The “Shiite Crescent”: Fact or Fiction?

The Reality of a Potential Power Shift in the Middle East

M. A. Thesis

Ágnes Remete

International Relations
Specialization in Diplomacy
Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Zsolt Rostoványi
ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present thesis is to examine the future of the Shiite-Sunni sectarian antagonism and struggle for the political power in the Middle East. The phenomenon of the Shiite revival, or as it is mostly referred to, the “emerging Shiite crescent” is expected to generate clashes and tensions in the region.

As being the most prominent regional Shiite power, the study is especially concerned with the role of Iran in the Middle East, but also puts emphasis on the internal political systems of the region’s Arab states, focusing on Shiite political ambitions. As being a significant factor, the study cannot disregard the effects of the Iraqi War either.

The outcome of the research shows that it is not a real assumption to expect a monolithic “Shiite crescent” evolving in the Middle East, particularly not with the leadership of Iran. We can rather speak about several Shiite crescents, i.e. in more and more countries of the region the Shiite population begins to strive for equal rights and equal representation.

Further investigation concerning the question is still to be carried out. A wider range of actors is needed to be involved in the research, together with other decisive factors, such as the religious and historical aspects.
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Introduction

The so-called “Shiite crescent” is said to be a myth, just a mere legend, while others claim that it is a real threat, which can influence the power balance of the Middle East. The present thesis intends to contribute to this debate by presenting numerous arguments, facts and possible future tendencies concerning the issue.

Studies relating to the topic tend to focus mainly on the power balance of the Middle East from a general, and principally a military point of view considering Iran and Israel as the most important players in the game. Few of them aim to analyse smaller actors and they do not make any effort to reveal the issue by jointly highlighting the sectarian and political aspects as important driving forces shaping the political structure of the region. Furthermore, research about the issue is rather incomplete, partly because of the aforementioned focus preferences, partly because of the fact that these processes are happening just in our days, thus it is difficult to provide a comprehensive analysis in them.

The Shiite revival, or as it is mostly referred to, the emerging “Shiite crescent” in the Middle East and its effects on the political stability of the region is an especially relevant and substantial issue in present-day world politics and international relations studies. It is considered to be a significant key-question in the Shiite-Sunni conflict that is already smouldering in the region. The Iraqi War, the legality and the success of which is quite questionable, has revoked or rather enhanced the re-activation of the Shiite community that had been forced into an inferior and discriminated position throughout many decades. The author believes that this development can be regarded as a positive starting point paving the way of a longer process, although certainly not from the Sunni leaders’ point of view, who are looking upon the new situation as a gradually evolving threat to their power position.

The topic is particularly relevant, despite the fact that it is eight years since the Iraqi War has started. Namely, processes evoked by the war are shaping very intensively nowadays and we still have to wait for several years until their culmination. The thesis is therefore attempting to jointly examine processes that have started recently, are just happening in our days and are expected to happen in the near future.

During the research, the following hypotheses are intended to be justified: it is not a real assumption to expect a monolithic “Shiite crescent” evolving in the Middle East,
particularly not with the leadership of Iran. One can rather speak about several Shiite crescents, i.e. in a rising number of countries of the region the Shiite population has begun to strive for equal rights and equal representation; a process that can result in smaller or larger political clashes and a conflict that will shape the future of the Middle East.

The study aims to meet the requirement of objectivity, thus it intends to present arguments for and against the issue equally and fairly. While selecting the sources, the author has also paid special attention to the purpose of neutrality and balance, using the works of both Western authors and Muslim authors.

In order to understand Shiite-Sunni antagonism and the background of the whole problem defined by the phenomenon of the “Shiite crescent” it is indispensable to get acquainted with the processes and important clash points existing within the Islamic civilization. Thus, in the first part of the thesis the author would like to provide a short overview on the historical background of the Shiite-Sunni conflict and the main dividing features within Islam.

After the short introductory part, the study focuses on the events of the near past, that is, on the period after the start of the Iraqi War. Events taken place since the outbreak of the war are rather hectic. Firstly, they can be characterized by the wide scale activism of the Shiites in every field of life, including the sphere of politics, religion, and economics. Secondly, we can experience another phenomenon that is parallel to the process of Shiite revival: the awakening of oppositional voices in each country of the Middle East. Moreover, an extremely important component of this process is the gradually growing general discontent with the present ruling regimes, regardless of religious affiliation.

In the third part of the thesis the author would like to present the power aspirations of the Islamic Republic and the related Sunni concerns. First of all, the aim is to examine the reality of the Sunni fear and to look carefully into the following questions: Is it really in the interest of Iran to manipulate Shiite population on a regional level? Is it really Iran, who is pulling the strings or one can rather speak about autonomous developments?

After presenting the processes taking place in the region the author intends to justify the assumption that the evolvement of a monolithic “Shiite crescent” is an unrealistic scenario in the Middle East – neither with the leadership of Iran nor with the command of any other power, since the idea is already suffering from several severe
barriers.

Finally, I would like to outline the future tendencies of the Shiite-Sunni conflict and its possible solutions. Anyhow, the future of the conflict depends very much on the possible reactions of the United States and Iran to the shifted power balance of the Middle East.

1. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

1.1 The “Shiite Crescent”

The term “Shiite crescent” was firstly mentioned and used by Jordanian King Abdullah on 8th December 2004 in an interview given to the Washington Post, in which King Abdullah reflected on the Iraqi events by assuming that a “Shiite crescent” is expected to emerge in the region and Iran definitely has a prominent role in this process. With this, the Jordanian king clearly referred to the empowerment of the Shiite population in the Middle Eastern region and above all, to the Shiite Iraqi government and to the Iranian positional gains, which could evoke a Shiite chain-reaction in the region, shifting the traditional Shiite-Sunni geopolitical balance and particularly destabilizing Gulf countries with Shiite populations.

The “Shiite crescent” includes all Middle Eastern countries, which have a significant Shiite population: first and foremost Iran, Iraq (mainly the southern part), Syria and Lebanon (also the southern region) in one direction and Kuwait, Saudi Arabia (the East Coast), Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the other. If we look at the geographical positions of these countries on the map, or more precisely the territorial locations of the Shiite population in these countries, they really form a shape resembling a crescent or a hook.

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1 “If pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government, Abdullah said, a new "crescent" of dominant Shiite movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon could emerge, alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects and pose new challenges to U.S. interests and allies.” For the detailed interview, see: Wright – Baker [2004]
The term “Shiite crescent” has soon become a popular expression, i.e. a “buzz word” in world politics. Moreover, at the foreign ministerial meeting of Israel and the U.S. Ehud Barak referred not to a “Shiite crescent”, but to a “Shiite banana”, extending from Iran through Syria, to Hezbollah and Hamas. Later, during one of his visits in the U.S. he accused the president of Syria of trying to create a “Shiite banana” together with Iran, which would connect Tehran, Bagdad, Damascus and the southern part of Lebanon. In October 2005 and in June 2006 two big conferences were held in the U.S. dealing with this topic. Furthermore, the next month the New York Times published a map showing the “Shiite crescent” as a belt running from Lebanon to eastern Saudi Arabia (Kramer [2007]).

In modern times the “fertile crescent” denoted those countries in the Middle East, from Iraq to Israel, where the soil and the water facilitated agricultural productivity in contrast to the Syrian and Arabian desert regions. In our days, the word “crescent” has been attached to the Shiite renaissance and its expansion from Iran to Lebanon and the Gulf monarchies. Besides this, the “crescent” symbolizes a new moon, a new beginning. The Shiite revival can also be a new beginning in the Middle Eastern region, since “it is

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2 The two conferences were the following, respectively: A Shia Crescent: What Fallout for the U.S.? (Transcript) [2005]; The Emerging Shia Crescent: Implications for the Middle East and U.S. Policy [2006]
fertile with potentiality and its sword, like Muhammad’s, is drawn against the enemies” (Nisan [2009]).

1.2 Conceptual and Terminological Limitations

The study attempts to analyse such region and civilization, which are differing fundamentally from the mechanisms and attitudes relevant in Western civilization. Therefore, it has to tackle numerous limitations with regard to applicable notions and concepts concerning the Middle East, as they are completely different from the ones used in the West. Moreover, some of them are even entirely inadaptable within this special region. Another limitation is due to practical factors: space, time, and content.

The objective of the present thesis is the analysis of the problems defined and symbolized by the concept of the “Shiite crescent”. Consequently, the research is limited, both in space and content. The author does not intend to analyse either the entire Islamic community or the entire Middle Eastern region. The aim is to examine and present only countries, which are either the components of the theoretical “Shiite crescent”, so they have a significant Shiite population, or neighbouring countries, where the Shiite question has appeared in any form. As in Iraq the Shiites are already in power, the study will not analyse Iraqi events in detail; they are only serving as a reference point in the research. Besides this, the concerned countries do not represent equal weights in the question, which is to be reflected by the differing emphases put on them within the thesis. Accordingly, the author intends to describe Iran, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Bahrain more exhaustively, while Kuwait and Syria are to be presented less profoundly. Finally, the role of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates is almost negligible concerning the issue, thus they are not examined at all in the thesis.

As the problems defined by the “Shiite crescent” touch upon basically political and power related questions, the study concentrates primarily on the political dimension of Shiite-Sunni antagonism and the Shiite revival. Both the religious and ethnical aspects are presented in close relation to the political sphere, since in most times they cannot be separated in practice either.

As for religious questions, the primary goal is to analyse the Sunni and Shiite sects, however, it cannot be neglected that there are numerous religious branches within Islam. Moreover, even Sunnism and Shiism are unable to form monolithic unities; therefore there are no authentic Shiite and Sunni positions. Heterogeneity within the
Shiite sect is analysed in the study to some extent, but in case of Sunnism, it is necessary to assume unity and homogeneity. This is due to the fact that it would make an analysis especially complicated if the study examined the position of each religious branch, and according to the author it would impair coherence.

Regarding ethnical questions, the study is focusing on Arab and Persian ethnicities, since from an ethnical point of view the Persian-Arab antagonism stands in the centre of the Shiite-Sunni clash.

The time frame of the study has been chosen on the basis of relevance, thus the author intends to analyse the events of the 20th century, namely the period after the emergence of modern states briefly and contemporary events comprehensively. Historical references mainly serve for understanding the background and roots of present day conflicts.

As referred to above, the region of the narrowly interpreted Middle East and the Muslim civilization have considerably unique and special characteristics, which are completely different from the Western world. Consequently, several Western concepts and terms can be applicable in the region only with reservations. Since religious and political community practically overlap in the Islamic world, Western political concepts will be somewhat inaccurate in any case. However, for the time being we have only these terms and notions at our disposal, so the thesis will inevitably use them, with special attention to their limits. Thus, in case of the Islamic world, the notions of nation, nation state, ethnicity, secular state, and secularity can be applied only with reservations.

Another problem resulting from the peculiarity of the region is even more important from the aspect of the thesis: unfortunately we do not have either reliable statistics or representative surveys concerning the region. These difficulties must be taken into account, if one does not want to make inconsiderate conclusions.
2. The History and Roots of the Shiite-Sunni Strife

The basic principle of Islamic religion is solidarity and the equality of community members, regardless of their origin or gender. Consequently, in theory, there is no, or at least according to the original religious doctrines there should not be any kind of discrimination within the Islamic community, except if it is based on real differences arising from differing mental and physical capabilities (Rostoványi [2004b]). However, the real situation is much more complex.

The religious, ethnical and theoretical heterogeneity of the Islamic Ummah is obvious, in spite of Muslim attempts to veil it. Moreover, besides all these natural differences, the political sphere is evidently pervading every dimension, forming and often deepening the already existing conflicts substantially. Different political interests and actual power aspirations can override existing ethnical or religious conflicts, just as it happened in the course of the Iraq-Iran War and the Second Gulf War.

From the aspect of the present thesis the most important dividing factor within the Islamic Ummah is based on religious differences. The Shiite-Sunni conflict stands in the centre of the discourse concerning the “Shiite crescent”, although it should be noted that certain dimensions cannot be separated completely from each other as they are in constant interaction. Therefore, the issue of the religious clash cannot be complete without examining the political aspects, since the doctrinal differences between the two main sects were immediately transformed into a political rivalry, although doctrinal-theoretical questions have always remained on the surface, disguising political interests.

2.1 Religious Split and the Struggle for Political Power

The most vigorous dividing factor within Islam is the Shiite-Sunni religious separation – it is even salient for the laic, Western observers, who consider Islamic community as being a monolithic, united block. However, the reason of the split is not rooted primarily in religious-doctrinal differences, but in the political circumstances of the age.

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3 The image of Muslim unity is strongly reinforced by the Muslims themselves, who try to disguise differences, controversies and problems within the community. For further details, see: Islam United? A Comparison of Shi’ite and Sunni Belief and Practice. Islamic Studies in Christian Perspective, available at: [http://www.rim.org/muslim/shiite.htm](http://www.rim.org/muslim/shiite.htm)

4 This is somewhat questioned by the fact that even some Washington counterterrorism officials could not differentiate between the two sects and could not say which group does the Al Qaeda, their most prominent enemy in the war against terrorism, belong to (Stein [2006]).
Ali and the question of proper succession is the central feature at the origin of the religious schism, which occurred in the decades immediately following the death of the Prophet in 632. Many followers did not accept to choose the leader of the community on the basis of a consensus. According to them, the caliphate should pass down only to direct descendants of Mohammed and Ali is the one and only successor of the Prophet. They often refer to themselves as “people of the house”, or “people of the prophet”. So, while Shiites feel that Ali should have been the first caliph, Sunnis regard him as the fourth and last of the “rightly guided caliphs” (successors to Mohammed as leader of the Muslims) following on from Abu Bakr 632-634, Umar 634-644 and Uthman 644-656 (Amin [2001]).

Initially, Shiism was a clearly political movement and evolved among the Arabs. It became a real sect only after Ali’s rise to power and particularly after his death. The theological firmament of the separation became really dynamic after the killing of Ali’s son, Hussein, at the Battle of Karbala. However, Hussein’s infant son, Ali, survived, so the line continued. Yazid formed the hereditary Ummayad dynasty and the division between Shiism and what came to be known as Sunnism was set.

It is undeniable that there are doctrinal, ritual, moreover anthropological differences, but the same can be concluded concerning the numerous branches within the two main sects, since neither Sunnism nor Shiism can be regarded as a homogeneous, monolithic religion.

Basically, Shiism differs from Sunnism in three fundamental features: the institution of the Imamate and autocratic leadership (which are closely interconnected), activism and the special importance of martyrdom (Rostoványi [1998]).

Nevertheless, in spite of existing theological differences, the real roots of hostility between the two sects can be found within the sphere of politics. From the very beginning, Sunni caliphs worried about the spread of Shiism less as a theological deviation than as a political threat (Nasr [2006a]). Namely, Shiite Islam spread rapidly throughout the region, fusing with numerous ethnicities and cultures, which led to

5 At the Battle of Karbala, Hussein and his outnumbered army were defeated and slaughtered by the troops of Yazid. From that time on, martyrdom has been a central, special element of the Shiite religion and Ashura, the commemoration ceremony of the battle, is the most important religious event of the Shiite community (Rostoványi [1998]).

6 According to Sunnis the leader of the community may not possess special spiritual qualities, since his main and most important task is to help the faith survive and grow rather than realize its spiritual ideas. On the other hand, Shiites believe that the community needs such a leader, who is, due to his special spiritual qualities, able to renew and strengthen continuously the bond between man and God, helping people to live in accord with the inner truths of religion (Nasr [2006a] p. 39).
further splits within Shiism. It soon formed a majority in several areas (today’s Iraq, Iran, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan), while elsewhere it formed significant minorities (Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Pakistan). But outside Iran, Sunnis have historically had a lock on political power, even where the Shiites have the numerical advantage. After the destruction of the Abbasid caliphate in 1258, attacks on Shiism grew even sharper and the demonization of Shiism gradually took shape. Shiites were considered to be inferior, infidel and they were even treated as traitors – at some places their situation was even worse than that of the Jews or Christians. According to Vali Nasr, for Shiites, Sunni rule has been like living under apartheid (Ghosh [2007]). In the Arab world, the rulers of all twenty-two states (except for the largely Christian Lebanon) have traditionally hailed from the orthodox Sunni majority, including Iraq and Bahrain, where Shiites actually make up the majority (Hirst [2005]). The Shiites of Saudi Arabia have been undoubtedly in the worst situation, where Wahhabism, the most conservative religious branch of Sunnism became the state’s religious ideology.

The abolishment of the Ottoman Empire officially ended four centuries of Ottoman rule of the Arab lands. Still, the French and British colonial presence had little bearing on the Shiite-Sunni power balance. However, one should not underestimate the significance of the fact that changes in power relations generated debates between Shiites and ruling elites in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Lebanon (Nakash [2006]). Thus, Shiite activism, even though only in slight degree, actually started already in the 1920s.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Shiites joined secular nationalist causes and looked to pan-Arabism or leftist ideologies to bridge the sectarian divide and include them in the political mainstream (Nasr [2004]). However, this was not the case, especially not with Arab nationalism, since it held an inherent bias against Shiism from the very beginning (Nasr [2006a]). The idea of Arab unity therefore became more and more equivalent to Sunni unity, namely, for the Shiites Arab nationalism meant more and more a process of “Sunnification”.

