

Whose Agenda Is Served by the Idea of a Shia Crescent?

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Abstract

After the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, it became evident that Iraq's Shia majority would dominate the future government if a free election was going to be held. In 2004, Jordan's King Abdullah, anxiously warned of the prospect of a "Shia crescent" spanning Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This idea was then picked up by others in the Arab world, especially Egypt's President Mubarak and some elements within the Saudi government, to reaffirm the Iranian ambitions and portray its threats with regard to the Middle East. This article seeks to unearth the main causes of promoting the idea of a revived Shiism by some Arab countries, and argue that it was basically proposed out of the fear that what the American occupation of Iraq unleashed in the region would drastically change the old Arab order in which Sunni governments were dominant. While Iran downplayed the idea and perceived it as a new American conspiracy, it was grabbed by the Bush administration to intensify its pressures on Iran. It also sought to rally support in the Arab world for US Middle East policy in general, and its failed policy toward Iraq in particular. Thus, to answer the above mentioned question, a close attention would be paid to both the Arab and Iranian agenda in the Middle East after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in order to establish which entities benefit most from the perception of a Shia crescent.

The difference between the two main schools of thought in Islam, Shiism and Sunnism, is mainly based on the issue of who should have led Islam after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Shia believe that Imam Ali, the prophet's son-in-law, and his descendants (the progeny of the prophet Muhammad) were the true successors of the prophet, while Sunnis believe that Abubakr, Umar, Uthman and finally Ali, have been the true leaders of Islam. The

divide between Shiism and Sunnism is an ideological one which still exists. This division, however, has been reinforced by national, ethnic, political, social, and even economic divides in the Islamic world and has been manipulated throughout the history by some rulers, politicians and colonialists to serve their own immediate interests. Most notably, after the American occupation of Iraq in 2003, some have tried to draw geopolitical lines and differences between Shia and Sunni. They have contemplated that Iran, being the strongest Shiite country in the Middle East, is trying to create a Shia geo-political region which counters the so-called Sunni geo-political turf and to advance its national goals and objectives. Political analysts and politicians alike believe that the rise of the Shia will lead to a new Middle East drawn upon religious lines.

Discussing the different claims to the creation of the Shia crescent, the present article seeks to examine who benefits most from it. To achieve this goal, we will make three arguments with respect to the benefits and costs of the idea of the Shia crescent for Iran, Arabs, and the United States. First, we maintain that Shia revival and thus an increase in Iran's regional influence might be used by the Islamic Republic to counterbalance the America's power in the Middle East. However, at the same time it may bolster and sustain fragmentation in the Islamic world which is against Iran's pan-Islamic ideals. Secondly, we argue that the idea of a Shia crescent might attract America's attention to Iran and its growing influence in the Middle East, while distracting the Americans from the un-democratic regimes in the Arab countries. However, this could cause instability in the region by which Israel would become more powerful and as a result the Arab world will become weaker. Finally, the article suggests that though the United States might use the idea of the Shia bloc to increase pressure on Iran and try to overthrow the Iranian regime, this, however, could subsequently lead to chaos and insecurity in the region, resulting in an even greater backlash of Islamic fundamentalism against the United States and Israel.

The Shia Crescent: Myth or Reality?

There are about 1.3 billion Muslims in the world, of which, 150 million, or roughly 15% are Shia. Shia are a majority in Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Iran, and Iraq. There are approximately 35 million Shia in Pakistan and about 25 million living in India. About 70% of the populations of the Persian Gulf states are Shiites and they primarily reside on oil-rich areas that constitute about

75% of the world's oil resources (Nasr, 2006: 59; Escobar, 2007: 192). The Shiites in the Arab countries have, throughout the history, been suppressed and deprived of the basic social, economic, cultural and political rights. For example, Iraq, in which Shia constitutes 65 per cent of the population, was ruled until 2003 by Saddam's Sunni-dominated government in which there was almost no Shia representation. In Saudi Arabia, Shia have been prohibited from performing a great part of their religious ceremonies. In Bahrain, where Shiites constitute 75% of the population, they are still under Sunni rule (Fuller & Franck, 1999).

The Islamic Revolution in Iran has had an enormous effect on the Muslim world as a whole but it has secured a much dearer place in the hearts of Shiites around the world. As a result of the victory of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iran has become the safe-haven and a stray of hope for many Shiites around the world. This has come to alarm many Arab countries with Shia population, of the possibility of their rise and subsequent demand for more rights. In 2005, we observed for the first time that an Arab nation came under a Shia-dominated government. Iraq, which has always been known as the spear head of Arab nationalism and a heavy weight in Arab politics, is now being ruled by a Shia majority. This came much to the dismay of Sunni Arab leaders.

