is the intensification of the Shi'a national and local attachments which has greatly become a patriotic Shi'ism.

Still, in the last couple of years, along with the wave of change in the Arab world which has led to the disappearance of some regimes faithful to the West and to the political and social rise of the Islamist movements, one can ascertain to a resuscitation of the Iranian activism in the direction of the reconstruction of a sphere of influence, even among Sunni actors, instrumenting the Islamic dimension of discourse and cooperation. Syria and Iraq become, by excellence, spaces within which the Iranian political and military leaders try to manifest their influence as concretely as possible, motivated by their own security interests. However, Teheran meets the strategies and geopolitical interests of the great Sunni powers here, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and recently Qatar offer assistance to each other in the emergence of a new Sunni-Shi'a "Cold War" which even gets to manifest itself concretely through the support of their own clients and allies in the case of the Syrian crisis or in the attempt to control the Iraqi political and community actors.

### *An Alliance with Uncertain Future*

In relation with Iraq, Iran is indubitable, the main winner of the disappearance of the Ba'athist power; more importantly even, from Iran's perspective Bagdad does not represent any longer a threatening outpost of the Sunni world nor of the militant Arabism. The Islamic republic egressed from a regime that represented, for decades, a

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three states: Shi'i, Sunni and Kurdish. A disintegrated Iraq poses a mixture of opportunity and threat that Iran would probably prefer to avoid", Moshe MA'OZ, *The "Shi'i Crescent": Myth and Reality*, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution: Analysis Paper, No. 15, November 2007, p. V.

constant threat to its territorial, economical, oil interests that was opposed to its strategy of resurrecting the Shi'a communities and that established itself as a defender of the Sunni cause within the region. Moreover, Iran breaks loose from one of the other two great geopolitical players of the Persian Gulf, the rivalry becoming now a dual one, between Riyadh and Teheran. The new Iraq is incapable to represent a military threat for Iran, the political power is mostly controlled by Shi'a and Kurdish elites and even though they do not manifest the hoped dependency on Iranian interests they are not in any case marked by an anti-Iranian attitude that would negatively reflect in the relations between the two states. The withdrawal of the American troops from Iraq meant the end of the threat of a possible anti-Iranian Western action originating from Iraqi territory; the aggravation of the security situation in Afghanistan, marked by the re-emerging intensity of the violence produced by the Taliban forces and the news of the future withdrawal of the American troops from this theatre is another positive sign for Teheran.

Likewise, the two neighbours meet again in their official adopted attitudes towards the Syrian crisis, where they plead for a political solution and manifest a concrete distrust towards the anti-regime groups, seen as both an agent of the regional Sunni powers and of the Western states. Discretely, both Bagdad and especially Teheran participate to the conflict on the Ba'athist side, either offering logistical, intelligence, military support or accepting/coordinating the departure of some militants or brigades that participate in the clashes<sup>1</sup>. In a context in which one may notice an elevated re-confessionalization of the regional political environment, re-activating the Sunni-Shi'a tectonic plate that was becalmed after the limitation of the Iraq sectarian war, in 2008, this alignment determining the distancing of Sunni leaders of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. After the end of 2012, the Nuri al-Maliki regime will have to face a more and more concrete opposition of the population and the Sunni Iraqi leaders, parallel with an unexpected tension in relation with the president of the autonomous region of the Iraqi Kurdistan, Massud Barzani which in the last years has been in an ever more visible proximity to Turkey, especially based on economic interests<sup>2</sup>. Being at the end of his mandate, Nuri al-Maliki has very slight chances to force the Parliament to accept his third confirmation, on the background of an ever more consistent coalition of his rivals, who are perturbed by the authoritarian tendencies and the seizing of the management of power into more and more exclusivist hands.

It is certain that the new 2013 provincial elections will be extremely important because they are an occasion for new political restructuring on the Iraqi scene, after their great 2009-2010 coalitions (State of Law, *al-Iraqiyya*, National Iraqi Alliance) have proven to be fragile and inconsistent. It is a challenge for Teheran, which must find new faithful clients whose ascension to back in order to keep Iraq in its sphere of influence. Iran doesn't only have to face a new regional Sunni coalition (as the last reunion of the Gulf Cooperation Council of December 2012 proved) but especially the uncertainty regarding its destiny at the start of a new mandate of the Obama administration and especially that of the electing of a new Israeli government.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah FAYEZ, "Iraq and Iran Aligned on Syria", Al Monitor, November 8, 2012, Internet, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/11/iraq-steps-into-irans-line-on-syria-policy.html> (accessed: 16 April 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Robin M. MILLS, "Northern Iraq's Oil Chessboard: Energy, Politics and Power", *Insight Turkey*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2013, pp. 51-62.