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7 Shiites were accused of having collaborated with the Mongols during the sack of Baghdad and of having betrayed the Abbasids.
8 In Pakistan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia there are still legends circulating today according to which Shiites have tails, or shaking hands with a Shiite is polluting, thus it is needed to wash hands immediately if it happens (Nasr [2006a]).
9 Wahhabism emerged in the Arabian Peninsula as an answer to the weakening of Islam and the growing popularity of Christianity. The anger of Wahhabis was not primarily directed at foreigners, but at the “traitors and corrupters of Islam”, who, according to the Wahhabis, distorted the real heritage of the Prophet, irrespectively of being a Shiite or a Sunni (Lewis [2004]).
10 Indeed, many of the Iraqi Shiites claimed that the British formation of modern Iraq undermined the unity of the country and it reinforced sectarian divisions between Shiites and Sunnis (Nakash [2006]).
The growing authoritarian character of the modern states and institutionalized discrimination have made the Shiites learn the harsh lesson: secular regimes and ideologies may come and go but Sunni biases endure (Nasr [2006a] p. 90). In the 1870s and 1980s Shiites began to look to other movements for remedy. They turned to Islamic fundamentalism and such movements, which were exclusively Shiites.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 further inflamed tensions and the period of relative tolerance came to an end. Ayatollah Khomeini launched the export of revolution, generating direct threat for the neighbouring Arab countries. Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabi ulama began to pursue a strategy of containing Shiism by building a network of seminaries, mosques, institutions, preachers, academics, etc. that would articulate and emphasize Sunni identity and eliminate Iran’s ideological influence (Nasr [2006a]). In Iraq, in spite of forming a temporary league against Iran between 1980 and 1988, a harsh anti-Shiite rhetoric and practice began, which even became much more intense after the Shiites’ spontaneous revolt in 1991 and turned into violence (Ghosh [2007]). By the mid-1990s (after the death of Khomeini) the revolutionary enthusiasm had dried up and Shiites had to become acquainted with reality: given their numbers, this was not a conflict they could win, and as the Sunnis became more militant, the Shiites would only suffer more (Nasr [2006a]).

Shortly after the attacks of September 11, 2001 the Sunni-Shiite divide was temporarily replaced by pan-Arab solidarity (Beehner [2006]). However, the overthrow of the Saddam regime in 2003 led to the revival of sectarian strife and violence – this process is still going on today, albeit undeniably less intensively. At the same time, the fact that the Shiite-Sunni conflict has captured world attention does not mean that we can speak about a new phenomenon – to Arabs and Iranians living in the region it is an age-old conflict that has flared up from time to time (Nasr [2006a]).

The split between the two main branches of Islam is nearly 1,400 years old and its roots go back high in the past. Nevertheless, those have never been completely forgotten, even if there have been short periods of détente between the two sects. Namely, the source of tension is not simply religious deviation, but more importantly the debate over group identity (Murphy [2007]) and to an even greater extent differing political interests. “Sunnis and Shiites are fighting for a secular prize: political domination” (Ghosh [2007]).

11 Shiites have always been underrepresented in the bureaucracy and military officer corps of the Arab states.
3. The Aftermath of the Iraqi War: Political (Re)Activation of the Shiites

The most important consequences of the Iraqi War and the American invasion of 2003 are the upset of the traditional Shiite-Sunni power balance on the one hand, and the shifting of the geopolitical balance in the Middle East on the other, which has turned the tide in Iran’s favour in the power game of the region.

This section intends to present the previous process, while a later one will highlight the consequences of the latter one, that is, the components and effects of the Iranian positional gains. As a matter of course, it is also necessary to add here that the two processes cannot be separated from each other as Iran itself is a Shiite country, thus the empowerment of Shiites means the revival of Iran at the same time. Still, the author feels it necessary to separate the two things, for two reasons. Besides easier comprehension, it is important to highlight the fact that the two processes – though often mixed – are taking place in different dimensions; therefore they affect interests on different levels. The upset of the Shiite-Sunni power balance raises concerns primarily within the countries of the region and it appears as an internal threat for the political elites, while the dominance of Iran represents concerns at a regional level, from an external, foreign affairs perspective.

In reality, the political activism of Shiites already began decades ago and evolved and gained strength gradually. The process cannot be attached to a single triggering event, either to the Islamic Revolution or to the Iraqi War, since the Shiites’ claim to be politically equally represented was born much earlier. Shiite-Sunni antagonism has a centuries-old history and even if there were periods of détente and rapprochement between the two sects, Shiite grievances have never been forgotten.

The birth of modern states came with a promise of better prospects for the Shiites, but it totally passed away. Then Shiites tried to assimilate into the community and became the followers of different secular, nationalist, and socialist ideologies. However, when these movements did not prove to be sufficient to achieve their goals, Shiites began to turn to Islamism and various Shiite movements for remedy.

The growing intensity of Shiite political activity reached the countries of the region in different periods and due to different events. However, in this process the Iranian Shiite Islamic Revolution of 1979 can be regarded as an evident catalyser, as it
pushed the Shiites toward expressing their demands in a much stronger voice. Then later, after the relative stagnation of the 1990s, the Iraqi War of 2003 was the factor that reactivated the process already started in the 1980s, in this case giving real political power to the Shiites. For the time being, only in Iraq, but the main question of the thesis is just the effect of this change on other countries with Shiite minorities in the region.

3.1 The Scope and Trend of the “Revival”

In April 2003 hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Shiites gathered in the Iraqi city of Karbala to commemorate Ashura, the most important religious event of the Shiites that had been banned for decades. The Shiites were in the streets, and they were holding their faith and their identity high for all to see. According to Vali Nasr, this event is undoubtedly the symbol of “Shiite revival” (Nasr [2006a] p. 19). The overthrow of the Saddam regime opened up Iraq’s Shiite holy cities and centres of learning again to a degree not seen for decades. Noah Feldman also points out that an especially important dimension of the Shiite revival is the cultural, intellectual renewal of Shiism and the vitality of Shiite traditions, in contrast to the decline of Sunni scholarship and clerics.

“Today’s Shia clerics have more influence over ordinary Shia believers than Sunni clerics have over Sunni believers.”12

The “revival” also produced a new leadership for the Shiites in the person of Ayatollah Sistani, who emerged not only as the undisputed leader of Iraq’s Shiites, but was soon recognized as such by Shiites from Lebanon to Iran to Pakistan (Nasr [2006a]).

The effect of the Shiite revival is unquestionable, even if it does not mean the advent of “pan-Shiism”. Namely, the example of Iraq has evoked a demonstration effect in Shiite communities beyond Iraq to begin to demand more say in how they are governed within their own countries.

The Shiite revival rests on three pillars: the newly empowered Shiite majority in Iraq, the empowerment of Shiites across Lebanon and the Gulf monarchies, and the current rise of Iran as a regional leader. The three pillars are evidently interconnected and each reinforces the others, ensuring a greater Shiite voice in Middle East politics and pressing toward a new power distribution in the region (Nasr [2006a] p. 184). As

12 The Emerging Shia Crescent: Implications for the Middle East and U.S. Policy [2006]
mentioned earlier, this section only focuses on the short review of the first pillar as well as some general questions and tendencies. The detailed analyses of the remaining pillars are part of the forthcoming chapters.

In Iraq, the fall of the Saddam regime brought the oppressed tensions and grievances to the surface and the age-old conflict has revived again between the two sects. The unity of Iraq was close to fall apart and Shiite-Sunni violence became common: Sunnis fought Shiites, Kurds fought Arabs, and what is more, Shiites being in majority position also fought against each other. Clashes have been taking place along ethnic and sectarian lines, but the struggle is clearly dominated by political motives (Cole [2006]).

By the time of the first post-Saddam election the gap between the two sects was enormous. The majority of the Shiites, in spite of the initial combatant attitude and primarily due to Ali Sistani’s pragmatic appeal, joined the political process, while Sunnis proclaimed an insurrection, both against the outsider occupying power and against the Shiites and the newly established state. Sunni parties boycotted the poll, allowing a Shiite coalition to sweep to power. After obtaining the power in 2005, the Shiites started to take revenge – many times by using the immunity of their uniforms – on the Sunnis for their long-standing offences. A large portion of the mostly Sunni middle and upper classes has fled the country and inter-sect marriages have become less and less common (Ghosh [2007]), further aggravating segregation, now at the level of the individual as well.

In Iraq, it was really the overthrow of the Saddam regime that directly sparked off Shiite-Sunni violence – after many decades, the discrimination and marginalization of the Shiites have come to an end. However, it is important to see that the current sectarian threat in Iraq is more the product of a deeply rooted rivalry in the region than the direct result of recent developments in the country (Nasr [2004]).

The second pillar of the Shiite revival is the empowerment of Shiites within the countries of the region. In this case, the process also began much earlier than the Iraqi War. Although there is no exact starting point in any of the countries, generally it can be

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13 Interestingly, Shiite leaders and their followers attributed every violent action to foreign intruders, not to their Sunni neighbours. These “outsiders” were first of all Saudi Wahhabis, but also Jordanian, Syrian and Egyptian Sunnis, who were by the way Arab Sunnis just like the Iraqis and moreover, some of them even had close connections with Iraqi Sunni insurgents. Thus, the notions of insider and outsider have little meaning in case of the Iraqi conflict. For further details, see: Nasr [2006a] pp. 178 and 208

14 Just Jordan and Syria together have nearly two millions Iraqi expatriates. While in Jordan rather the upper and wealthier classes settled down, in Syria mostly the lower and poorer strata found refugee (Csicsmann [2008]).
said that it was around the period of the 1970s and 1980s, when the need among Shiites to express their identity and detachment was born. Since its detailed analysis is to be presented later, herewith the author intends to give only a short overview on the attitudes of the countries with regard to the Iraqi situation and the Iraqi War as a whole.

The neighbours of Iraq have particular interests in Iraq. Due to its geographic position and demographic composition, Jordan is especially exposed to influences coming from Iraq. For Jordan, the stability and security of Iraq have therefore special importance, just as well as the protection of Iraqi Sunni Arab minorities and the prevention of terrorism from leaking into the country. On the other hand, for the Jordanian Sunni leadership it is especially crucial to preserve the sensitive sectarian balance at home, to which exactly the dominance of the Iraqi Shiites poses a direct threat. King Abdullah’s statements about the Shiite empowerment are not accidental either, and although they have become less frequent, they are taken very much as an offence by both the Iraqi Shiites and Iran (N. Rózsza [2007]).

For the Syrian Alawi regime, the largest threat can be the growing radicalization of the Sunnis. As far as the situation in Iraq is concerned, Syria – very much like Iran – has been especially interested in preserving a sort of “controlled chaos”. Namely, it helped suppress the insurgency (such as arresting some militants) on one hand, but also gave some covert support to the insurgents on the other, in hopes of keeping the U.S. bogged down across the border (Nasr [2006a]).

The Iraqi events also raised great enthusiasm among the Shiite population in Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and the demonstration effect has proved to be clear: following the “Iraqi model”, Shiites are claiming political rights, proportional representation, political reforms, and real democracy more forcefully.

In Lebanon, Shiites acquired significant parliamentary influence in the elections of 2005, and one of the hinges of the Shiite revival was the Hezbollah’s war against Israel in 2006, which resulted in the Hezbollah’s substantial prestige growth in the Muslim – and not only the Shiite Muslim – world.

For Saudi Arabia, currently a weak Iraq would give rise to concern, which could bring about violence sweeping through the border on one hand, and a Shiite emergence in the region on the other. However, for the Saudi leadership the Iranian positional gains

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15 Alawism is a particular offshoot of Shiism, which deviates from Islamic orthodoxy and includes elements of Christianity and pre-Islamic religions to such an extent that in some cases it does not even resembles Islam (Rostóványi [2002]).
raise more serious concerns, moreover, according to Erzsébet N. Rózsa the two countries are already fighting a “proxy war” in Iraq. At the same time, the Shiite empowerment in Iraq may induce a demonstration effect on the Saudi Shiite minority, thus besides religious obligations, it is in the special interest of the Saudi leadership to support the Sunnis of Iraq. The Saudi public opinion clearly sympathizes with the Iraqi Sunnis and calls out for the Sunnis’ defence against the Shiite militias.

Till now, Saudi Arabia has not intervened in the conflict but according to general opinion it provides financial support through private individuals, and moreover, to certain extent gives military supply for the Iraqi Sunnis and for a long time it was even raised that in the long run it is not impossible to expect a Saudi armed interference after the withdrawal of the American troops (N. Rózsa [2007]). Now, it seems that the Saudi leadership was only harsh on a rhetorical level, but it demonstrates quite well how important Saudi interests are at stake in Iraq.

Finally, it should be added that even countries beyond Iraq are not exempt from these processes either, thus for example Qatar and the United Arab Emirates must also reckon with growing sectarian tensions.

3.2 A New Order in the Middle East?

Most experts share the view that from the middle of the 2010s one can witness the evolvement of a new Middle Eastern order that is completely differing from the one till now. One of the elements of this development – if not the most important – is the empowerment of the Shiite religious sect accompanied by its vigorously increasing influence within the Islamic world.

According to Richard N. Haass, the fourth big era of the Middle East, which is dominated by the American presence, is coming to an end. However, the visions of a new, peaceful and democratic Europe-like region have not been realized at all. Much more likely is the emergence of a “new Middle Eastern order” that will cause great harm and challenges to the U.S. and the world. There are several reasons accounting for the end of the era, but among these the invasion of Iraq in 2003 has a special and apparent role. One of the victims of the war is the Sunni dominated Iraq, which has become the main scene for Shiite-Sunni hostilities. As for the notion of democracy, for the countries in the region it has become equal in many respects to the upset of political order and the end of Sunni rule (Haass [2006]).
The Iraqi War, similarly to Donald Rumsfeld’s “old Europe” and “new Europe”, has drawn a line in the Middle East as well. The identifying nature of the “old Middle East” is the Arab component and Arab nationalism as the dominant political ideology, which has the same seats as the ancient (Sunni) caliphs had: Cairo, Baghdad, and Damascus. The character of the “new Middle East” coming into being is defined in equal part by the identity of the Shiites, whose cultural, political and commercial ties cut across the divide between Arab and non-Arab. According to Vali Nasr, the “new Middle Eastern order” will not be defined by the Arab identity or by any particular form of national government any more, but rather the Shiite revival and the Sunni response to it. Namely, in the coming years, beyond Iraq, other countries in the region will also have to cope with intensifying rivalries between Shiites and Sunnis within their borders. Furthermore, the revitalization of Shiites, together with the increasing Sunni frustration and anxiety accompanying it can result in regime changes in the region (Nasr [2006a]).

It was also Vali Nasr who pointed out very expressively in one of his speeches that “the Middle East that will emerge from the crucible of the Iraq War may not be more democratic, but it will definitely be more Shiite.”16

4. The Raison d’Être of the Sunni Concerns

“The “Shiite crescent” is now a shining beacon, casting its light upon all those in the Middle East zone of escalating tensions, provocations, and warfare.”17

Jordanian King Abdullah already “rang the alarm” after the Iraqi War in 2004, visioning the emergence of such a “Shiite crescent” that will destabilize Gulf countries with significant Shiite populations and will intensify Shiite-Sunni hostilities, even in Saudi Arabia. “There’s going to be some sort of clash at one point or another,” he said. “We hope it’s just a clash of words and politics and not a clash of civilizations or peoples on the ground” (Wright-Baker [2004]).

On the other hand, one of the consultative agencies functioning beside the Saudi government argues in a study made in 2006 that although the Shiites will certainly get

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16 The Emerging Shia Crescent: Implications for the Middle East and U.S. Policy [2006]
17 Nisan [2009]
more rights in the future, there are demographic, economic and military obstacles to such a region-wide Shiite revival that reorganizes fundamentally the political structure of the region and threatens Sunni domination (Obaid [2006]). So, arguments are differing concerning the question, even if one could rightly assume in the above-mentioned report\textsuperscript{18} some reassuring Sunni propaganda.

Similarly to Jordan, many other Sunni regimes have repeatedly expressed their worries about a possible Shiite majority in the Iraqi elections that would remarkably strengthen Iran’s position in the region. Jordanian Abdullah himself clearly expressed that Iraqis alone have the right to take part in an election “free of external influence” and this may produce a government, which represents a group at the expense of another. Nevertheless, later he also explained that his statements would never be directed against the Shiites; moreover, he is keen to see the Sunnis and Shiites together as they have always been.\textsuperscript{19}

However, the situation is much more tinged than that. It is clear that there is real anxiety behind Abdullah’s statements – fears that arise in the circles of all Sunni regimes: what if the Shiites get too much power, what if Iran obtains the hegemony over the Middle East and what if all these result in their loss of power? Answering to these questions is not simple. It is possible that one can only speak of plain rhetorical tricks, which aim to preserve the insured status quo and its ideological establishment – a tool to nip all kinds of reform ideas affecting political power in the bud. Or rather is it possible that the worries are far too grounded and real? I believe that the truth can be found somewhere in-between. However, for this it is needed to examine several factors because without this making a standpoint would be impossible and would lack credibility at the same time.

The first aspect to be analysed is the most important and obvious one: How large Shiite communities do we speak of in case of certain countries when we refer to a Shiite minority or majority? Does the Shiites’ demographic potential confirm Sunni fears, or – and with this we already jump to the second aspect – how large is the economic power that they represent concerning their home state and the region? Having taken into consideration all these factors and the effects of the Iraqi War as well, is it founded to

\textsuperscript{18} The study examines the possible components of the Shiite revival and their potential risks from a Saudi point of view. The document will be referred to later as well, but it is always needed to bear in mind that the report has been made for the Saudi government, thus its objectivity is questionable. For the full study, see: Obaid [2006]

\textsuperscript{19} Jordan’s King Abdullah Defends Statement on Shiite “Crescent” [2005]
expect a power shift, that is, the overthrow of the Sunni regimes in the affected countries? And finally it is needed to examine to what extent can the forge ahead of Iran and Shiite Islamist organizations be regarded as part of a global tendency, that is, to what extent can the same phenomenon be observed in other countries, outside the sphere of the “crescent”?