This phenomenon attracted the special attention of politicians and scholars alike resulting in two main view points. First, some argue that as a result of the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam in 2003, a Shia bloc has formed in the Middle East. Secondly, they argue that this bloc will be guided by Tehran (Walker 2006). Towards the end of 2004 when Iraq was at the brink of civil war and the stakes were high in Iran's nuclear issue, King Abdullah of Jordan concluded in an interview that the ultimate result of the war in Iraq was the creation of a Shia crescent in the Middle East ruled by Iran. He said that: "If pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government, a new 'crescent' of dominant Shia movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon could emerge ..." (Right & Baker, 2004). In September 2005, in a trip to the United States, the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, in what was a clear indication of the Saudi concern, called the war with Iraq a "handover of Iraq to Iran" (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007: 133). In April 2006, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, in an interview with the Al-Arabia television station, claimed that Shiites residing in Arab countries were more loyal to Iran than their own countries. He further added that: "Naturally Iran has an influence over Shia who makes up 65 per cent of Iraq's population" (Ibid, 134). In an

article that was published in the New York Times in November 2006, Navaf Obaid, the national security advisor of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, reflected on the immediate necessity for “massive Saudi intervention” in Iraq in alignment with Sunnis there (Obaid, 2006b).

In addition to the politicians, scholars also believe that as a major consequence of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by US-led coalition forces, Shiites have become more powerful. They have used analogies such as Shia rising, the Shia revival, Shia axis, pan-Shiism, Shia international, Shia renaissance, Shia bloc, Shia empire, Shiitestan and the Shia awakening, to express this idea. Of course, such phobias existed in the past, mainly ignited and fuelled by Sunnis in general and Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, in particular. For example, Sefr al-Hawali, a leading Saudi Arabian Wahhabi cleric warned of the Shia arc after the Shia uprisings of 1991 in Iraq, an arc stretching from Afghanistan through Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, the Alavis of Turkey and Syria and Lebanon (Sefr al-Hawali, 1991 quoted in Yamani, 2008: 151). As Yamani describes, the phobia that the Wahhabis have is an ideological one in which they believe that Shia forces can influence the Shiites of the Persian Gulf and particularly of Saudi Arabia. As a result they lead to their dominance and push back on Sunni influence in the region (Yamani, 2008: 151). It is worth noting that this concern has been mainly an ideological one and it was not transformed into a political or geo-political issue until the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Vali Nasr has discussed the issue in his latest book titled “The Shia Revival”. According to him, the fall of Saddam changed the balance of power between Shia and Sunnis in the Middle East. Not only did the United States change the regime in Iraq, it also challenged the dominant Sunni rule over the region. The most important result of the war was that a democratic government with a majority Shia population was placed in a very influential Arab country. Granted that such a power change will have religious and cultural effects, but it will subsequently lead Iran to ride “the crest of the Shia revival” (Nasr 2006: 170-1). According to him, “... the Shia revival refers to a consensus among Shia governments and movements on the point that gains made in Iraq should be protected and entrenched” (Ibid, 179). Nasr further argues that this will not mean the advent of pan-Shiism. Nor does it mean that there will be a government controlling the region but it will translate into Shia demanding more influence and presence in this region. From his perspective, the Shia revival rests on three pillars: the rise of the Shia in Iraq to power, the rise of Iran as a regional leader, and the empowerment of Shia in

Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE and Pakistan. Each of these will depend on and enhance others (Ibid, 179-184).

Maximilian Terhalle, a Persian Gulf analyst, examining the Shia awakening, argues against the formation of a Shia crescent. He believes that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent events in the Middle East such as the 33-day war between Hizbullah and Israel in 2006, led to the recognition of the so-called forgotten Shia in the Persian Gulf Arab states. According to him, the importance of Shiism in the region in the first decade of the 21st century is due to three interwoven developments: the growing geo-political importance of Iran in the region after the fall of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, the increasing awareness among Shia in the Persian Gulf states due partly to the American plans of promoting democracy in the region (Shia in the Persian Gulf states are mainly being ruled by Sunnis and are now demanding for more rights), and the decline in the power of the United States in Iraq and her inability to prevent Iran from continuing its nuclear program. It is important to note that Terhalle does not mention the Israeli loss in the 33-day war as a determining factor which increased Shia empowerment in the region. (Terhalle, 2007).

Examining the Bush Doctrine on the Middle East in an article, Ehteshami touches upon the idea of the Shia crescent. He believes that “the marking of the two key Shia ceremonies of Ashura and Tasua in Najaf and Karbala in late Spring 2003 demonstrated to the world the cultural depth and vigour of Shiism in Iraq. It also gave a fright to those Sunni neighbours who had for years feared the emergence of a ‘Shia international’ that would openly challenge their interpretation of Islam, on the one hand, and ultimately threaten their regimes by demanding more rights for the Shia minorities in those states, on the other” (Ehteshami, 2006: 111) He further argues that one can talk of a Shia crescent stretching from south Asia to the heart of the Shamat in Lebanon. “The Shia awakening can shake, if allowed to grow and consolidate, the very foundations of the political orders that were resurrected atop the old Ottoman territories early last century. In the Persian Gulf, it can shake them from within, and elsewhere it can challenge Sunni orthodoxy by presenting alternative Islamic discourses on a broad range of issues (Ibid, 112). He seems to imply that the Shia factor now acquiring an Arab dimension may help Iran to “separate the Iran-Shia ‘double whammy’ so masterfully exploited by Saddam in the 1980s to win favours from the fearful Gulf Arab states” (Ibid).