Before turning to the analysis of certain aspects, it is important to point out that in the background of the entire question concerning the Shiite revival and related Sunni fears stands the increasing Iranian influence. Iran is the most threatening factor for the Sunnis and since Iran is a Shiite country, the empowerment of Shiites also constitutes a danger for them. The two processes are therefore closely interdependent in the discourse on the “Shiite crescent”. Practically, all Sunni fears can be traced back to this without openly being formulated. Moreover, it cannot be excluded that if the Persian Iran with increasing power was not happened to be a Shiite country, the entire problem of Shiite revival would not exist in this form, or at least it would not be so stressed. It is another question, however, that without the presence and harsh rhetoric (and in certain cases real support) of Iran one could not witness so voluminous Shiite activism.

### 4.1 Demographic Overview

The estimated number of the world’s Muslim population is 1.3-1.5 billion – within this, Shiites constitute a clear minority, with 10-15%. This means approximately 130-220 million Shiite inhabitants worldwide. If we narrow down the research to the area of the Middle East, the ratio considerably changes: 63% of the Muslim population of the Middle East is Sunni, while 37% is Shiite (Obaid [2006]).

On the territory belonging to the sphere of the “Shiite crescent” one can even speak of a significantly larger proportion of Shiite population (see Table 1): the proportion of Shiites living in these countries to the entire population is 58%, while in case of the Gulf countries it exceeds 65%. In this ratio Iran with its nearly 78 million, almost entirely Shiite population obviously represents a big weight, but even so it could be stated that numbers themselves are already questioning the justification of Sunni rule over the territory. And if there were more liberal regimes in these countries, in many places the Shiites would definitely constitute a majority, while in other places they would play an important role in decision-making.
Table 1

Proportion of Shiite and Sunni population in the countries of the “Shiite crescent”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Shiite (%)</th>
<th>Sunni (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>77.9 million</td>
<td>69.3 million</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>7.0 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>1.2 million</td>
<td>682 thousand</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>292 thousand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>30.4 million</td>
<td>18.8 million</td>
<td>60-65%</td>
<td>10.6 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>4.1 million</td>
<td>1.6 million</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>820 thousand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>2.6 million</td>
<td>663 thousand</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>1.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab</td>
<td>5.1 million</td>
<td>816 thousand</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4.1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emirates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>26 million</td>
<td>3.1 million</td>
<td>10-15%</td>
<td>22.9 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria*</td>
<td>22.5 million</td>
<td>3.6 million</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16.6 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>169.8 million</td>
<td>98.56 million</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>63.8 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In case of Syria the Shiite population refers to the Alawi community, although they are not exactly the same and many argues that the Alawis do not belong to the Muslim religion at all.


In Iran, Bahrain and Iraq Shiites clearly form a majority, while in Lebanon they are the largest religious sect, and in the Gulf countries they constitute a significant minority. On the basis of this one can state that the demographic proportions confirm Sunni fears in the region; to such an extent that in certain Sunni circles it has been already raised that Shiites – with the effectual support of Iran – strive to convert Sunnis (Ghosh [2007]), while in Syria, where the country’s majority Sunni population views the deepening relationship of Syria and Iran with growing suspicion, whisperings and rumours say that the Islamic Republic is funding Shiite religious institutions and it is offering cash and other incentives to persuade Sunnis to convert (Abouzeid [2007]). As in these countries there are no statistical data with regard to this, the reality ground of the rumours cannot be examined. Nevertheless, in my opinion even if there are such
aspirations among the Shiites, those have only a sporadic character and one cannot speak of conversion in large numbers.

It could also be interesting to examine from another aspect whether the number of Shiites increases in the region or not, that is, whether the Shiites’ fertility rate is different from other, but particularly from the Sunni community’s data? If this is the case then it is possible to draw conclusion with regard to the growth rate tendencies of the Shiite population, and if on the basis of this it turned out that the Shiites’ fertility rate is higher in general than that of the Sunnis, I believe that it could serve as a reason for further anxiety among Sunnis. The problem is that, similarly to the number of conversions, there are no available statistical data concerning birth rates and fertility rates in the region – or to be more precise, there are such data, but those are not structured according to the different religious groups.20

The thesis can only rely on the results of one single survey, which is able to verify, however with certain limits, that among the Shiites the number of births is really higher, therefore the Shiite community is growing faster than the Sunni one. One of the major limits of the study is that the author analyses only the Lebanese processes, particularly the data of the Shiite, Sunni, Druze, Catholic and non-Catholic communities. The second limit is time-related, since the study was made in 1981. In spite of this, I consider it important to present the results of the survey because they give the opportunity to draw conclusions to relevant tendencies from our point of view.

The study (Chamie [1981]) is based on the data of the 1971 National Fertility and Family Planning survey of Lebanon, while the author was personally involved in the research and analysis of the survey’s results. Dr Joseph Chamie starts from the hypothesis that besides socio-economic situation and culturally determined attributes of certain communities, religion and religious affiliation can also have a considerable effect on reproductive behaviour. Factors are obviously difficult to separate because they are in close connection and sometimes they either strengthen or weaken each other. Religious differences are the most considerable in communities with disadvantageous social and economic situation, while by stepping up the hierarchy those differences tend to decrease. The author also points out that within the Muslim community disparity

20 The UN made World Fertility Report contains the fertility rates of every country specified according to age groups and genders. The Report is really essential in examining the change of demographic ratios in the region, but from the thesis’s point of view, unfortunately it does not provide relevant information because it takes the entire population of certain countries as a basis and does not analyse data relating to certain ethnicities and religious groups. In greater detail, see: World Fertility Report 2003, available at: http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/worldfertility/Country_Profiles.pdf
between the different religious sects with regard to fertility differentials is almost as great as between the Christians and Muslims. Moreover, there are even observable overlappings for example between the Catholics and the Druze.\(^{21}\) Consequently, it seems that Shiites and Sunnis are not only divided along political, religious and ethnical lines, but demographically as well.

Concerning any socio-economic criterion (education, occupation, income, etc.) it is clearly observable that Shiites are at the very bottom of the socio-economic scale in Lebanon. Shiite wives are the least educated and the proportion of Shiite wives with no schooling is 70\%, nearly twice the national average of 40\% (Chamie [1981] p. 34). Besides this, the Shiite sect forbids the use of abortion, while Sunnis tend to follow a more liberal position (Chamie [1981] p. 38). It is also interesting that although the Muslim religion, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, does not oppose birth control, it is rather the Catholics who are among the most approving of these methods, while Shiites express the least favourable attitude toward contraception because of religious reasons\(^{22}\) (Chamie [1981] p. 40).

If we examine the number of children ever born, the two groups having the most extreme values are the Shiites and the Druze. Shiites have the highest fertility rate among the analysed Lebanese sects, while the Druze have the lowest one and also the most similar one to the Christians'. As for the number of living children, the Druze have an average of 5 children, while the Sunnis have 6, and the Shiites have 7 (see Table 2).

The ranking of the groups according to each of the three fertility measures is unequivocal. From high to low fertility the ordering is: Shiites, Sunnis, Druze and Catholics (roughly similar), and non-Catholic Christians (Chamie [1981] pp. 43-46). The highest ideal number of children was also expressed by the Shiites in all age groups: in total, the Shiites would like to have a little bit more than 4 children (4.5), while the Sunnis would like to have less than 4 (3.9).\(^{23}\)

\(^{21}\) The Druze is a breakaway sect constituting a particular ethnicity within the Islamic world and following remarkably different laws from Shiite Islam (Rostoványi [2002]).

\(^{22}\) Contraceptive use is the least approved among the Shiites with a proportion of 56\%, as opposed to 76\% among the Sunnis, while the proportion of those who ever used such methods is also significantly smaller among Shiites: 47\% as opposed to 62\% of the Sunnis. See: Chamie [1981] pp. 63 and 66

\(^{23}\) Chamie [1981] pp. 53-54
Table 2

Number of children ever born and number of living children per 1,000 married women by religion and wife’s age: Lebanon, 1971

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wife’s age</th>
<th>15-19</th>
<th>20-24</th>
<th>25-29</th>
<th>30-34</th>
<th>35-39</th>
<th>40-44</th>
<th>45-49</th>
<th>All ages</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of children ever born per 1,000 married women</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>632a</td>
<td>1,559</td>
<td>2,694</td>
<td>3,878</td>
<td>4,593</td>
<td>5,135</td>
<td>5,200</td>
<td>3,869</td>
<td>925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Catholic Christian</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>1,492</td>
<td>2,266</td>
<td>3,669</td>
<td>4,034</td>
<td>4,223</td>
<td>5,141</td>
<td>3,558</td>
<td>592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>1,143</td>
<td>2,153</td>
<td>3,963</td>
<td>5,157</td>
<td>6,140</td>
<td>6,358</td>
<td>6,907</td>
<td>4,773</td>
<td>564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiite</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>2,557</td>
<td>3,874</td>
<td>5,872</td>
<td>7,098</td>
<td>8,247</td>
<td>8,492</td>
<td>5,714</td>
<td>567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druze</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>1,263a</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>4,231</td>
<td>4,950</td>
<td>5,333a</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>3,891</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,925</td>
<td>3,147</td>
<td>4,527</td>
<td>5,215</td>
<td>5,900</td>
<td>6,333</td>
<td>4,375</td>
<td>2,767</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Number of living children per 1,000 married women** |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |         |    |
| Catholic   | 632a  | 1,480 | 2,625 | 3,729 | 4,311 | 4,771 | 4,800 | 3,670   | 925 |
| Non-Catholic Christian | *  | 1,476 | 2,160 | 3,521 | 3,729 | 4,010 | 4,600 | 3,328   | 592 |
| Sunni      | 1,000 | 2,031 | 3,757 | 4,755 | 5,570 | 5,852 | 5,907 | 4,365   | 564 |
| Shiite     | 1,150 | 2,386 | 3,789 | 5,456 | 6,134 | 7,290 | 7,222 | 5,148   | 566 |
| Druze      | *  | 1,158a | 2,900 | 3,962 | 4,750 | 5,056a | *  | 3,689   | 119 |
| Total      | 944 | 1,824 | 3,019 | 4,277 | 4,771 | 5,420 | 5,598 | 4,043   | 2,767 |

\[a \text{ 19 cases in base.} \]
\[* \text{ Less than 20 cases in base.} \]


It is clear that the obtained results are in close connection with the social status of the respective religious groups. In Lebanon the Shiites have the worst socio-economic situation and they are the less educated as well, which explains to a great extent their fertility rate indicators. Namely, it is a generally accepted tendency that being on a higher level of the socio-economic scale means at the same time having a lower fertility rate.
Chamie himself also noted already in 1981 that measures should be taken towards greater socio-economic equality because considerable alterations in the population’s religious composition may have dramatic effects on the country’s existing political system and overall stability (Chamie [1981] p. 80). It is especially true for Lebanon, as there are very few countries in the world in which demography is so directly and fundamentally linked to the official distribution of political power.

All in all, the study seems to confirm the threatening prospects because it has estimated the following rates of natural increase for the certain religious groups: Shiites, 3.8%; Sunnis, 2.8%; Catholics, 2.0%; Druze, 1.8%; and non-Catholic Christians, 1.7% (Chamie [1981] p. 85). Migration patterns are further tingeing the situation: although accurate migration figures are not available, Chamie states that, on the basis of several studies, members of Christian denominations are more likely to emigrate than members of the Muslim sects (Chamie [1981] p. 85). It would be particularly interesting to examine the tendencies within the Muslim community.

Apparently, the situation in Lebanon points to a redistribution of seats in the Chamber of Deputies, and the sect with the greatest number of seats would be the Shiites, who are the poorest, least educated, and, historically, the most disenfranchised of the Lebanese religious groups (Chamie [1981] p. 86).

In relation to the study the question certainly arises: what could be the existing tendencies in other countries of the “Shiite crescent”? I have considered the presentation of the study’s results particularly important because Chamie argues that the results of the survey can be generalized, that is, they can be valid in other countries as well. Thus, from the thesis’s aspect it would mean that the ground for Sunni fears would even increase in the future. I would certainly abstain from rash conclusions with regard to this as Chamie himself also admits that adequate data for extensive research are missing on the one hand (Chamie [1981] p. 81), and the future development of these processes cannot be predicted on the other (Chamie [1981] p. 84). Nevertheless, it is a fact that since the 1970s Shiites have become the biggest religious sect of Lebanon; to what extent it is attributed to the fertility tendencies analysed in the study, and to what extent do they characterize other countries in the region are questions to be answered at one’s discretion. But the results are in any case worth to think about.
4.2 Economic and Geopolitical Aspects

The Shiite population of the Middle East is not only forced into an inferior status in a political and social sense, but even economically. In Lebanon it is the Shiite community that is the poorest and most neglected social group. In Saudi Arabia, Shiites are subject to negative discrimination for decades. Namely, until the increase in oil revenues in the 1950s, the burden of taxation fell mainly on the Shiites and the appearance of ARAMCO, an American oil company in the Eastern province, further increased tensions in spite of the initial positive effects. After a certain period, employment possibilities for the Shiites gradually ceased to exist at the company, as it subsequently gave preference to Sunnis in hiring. Shiites therefore, unlike their Kuwaiti counterparts, benefited little from the oil boom. Moreover, their situation even deteriorated: they had to comply with more and more criteria in order to be employed and they got lower wages than their Sunni or foreign fellows. Additionally, the traditional agricultural sector of the Eastern province was totally ruined by oil extraction, not to mention the fact that oil revenues only benefited the Sunni part of the province, while Shiite territories were completely neglected (Nakash [2006]).

The reason for this could probably be that the 2-3 million Shiite inhabitants of the country mostly live and work in the Eastern province, which they dominate demographically and which is also home to the largest oil fields.\(^{24}\) Thus, if the Shiites had the same requirements to obtain employment and had the same opportunities to get forward on the corporate ladder, then, having become wealthy from the petrodollars, they would gain too much influence in the region and then in the whole country. Additionally, they could make political capital out of their increased economic power. Thus, it seems that it is in the clear interest of the region’s governments to prevent Shiites from gaining any kind of economic position or influence. The only exception in this respect is the previously mentioned “odd-one-out” Kuwaiti case, where several Shiites in the oil industry grew immensely rich, and a Shiite even held the post of oil minister in the mid-1970s (Nakash [2006] p. 48)

The fact in itself that Shiites constitute for the most part of the population living along the Gulf can be an important geopolitical aspect, which cannot be disregarded by the Sunni regimes. The eight years long war between Iran and Iraq was partly because

\(^{24}\) The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia [2005]
of the same reason: Iraq intended to carve out a bigger territory for itself from the Gulf coast in order to increase the country’s ability to reach the sea, thus to increase its scope for action. Although the danger is not real at all, given that the situation in Iraq moved towards splitting into parts, as being cited by many authors, and possibly a Shiite “mini-state” emerged in southern Iraq, it would have a serious consequence for Iraq because it would lose its exit passage to the Gulf. Accordingly, Iraq would cease to be a coastal state that would mean an enormous positional loss for the country.

Moreover, from a Sunni point of view, the situation would be further aggravated if the “Shiite crescent” really came into being as King Abdullah has envisaged it. Namely, if a monolithic Shiite block emerged in the region with the leadership of Iran, territories along the Gulf would fall almost entirely under Shiite, or rather Iranian influence and control. Consequently, Saudi Arabia would have the reason to be anxious about the oil reserves in the Eastern province.

Otherwise, the Iranian economic influence is already considerable in the region: the local markets of Gulf countries are crowded with Iranian merchants. The main market for example in Doha, Qatar, is called the “Irani Bazaar”. The trading class in Dubai and Kuwait has always had a large Iranian component. In addition, a senior government official of the United Arab Emirates – as soon as they were alone – began telling Vali Nasr in fluent Persian that in UAE government and business ranks there are many Iranian Shiites, who are hiding their ethnic origin (Nasr [2006a] p. 109). Since it is commonly known that among Shiites it is allowed to conceal real identity from the members of the community, one cannot know exactly how many Shiites work actually in influential economic positions in the region. However, according to Nasr Iran enjoys close ties with the economically influential Shiite communities living along the Gulf.

As for the Shiites’ economic role the hundreds of thousands of Iranian pilgrims cannot be disregarded either, who travel to visit Shiite shrines and clerics every year, not only filling local bazaars as consumers, but in many cases buying property as well to set up a business in the given city or its surroundings (Nasr [2006a] pp. 212-213).

Sunni fears therefore seem to be confirmed economically as well, although in respect of its scale one can only have guesses. Nevertheless, according to Reza Aslan the current conflict has more to do with the region’s geopolitical fragmentation, which is “a direct result of colonialism and Western aggression.”

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4.3 The Elements of the “Crescent”: Country Profiles

4.3.1 The Reasons of Activism and Political Ambitions of the Shiites

The basic reason for the growing activism of the Shiites is, to put it simple and short, the lack of political representation – or at least it is certain that the core issue behind the conflict can be traced back to this fundamental question. The process itself, however, cannot be simplified exclusively to general tendencies, as it is the result of several, simultaneously existing and intertwining phenomena. Therefore, the author feels it necessary to present in case of every affected country the most important events leading to the empowerment of Shiites and also the – sometimes completely confronting – political goals of the most prominent organizations and groups. Only afterwards I intend to outline – by relying on the already examined internal processes of the certain countries – those general tendencies that put the whole issue of the Shiite revival into a complex, regional context.

**Iraq**

In Iraq the number of Shiites did not reach the 50% until the 19-20th century, thus the history of vigorous debates between Shiites and the Sunni elite is relatively short. Change came with the massive conversion of Arab tribes to Shiism mainly during the 19th century, and the share of the Shiites grew to 56% of the Iraqi population by the beginning of the 20th century (Nakash [2003]). Yet, between 1921 and 2003 Iraqi Shiites were dominated by a Sunni minority elite keeping all political power in its hand. Namely, the Iraqi monarchy created by the British was built around a Sunni elite and King Feisal, thus the systemic discrimination of the Shiite majority began.