Escobar attends to the Shia revival and perpetuates the idea of a Shiitestan. He believes that a so-called Shia common front will emerge based on the premises of growing Iran's influence in the region and through uniting Shiites from Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon. But according to him, this front which may be interpreted as a Shiite crescent by alarmist Sunni Arabs, has "no military, expansionist logic behind it" (Escobar, 2007: 185). As per Escobar's beliefs, this common front is "in favour of moving towards a more market-oriented economy and a progressive liberalization of morals and public opinion". To substantiate his argument, he calls the readers to hear this from young people, women, workers in the cultural industry and philosophers in Tehran, who, in his view, set the agenda in Iran. (Escobar, 2007:185). He believes that given the current circumstances of Shia in the Middle East, the creation of a Shia crescent is very far fetched. "No Shiite crescent –and no Shiite International- may exist because the Shiite galaxy, with the exception of Iran, remains fragmented, polymorphous, and an archipelago... The only thing that unifies Shiite communities everywhere ... is opposition to 'illegitimate' Sunni Islam ..." (Ibid, 196).

And last but not least, Ray Takeyh believes that Iran has no choice but to follow a policy that is realistic and in line with its national interests instead of the messianic promotion of the Revolution. He believes that even though the Shia crescent will cause the Iraqi Shia to look upon the Iranians for support, Iran's goal in supporting them would be just towards creating a friendlier Iraq. For this reason, Iran has not only deep ties with Iraqi Shia, but with kurds and certain Sunni groups in Iraq. We can conclude from Takeyh's beliefs that even though the rise of a Shia crescent is of grave concern for countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and even Syria; Iran is not itself trying to create a Shia crescent for the purpose of reaching a balancing axis against Arab countries (Takeyh, 2006: 180-1).

In sum, from the recent developments in the Middle East one may observe the Shia empowerment in the region. However, the claim that a Shia bloc is being built to counter the Sunni Arab countries as well as the United States, can not be established due to several reasons. Firstly, as Escobar put it, except for Iran, the Shiite population is scattered and fragmented geographically. Secondly, as Nasr has argued, Shias are far from a political monolith. "They are under the control of no single authority, and no one person or entity is dictating their views of the future" (Nasr, Ibid, 183). Thirdly, the assertion of King Abdullah of Jordan that Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon constitute a Shia crescent is baseless. On the one hand Syria by itself is not a Shia

country by any standards. The population of Syria is primarily Sunni, only about 13 percent of the population are Alawis who are not even considered by many as legitimate Shia. On the other hand, even though the Shia in Iraq see themselves as allies of Iran, the Iran-Iraq war showed that their national sentiment is more important than their religious sentiment. Also, as it was clear in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion of 2003, and as Grand Ayatollah Sistani and other Iraqi officials have stated repeatedly, there will be no such Iranian “Islamic Republic” model that will be implemented in Iraq.

Iran and the Shia Crescent

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, many factors such as the Islamic ideology, nationalism, geo-politics, economy, especially the economy of oil, culture, ethnic factors, political factionalism as well as the structure of the international system, have influenced on and shaped its foreign policy (Hunter, 1999). There is an ongoing debate and many different view points as to which factor has been the main decisive and contributing factor (Haji-Yousefi 2005). Some observers believe that the structure of international system has had much effect on Iran’s foreign policy behaviour especially in determining its overall orientation. The reason behind this observation is the constant concern of Iranians and Iranian leaders over the influence and interferences of foreign governments in Iran and Iranian affairs. This concern has played a centripetal role among the leaders of the Iranian revolution (Amirahmadi and Parvin, 1988, Farsoun and Mashayekhi, 1992). For example, if we take a look at the main reasons why Ayatullah Khomeini opposed the Pahlavi regime, two main disagreements can be observed: the Shah’s dependence on, and obedience to the United States on the one hand and his tacit alliance with Israel on the other (besides the Pahlavi dictatorship). This element is even apparent in the Ayatollah’s will where he prescribes “You must be aware and careful to the games of politicians as they would like to wane you with their tricks to either the East or the West and you will be heading for these plunderers, be aware and with hard work and firm will eliminate your dependence on them.”

The main slogans of the Iranian Revolution dictate the terms “Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic” which reflect on the importance of this issue. The importance of independence and the distrust of foreigners, imperialists and capitalists are clearly stated in the constitution of Iran. From an observer point of view, this issue has resulted in a phobia of foreigners and a

negative view toward them. This phenomenon has roots in Iran's history and a particularly important role in the Islamic Revolution and its eventual foreign policy. In the present article we will not focus on this aspect of Iranian foreign policy (Haji-Yousefi 2003), but we will just refer to the 8 year Iran-Iraq war in which almost no country was on Iran's side while Iraq enjoyed the support of the whole world. After the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980, the United Nations did not consider it as a threat to international peace and security. In fact, it took the Security Council more than two years to call for the withdrawal of the Iraqi forces. Iraq freely used chemical weapons against Iranian troops. As the Iranian nation expected, it took the United Nations a whole five year period to address the issue. It is noteworthy to mention that many Western countries were involved in selling to Iraq chemical weapons for bombing the Iranians. This can be compared to the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. In twelve hours of the invasion, the United Nations Security Council demanded that Iraq leave Kuwait without any pre-conditions. The eight years of the Iran-Iraq war and Iran's unfair treatment by the international community moulded many lessons for the Iranian nation and policy-makers. "For the Iranians, the lesson was clear: When in danger, Iran can rely on neither the Geneva Conventions nor the UN Charter for protection" (Parsi, 2007: 6). Iran concluded that it can rely only on itself.