After a decade of instability that followed the collapse of the monarchy in 1958, the Baath Party rose to power and the formation of modern Iraq generated a heated debate between Shiites and the ruling Sunni elite over the question “who is an Iraqi”. Iraqi Shiites did not always belong to this category, as unlike the rulers and the Wahhabi ulama of Saudi Arabia expressed their hostility toward Shiism in religious terms, successive Sunni governments in Iraq questioned the Arab origin of the Shiites and associated them with Persian culture and Iranian history (Nakash [2006]).

During the Saddam regime, the situation of the southern Iraqi Shiites further
deteriorated. The Baath Party completely neglected Shiite territories, banned Shiite religious ceremonies and killed the religious leaders of the community. In spite of this, Iraqi Shiites remained loyal to the regime right until 1991, even during the eight years long war against Iran. In 1991, however, Shiite soldiers returning from Kuwait sparked off an insurrection in southern Iraq, with the considerable encouragement of the U.S. Yet, the Shiite insurgents’ efforts finally remained unsupported by Washington and the result was a bloody reprisal of the Shiites (Nasr [2006a]).

As in Iraq there were no legally operating Shiite organizations, Shiites could only turn to their religious leaders for some relief. As a result, Shiite religious opposition movements started to gain larger and larger support already from the 1960s. Their primary goals were to put an end to Shiite marginalization and political discrimination, as well as to improve the socially inferior status of the Shiites. For a long time the most successful opposition movement was the Al Dawa Party established in the 1950s, which can be regarded as a forerunner of other revolutionary movements dedicated to the creation of an Islamic state. The most important Iraqi Shiite organization on strong Islamic bases is still up to now the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), formerly called the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), founded in 1982 by Shiite refugees in Tehran under the auspices of Ayatollah Khomeini. Shiite paramilitary groups established the Badr Brigades (now Badr Organization) that became the armed wing of the ISCI (Rostoványi [2004a]).

Nowadays the most prominent religious leader of the Iraqi Shiites is indisputably Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who became the leader of the Shiite community in 1992, after the death of Abul-Kassim Khoei. However, Sistani did not participate in political life during the Saddam era, thus he became widely known among Shiites outside Iraq and Iran only after 2003. Ali Sistani differs fundamentally from other Iraqi Shiite clerics, as he sees the ulama mainly as teachers and defenders of the faith, not as active participants of political processes (Nasr [2006a]). Therefore Sistani has never promoted the creation of an Islamic state.

After the overthrow of the Saddam regime the discriminated Shiite political figures of Iraq got the possibility again to take the fate of their state and community in their hand. However, an important obstacle to this can be the rivalry of the different

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26 The American leadership was very much influenced by the Saudi warning that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq would turn the tide toward Iran in the Middle East.

27 A Shia Crescent: What Fallout for the U.S.? (Transcript) [2005]
Shiite organizations and the lack of unity, which is, by the way, not only a characteristic of the Iraqi Shiites, but of the whole “Shiite crescent” as such, which is to be further elaborated in a forthcoming chapter.

*Bahrain*

The Al Khalifa family conquered the islands of Bahrain in 1783, imposing a Sunni rule over the Shiite majority living there. The Al Khalifa did everything to preserve their leading role; they even encouraged the migration of Sunni nomadic tribes into the islands to alter the ratio of Sunni to Shiites in the country. Bahraini society remained extremely divided well into the 20th century. The country gained independence in 1971 and afterwards the ruling family grew dependent on the Saudi support for their survival.

Tensions came to the surface after 1975, when the Emir suspended the constitution and dissolved the National Assembly, then between 1994 and 1999 there were several uprisings in the country – Shiites claimed political reforms and the termination of their economic discrimination (Nakash [2006]). The government’s first reaction was brutal violence and oppression, but later, due to social pressure, the ruling family introduced changes between 1999 and 2002. However, these reforms, like those that had been introduced a few years earlier in Jordan, did not result in any fundamental change concerning power relations. Power remained completely in the hand of the ruling family, reforms only served for easing the legitimacy crisis by creating some sense of national consensus.

After 2001 tensions rose again, in which the increase in the presence of U.S. forces on the islands due to 9/11 had a considerable role, since it caused the Al Khalifa to impose new restrictions, mainly on the Shiites. For this reason many of the Shiites boycotted the 2002 elections, which led to an even larger domination of the Sunnis, further deteriorating the situation of the Shiites in the country (Nasr [2006a]). It is no wonder therefore that Shiites have been watching attentively and with huge excitement the development of Iraqi events, since changes hold out promises with regard to their own situation as well.
Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia the Shiite population had to endure total religious, political and economic discrimination for long decades. In the 1930s, the formation of the modern Saudi state posed further challenges to the Shiite minority, resulting in complete social marginalization and exclusion of Shiites from public life, and Saudi Shiites became second- and third class citizens – their situation was even worse than that of the Jews and Christians (Nakash [2006]).

Until the 1960s and 1970s, the almost two million Shiite inhabitants of Saudi Arabia did not challenge Saudi power or spoke out against disenfranchisement, which would have invited repression. Instead, the more activist political leadership and structures only developed abroad from the 1960s, affected by broader trends influencing the Shiites in the region.28

Similarly to Shiites living in other countries, Saudi Shiites first turned to certain leftist movements and then they espoused Islamist ideology. Accordingly, the ideas of Arab socialism influenced Shiite oil workers in the Eastern province significantly, who started to demand higher wages and better working conditions already from the 1960s (Nakash [2006]).

From the beginning of the 1970s, one can witness Islamism gaining ground in Saudi Arabia. Due to growing oppression and ousting of opposition forces, most of the Shiite religious leaders left the country and fled to Iraq or Kuwait. The process was significantly boosted by the victory of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, which, with its demonstrating effect, contributed to the century’s largest Shiite uprising in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi reaction to the growing Shiite threat was the collective punishment of its own Shiite population, by further restricting their rights and economic role (Nasr [2006b]).

However, in spite of their hopeless situation, or rather just because of this, political activism of Saudi Shiites has further continued and even if only in abroad, but oppositional organizations, like the Saudi Hezbollah and the Islamic Reform Movement to mention the most important ones, were set up representing Shiite interests and demanding equal political and religious rights for the Shiites (Nasr [2004]).

28 The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia [2005]
Instead of Ayatollah Khomeini’s goal to overthrow the Saudi regime, pragmatic Saudi activists focused on specific grievances: the right to observe Shiite rituals, an end to discrimination, a greater share of oil revenues and modernising neglected Shiite regions. More active Shiite political attitude, however, lasted only until the end of the 1980s, when the exiled leadership moderated its aggressive views and recognized that, given demographic realities, Shiites could not wage a successful revolution. In exchange for their ending active opposition from abroad, the Saudi government assured the Saudi Shiites that their fundamental social and religious grievances would be remedied. Nevertheless, Shiites claim that, with only a few exceptions, little has been done to address their needs.29

Kuwait

In Kuwait the situation of the 26% Shiite minority has evolved absolutely differently than in Iraq, Bahrain or Saudi Arabia. An eloquent testimony of this is the fact that during the Second Gulf War in 1990 Shiites constituted the backbone of the Kuwaiti resistance, and they clearly reaffirmed their allegiance to the Al Sabah family. The behaviour of the Shiites can only be partly explained by the sense of Kuwaiti nationalism generated by the Iraqi invasion. A more important factor behind this positive attitude is the tolerant policy of the Al Sabah toward Shiites during the 20th century. This is not to say, however, that the Al Sabah did not occasionally discriminate against Kuwaiti Shiites, but the Shiite community played a significant role in Kuwaiti economy, and its members participated in parliament and held positions in the army and the police (Nakash [2006]). Consequently, the fate of the Kuwaiti Shiite minority is significantly different from their Arab counterparts’ living elsewhere.

Syria

In Syria one can witness a parallel process to the Iraqi and Bahraini events during the 1970s, although with actors in a “reverse order”. Considering that the majority of the country’s population is Sunni, here it was the growing activism of Sunnis that meant a threat for the minority rule of the Alawis, who turned several times to Ayatollah

29 The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia [2005]
Khomeini and Imam Musa al-Sadr for fatwas declaring Alawis to be Shiites and hence Muslim (Nasr [2006a]). Yet, developments in Iraq serving as an example of a minority regime’s having fallen just next door, and now contemporary events in the Arab world can even further raise internal tensions, by increasing Sunni expectations of empowerment.

**Lebanon**

The Shiites’ situation in Lebanon is somewhat special compared to other Arab countries. Namely, here Shiites were not entirely disenfranchised in a political sense, since in Lebanon, right after independence (1943) such a “national pact” was created that laid down the division of power among the six biggest religious sects. However, the pact had a serious weakness, that is, it did not count with changes in the religious communities’ relative weights (Csicsmann [2008]). So, in Lebanon, in contrast to other countries analysed so far, the debate over national identity and history did not take place among Muslims, but among Christians and Muslims, as here the Christian Maronites emerged as the dominant political sect, retaining that position right until the civil war of 1975-90 (Nakash [2006]).

In 20th century Lebanon economically the Shiites were in the most disadvantageous position from the 17 sects, but in spite of their common grievances they lacked socio-religious and political unity until the second half of the 20th century. However, in the 1960s Lebanon also experienced the same development that characterized the whole Middle Eastern region, which resulted in the growing activism of the Shiite clergy, challenging the legitimacy of the existing socio-political order. But unlike in Iraq, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, in Lebanon the Maronite elite proved to be much weaker and fell after the outbreak of the civil war, further enhancing the volume of Shiite revival (Nakash [2006]).

The situation was further aggravated by the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, which resulted in the appearance of Palestine refugees in southern Lebanon, and it practically changed the traditional home region of the country’s Shiites into a Palestinian armed camp,

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30 The six religious sects are the following: Maronite, Sunni, Shiite, Greek orthodox, Druze and Christian.
31 The Taif Agreement of 1989 was destined to correct this anomaly and it practically adjusted the political weights of certain religious sects to their shifted demographic proportions. However, due to further changes in the demographic composition, a new revision would be needed, which would result in the further influence growth of the Shiites (see in greater detail later).
completely excluding Shiites from resources. The Shiites of Lebanon consequently turned away from the Arab case, and instead, they started to demand recognition and rights for themselves. Yet, none of the Arab countries showed any interest in Shiite suffering, and it was Musa al-Sadr who showed them a path forward. Al-Sadr brought together the fragmented Shiite communities and in 1974 he established the movement of Amal (Hope), which became a “signal beacon” for the Shiite awakening, challenging both the cement-hard Maronite and Sunni hegemony, not only in Lebanon, but also in the whole region (Nasr [2006a]).

After al-Sadr’s enigmatic disappearance\(^{32}\) the movement fading into obscurity due to the eruption of the civil war in 1975 began an impressive resurgence, partly because of the growing Shiite outcry and partly because of the leader’s disappearance. The Iranian Islamic Revolution further contributed to Amal’s renewed popularity. By the end of the 1980s however, the organization became significantly weaker and lost from its attraction. Instead, it was Mohamed Hussein Fadlallah, who became the most influential Muslim scholar in Lebanon (Norton [2007]) and soon a new, far more radical Shiite power emerged, in the person of Hezbollah, which demanded not merely Lebanese reforms, but a pan-Islamic revolution, and unlike Amal, which emphasized Shiite-Palestinian tensions, it focused its attention on the fight against Israel (Nasr [2006a]). In fact, by its formation in 1982, Hezbollah became the main rival of Amal.

In the 1980s Hezbollah definitely refused participation in the political system and in contrast to Amal, it was unwilling to compromise with the corrupt political elite. However, in the 1990s Hezbollah’s harsh attitude gave way to a more realistic and pragmatic organization, considering the shifting political landscape of Lebanese and regional politics. A new, Janus-faced organization evolved, retaining a fierce commitment to oppose Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon, while integrating into the political system that they had previously denounced.\(^{33}\) Accordingly, in 1992, despite huge dilemmas, Fadlallah decided to participate in the Lebanese elections: he recognized that an Islamic state was impossible in the diverse Lebanese society, thus the main goal was to achieve gradual reformation, which required Hezbollah’s participation in the political system instead of remaining outside (Norton [2007]).

\(^{32}\) In 1978 al-Sadr flew from Beirut to Tripoli to attend ceremonies commemorating the death of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, but he did not arrive. Although his fate is still unknown, it is widely suspected that Gaddafi himself ordered his assassination, because he viewed him as a political rival.

\(^{33}\) Hezbollah was influenced in its decision by the Iranian regime change after Khomeini’s death (1989), as well as by the increasing Syrian military presence.
As Shiites living in southern Lebanon belong to the poorest strata of the Lebanese society, Hezbollah with its social activities became very popular soon. Furthermore, Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 resulted in an additional prestige growth for the organization, and Hezbollah, led by Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, decided in favour of more intensive political participation, setting its main goal “to create a modern political party from an underground paramilitary movement” (Ablaka [2006] p. 240).

Apparently, like in other countries of the region, one can witness the empowerment of Shiites in Lebanon in the last three decades, during which Shiites could “undress” their political silence and they became the largest, and hereby certainly the most unavoidable sect of the country.

After examining the internal processes of the certain “elements”, I intend to outline the general tendencies concerning Shiite revival. Namely, none of the previously analysed processes can be regarded as an entirely unique phenomenon – all the Shiites of Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon have experienced the same “enlightenment” from the beginning of the 1960s.

The formation of modern states changed the structure of Shiite society, and from the 1960s and 1970s one can observe a gradual secularist trend among Shiites. As a part of the process, middle- and upper-class Shiites gradually detached themselves from their traditional Shiite community and leaders; they tended to educate their children in secular schools and joined various secular movements.

Interestingly, it was not secular Shiites who benefited most from the change in Shiite society but the ulama. In Lebanon, first Imam Musa al-Sadr, then later Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah and Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah became prominent. The poverty and lack of social services in Iraq was also somewhat retrieved by the efforts of such clerical leaders as Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr and Ali Sistani. In Iran, too, after decades of modernization, it was the ayatollahs rather than secular leaders who grew influential.

The ulama itself has also undergone structural changes during this period, adopting a new approach to politics. They became involved in social mobilization and used many of the ideological and political tools of the left (Nasr [2006a] pp. 83-86).

It can also be regarded as a general tendency that in every country of the region one can observe the “Lebanese model”, that is, Shiites gradually turned away from Arab nationalism and started to fight for the recognition of their own identity. Although some
of them embraced socialism enthusiastically in the beginning, it appeared very soon that this is not a viable ideology in the Islamic world either (see Egypt, Syria and Iraq). Thus, it was Islamic fundamentalism that emerged as a new ideology extremely popular among disillusioned Shiites. In Iraq several Shiite activists established the Al Dawa Party at the end of the 1950s; the exiled Kuwaiti Shiite leader, sheik Hassan al-Safar was also very much influenced by similar ideologies in the 1970s, and the culmination of the process came as the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran (Nasr [2006a]).

At the turn of the 21st century, Shiites across the Middle East are questing for socio-political justice and for such a political system that can reconcile Islamic and Western concepts of proper government (Nakash [2006]). This political revival, however, as Vali Nasr points out, does not mean that Shiites of Iraq, Saudi Arabia or Lebanon want to opt out of their countries. They only want to redefine what nationalism means, that is, what it means to be Iraqi, Saudi or Lebanese, and they would like the Shiite identity to be part of it besides Arab identity.34

In essence, the Shiite revival has been unfolding for fifty years almost unobserved, simultaneously in the affected countries. Yet, the question has become extremely important in our days because due to our globalized world, Shiites of the Middle East are increasingly aware of happenings in Iraq, Iran, or elsewhere in the region, which can generate immediate effects in their home country. Revival can thus be even greater and more radical than ever. The sweeping changes that it can evoke, including the reality of regime changes, will be touched upon in a following chapter.

4.3.2 Political Activism in the Light of the Shiites’ Voter Turnout and Election Results

One of the most obvious indicators of political activism is the voter turnout of each community in respective elections and the volume of support for the different candidate groups. In Western societies it is beyond question: there are regular elections and the results are easily available, and what is even more important, they are reliable and maximally representative. However, in the countries of the Middle East the situation is completely different. As none of the examined states belonging to the “Shiite crescent” is a Western-like democracy, analysing election results in practice is very difficult and

34 Iran and the Shia Revival in the Middle East (Transcript) [2006]
the possibility to draw far-reaching conclusions is limited. Another limit comes from the fact that the institution of elections is pretty young in these countries, which certainly affects the length of time reference. Additionally, if there are elections at all, sometimes they serve only the interests of the ruling elite to ease social tensions and they are without real stake. However, besides all these technical and methodological difficulties, I strongly feel it necessary to present the “parliamentary” processes of the region because they reveal many things about the “Shiite question” as such.

Iraq

In Iraq the first government that included Shiites according to their proper number was the transitional government set up with American assistance after the overthrow of the Saddam regime. The right balance of Shiites and Sunnis finally became realized: the transitional government had 13 Shiites out of its 25 members, including the first prime minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari (Nasr [2006a] p. 198).

The first, truly free general elections were held in January 2005. Most of the Sunnis boycotted the elections, but turnout was high: 58% (Nakash [2006] p. 155). Shiites therefore answered to Ali Sistani’s call, who propagated participation in the elections very strongly. The result also reflected the predominance of the Shiites: their common list managed to get 48% of the votes and almost half of the parliamentary seats (Nasr [2006a] p. 189). Following the ratification of the new constitution elections were held also in December 2005. Voter turnout was very high, 79.6%, due to the fact that this time Sunnis also took part in elections. Results produced a shaky government headed by Nouri al-Maliki, while from a Shiite perspective they were very similar to the ones at the previous elections: Shiites took almost half of the votes and half of the seats (Steele [2005]). After the elections, an intensive wave of violence shook the country threatening with a civil war, but the situation began to calm in 2007 (Katzman [2011]).

The latest elections in 2010 came with a surprise concerning the election results. Namely, the secular party of Ayad Allawi, the Iraqi National Movement managed to win the elections, while the Shiite alliance split into two parts before the elections. Facing the results many point to a rise in Iraqi nationalism and some even pronounce the end of sectarianism. Ali Sistani also declared that he would not support any political party nor would he get involved in the political process, seen by some as a signal of irreparable division within the Shiite political community (Altikriti [2010]).
Nevertheless, Shiite parties are still very strong in Iraq, though differences are certainly increasing, and I also believe that religious affiliation in Iraq is not a sine qua non any more.

**Bahrain**

In Bahrain, after gaining independence in 1971 the constitution of the country was approved in 1973, on the basis of which the first, elected National Assembly was set up. However, the Emir already dissolved it two years later, in 1975. Due to the intensifying Shiite demands and unrests of the 1990s, several reforms were introduced in the country between 1999 and 2002, and as a part of this, the National Assembly was summoned again. In 2002 the Emir changed his status from Emir to King, and pronounced Bahrain a constitutional monarchy. After almost thirty years, Bahrainis held their first free national elections on 24 October 2002, in which – without precedent in the region – women could also participate.\(^{35}\)

Many Bahrainis and especially Shiite opposition movements boycotted the elections, thus the voter turnout was only 53%, and it resulted in a Sunni dominated parliament (they took 27 of the 40 seats)\(^{36}\) stocked with conservative and pro-government representatives.\(^{37}\) Within this, Islamist candidates took 19, the independents 18, and the liberals 3 of the 40 seats.\(^{38}\)

Between 2002 and 2006 Shiite opposition groups continued their demand for constitutional reforms, since they did not accept that the king nominated half of the parliamentary seats directly. However, by 2006 they indicated their intention to take part in the elections, but retained their demand for constitutional reform at the top of their agenda.\(^{39}\)

In November-December 2006 Bahraini people could vote for national MPs for the second time, in which Shiites participated as well. It was the first time Al Wefaq, the biggest Shiite Islamist opposition group took part in elections.\(^{40}\) The campaign excellently reflected the Sunni fear concerning the outcome of the elections: many

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\(^{35}\) [Overview History Bahrain (2006)]
\(^{36}\) [Nasr (2006a) p. 235]
\(^{37}\) [Sunnis in Bahrain Threatened With Iraq-Style Chaos if Shiite Majority Elected (2006)]
\(^{38}\) [Inter-Parliamentary Union: Site on Parliamentary Democracy]
\(^{39}\) [Overview History Bahrain (2006)]
\(^{40}\) [Strong Shia Gains in Bahrain Vote. MENA Election guide]
anonymous messages warned Sunni Muslims to back pro-government candidates against the Shiite opposition or face an Iraq-like chaos in the country.\textsuperscript{41}

Voter turnout exceeded 70%. Results reflected the forge ahead of the Islamist parties on the one hand, and the overwhelming majority of the Shiites on the other. Sunni fears therefore did come true: Shiites had won 40% of the votes.\textsuperscript{42} Al Wefaq took 17 of the 40 seats, while Sunni Islamists got 14, and pro-government independent candidates obtained 9 seats (Fadhel [2006]).

The latest parliamentary election was held in October 2010, which was probably the most controversial one in the history of independent Bahrain. The election was accompanied and followed by boycotts, arrests and heated debates between the Shiite majority and the Sunni ruling elite. The government was criticised for preventing Shiites from voting, arresting dissidents and curtailing media and Internet freedom.\textsuperscript{43} Voter turnout was 67%, a little lower than in 2006 (Birnbaum [2010]). Al Wefaq won 18 of the 40 seats (one more than in the previous election), making it again the largest force in Bahrain’s Council of Representatives. Interestingly, the election brought about the significant forge ahead of the independent candidates, who got 17 seats, compared to the 9 in 2006. Sunni parties managed to obtain only 5 seats. Thus, Shiites and independent candidates won an overwhelming majority of seats for the first time (Al’Aali [2010]).

Facing the election results it can be stated that the tendency of Shiite empowerment in Bahrain is definitely continuing, and beside Iraq, there is another Arab country, in which one can observe a Shiite majority gaining ground. The process is accompanied by a series of protests by Shiites, complaining at first about their “second-class” status, and now, following a deadly night raid on 17 February against protesters at Pearl Roundabout in Manama, even calling to end the monarchy.\textsuperscript{44} Demonstrations have become very intensive and the prospect of a regime change has come fairly close to reality, which is to be further examined later.

\textsuperscript{41} Sunnis in Bahrain Threatened With Iraq-Style Chaos if Shiite Majority Elected [2006]
\textsuperscript{42} Strong Shia Gains in Bahrain Vote. \textit{MENA Election guide}
\textsuperscript{43} Shia Group Holds Strong Position in Bahrain Elections [2010]
\textsuperscript{44} Clashes Rock Bahraini Capital [2011]
Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, therefore the king is not constrained by a written constitution or a legislative assembly and political parties are not allowed. The king governs according to the Sharia, and since 1992 there is a national Consultative Council composed of 150 members appointed by the king for four years to serve in an advisory role (Metz [1992]).

On 3 March 2005 the first (and since then the only) municipal elections of the last four decades were held in Saudi Arabia. Based on the results, it seems that Iraqi events mobilized Saudi Shiites as well. Namely, in the first elections of Saudi Arabia voter participation was twice as high in the Shiite Eastern province as in any other province (Nasr [2006b]). Even though only very minor local government positions were at stake and only half the seats were in play, hundreds of candidates competed for seats in municipal councils.

While there are no legal political Shiite organizations in Saudi Arabia, informal networks do exist. Most of them are Islamist religious groups, but a smaller number of secular activists also have emerged in the country. The most powerful and popular Shiite informal network is the Shiite Islamic Reform Movement, led by Hassan al-Saffar. Programmatically, the group gave up its 1970s radicalism and focused mainly on education, charities, and mosque maintenance.

Of the 12 seats available in Qatif and al-Hasa, 11 went to the Shiites; the only one they lost was due to a candidate disqualification on election eve. However, during the campaign unity did not characterize the Shiites at all. Coordination between Shiite leaders partially gave way to competition, primarily between the Shiite Reform Movement, independent Islamists, and liberals. Still, it is remarkable that the Shiite population of Saudi Arabia also reacted upon Sistani’s principle of “one man, one vote”, and the representatives of Shiite informal organizations managed to take seats in municipal councils.

The next Saudi Arabian election was scheduled for 2009, but the royal family decided to postpone it by at least two years, which was a decision considered by many as another blow on the reform process. The king phrased the decision in positive terms,

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45 The other half of the seats, similarly to Bahrain, is appointed by the king.
46 The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia [2005]
47 Ibid.
saying that the aim of the delay is to prepare changes to the law to expand the participation of citizens in the management of local affairs (Slackman [2009a]), but it seems that Saudi Arabia’s Shiites were deprived even of their little chance to influence their fate.

**Kuwait and Syria**

Kuwait and Syria are “odd-one-outs” in a way among the analysed countries. Kuwait is peculiar because its Shiite minority has never lived under total oppression or discrimination. Though, during the elections of 2006 and 2008 sectarian debates became more stressed and the results show small Shiite activism. However, it is not significant at all, moreover, it is rather the Sunni Islamist groups who became stronger in the country.48 As for the last elections, which were held in 2009, one can observe that Sunni Islamists lost some ground, while the number of Shiite lawmakers rose by 4, which is again not a significant change. However, what was really special in the election is that Kuwaiti women won 4 seats in parliament, for the first time in the country’s history (Abdallah [2009]).

Syria is special because here it is the Sunni majority that lives under a Shiite authoritarian minority rule. Although in Syria there are political parties and pressure groups, their political, economic and social influence is quite insignificant. The Peoples’ Council composed of 250 members is elected for four years by Syrian citizens above the age of 18, while the president is appointed by the ruling Baath Party, and after the approval of the Peoples’ Council the president is “elected” by a referendum for a seven-year term. Alawis governing the country today gained important positions in the 1960s, due to a military overthrow and the rise of the Baath Party, and they have managed to preserve their predominance in political life so far. As they are in minority, they have to cooperate with other sects as well. Accordingly, several important positions are held by Sunnis. Nevertheless, the key positions are held by the Alawis in order to guarantee the stability of the country by preventing the weakening of the central government.49 Yet, it seems today that even anti-western Syria is not immune to revolution either (Hirst [2011]). Unrest is gathering pace, and reforms cannot be further delayed.

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48 Sunni Islamists Gain in Kuwait Poll [2008]
49 Országelemzések: Szíria, Kültügyi Figyelő
In Lebanon there is a sectarian multi-party system, that is, the members of the National Assembly are elected on the basis of sectarian proportional representation to serve four-year terms. Since the Taif Agreement of 1989 there are 128 parliamentary seats. As the Agreement maximized the obtainable seats both for the Sunnis and Shiites in 27, in case of Lebanon speaking of a Shiite forge ahead on the basis of parliamentary mandates does not have a sense. Though, it is worth to examine the results of the consecutive Lebanese elections in respect of the distribution of Shiite seats, since they are reflecting excellently the changing power relations within the Shiite community.

First of all, the emergence of Hezbollah, who decided to participate in the elections of 1992 despite great dilemmas, is remarkable. The organization evolved from a revolutionary movement into a political party, with a campaign strategy focusing mainly on social questions and welfare services, which made Hezbollah extremely popular. However, Hezbollah strives not only for the votes of the Shiites, but also for those of the Sunnis and Christians in mixed areas (Nakash [2006]).

In 1992 Hezbollah won 8 of the 128 parliamentary seats, and together with 4 additional seats won by non-Shiites affiliated with its electoral list, the party had the largest bloc in parliament (see Table 3). In 1996, the organization won all together 10 seats, and during the elections of 2000 Hezbollah allied with Amal, and together they won more than a quarter of all seats in parliament (Norton [2007] p. 102). In 2005, after the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from the country, Hezbollah managed to obtain 14 seats, while in southern Lebanon the Amal-Hezbollah alliance took four quarters of Shiite votes, and all together they won 23 seats (Csicsmann [2008] p. 196). Moreover, together with Amal they were successfully negotiating over the composition of the new government, which thus had 5 Shiite ministers, including the foreign minister (Nakash [2006] p. 126).

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50 CIA – The World Factbook
In the light of the steady empowerment of Hezbollah it is no wonder that most analysts had predicted that the Hezbollah-led coalition would win the elections of 2009. Therefore it came as a surprise that in the end, the American-aligned coalition managed to win 71 seats, while the Syrian-Iranian aligned opposition, which includes Hezbollah, took only 57 (Hezbollah alone won 12 seats, 2 less than in the previous elections). However, it should be also noted that the Lebanese election did little to change the real balance of power in the country, where Hezbollah is still by far the strongest player. Another interesting point is that voter turnout was almost 55%, far higher than the 28% of 2005. Consequently, Lebanese people do want to influence their fate, and concerning the results, it seems that the majority of the Lebanese have resolved their minds; they do not want confrontation, they want peace (Slackman [2009b]). We will see what has the future in store, as 2011 came with another turn in Lebanese politics.

Facing the election results of each affected country, we can claim that the whole region is characterized by some – smaller or larger – degree of Shiite political activism. The role of the Iraqi events is indisputable in the acceleration of a process that has been latent since decades in the countries of the region. And now, Bahrain can serve as the next precedent, which may have tragic consequences for the Sunni regimes, although

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**Table 3**

Parliamentary election results for 27 Shiite Seats

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<th><strong>Hezbollah</strong></th>
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<th><strong>Greek Catholic</strong></th>
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* Secular parties and traditional elites.

the future is rather uncertain.

According to Vali Nasr, the challenge that the Shiite revival poses to the Sunni Arab regimes of the Middle East and to the conception of political identity and authority is not substantially different from the threat generated by Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution. Iran’s revolution also sought to break the hegemonic control of the Sunni Arab establishment, the only difference is that in the 1970s and 1980s the Shiites were the more radical, while now the reverse seems to be true (Nasr [2006a] p. 241). Sunni fears are certainly increasing, and their attempt to divert attention from their internal problems by exaggerated statements concerning the Shiite Iranian threat is not a viable tactic any more. They really have to cope with the situation and the introduction of some kind of reforms is inevitable, otherwise they have to face the prospect of their total defeat.

4.3.3 The Reality of Regime Change

When U.S. soldiers marched into Baghdad in April 2003, there was strong anticipation of political change among Shiites in the Arab world. Shiites contended that a Shiite-led government in Iraq would force their own governments to introduce serious reforms that would improve their position in the state. However, change did not come as quickly as many had expected (Nakash [2006]). It has been nine years since the Saddam regime fell, but Sunni leaders are still on power, though their rule has become rather shaky. Change is obviously taking place and facing present events one can rightly claim that the Arab world is in a complete turmoil. The new Middle Eastern realm is unpredictable, but what is sure is that disenfranchised groups are making their voice heard more and more intensively.

Iraq

Iraq has already gone through a regime change and Ali Sistani, presently the most supported Shiite leader, had a great role in altering Washington’s plans for Iraq, resulting in the transfer of sovereignty to an Iraqi interim government in which Shiites had a prominent role (Nakash [2006]). Namely, Sistani was able to achieve that the U.S. did not reckon him and Shiites as a threat, but as a potential ally, since the interests of the two sides concerning democracy building are in certain respect very similar.
Sistani’s primary goal was to set up a government on the principles of majority rule, accountability and representation, which would reflect and protect Shiite identity. He parted ways definitively with anything like an Arab dictatorship, such as the Baathist one, or a Khomeini-style theocracy. He limited the rule of Islam to providing values and guidelines for social order. With this, he had quietly but surely brought to the broader Middle East a new approach to politics that stands as the most compelling and most credible challenge that fundamentalism and other forms of authoritarianism have ever had to face (Nasr [2006a]).

Syria

In case of Syria, it is the Sunni majority who questions the legitimacy of the Alawis’ minority rule. For more than four decades Syria has been a secular state and religious questions have not been on the agenda. However, spurred by the civil war in Iraq and rising Sunni-Shiite tensions in Lebanon in the past few years, Syrians are increasingly aware of their sectarian identities, and the country’s majority Sunni population now views Syria’s deepening relationship to Iran with creeping suspicion (Abouzeid [2007]). Yet, the growing unrest in the country now has an even more important dimension, which prevails over mere sectarianism. The issue of the Sunni-Shiite antagonism have become strongly politicized and protests now are directed against authoritarian rule and lack of rights. Since March 2011 the situation is rather hectic in the country, with the authorities veering between offers of concessions and crackdowns. It is to be seen in which direction the events will turn.

Lebanon

Debate over democracy and power distribution has become intensive in Lebanon as well. Hezbollah, together with Amal, joined the anti-Syrian government in 2005, creating a powerful Shiite front in decision-making. Hereby, Shiites became a non-evadable force in Lebanese political processes. By this time Hezbollah distanced itself from sectarian tensions and emphasized Lebanese nationalism rather than calling for Shiite empowerment. Particularly, Hezbollah, similarly to the Iraqi Shiites, has been promoting a type of nationalism that embraces Shiism as well as Islamic and Arab identities (Nasr [2006a]). Thus, the Iraqi-Lebanese model together with Ali Sistani’s
principle of “one man, one vote” imply that Shiite revival does not manifest itself in the picture of some sort of “Pan-Shiite Empire”; Shiites only want to complete the identity of their nation with their own one, in an equal proportion.

After the war against Israel in 2006 Hezbollah’s prestige increased enormously in the Islamic world, including the Sunnis as well. For a short time, Shiite-Sunni antagonism was pushed to the background, and strong support for Hezbollah was apparent both within Shiite and Sunni communities. However, in contrast to the celebrations of Hezbollah’s victory in the wider Arab world, within Lebanon many began to question Hezbollah’s role in provoking the war. In fact, the war has split Lebanon in two: one Lebanon represented by a coalition of mainly Sunnis, Druze, and Christians, while the other also represented by a coalition, consisting mainly of Shiites and some Christians (Norton [2007]). Furthermore, the debate over the redistribution of political power generated further tensions in the country, promising with a prospect of additional gains for the Shiites.

The hotly debated legislative election of 2009 was followed by an uneasy balance in Lebanon. A coalition government was formed between Hezbollah and the March 14 Coalition, a Christian-Sunni alliance backed by the U.S., which managed to retain control of the Lebanese Parliament. Saad Hariri, whose father’s assassination in 2005 led to huge protests in the country, became prime minister.

In January 2011, Hezbollah forced the collapse of the government, deepening a crisis over the United Nations-backed tribunal investigating the killing of Mr Hariri and 22 others in 2005, in which Hezbollah totally denies any kind of involvement. Hezbollah demanded the government of Saad Hariri to end its cooperation with the court, and when he refused, Hezbollah withdrew from the cabinet with its allies. Two weeks later, Hezbollah rounded up the votes needed to form a new government, and as a culmination of the generation-long emergence of the Shiite Muslim movement from a shadowy militant group to the country’s pre-eminent political force, Hezbollah appointed its own prime minister, in the person of Najib Miqati. Although Miqati called himself as a consensus candidate, the symbolism of Hezbollah choosing the country’s prime minister was enormous, and hereby Shiites practically have achieved the top position in Lebanese society.

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51 Lebanon [2011]
Turning our attention to the other edge of the “crescent”, many thought that the Iraqi events would lead to political liberalization in the Gulf monarchies. However, right after the Iraqi invasion, the theory of the “Shiite crescent” affected negatively the pace of political reform by reinforcing the traditional conservatism of the ruling families in the Gulf States (Ulrichsen [2009]).