This deep suspicion of the outside world has had so high influence on Iranian foreign policy and decision making that, in our view, it is a determining factor in the country's foreign policy. In retrospect, we believe that the Iranian behaviour should be looked at as a consequence and reaction to the international environment that surrounds it. In this matter, we can observe that the Iranian foreign policy has primarily sought to steer away foreign influence and interference in Iran's affairs. Hence, one can look at Iran's foreign policy as mainly a defensive one based on the threats that it faces (Haji-Yousefi, 2005).

In view of this, once the idea of a Shia crescent was introduced by conservative Arab regimes along with the United States and Israel, Iran saw it as a threat to its interests and tried its best to refuse such rhetoric. Iran again realized that the Arab conservative states along with the United States and Israel seek to resort to this issue in order to weaken its rising position in the Middle East. This was the main lever exploited by them to oppose the Iranian Revolution. The Islamic Revolution in Iran did not paint a Shia image of itself. In fact, it focused more on an Islamic agenda as opposed to a Shia agenda. This is evident in the speeches and actions of the late founder of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini. However, this was not what many

Arab nations analyzed since they considered the Iranian Revolution an Iranian-Shia revolution instead of an Islamic one. One can observe that the idea of a Shia crescent theory falls within the same framework and context of the previous strategy to create an ethnic-religious divide in order to further isolate Iran. In other words, the United States is in favor of regime change in Iran and is planning to do so by creating yet another fear of a Shia rise. This, in their view, would enable the U.S. to build support against Iran and subsequently create a coalition to counter it militarily. This is the dominant perception in Tehran with respect to the idea of a Shia crescent. Ayatollah Khamenei, in reaction to the idea of a Shia crescent, stated that the Western policy towards the Middle East has been one that is focused on fear mongering among the countries in the Persian Gulf and within Sunni Muslims because of a growing Shia power: “The enemies of the Muslim Ummah are trying to create a division within the Muslims and to diminish the friendship that already exists” (Keyhan, 2006). The Iranian President, Mahmood Ahmadinijad, in an interview with the Al-Arabia TV Channel, said: “The Muslim Ummah is a united one and there is no talk of Shia or Sunni. We have supported Sudan. Is Sudan a Shia state or a Sunni one? We have defended the rights of the Palestinian people, are they Sunni or Shia? We don’t mind whether they are Shia or Sunni. We say that they are Muslims... The Muslim world should know that the Iranian nation and the Islamic Republic of Iran will never take any steps in creating diversity among Muslims (my translation) (<http://sepehrnews.com>). In sum, Tehran believes that the idea of the Shia crescent is nothing more than a mere tactic to create a phobia towards Shiism and Iran.

It seems that the tacit tactic of placing Muslims in front of each other, of which the Iranian spiritual leader warned the Muslims, is the latest tactic being used by the United States to control the region. The United States has started a strenuous effort to build a coalition along this thought and fear. The latest developments in the region are evidence to this occurrence. One can refer to the clashes between Fath and Hamas in the Summer of 2007, the explosion of the shrines of two Shia Imams in Samarra in the Summer of 2007, the ongoing conflict within the Shia of Iraq (Muqtada al-Sadr vis. The Iraqi government), and the recent clashes in Beirut between Hizbullah and other Lebanese factions, as few examples of making Muslims kill each other. Tehran believes these incidents are interrelated and herald a new American (and Israeli) plot in the region.

Hence, we can observe that Iran does not have much of a choice but to follow the foreign policy that it has thus followed during the last 28 years, i.e. to avoid and resist against the

hegemony of the United States in the region and to try to mend its ties with its neighbors, in particular with Arab neighbors in order to secure itself (Haji-Yousefi, 2006). Iran's foreign policy has been categorically geared towards countering the threat from the United States and its hegemony in the region. As a result, Iran has tried to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It has tried to maintain a better relationship with the Eastern bloc, support Hizbullah in Lebanon, maintain its strategic partnership and support to Syria, and support anti-American groups in Afghanistan and Iraq. A policy of friendship with its neighbors, in particular Arab states, even going as far as re-instating ties with Egypt, continuing an offensive policy towards Israel, continuing efforts to maintain the nuclear program and its unwillingness to accept resolutions passed against its nuclear program all and all point to Iran's effort to balance the American presence in the region. Thus, it is natural to expect a country which is constantly surrounded by hostile pressure to fully utilize all the resources in order to maintain its national security and to take into play any geo-politically advantageous position it may have.

Arabs and the Shia Crescent

The Arab world has always experienced lack of unity. Despite Arab nationalism which has been a point to converge on, it has always been subject to division based on political beliefs and ideas. During the Cold War, the Arab countries were divided along the East-West line and this was the main separating point. At the end of the Cold War, the East and West lines were smeared and replaced by new conservative and radical lines. This in turn introduced a new array of differences. It is believed that the first substantial blow to Arab unity occurred in the 1967 war. However, one can probably argue that the hardest blow came in 1991 when Saddam invaded Kuwait (Parsi, 2007: 140, 148). This put an end to any reasonable plans for a united Arab world as one Arab nation had attacked another. After the liberation of Kuwait by American troops and the permanent presence of the United States in the region, the consensus among Arab states completely dissolved. So each state took a more nationalistic approach to fulfill their interests as opposed to a more Arab-oriented approach in critical matters such as their relationship with the United States and their approach towards Israel. The Arab world was dismantled and no one could any longer refer to the Arab bloc. Instead as Ehteshami puts it: "The drive for collective pursuit of 'Arab national interests' gave way to the pursuit of territorial interests as defined in nation-state terms" (Ehteshami, 2006, 106).

One can say that the tragic events of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing American policy in the Middle East, killed pan-Arabism as a viable political and ideological force in the Arab world. Arab states faced a crisis and the United States relationship with some of them was strained. In some cases there was a substantial amount of friction. 15 of the 19 hijackers who hit the towers in New York and the majority of the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba were Saudi citizens. This caused so much tension between the United States and Saudi Arabia that radicals in the United States were talking of “decapitation” and moderates of “democratic pre-emption”. Thus suggestions of reducing American dependence on Saudi oil were brought forward (Glazov, 2003, Bahgat, 2001).

The subsequent war on terrorism and the U.S. policy of “either you are with us or against us”, forced many Arab states to make a decision as to their stance. The United States` decision to go to war with Iraq caused a great deal of confusion and uncertainty within the Arab world and they were faced with a determining and complex paradox. On the one hand, their relationship with the United States was at hand and they did not have much sympathy for the Iraqi dictatorship. On the other hand, they observed some of the largest anti-war demonstrations in their own countries (with the exception of Kuwait). This caused the Arab states to take an anti-war stance, though, some in particular the Persian Gulf Arab states gave logistical support to the United States. The Arab League released a statement after its March 2003 meeting condemning the invasion of Iraq. However, a raft was created between the states that did have American bases (KSA, Qatar, Kuwait) for the war with Iraq and those who did not provide much logistical support such as Lebanon, Syria and Libya (Haji-Yousefi 2004: 220-1).

The introduction of the Greater Middle East initiative and the policy of promoting democracy in the region also introduced a new challenge to undemocratic Arab regimes. They were left with a dilemma. On the one hand they needed the American protection and security assurance while on the other they had to make changes in their political and electoral system (Ehteshami & Wright, 2007). As a result, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the UAE made some preliminary changes towards democratization. We can point out that Arab states faced a domestic dilemma as well as an international one as democratization affected their domestic affairs. Traditionally, the United States favored dealing with dictatorships and strongly controlled central governments for strategic and geo-political reasons. However it seems that the U.S. concluded that it could cause the anti-American hatred. As a result they embarked on a new

plan for the Middle East which was introduced in 2004. This was something most Arab states could not accept as it was detrimental to their internal security. This discontent was clearly indicated by leaders of such states as Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Bronson, 2006).

Arab states were left with the democratization dilemma. In order to alleviate it, they looked into what was happening in Iraq to reduce the pressure being placed on them. Thus, the idea of the creation of the Shia crescent which was first mentioned by King Abdullah of Jordan in 2004 was a way to divert attention from democratization to Iran. Egypt and Saudi Arabia followed suit. Of course, part of the fear arises from their competition for power in the region-the power which they share with Iran -and the worry of Iranian dominance. However, this does not seem to be the determining factor. It seems that the reason behind the idea of the Shia crescent was to create a Shiaphobia and Iranophobia and to distract America's attention from democratization in the Arab world. Secondly there was an attempt to increase America's reliance on conservative governments in the Middle East, those who have strongly controlled central governments. In short, the United States was caught in the midst of the instability and insurgency in Iraq (which was being fueled by many Arab states). After the establishment of a democratic government in Iraq and making the Shia the de-facto rulers there, the Arab states took the opportunity to introduce a Shia crescent theory and thus to raise the concerns of the United States towards Iran and align the U.S. with their own interests.

Some analysts believe that the main reason behind the Shia crescent theory is the fear of Arab states of an escalating civil war between Shia and Sunnis in Iraq, one which might eventually ignite a Shia-Sunni war in the region (Walker, 2006). However, this does not seem to be the most important factor due to the fact that throughout history Shia have generally never risen against their Sunni rulers to avenge the crimes that were done against them. Further, it has always been Sunnis and in particular Wahhabis who have been the ones that attacked and killed Shia mercilessly considering them infidels. We don't need to look far in modern times to see the reality of this claim. When the Taliban took over Afghanistan, they butchered and massacred any Shiite they could find. However, after the fall of the Taliban we did not see any reaction by the Shia to avenge their massacre. In Iraq, after Al-Qaeda and the Al-Zawahiri network established their base there, they placed a bomb near the Shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf in 2003 which claimed over 100 lives including one of the most prominent Shia clerics, Ayatollah Baqir Hakim. Also, as noted previously, a bomb was planted in the Shrine of two Shia Imams in Samarra in the summer