In Bahrain the government introduced measures discriminating Shiites; moreover, it invited Sunnis to the country and gave them Bahraini citizenship in order to change demographic ratios.\(^{52}\) Undoubtedly, ruling elites everywhere answered to the Iraqi events first with retaining oppression and status quo. However, in March and June 2005, thousands of Bahrainis poured into the streets to ask for full-fledged democracy and proportional representation (Nasr [2006a]).

Now the situation in Bahrain is again critical. The situation became worse after the controversial elections, which was further aggravated by the Bahraini security forces cracking down on peaceful demonstrators on 17 February. Now Bahrain has to cope with unprecedented protests, which can be the gravest test of the Al Khalifa family’s legitimacy after the unrests of the 1990s. Popular anger and criticism against the ruling family have reached unparalleled levels, flaming tensions between Sunnis and Shiites.

It is important to note that here also, the underlying problem is not sectarianism or Iranian influence in itself, but rather “the rule of the few over the wishes of the many”, as Frederic Wehrey pointed out very expressively. The Sunni-Shiite split is obviously a major division on the islands, but this would not be so if the country had a more just and representative form of government and more equal distribution of resources (Wehrey [2011]).

Many fear that the unrest could potentially turn into regional sectarian violence; remarkably Saudi Arabia, who sent troops into Bahrain to help calm weeks of protests by the Shiite Muslim majority – a move seen by many analysts as a mark of concern in Saudi Arabia that concessions by the country’s monarchy could inspire the conservative Sunni-ruled kingdom’s own Shiite minority. Al Wefaq called the step an occupation, and accused Saudi Arabia of launching an undeclared war.

The Al Khalifa offered assurances that talks would address opposition demands

\(^{52}\) The Emerging Shia Crescent: Implications for the Middle East and U.S. Policy [2006]
including parliamentary, electoral, and government reforms. However, even if talks are successful, the opposition is increasingly split and more radical groups could keep up protests (Nouei hed-Richter [2011]).

**Saudi Arabia**

The changes in Iraq after 2003 activated Saudi Shiites as well, who expressed their discontent in demonstrations shouting anti-government slogans, and sided with other Saudi reform groups in advocating broader socio-political change in the kingdom. Virtually all the reformers agreed that Saudi Arabia should retain its Islamic orientation, but they urged the crown prince to curb the powers of the Wahhabi clerics.

The Saudi king gave in to Shiite pressure and adopted a conciliatory posture toward Saudi Shiites already in 2003, but this time gestures to establish a “national dialogue” were insufficient. After he became king in 2005, Abdullah took further steps to defuse tensions, which were really welcomed by the Shiites (Nasr [2006a]). Additionally, the king decided to order the introduction of much more comprehensive reforms than ever. Notwithstanding, protests broke out among Shiites, as they felt that they were left out of the reforms: they got neither any ministerial position nor representation in the council of senior scholars that had been reorganized to include all schools of Islam (Nasr D. A. [2009]).

Although the Saudi government has successfully oppressed reformist movements so far, in the long run it will not be able to ignore changes in the Middle East, and especially after the events in Tunisia and Egypt, when Middle Eastern rulers are busy to make some concessions to appease their people, it will be forced to introduce wider reforms than expanding the role of citizens in local affairs through elections (held in 2005), which will definitely include the recognition of Shiite rights as well (Nakash [2006]).

A further source of uneasiness within the country is the widespread and persistent reports of the deteriorating health of the king. It is not surprising therefore that in the middle of such uncertainty some are trying to take the opportunity to push for political liberalization.53

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53 Middle East Turmoil: Saudi Arabia Apart From the Rest? [2011]
It seems that the relative, fragile internal stability of the region has flared up, starting with the Iraqi regime change and possibly leading to further, smaller or greater changes. Anyhow, it is important to highlight that the present processes cannot be interpreted exclusively within the framework of Sunni-Shiite antagonism. Moreover, the Shiite-Sunni question seems to be pushed into the background and conflicts rather stem from a much wider and complex base. Religious affiliation is not a core question any more, the real problem is discrimination, oppression and lack of rights, and the participants of the conflict are not only members of a single group, but they vary, yet share a common cause: Shiites in Bahrain, Sunnis in Syria and others all strive for achieving a more equal, more just political system, and in this question the region’s Arab population seems to agree. In this respect therefore pan-Arab solidarity is apparently coming to the foreground again, while the sectarian dimension of the conflict has become less significant.

Another important characteristic of the present development is that although many expected that Islamism would be the new force with which Sunni regimes have to compete for power, to the great satisfaction of Iran, what we are experiencing now is that it is not primarily the fundamentalist organizations, who take the lead in the demonstrations, but one can rather observe the involvement and growing activism of ordinary people, all of them being fed up with and furious about the system in which they live. What is also important to be highlighted is the fact that these movements are not directed from above; they are rather spontaneous and individualistic movements, feeding from below. They are not governed by Iran or any other force, thus it is much more difficult to oppress them. What is even more ironic in the situation is that apparently, one of the most serious enemies of the ruling regimes is Internet – no wonder that their first step everywhere is to turn off Internet connection.

The present ruling elites should definitely adjust to this new situation. Firstly, they should find another tactic to handle the situation instead of highlighting the Shiite or Islamist threat, as it is becoming more and more obvious that the people in unrest are not extremists at all and their demands are legitimate. Secondly, Sunni regimes must somehow understand and accept the idea that change does not necessarily mean their fall. It should not be a zero-sum game, since it is still not so widespread among protesters to demand the ousting of the monarchs or the end of the monarchies. They want reforms. But I think what the ruling families are doing now is just in contrast to their real interests. They should change strategy in time because this behaviour can lead
exactly to their defeat, which they want to avoid so much, whereas if they eased the rigidity of the system, they could possibly preserve their ruling status.

4.4 Beyond the “Crescent”

4.4.1 The “Shiite Question” and Its Validity in the Neighbouring Countries

Jordan

Jordan is obviously one of the most affected countries by the phenomenon of the “Shiite crescent”, and it did not come by chance that it was King Abdullah, who evoked the whole concept. Effects of the Iraqi War have reached Jordan as well. The spillover of violence to the country and the “emancipation” of Iraqi Shiites have posed a huge challenge to the Jordanian regime and generated internal tensions. After the bombings in Amman in 2005 the role of the security forces was reinforced in the country, which implied the postponement of political reforms at the same time (Csicsmann [2008]). Additionally, the country was hit hard by the global downturn of 2008, resulting in a severe economic crisis.

However, it seems that the real threat for Jordan now definitely does not come from an ascending pan-Shiite alliance, but rather from its own citizens, who are not even Shiites, constituting only 2% of the population, but rather Sunnis, who are harbouring hostile feelings against the Hashemite-regime and demanding reforms more and more vigorously. Indeed, Abdullah’s autocracy depends on the positive discrimination of a conservative minority over the more advanced majority (Hirst [2005]).

In late January 2011 Jordan was also hit by the waves of unrest that have spread across the Arab world in the wake of the revolution in Tunisia. As a consequence, after four weeks of unusual public demonstrations, King Abdullah dismissed his cabinet and the prime minister, in a surprise move with the aim to calm street protests. The king also promised changes at the same time, which definitely gave him some time, but many questions remained open and no real steps were taken. The recent demonstrations are the first serious challenge to the rule of King Abdullah, and what is most striking is that in Jordan, like elsewhere in the region, it is the very system of the monarchy that is
being questioned. People, including the so-called “March 24th Movement”\textsuperscript{54}, are attacking corruption, autocracy, restrictions on freedom of political expression, and reductions in government subsidies.

The king’s first reaction to tamp down frustration was the announcement of $125 million in subsidies for basic goods and fuel and an increase in civil servant pay. However, these steps will not be enough if the king intends to preserve the stability of the country, which obviously has a special importance for the U.S. as well.\textsuperscript{55}

\textit{Egypt}

In case of Egypt, having almost 90\% Sunni Muslim population, it can come as a surprise that many speak of a remarkable rise of the so-called “Shiite question” in the country. Namely, there is a popular idea among Egyptians that a lot of Sunnis are converting to Shiism, though there is no even a single documented case of it. And that is where the problem comes from: there are no official figures concerning the number or nature of conversions. Statistics in Egypt a few years ago showed that the Egyptian Muslims were 100\% Sunnis and Shiite ideology could not penetrate at all. However, it is said that recently thousands and perhaps dozens of thousands of Egyptians have converted into Shiism, due to the intensive Shiite preaching efforts in the country sponsored by Iran, and the new converts are now disguised in Sufi groups. The phenomenon, whether it is true or not, was also confirmed by the leader of the Egyptian Shiites, Muhammad al-Darini (Al-Majid [2008]).

According to another source, it is believed that Shiites account for 5 million of the 80 million population (Al Sherbini [2009]), which is quite a huge estimate. Some Western and Egyptian sources indicate that Shiites constitute less than 1\% of the Egyptian population (approximately 657,000), which I think is the most realistic assessment (Khalaji [2009]).

The attack on Iran’s Shiite conversion campaign has been led mostly by Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a former senior member of the Egyptian Brotherhood and one of the movement’s leading ideologues. Qaradawi became a fierce critic of Iran and the Shiites after the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006. At that time, Qaradawi

\textsuperscript{54} The group has taken the name “March 24th Movement” after the date they began camping out in the centre of Amman, with the aim to achieve real changes (Kadri-Bronner [2011]).

\textsuperscript{55} Jordan [2011]
launched an attack on the Shiites, accusing them of trying to penetrate into Egypt and other Sunni societies to convert their people to Shiism (Altman [2009]). Qaradawi’s statements have caused a huge impact, not only because of his clerical status and fame in the Arab and Islamic world, but because he represents a tolerant school of thought, and he usually emphasizes tolerance between the two sects (Al-Majid [2008]). The motives of his more hostile stance, however, could be explained by the general fear from a Shiite empowerment in the region led by Iran and its allies, strongly reinforced by Hezbollah’s victory right next door.

As a matter of fact, Egypt has long been suspicious of the connection between the Egyptian Brotherhood and Iran, based mainly on Iran’s strong ties to Hamas – an offshoot of the Brotherhood. However, now the Shiite question seems to divide the Muslim Brotherhood as well, for which Shiism has not always been an issue, as at its core the Brotherhood’s basic ideological doctrine is pan-Islamic and religiously inclusive (Altman [2009]).

Another cause for concern can be that Egyptians are more receptive toward Shiism than other Sunnis, as the Fatimid Dynasty, established in the tenth century as an offshoot of the Shiite Ishmaelite movement, has still strong traditions in the country. Egyptians still respect the symbols, icons and sacred places of that period, and the dynasty played a great role in the cross-fertilization between Iran and Egypt (Khalaji [2009]).

What is sure and can be brought up as evidence is that in July 2009 Egyptian authorities questioned a 12-member group led by Hassan Mousa accused of setting up a group to promote Shiism and spreading “extremist” ideas. The police also claimed that Mousa had received financial support from Shiite leaders abroad (Al Sherbini [2009]). In fact, in the debate over conversions, neither Iran’s supporters nor its detractors have seriously denied that “Shiitization” is taking place among Sunni populations (Altman [2009]).

Apparently, there are Shiite religious groups operating in Egypt, though the volume of their activities is highly questionable. I do not think that conversions take place in massive numbers and in a systematic way; rather it can be another tool in the hand of Sunni regimes to evoke a confrontation with Iran by turning Arab public opinion against the Shiites. And facing present events in Egypt, not only the country’s fate is uncertain, but the future of the “Shiite question” as well.
In Yemen the “Shiite question”, accompanied by intensive fights since 2004, is not a present issue; its roots go back much further. In 1962 a revolution in the country ended over 1,000 years of rule by the Zaydi Hashemites, who belonged to a branch of Shiite Islam. Saada, in the north, was their main centre and since their fall from power the region has been largely ignored economically and remained underdeveloped. Furthermore, the Yemeni government has had little authority in the mountainous areas, creating a constant political instability in this region.\(^{56}\)

Shiites, who are considered to be heretics by extremist Sunnis, constitute 40% of the population, and they are in majority in northern Yemen, while Sunnis, who make up most of the governing elite, are concentrated in the more developed coastal regions of the south. Thus, the sectarian conflict has a geopolitical dimension as well.

In fact, Yemen’s government faces a permanent rebellion by Shiite tribesman, particularly in the country’s northern mountains. The rebels are the followers of cleric Hussein Badr Eddin al-Houthi, who was killed in 2004, after months of battles with Yemeni security forces. The Yemeni government accused Mr al-Houthi’s rebels of wanting to overthrow the regime and impose Shiite religious law, while the rebels declared independence and claimed that they are only defending their community against discrimination and aggressive acts by the government.\(^{57}\)

Many warned that Yemen’s northern region might change into a Sunni-Shiite sectarian battlefield, while the Yemeni government accused Iran and also the Hezbollah of funding the Houthi fighters. In August 2009 the Yemeni army launched an offensive against Shiite rebels in Saada province. The conflict even crossed the border, as clashes broke out between the Shiite rebels and Saudi security forces along the common frontier. The rebels accused Saudi Arabia of supporting the Yemeni government in attacks against them, while the Saudi government denied it.\(^{58}\) Though, the Saudi government is certainly interested in the weakening of Shiite protesters near its borders, as its Shiite minority can be very much influenced by events taking place in their neighbourhood. Moreover, many assume that Shiite insurgency can trigger unrest in Oman as well, where the Shiites are politically under-represented, and such an extensive

\(^{56}\) Profile: Yemen’s Houthi Fighters [2009]
\(^{57}\) Deadly Blast Strikes Yemen Mosque [2008]
\(^{58}\) Yemen – Timeline [2011]
conflict could destabilize the entire Arabian Peninsula, which would erode U.S. dominance in the region and would empower Iran as a result (Vladislav [2011]).

Apparently, secular issues are constantly on the agenda in Yemen, but presently, the current protests have a much wider dimension, like elsewhere in the region. The protests were initially against unemployment, social and economic conditions as well as government’s corruption. Later, protesters called for political reforms, social change and even demanded the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The administration is now trying to rebuild the national unity: in February 2011 the president announced a plan for a coalition government that would include all opposition parties and promised that neither he nor his son will seek office after 2013 (Vladislav [2011]). Moreover, under a deal initiated by the Gulf Cooperation Council, Saleh even agreed to step down and hand power to his deputy in exchange for immunity from prosecution. However, the question is far from being closed as it seems that the opposition is very sceptical about the president’s promise and has no intention to soften its stance, whereas Saleh is not willing to give further concessions either. Anyhow, one of the parties shall give in in the near future; otherwise the situation in Yemen will threaten with a civil war.

Observably, the Shiite question is absolutely valid in these three neighbouring countries, although each of them is affected to a different extent. What is yet common in the three cases is the fact that they all have to cope with tensions that are not of a sectarian character only; moreover, in some cases they completely lack any sectarian aspect. Present conflicts represent multiple dimensions, including social, political and religious ones, therefore the solution to them is not so simple either, and due to this complexity regimes have to find comprehensive answers addressing multiple needs, which will be a huge challenge for them.
5. The Hidden Agenda: Examining the “Iran Factor”

Iran represents the main threat in the eye of the Sunni regimes. King Abdullah’s vision of a “Shiite crescent” – despite his vehement refutations – is also directed against Iran, and Sunni fears mainly stem from the significant positional gains of the Islamic Republic.

Firstly I intend to present how Iran has become a non-evadable regional power in the Middle East and how it changed after the Iraqi War to be the conductor of the threatening Shiite revival. Secondly, I would like to analyse the existence and reality of Iranian Shiite networks throughout the Middle East.

5.1 Iranian Positional Gains and Sunni Scares after the Iraqi War

Although only half of Iran’s population is Persian, the country is characterized by a special sort of “Iranian nationalism”, in which Iranian and Shiite Islam identities are mixed (Maróth-Rostoványi-Vásáry [2007]). The great power status of Iran is not a new phenomenon – it has always played the role of the regional hegemon during its 2,500-3,000 years long history. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi wished to make the country the “policeman of the region”, while the Islamic Revolution strived for creating an “ideological hegemony” (N. Rózsa [2007]).

A series of provocations have intimidated Sunni regimes, both rhetorically and factually. Bahrain was a target for exporting the Islamic Revolution, while the three Persian Gulf islands seized by Iran in 1971 are another sore point for the Gulf monarchies, especially for the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia’s Eastern province with its Shiite population has been also a source of political tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran since the 1970s and 1980s (Nisan [2009]).

The withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon in 2000 significantly increased the popularity of Hezbollah in the Muslim world, and herewith Iran, as the zealous backer of the Lebanese case and the most prominent supporter of the fight against Israel could also ride the wave of popularity. The war in Afghanistan after 11 September 2001 has further increased Iran’s scope for action. Thereafter, as a result of the 2003 Iraqi War, Iran’s other counterweight has also ceased to exist, thus now there is no such a great
power in the region that can be a real counterpoint of the Islamic Republic – even Saudi Arabia is incapable of filling this role (N. Rózsa [2007]).

On the whole, there are two factors that assure a significant position to Iran even on a global level: the country’s oil and natural gas reserves and the industrial background built around them. Furthermore, technical modernization is supplemented with the nuclear program, which is an unequivocal signal of the fact that Iran is working hard on the further reinforcement of its position – its technical and scientific program serves this purpose as well (N. Rózsa [2005]). The Iranian nuclear program is subject to many debates nowadays, but I do not intend to get into its details. Officially, the program serves peaceful purposes and Iran is not working on the production of nuclear weapons. However, the endeavour to possess nuclear weapons would fit into the great power aspirations of Iran. Anyhow, the danger of Iran’s possible attainment of nuclear weapons does not lie primarily in the fact that it wishes to level a blow at anybody. The beginning of a nuclear arms race in the region would spell much greater danger (Rostoványi [2007]).

In May 2003, just after the fall of Saddam, Iran’s president travelled to Beirut, where local Shiites welcomed him as a hero. Seyyed Muhammad Khatami said nothing about a Shiite political revival; he only talked about Iran’s cultural ties with Lebanon. However, the symbolism of his triumphal visit was designed to signal that in the new Middle Eastern order Iran would like to ride the crest of the Shiite revival (Nasr [2006a]).

The 21st century has undoubtedly come with promising changes for the Islamic Republic. The culmination of this process was the elimination of the Iraqi counter pole, putting the Persian state into more favourable position than ever. Iran has gained huge influence in the region, first of all in Iraq, Lebanon and even in Gaza. It does not come by chance therefore that Sunni regimes are watching every step of Iran with special attention and growing concern and the sectarian violence, first in Iraq, and now elsewhere, all have the signs of a hegemonic Persian ambition (Eshel [2007]). In fact, many Iranians believe that a Shiite-run Iraq is a source of security for the country and as it is said that democracies do not go to war with each other, they take it as an axiom that

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59 According to certain reports Islamist Hamas members receive military training from Iran (Nisan [2009]).
Shiite governments do not go to war with each other. Thus, the cause of war can only be the Shiite-Sunni antagonism.60

Accordingly, many worry about the resurgence of Iran’s regional ambitions, fuelled this time not by religious ideology but by Iranian nationalism. Tehran sees itself as a regional power and it is undoubtedly the most influential country of the Shiite zone. Besides this, it is demanding international recognition of its interests and by aggressively pursuing nuclear power it gives rise to anxiety on behalf of the neighbouring countries (Nasr [2006b]). On the other hand, others argue that Iran’s newfound regional sway is not a deliberate Iranian policy of renewed regional subversion, but rather the shrewd exploitation of opportunities (Aarts-Duijne [2009]). Nevertheless, Sunni Arab regimes are very much concerned about Iran’s new role.

The rivalry of Saudi Arabia and Iran became especially intensive after the Iraqi events and it is still observable to a great extent. Interestingly, they are battling indirectly, trying to win the hearts and minds of ordinary people in Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and other countries in the region. Iran is for example believed to have better intelligence presence in Iraq, while a large percentage of the Iraqi suicide bombers are Saudi citizens. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is also reported to be active in Iran, especially in the ethnically Arab, oil-rich south of the country, where it is believed to be offering financial incentives for locals to convert from Shiite to Sunni Islam.61 In my opinion these assumptions lack any reality, though it is possible that such aspirations are sporadically taking place, but certainly not with the direct support of the Saudi government.62

On the other hand, others argue that the Islamic Republic is now a tired dictatorship, which has completely lost its revolutionary character (Nasr [2006b]). Although in this respect it is certainly true, Iran will definitely be the only hegemon power of the region for the next years or decades. This seems to be reinforced by the fact that the present situation generates huge fear in the Sunni regimes. In most Arab countries sectarian tensions are blamed on Iran and its increased influence together with its alleged sponsorship of Shiite networks is a proof to Arab leaders that their old Persian rival is determined to reshape the Middle East to suit its own interest. Jordan’s King Abdullah warned of a rising “Shiite crescent” in 2004. Saudi Arabia’s King

60 Iran and the Shia Revival in the Middle East (Transcript) [2006]
61 Shi’ite Supremacists Emerge from Iran’s Shadows [2005]
62 By the way, it would imply a potential internal political risk for Iran, since the country’s Sunni minority lives in the least developed regions and they are politically absolutely under-represented.
Abdullah accused Iran of wanting to spread Shiism in Sunni countries. Hosni Mubarak, then the president of Egypt, in 2006 said that “most of the Shiites are loyal to Iran and not to the countries they are living in”, while the attitude of Iraqi Sunnis has been the following: “If the Arab states don’t come to our help, they will find Iran at their gate” (Ghosh [2007]). Al Qaida simply accused Ahmadinejad of wanting to establish a Shiite caliphate designed to destroy the Sunni countries (Nisan [2009]).

Although these statements are full of rhetorical exaggerations, behind them there are real worries. Anyhow, Iran firmly refuses all kinds of accusations. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah also defended the Islamic Republic and said that Tehran is not planning to implement a “Shiite crescent” in the Middle East and it is not interested in transforming Sunnis into Shiites.63

During a visit to the U.S. in September 2005, the Saudi foreign minister told his American audience that the potential for disintegration of Iraq is real and that would “bring other countries in the region into the conflict.” Although this has not happened so far, the Saudi prince’s refrain has become the mantra for Sunni leaders from Lebanon to Bahrain, warning of growing Iranian influence to gain international support for resisting Shiite empowerment (Nasr [2006a]). In March 2009 it was also the Saudi Prince, who told at a meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo that the Arab world has to present “a unified and joint vision” in their dealings with Iran and has to stand up to Iran’s regional ambitions, including its nuclear program. Prince Saud al-Faisal also added that non-Arab countries should not intervene in the internal affairs of Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestine territories.64 Arab leaders also fear that the new American administration’s efforts to resolve some of its problems with Iran might lead to a deal that would bring U.S. and Iran closer at the expense of Arab interests. However, Clinton assured the Arab ministers that Washington will consult fully with Gulf allies on Iran issues (Nasrawi [2009]).

Apparently, many Arab regimes suspect a hidden Iranian agenda behind the empowerment of the Shiites and depict the Shiites either as Iranian informants or the Iranian “fifth column”. In recent years these rhetorical expressions have become a staple of Wahhabi sermons as well (Nasr [2006a]). These statements are partly self-serving: they allow Sunni leaders to maintain the ideological base and legitimacy of their rule.

63 Nasrallah Denies Iran Is Seeking “Shiite Crescent” in the Middle East [2007]
64 Hereby referring obviously to Iran, who is accused of actively supporting radical Shiite organizations exactly on these territories.
and they provide them with a pretext to divert attention away from their internal problems, as well as to resist U.S. calls for domestic political reform. They argue that, if bringing democracy to the Middle East means empowering Shiites and strengthening Iran, Washington would be well advised to stick to Sunni dictatorships (Nasr [2006b]). In fact, Sunnis are scared of a Shiite revival because it threatens their political interests, but they communicate their fear in a way that they put Iran to the centre of the whole Shiite issue, as an active shaper of the events. King Abdullah, after being widely criticised for his views about the “Shiite crescent”, also suggested that his pronouncements had been aimed not so much at Shiites as a religious community, but as a political community, backed by Iran.65 My impression is that Sunni visions concerning Iran are fairly exaggerated and the main reason for the concern of Arab states is not the rise of Shiite power, but the possible democratization of the Middle East.

As for the role of Iran, I agree completely with Kayhan Barzegar and Amir M. Haji-Yousefi, who argue that Iran’s actions are dictated more by security concerns than expansionist designs. Ideology serves only one element of national power and the Iranian behaviour should be looked at as a consequence and reaction to the international environment that surrounds it. In this respect, Iranian foreign policy and decision-making is very much characterized by a deep suspicion of the outside world, thus Iran’s primarily goal is to steer away foreign influence and interference in the country’s affairs. Hence, one can look at Iran’s foreign policy behaviour as mainly a defensive one based on the threats it faces. Indeed, it is natural to expect a country, which is constantly surrounded by hostile pressure to fully utilize all resources in order to preserve its national security and to capitalize on any geopolitically advantageous position it may have (Barzegar [2008] and Haji-Yousefi [2009]).

Ray Takeyh also argues that Iran should not be considered as “a revisionist power.” It is rather a “status quo power with incendiary rhetoric”, and it has always tried to overcome the sectarian divide in the Middle East by using fierce anti-Israel and anti-U.S. rhetoric.66 Ahmadinejad himself also said in an interview with the Al-Arabia TV Channel that the Muslim Ummah is united and there is no talk of Shiite or Sunni. He also added that the Muslim world should know that the Iranian nation and the Islamic Republic of Iran would never take any steps to create diversity among Muslims.

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65 Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence? [2005]
66 The Emerging Shia Crescent: Implications for the Middle East and U.S. Policy [2006]
I also think that it is not in the interest of Iran to support Shiites one-sidedly. In fact, its goal is rather not to alienate Sunnis because Tehran wants to be the representative of the entire Islamic Ummah, and in this respect its aim has not changed compared to the revolutionary endeavours of the 1980s. Sectarian fragmentation and antagonism does not serve the interests of Iran, as it needs the support and solidarity of the Sunni Arab world in its effort to become a global power, which includes the necessity to push its nuclear program through the Western powers. However, it will not be easy, since Arabs are exactly scared of the very same idea – at least as much as the West.

5.2 The Reality of the Iranian “Shiite Network”

Iran’s “secret network” nowadays mainly gets attention in relation to Iraq and most of the accusations against Iran target the assumed Iranian presence in Iraq.

According to some assumptions, in the British area of operations there are at least a dozen active Islamist groups linked to Tehran, who are blamed for carrying out terrorist attacks and imposing Islamic laws by force. The Badr Organization, consisting of nearly 12,000 militiamen trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, have been blamed for a series of killings of Sunni Muslims, while the Mahdi Army received arms and volunteers from Iran during its battle against American and British troops in 2004 (Beeston [2005]). Jordanian King Abdullah also warned before the Iraqi elections scheduled for January 2005 that Iran was trying to influence the elections to create an Islamic government in Iraq. According to the king more than one million Iranians crossed the border into Iraq to vote in the election with the encouragement of the Iranian government, while others are members of militias trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who could fuel trouble in Iraq after the election (Wright-Baker [2004]). On the other hand, Tehran denied any involvement and support in the hostilities.

The extent and depth of Iran’s influence in Iraq is difficult to be judged. Personal ties certainly exist between the two Shiite communities. The leaders of ISCI lived in Iran for years and initially they were pressing an Iranian-like political system. However, since they had no alternative but to form a coalition and make a compromise with other Shiite groups, their views, and consequently their relations to Iran, have changed a lot (N. Rózsa [2007]). Many members of the Al Dawa movement were also forced to Iranian exile during the Saddam regime, where they joined such Shiite activists as the
cadres of ISCI and received training from Tehran. Even Muqtada al-Sadr has Iranian connections (Nasr [2006a]), and Iraq’s most prominent Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani is Iranian-born and speaks Arab with a Persian accent.

Bonds between the Shiite populations of Iran and Iraq are also unquestionable. Thousands of Iranians make pilgrimages to the holiest Shiite cities of Najaf and Karbala (Wright-Baker [2004]). Besides this, many Iranian Shiite pilgrims have stayed to study in Iraq, or some even settled down, married and started families. Therefore the presence of large numbers of Iranians inside Iraq is neither abnormal nor a new development, and it cannot be interpreted as evidence of Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs. In many respects Iraqi Shiites are looking at Iran as the only power that supported them during the period of bloody revenge after the insurrection of 1991 (Nasr [2006a]). This is not to say, however, that Iran is the example for them to be followed, or Iran is their “homeland”. As University of Vermont professor F. Gregory Gause also suggested in one of his speeches, Iraqi Shiites are not drawn toward Iran out of some “primordial loyalty,” but they are looking for allies.

Since 2003, Iran has officially played a constructive role in Iraq. It was actually the first country in the region that sent an official delegation to Baghdad for talks with the Iraqi Governing Council. It also provided financial support to Iraq and offered to help rebuild Iraq’s energy and electricity infrastructure. However, according to Vali Nasr Iran’s unofficial influence in Iraq is even greater. In the past few years Iran has built an impressive network of allies and clients, including intelligence operatives, armed militias, and politicians (Nasr [2006b]). The International Crisis Group also admits in its report summarizing the results of a several months’ long Iraqi research that Iranian presence in Iraq includes a widespread network of paid informers, the members of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps as well as religious propaganda and social welfare campaigns. However, Iran’s presence in the country is far less extensive as many claim. There is no concrete evidence that would support that Iran is seeking to maximise instability in Iraq, and there is no indication that Iranian electoral manipulation is anything more than speculation.

Erzsébet N. Rózsa draws the attention to another interesting aspect. Namely, the process is worth to be examined in the opposite direction as well: how much influence

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67 Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence? [2005]
68 The Emerging Shia Crescent: Implications for the Middle East and U.S. Policy [2006]
69 Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence? [2005]
does Iraq have in Iran and to what extent do Iraqi processes affect Iranian internal and foreign policy? Indeed, Iraqi events can boost internal debates in Iran and the example of a potentially successful democracy next door can serve as a precedent for the Islamic Republic\textsuperscript{70} (N. Rózsa [2007]). Vali Nasr also confirms that the influence between the two countries runs the other way as well. There is a great deal of influence exercised by Iraqis over the Iranian government, including Iraqi seminaries in Qom and powerful Iraqi leaders, who are now among Iran’s leading politicians.\textsuperscript{71} Moreover, since Saddam’s fall, many Iranians have begun giving their religious taxes and donations to Sistani’s representative in Qom, where Sistani enjoys great popularity among the city’s merchants and its bazaars (Nasr [2006a]).

Concerning the extent of Iran’s influence in other countries, one must face the same problem of uncertainty and opinions differ in the question of regional Shiite networks. Vali Nasr argues that Iran’s position also depends on its network of militias that form the backbone of Shiite power. From Hezbollah in Lebanon to the Badr Organization and Mahdi Army in Iraq, and the Army of Muhammad in Pakistan, Shiite militias project Shiite power and they are links in a chain that represents the muscle of the Shiites. Indeed, all of these groups have been organized, trained and funded by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards (Nasr [2006a]).

Hezbollah certainly served as a stalking horse for Iranian interests, especially in the 1980s. Most of its members received military training in Najaf, Karbala and Qom under the ideological influence of Baqir al-Sadr, Muhsin al-Hakim, and Khomeini. However, by the end of the decade Iran’s policy changed in this respect and it reinterpreted its relations with Hezbollah. At the beginning of the 1990s, the new Iranian leadership, led by president Rafsanjani, reoriented its policy toward the broader Shiite community and for a short time distanced itself from militias. Tehran also viewed the fighting between Amal and Hezbollah in Lebanon with great disgust (Norton [2007]).

After the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon in 2000 the Iranian government surprisingly did not promote further anti-Israeli actions, but rather called for ending provocation. As a result, Hezbollah really gave up armed activities against Israeli targets. Additionally, the realization of an Islamic revolution and Islamic state that was

\textsuperscript{70} Though democratic institutions are not totally unknown in Iran, since in many respects the political structure of the country is the most democratic one in the Middle East. In greater detail, see: Csicsmann [2008]

\textsuperscript{71} Iran and the Shia Revival in the Middle East (Transcript) [2006]
declared as an objective for the organization in the 1980s has also become only a history (Ablaka [2006]). By the 1990s Nasrallah himself also admitted that Shiite political Islam has no place in Lebanon. An Islamic state requires overwhelming popular support that simply does not exist in Lebanon, thus the alternative was to participate in Lebanese politics while remaining philosophically committed to the idea of an Islamic state (Nakash [2006]).

With the transformation of Hezbollah the volume and means of Iranian support have also considerably changed. The Iranian reformist president, Khatami nursed good relations with Nasrallah and assured him of his support. However, former military and financial sponsorship was replaced by political and diplomatic assistance (Ablaka [2006]). Yet, according to the Iranian leadership this should not be interpreted as supporting terrorism, since Hezbollah is a legitimate political force in Lebanon; so much, that now we can see a dream partly coming true due to the new cabinet in Lebanon, which is headed by a prime minister chosen by Hezbollah. Israel already warned of the implications of the new cabinet. In a radio interview, Vice Prime Minister Silvan Shalom described it as effectively “an Iranian government on Israel’s northern border” (Shadid [2011]). Still, Miqati sees himself as a person representing a compromise and we will have to wait for several months to see in which direction Lebanese politics will move along.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was not intact from violent incidents either. The otherwise safe and secure country was shaken by several bomb explosions in 1995, targeted against American objects and personnel. The attacks were quickly blamed on Iranian-backed organizations. Some reports in 1997 indicated that a group called Saudi Hezbollah, sponsored by Lebanon’s Iranian-backed Hezbollah, might have been responsible. Interestingly, such reports were concluded in spite of the fact that Islamic militant organizations claimed responsibility for the bombings (Esposito [1997]). Whether these groups have or had any relations with the Islamic Republic is questionable. Yet, there is a widely held feeling in other Gulf States as well, at both the political and public levels, that Iran has been maintaining a network of undercover agents and sleeper cells in the Gulf since 1979 that could be activated on Tehran’s orders (Ulrichsen [2009]). In April 2011 Arab foreign ministers of the Gulf countries met in Riyadh to discuss the Iranian regime’s meddling in the region, which reflects the seriousness of the question. The Kuwaiti daily al-Qabas even cited credible sources saying that Iranian embassies are being accused of coordinating spy networks in
countries other than Kuwait, where some of them were recently discovered.72

Iran has also been accused of being active outside the “crescent”. Beside the longstanding and growing ties existing between Iran and Hamas, relations between Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood are also said to be improving. The Brotherhood shares deep affinity with the Khomeinist political ideology that defined the Iranian Revolution. In the 1970s Brotherhood representatives were in close contact with exiled Iranian activists who were striving for the overthrow of the Shah’s regime. However, Brotherhood’s initial enthusiasm was soon dampened, when the revolution turned out to be different from the expectations of Sunni Islamists. By the end of the 1980s, Brotherhood relations with Iran deteriorated significantly, as the nature of revolution was increasingly perceived not in universal and pan-Islamic terms, but as a Persian nationalist and exclusively Shiite revolution.

The Egyptian Brotherhood began to search for Iranian support again more intensively partly because of the movement’s domestic difficulties. Namely, since its successes in the parliamentary elections in 2005, the organization has come under growing pressure from the Mubarak regime, and Iran has helped the Brotherhood by trying to delegitimize and embarrass the Egyptian regime. However, after 2006 relations became sour again between Iran and the Brotherhood due to the issue of alleged Iranian conversions taking place in Egypt. The question was raised firstly by al-Qaradawi, who reiterated his attack on Iran’s efforts to spread Shiism in the region at several fora.