of 2007. In these instances, the Shia did not respond to the horrendous acts by taking vengeance on Sunnis as their leader Grand Ayatollah Sistani had reiterated to them not to do so. Ayatollah Sistani was well aware of the intentions of the Wahhabis for initiating a Shia-Sunni conflict in Iraq and prevented it masterfully. In addition, it is Sunnis and Wahhabi leaders that consider Shia as heretics and infidels and there is no such converse ruling coming from Shia leaders. The 33-day war in 2006 between Hizbullah and Israel proved that Muslims, Shia and Sunni, would unite when encountering a common enemy. The Wahhabis and the Salafis are a very small minority among Muslims and have raised the wrath of most Muslims since they have tried to ignite such conflicts (Ayoob, 2005).

As a result, one can observe that the main reason for the concern of Arab states about what they call the Shia crescent is not the rise of Shia to power in Iraq, but in fact their fear of democratization. In other words, the real threat to the Arab world is its democratization and not necessarily the rise of Shia power in the region. As Vali Nasr implicitly says that the concern of Arab states about the rule of the majority in Iraq mainly refers to the fact that it is the first Arab country in which the rule is determined by a democratic process (Nasr, 2006: 109). The revival of Shia power in the region points to the legitimacy crisis that is erupting among the leaders of the Arab world in which they fear democratization at their doorsteps. Yamani states this point aptly with regard to Saudi Arabia, a point which also applies to other Arab states: “The Shia revival thus threatens to expose the erosion of legitimacy and the increasing gap between the Sunni Wahhabi rulers and their people” (Yamani, 2008:151). It is interesting to note that even though this issue was brought up by the King of Jordan in 2004 after the invasion of Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Egypt became more concerned towards the idea of a Shia crescent after the 33-day war between Israel and Hizbullah condemning the latter (Fattah, 2006). The popularity of Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah among Arabs points to the vivid fact that the main issue facing Arabs and the Middle East in general is not Shia and Sunni disputes. In fact, it is not even a Persian-Arab issue (president Ahmadinijad’s popularity in the Arab world attests to this fact) so much so as it is a battle for legitimacy among states that have traditionally had authoritarian regimes and rules such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia which terribly fear democratization.

The Arab states which have openly opposed the U.S. plans for democratization in the Middle East are also the ones which have brought up the Shia crescent theory and have presented it as a major threat to the region. That is why Fouad Ajami, a professor at the School of

Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University, believes that Arab states are more worried about democratization than they are about a Shia revival in the region. Ajami further argues that “The idea that the Shia will make their claim on political power in the affairs of the Arab world and that it will be peaceful is not really tenable. It will be a very, very contested political game and we have to accept it. We must not be scared off by what the Jordanians and Egyptians and others are telling us. ... We should not be frightened of radical Shiism; we should understand these things on their own terms. We should not jump when someone says to us ‘radical Shiism’, for one interesting reason. The 19 who came our way were not Shia. They were good Sunni boys, and we should remind the Arab regimes when they try to frighten us out of our skins that in fact we also have another menace, which is radical Sunnism” (Walker, 2006).

The United States and the Shia Crescent

In April 2008, in a very rare event, the former U.S. president Jimmy Carter met with Hamas’s political leader Khalid Mashal in Damascus. Carter elaborated that the only way the United States will be able to reach its objective of a Palestinian state by the end of the year, is by incorporating Hamas into any negotiations it will have. This point was obvious in the unsuccessful Middle East Peace conference which was held in Annapolis on the 27th of November, 2007. Hizbullah, Iran and Hamas were not invited to the conference. In other words, the United States does not want those who dare to voice their opposition to its policies in the Middle East (read its hegemony) to be included in the peace negotiations. Carter argued against this strategy as he wrote in the New York Times that in the Middle East, “the path to peace lies in negotiation, not in isolation” (Carter, 2008).

Considering everything, it is a mere fact that president Bush Middle East policy, particularly after September 11th, has been a divisive policy of either you agree with us or you are against us. As a result, the countries of the Middle East were divided into two categories of against or with. Iran, Syria, Hizbullah of Lebanon and the Hamas government of Palestine are looked at as those opposed to U.S. foreign policy. In view of this, the general U.S. policy towards the region has been one of force in which they seek to break the will of all those opposed to them with the threat and use of force. In this manner they have claimed to alleviate and root out the national security threats they see in the Middle East. Afghanistan was occupied in 2001 followed by a 2003 invasion of Iraq. However, neither led to the resolution of the main

security issues nor did they solve the problems in the Middle East. The U.S. was able to offload some of the pressures of Afghanistan over its NATO allies. However, instability still exists in Afghanistan. Just to point to some of the instability in Afghanistan, we may say on April 27, 2008, there was an attempt on Hamid Karzai's life and on the following day a bomb explosion caused 29 casualties. Five years has passed since the occupation of Iraq and since then stability has not come to the state, though much progress has been made in the democratization of the country such as a ratified constitution and parliamentary elections. Regardless of that, violence carries on, on a daily basis. As of April 2008, 4061 U.S. troops have given their lives to the war and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have been killed.

The U.S. foreign policy failure in the Middle East has resulted in her attempt to look for an alibi to blame other nations and consider certain occurrences in the region as the possible causes of its failure. Iran seems to best fit the description of their blame playing game. It is easy for the United States to blame Iran and the "Iran Puzzle" as the main cause of its unsuccessful foreign policy in the Middle East and see the solution of the "Iran Puzzle" as the only remedy to all of the Middle Eastern problems. The traditional point of view, especially among the Arab countries, has been that the heart of all the problems in the Middle East is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and none of the other problems can be resolved unless this one is tackled properly. However, the United States has tried to portray Iran as the root problem of the Middle East and it has pointed to its growing influence in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine as an evil which the Arab world must confront and counter. This policy resembles very much the U.S. Cold War strategy against the communist threat.

In essence, the American military presence in the Middle East is geared towards containing Iran and countering any influence that it might conceive in the region. Iran is practically surrounded by U.S. military presence. The invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq from one end, the establishment of US military bases north and south of Iran (Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE) from another end, and the permanent placement of naval carriers in the Persian Gulf, have served to completely encircle Iran. It is interesting to note that the Arab Persian Gulf states have played along with this policy and have not voiced any concern since they see their security assurance being under U.S. military presence and support. We have observed an increasing number of voiced military threats from the United States towards Iran in the past couple of years, most recently on April 30th, 2008

when Bush, Rice and Gates verbally threatened Iran with military action. Some observers believe that the United States might resort to even using nuclear weapons in order to change the regime in Tehran (Hersh, 2006).

Secondly, the United States has tried to use any means possible to put pressure on Iran and to limit its reach. Preventing Iran's access to nuclear know how and technology, leading the drive to push Iran's nuclear case from the IAEA board of directors to the Security Council and ratifying 3 resolutions in the Security Council against Iran which imposed economic sanctions on that state, accusing the Iranian Revolutionary Guards as an entity that seeks to acquire weapons of mass destruction, declaring that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds force is a terrorist entity and allocating 75 million dollars for the promotion of democracy in Iran, all have been serving this goal. In this instance, Arab countries have been publicly low key about this issue and have been playing a two-faced game.

Thirdly, the United States has tried to create a regional coalition in the Persian Gulf to counter and confront Iran. Conservative Arab states are the centripetal piece of this regional coalition for the Americans. This so-called regional coalition is based on the same post September 11th policy that the United States has followed to draw the line between those who are with it and those who are against it, namely, Iran, Syria, Hizbullah of Lebanon and Hamas. In contrast to the Greater Middle East policy of the United States that was adopted in 2004 for greater democracy in the Middle East, the United States has embarked on a mission to create a regional coalition from conservative Arab states which are authoritarians, either monarchies or dictatorships. The fear of these states from the developments in Iraq and the Shia revival might cause them to line up in order to counter Iran, however, such has yet to happen. The Annapolis peace conference and the constant visits by U.S. officials to the Middle East were geared towards obtaining this objective (Sicherman, 2007).

Fourthly, the United States has increased its weapon sales to both Israel and Saudi Arabia. In October 2007, the Bush administration announced its plans to sell 20, 30 and 13 billion dollar worth of weapons and military equipments to Persian Gulf Arab states, Israel and Egypt, respectively. The U.S. Secretary of State Rice and her under-secretary, Nicholas Burns both reiterated that the objective of selling weapons to these countries, in particular the Persian Gulf Arab states, was to counter and balance Iran in the region. (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1249890>).

Even though the diplomatic confrontation between Iran and the United States is not a new phenomenon, as Nasr and Takyeh both point out, the interests that America is seeking are different. The Bush administration believes that it can resolve the problems of the Middle East through containing and controlling Iran (Nasr and Takyeh, 2008). It is based on this very principle that it believes it can convince Arab governments, particularly, those of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to recognize the government of Nuri al-Maliki in Iraq. As a result, the United States believes that the ongoing insurgency and instability in Iraq will allow for Iran's influence to grow and to create a Shia bloc which will prove to be a serious point of concern for the Sunni Arab world. The United States' recent efforts to convince Arab countries to open and expand their embassies in Baghdad are in line with this objective. The United States is also convinced that Arab countries would bring much pressure in order to reduce the influence which Iran has on Lebanon's Hizbullah. It also believes that Arab countries and Israel share a common goal of eliminating Hamas and this will lead to a resolution between the Arabs and Israel (Nasr & Takyeh, 2008).

It is clear now that the United States did not contemplate or prepare for a Shia revival as a result of the fall of Saddam Hussein. However, it is now trying to direct this phenomenon in order to achieve its own interests. In other words, the United States is trying to take advantage of the uncertainty and fear that the Arab states feel as a result of a Shia revival in order to create a regional coalition including Israel and Arab states against Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas. From the Bush administration's perspective, once such an alliance is formed, Iran's influence and power in the region will be reduced and their objectives will have been met. The counter balance with Iran will firstly lead to a favorable resolution for the West in regard to the current crisis in Lebanon, in which Hizbullah will be weakened and even defeated. Secondly, a weaker Iran would have a smaller hand in Palestine and Hamas and as a result a two state solution can be adopted. Thirdly, by using the Shia fear instrument, Bush administration would force Arab nations to recognize the government of Nuri al-Maliki in Iraq, thus creating more stability in Iraq and reducing Iran's role in that country. The frequent trips by the officials in the Bush administration in their last year in office indicate the urgency that the U.S. sees in obtaining its goals. One can point to Bush's Middle East trip in January 2008 (to Israel, the Palestinian territories, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt) and to Dick Cheney's trip to the Middle East in the March of 2008 (to Oman, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Palestinian territories and

Turkey) and to Condoleezza Rice's and Robert Gates' frequent visits to the Middle East in 2007 and 2008.

Some Concluding Remarks

In this article we tried to analyze the idea of a Shia crescent and answer the question of whose agenda would be served by the idea of a Shia crescent. By investigating the case for each of Iran, the Arab world and the United States, we concluded that it seems that Arab countries are trying to create an atmosphere of Shiaphobia and Iranophobia so that they would distract the United States' attention from their own internal affairs. The stated U.S. policy of democracy promotion in the Middle East in 2004 came to being while the U.S. was intoxicated with its success in Iraq, calling for democratization in the Middle East and as a result creating a crisis for many Arab countries and to their eventual disagreement. As stated by Yamani, the idea of a Shia crescent was first created by Saudi Arabia but reiterated by King Abdullah of Jordan so that the American attention could be directed at the Shia revival in the Middle East (Yamani, 2008). Also, the United States shortly found itself stuck in Iraq and it was looking for an exit strategy. So it defined Iran as the root cause of all the problems in the Middle East and it left behind its Middle East democratization-promotion policy relying once again on dictatorial Arab states so that it could counter Iran and its supporting entities such as Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas.

From an observer's point of view, this policy is similar to that of U.S. during the Cold War and is not only unable to contain Iran's influence in the region but it will only create more instability there. The Bush administration believes that it can overcome the problems of the Middle East with the use of military force and the language of force. The Bush administration along with its Neo-conservative hawks whose view of the world is based on an American empire has turned its face to the realities of the Middle East and has not done anything but to create instability which is not even in American interests.

It would seem natural for Iran to take advantage of the Shia revival in the Middle East. However, Iran itself is well aware of its own limitations. Firstly, as stated earlier, Iran's revolution was an Islamic revolution and not a Shia one and all of its constituencies were based on Islam. So any portrayal of this revolution as a Shiite one is an incorrect assessment and a result of incorrect propaganda. Secondly, Shia have always been discriminated against and in no time has there been a case when Shia have come to power and misused it to conduct a vendetta

by creating fear and uncertainty. However, the converse has not been the same in the case of Sunnis and Salafis in particular. Thirdly, objectives of Iran which are stated in its 20-year outlook are ones which require a very stable Middle East and it is thus not in its interests to promote and support insecurity and instability in the region. Of course, naturally as any other nation would do when it sees its national security in danger Iran would use all resources at its disposal in order to protect it.

Arab states must also realize that the days of dictatorial regimes have come to an end. They should not run away from their own domestic issues. In fact they need to address them regardless of how complex they are. Secondly, they must recognize that what has happened in Iraq is here to stay. They must learn to co-exist with a Shiite Iraq and to recognize and establish ties with it. If not, other countries will fill in the vacuum that they will create. Thirdly, they must understand that the outstanding challenge facing the Middle East is the Israeli-Palestinian issue and without a proper resolution of this issue, the challenges in the Middle East will not go away.

Lastly, the United States needs to learn a lot from its previous experiences in dealing with Iran. As a first lesson, it should recognize from its more recent experience in Afghanistan and Iraq that using force cannot alleviate problems. Softer policies like those adopted by the EU or China have shown more success and they will eventually outmaneuver those of the United States. Secondly, it must understand that putting more pressure on Iran will not result in anything tangible as Iran has showed over and over again that foreign pressure will only lead to a stronger government and a more ardent nation behind their government. The United States and the international community must recognize that it is due to their incorrect policies especially during the Iran-Iraq war that Iran is pursuing a nuclear program. It is vital that Iran be recognized as another player in the international community. If its security concerns are being acknowledged, Iran would not have a reason to become adventurous in the region. Thirdly, the United States should continue its democratization-promotion policy and make it its primary concern in the Middle East as the majority of the Middle Eastern population would like to have peace and stability rather than terrorism. It must also realize that those who turn towards terrorism and extremism are mainly instigated by the policies of Israel and the United States. If the United States pulls away from its demanding policies in the Middle East, then there is no reason for extremists to fuel the fires of hate and terrorism.

In sum, this article aims at the point that the idea of a Shia crescent will not benefit anyone in the Middle East. In fact, it will only create more instability and violence for all the players in the region and beyond. This lose-lose policy should be reversed into a win-win policy and in that effect the United States would play a key and determining role.

NOTES

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