Thereafter, the Brotherhood’s position on Iran became even more ambiguous in early 2009, when a Hezbollah cell was discovered in Egypt. Now, the Brotherhood movement is internally very much divided over the Shiite question, with some of them supporting Shiism’s new influence, while others being rather hostile to Shiite power.

Anyhow, when leaders of the Egyptian Brotherhood promote the recognition of Twelver Shiism as an orthodox school of Islamic jurisprudence, they effectively try to counterbalance the Wahhabi/Salafi-led campaign to vilify Shiism, as well as Arab nationalist efforts to contest Iran’s growing power. In this way, the Brotherhood’s universalistic approach actually has helped make it acceptable for Sunni Arabs to align themselves politically with Iran, and it seems that it has also made Sunni societies increasingly more open to Shiite religious influence (Altman [2009]).

Nevertheless, a breakthrough in relations between the Brotherhood and Tehran is
very unlikely, but the consequences of such a possible alliance would be very damaging for the region’s Arab regimes. So far Iran has been mainly focusing on expanding its influence in the Gulf region, thus connections to the strongest opposition party of the Middle East would be a great leap forward (Khalaji [2009]).

Altogether, based on the evidence, I think that Iran’s meddling in the region is mostly overemphasized, though related statements are not completely without foundation. Still, Sunni Arab leaders are rather biased in this question, since they are very much involved in the conflict. In fact, putting a new face on the matter has been a fairly effective tool in the hand of Sunni regimes, thus one must not draw far-reaching conclusions from their “mantras”, as Vali Nasr calls them. Iranian presence does undoubtedly exist in the region in many forms; certainly there are spies and cells as well. But, the scope of their influence is highly overestimated and I think that Iranian presence in other countries is just as strong as their influence in Iran, conversely.

As a conclusion, it can be said that Iran is definitely the “champion rider” of the Shiite revival, who is obviously trying to exploit every arising prosperous opportunity. However, it is questionable whether the Shiite community is willing to accept the leading role of Iran, as at some point Shiite revival can turn from a desirable development into a potential threat. Rivalry has already begun within the Shiite community, which can result in Iran’s isolation. Thus, the Islamic Republic needs to change its harsh rhetorical stance and has to present its ambitions in a way that does not alienate Shiite fellows completely.

6. Limits of an Emerging Monolithic “Shiite Crescent”

Experts are generally divided on the reality and significance of the “Shiite crescent”. Some say that it is only a tactic by Sunni autocrats to gain Washington’s political and financial support for their regimes. Thus, when they say that there is an emerging “Shiite crescent” threatening the region, they actually mean “help me, invest in me, and I will be the praetorian guard of the Sunni order.” Others argue that the aim of scaremongering is to create a united alliance against Iran in the Arab world. Yet, many assume that a Shiite ascension, coupled with the prospects of a nuclear Iran really has
the potential to increase regional tensions, which can even escalate into a regional conflict (Beehner [2006]). I argue that the Shiite revival will certainly generate tensions in the region, though not primarily on an inter-state level, but rather within states. Therefore conflicts will not mainly occur between states, as opposed to the arguments of the “Shiite crescent” discourse. Consequently, I do not consider the emergence of a “Shiite crescent” as a possible scenario within the frame of King Abdullah’s theory. Neither with the leadership of Iran nor under the guidance of any other power will a monolithic Shiite block emerge.

After the fall of the Saddam regime Shiites throughout the Middle East were waiting for further developments with great enthusiasm. However, most of them did not interpret the situation as a pan-Shiite glory, but they were hoping for the improvement of their own position at home. Therefore, they did not think of a region-wide unification of the Shiites, especially not under the auspices of the Islamic Republic. The influential Shiite cleric, Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah openly expressed the wish of many Arab Shiites that a revival of Najaf as the centre of Shiite learning should end more than a quarter of a century of Iranian domination of Shiism (Nakash [2006]). In fact, neither the Iraqi Shiites nor Shiites in general form a monolithic unity. I believe that this is the biggest obstacle to the ascension of a “Shiite crescent”.

Shiites are very much divided by region, class, tribal affiliation, ethnicity and they also differ in religious and political questions (Otterman [2003]). Firstly, I intend to present ethnical tensions within the Shiite community, then differences in political-religious questions and the rivalry of concepts concerning Shiite power. Finally, I would like to touch upon Iran’s role in the discourse of the “Shiite crescent”, mostly focusing on factors that prevent the Islamic Republic from being the “master” of Shiites.

6.1 Ethnical division

Ethnical fragmentation does not only characterize the Muslim community in general, but it also proves to be a decisive factor among Shiites themselves. Ethnical division in this case means primarily the Persian-Arab antagonism, not forgetting about the fact that there are many Kurd and Turkmen Shiites as well. Still, most of the Shiites are Persian or Arab. Most of the Persian Shiites live in Iran, whereas Arab Shiites are not concentrated in one single territory to such a great extent.
According to Vali Nasr the eight years long war’s legacy did not divide Iranian and Iraqi Shiites so much, and today Iraqi Shiites worry far more about the Sunnis’ domination than about Tehran’s influence in Baghdad. He also argues that although ethnicity will continue to matter to Iranian-Iraqi relations, now that Saddam has fallen and the Shiites have risen to power, “it will likely be overshadowed by the complex, layered connections between the two countries’ Shiite communities” (Nasr [2006b]). It is true that ties are very strong between Iraqi and Iranian Shiites, as seen in the previous chapter. Still, I believe that ethnicity has an important role not only in the relation of Iran and Iraq, but also concerning the entire “Shiite crescent” discourse. This is not to say, however, that the only reason for Iran not being able to grab the leadership of Shiite ascension is its Persian ethnicity. Yet, when Iraqi Shiites are looking at their leaders having Iranian origin and Iranian bonds with great suspicion, it is largely attributable to their antipathy against Persian ethnicity. Common religion and common cultural traditions certainly do matter and they represent a strong cementing force, but just only to a certain point. As soon as it comes to the question whether to accept Iran’s growing influence and guidance in uniting the Shiite community, I assume that this proves to be insufficient. In fact, hostile feelings against Iran from the Shiites’ part are partly due to the existing Arab-Persian dividing line. However, differences touching the sphere of power and politics are even much more decisive.

6.2 Rivalry of Concepts, Ambitions and Goals

As soon as they had taken over power in Iraq, Shiite clerics found themselves deeply divided, more over political than religious issues. The seemingly united Shiite leadership split into fractions and immediately began to compete for power. They disagreed in many questions, like cooperation with the U.S., elections, governance, constitution, and federalism (Nasr [2006a]). Since then, the debate over the future of the new, Shiite-led Iraqi state has been continuously present within the Shiite community and it will certainly be further reinforced after the departure of American forces.

The situation in Iraq is a good example of how a community that seems to be homogeneous, representing the same interests and values, falls apart after achieving its final goal, that is, power. The example is especially relevant because it shows excellently the reason why I assume that there is no chance for the formation of a monolithic “Shiite crescent”, since, just like in Iraq, Shiite fractions are unable to come
to a compromise regarding a series of questions. So different are their visions about state, power and religious leadership, as well as their political interests that as soon as the possibility of a “Shiite crescent” arose, that is, due to their common efforts Shiites really came to power in several countries of the region, practically that would be the very moment of the dismantling of the “crescent”, and it would be replaced by rivalry between the, then already, Shiite powers.

By today, the majority of Islamist movements have already given up the idea of an Islamic state and Islamic revolution. By the end of the 1990s, the memory of the Iranian Revolution had become slurred, and what is more, Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution died. More and more organizations have reached the conclusion that taking part in political processes is the best vehicle by which to present their agenda to the public and to gain political influence. Thus, paradoxically, Islamists are becoming prime advocates of concepts of democracy and human rights, precisely because they are the primary victims of their absence73 (Fuller [2003]). More than thirty years after the victory of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, the need to revise the “revolutionary idea” and reform the religious system established by Khomeini are more and more coming to the foreground.

Many argue that on the level of politics one can observe the rivalry of two Shiite visions: one is represented by Ayatollah Ali Sistani and can be compared mostly with the concept of “Islamic democracy”, while the other is today represented by the Iranian hard-liner clerics and Ayatollah Khamenei, and it is very close to the concept of “theocracy”.74 Accordingly, in spite of the fact that presently in both countries the Shiites are on power, a religious-political rivalry is expected between Najaf and Qom.

These two cities also embody and present the two, clearly distinguished religious concepts in Shiite Islam. While the Shiite clergy traditionally favours the separation of religious and political authority, the activists advocate the connection of religiously based legitimacy and practice of politics. The first is exemplified by most of the Iranian grand ayatollahs, who keep away from politics; the latter by Ayatollah Khomeini, who in his theory of the “Islamic government” advocated the absolute power of the religious scholar (velayat-e motlaqe-ye faqih). The Khomeini-like activist trend, however, was

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73 This does not guarantee, however, that they do not aspire to create an autocratic rule after gaining power in a democratic way.
74 In fact, these categories are artificial constructions and they certainly can’t be interpreted as axioms. Namely, Iran is not a pure theocracy, moreover, in many respects it is the most democratic country in the region, while Sistani has never spoken concretely of an “Islamic democracy”. Still, I intend to use these generalizations in order to emphasize more the contrast between the two concepts.
not an overwhelming phenomenon in the Iranian Shiite tradition, and many do not accept its justification today either. In this respect, Ayatollah Ali Sistani is positioned somewhere between the two trends favouring the separation of religion from politics, but also giving his opinion on several political issues at the same time. Yet, he does not undertake an institutional political role (N. Rózsa [2007]).

The rivalry of concepts can even lead to a rivalry of political influence between the leaderships in Najaf and Qom/Tehran. Namely, the Sistani-like religious and political interpretation is far more close to the idea of democracy, representation and free elections, whereas Qom’s/Tehran’s position is still based on the doctrine of velayat-e faqih, containing autocratic and theocratic elements.

Nicholas Blanford also emphasizes that Iraq does not primarily represent a theological challenge for Iran, but rather a political one (Blanford [2004]). A successful and stable democratic system in Iraq can have a demonstrating effect in Iran, which would strengthen even more the pro-reform voices in the country.

In fact, democracy is not completely alien from Shiite Islam. Whereas Sunni clerics are usually appointed and paid by the government, which thereby confers legitimacy on them, in Shiism the followers select the mujtahid (religious leader) of their choice, pay their religious dues to him, and abide by his rulings. Therefore, the religious leader receives his legitimacy from the people, not from the government, and in this lies the essence of democracy (Nakash [2006]).

Another dividing line within the Shiite community is the approach to the concept of “Islamic revolution”, which is closely connected to the debate over “Islamic democracy” and “theocracy”. Namely, more and more Shiite Islamist organizations, initially with the aim of creating an Islamic state, raise the reform of the revolutionary idea. Many hoped in the Shiite world that with the renaissance in Najaf a reform movement can unfold in Iran that would encourage Shiite clerics to adapt Shiism to modern times. The most radical reform proposition concerning the Khomeini-like revolutionary idea has come from the Lebanese Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah. He argues that change must begin in the religious leadership itself, advocating that the marja’iyya in Najaf should evolve into an institution similar to the papacy in the Vatican. The idea of a Shiite independent religious institution was first proposed by Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr shortly before his execution by the Baath Party in 1980. The

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75 In greater detail, see: Rostoványi [2004a] pp. 335-337. Generally on the reconcilability of Islam and democracy, see: Csicsmann [2008]
idea was revived by Fadlallah in the 1990s, drawing the attention to the fact that Shiite seminars do not prepare religious leaders to deal with modern life. Therefore, Fadlallah proposed a universal Shiite leadership established as a single institution with a permanent headquarters that would support the religious leader. The leader himself would have representatives in various countries acting as ambassadors, who would travel throughout the Muslim world, reaching out to the faithful. Also, the institution would provide continuity upon the death of the leader (Nakash [2006]).

Fadlallah’s radical views and activities are not seen positively by the Iranian leadership at all. For the past decade, Fadlallah has been frequently holding meetings in Damascus, where Shiites from Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia discuss their views. Fadlallah combines progressive social views with anti-American rhetoric and criticism of Iranian and Hezbollah theocracy. In response, the Iranian regime has bitterly denounced Fadlallah and attacks from Qom have questioned his religious credentials (Nasr [2006a]).

Apparently, beyond ethnical fragmentation the Shiite community is not united in many religious and political questions either. Additionally, different goals are to be realized in different ways. Within Islamism we also differentiate between moderate and radical tendencies. The main difference does not really lies in long-range goals, but rather in the ways of realizing them. While radicals regard force as a fundamental tool, moderate organizations give up violence and accept political rules. Moreover, many times they participate in political processes and even demand for political reforms and pluralism – as it serves their own interests as well. Furthermore, more and more Islamist theoretical believes that Islam and democracy can be reconciled with each other (Rostoványi [2004c]).

The militant wing of Islamism constitutes a minority within Islamism. It is also usual that within one single organization one can find side by side a radical, militant wing and a moderate wing pursuing social and charitable activities. But also in this case it is generally the more moderate wing that is decisive in the operation of the movement. Accordingly, Hezbollah now clearly takes a stand on participation in Lebanese political processes and has mostly renounced radical tools to achieve its goals. In Iraq most of the Shiite fractions have chosen the same route. For a short time even the radical Sadr movement had joined the Shiite coalition, but later it entered into a bloody conflict with ISCI (Cole [2006]). Even Sistani was unable to stop the bloodshed
that led to the fragmentation of the Shiite community in Iraq, demonstrating well the depth of existing gaps among Shiites.

6.3 Iran as the Leader of the “Shiite Revolution”?

Looking upon Iran as the creator of a “Shiite crescent” implies that Iran is deliberately aspiring to drive the region’s Shiite communities under its influence. Although Iran’s influence in the region has significantly increased, even the Persian state is unable to create a kind of “Shiite empire” by acquiring such enormous support. Karim Sadjadpour also argues that, as opposed to the early days of revolution, the Islamic Republic now does not hope to achieve regional hegemony by trying to instigate Islamic revolutions throughout the region to create a “Shiite crescent”. Iranians only want to have their Shiite friends in as many positions of leadership as possible, not just in Iraq, but throughout the region. This however does not mean taking over. It is obviously not a feasible scenario and Tehran knows it very well.76

The already referred report made by a Saudi consultancy agency enumerates several arguments to prove that Iran, in spite of its rhetoric, has many limits that prevent it from becoming the leading power of the region’s Shiites. The report compares the different attributes of Saudi Arabia, as the leading Sunni power, and the Shiite Islamic Republic. On the basis of these features, it concludes that Iran is not strong enough, either in economic or military terms, to fully dominate the region.77

Erzsébet N. Rózsa also points out that the Islamic Republic has been a regional power of the Middle East for thousands of years, and in spite of the revolutionary ideology its foreign policy has been always characterized by pragmatism and pragmatic considerations (N. Rózsa [2005]). However, the Iranian hegemony has several limits: Shiites make up only 10-15% in the Muslim world and the revolutionary religiosity deters even the more religious societies (N. Rózsa [2007]). Otherwise, despite harsh rhetoric, there are changes in this respect. Iran today is very different from the embattled Islamic Republic of the early 1980s, with the vast majority of Iranians

76 A Shia Crescent: What Fallout for the U.S.? (Transcript) [2005]
77 The economic powers of the region are mainly Sunni countries, whereas Iran’s economic indicators are below the average, and it is also legging behind Saudi Arabia in oil production and oil export. Regarding military aspects it is true that Iran has the biggest army in the region, but it stays far behind Israel technically and in terms of efficiency. Additionally, Iran’s nuclear program will urge the region’s countries to develop nuclear deterrence as well, let alone the fact that the West will not stand by doing nothing about Iran acquiring nuclear weapons (Obaid [2006]).
demanding for reform and socio-economic justice (Nakash [2006]).

Altogether, Iran is not an almighty master of the Shiite revival; it can only be the main beneficiary of the process, and this new situation is obviously not given a tremendous reception by the region’s Sunni elites. Still, I believe that Iran is not able to assemble a united “Shiite crescent”; instead, one can observe a multipolar Shiite community characterized by political rivalry and various power centres.

6.3.1 Political Rivalry and Multipolar Shiite Community

Since Mohammad Hussein Boroujerdi 78 there has been no universally accepted supreme religious leadership in Shiism – even Khomeini could not achieve this title (Nasr [2006a]). Beside the debate over religious leadership, power rivalry makes united Shiite action impossible, even within a single country, let alone among different countries. This is why Vali Nasr argues that it would be a mistake to think that there is such a thing as pan-Shiism that is being controlled from one place. Shiites in the Arab world certainly have religious and cultural attachment to Iran, but it does not mean that they are controlled by the Islamic Republic. In fact, it is more common that the Sunnis define the Shiites as the client of Iran than the Shiites themselves do. 79

The pluralism of the Shiite community, however, does not mean that there is no basic shared vision of Shiite interests. Moreover, in context of the Iraqi events coupled by Sistani’s efforts to unite the community, Iranian conservative newspapers began to talk of a “Nasrallah-Sistani-Khamenei axis”, bringing Hezbollah, Iraqi Shiites and the Iranian government together to defend Shiite interests 80 (Nasr [2006a]). Such ideas totally lack reality. Considering the events of the past years, presently I do not even see any chance for Iran and Iraq having a closer relationship than general good-neighbourliness.

In fact, the Iranian presence in Iraq is viewed with fear by not only the Sunnis. Many secular Shiites assume that Iran is striving to create a theocratic state in Iraq and the members of ISCI and Al Dawa are the agents of Iran, working on the realization of the Iranian model. These assumptions are surprisingly very popular in Iraq, and not only among Sunnis. Survey results also tend to support such anecdotal evidence. According

78 Ayatollah Boroujerdi died in 1965.
79 The Emerging Shia Crescent: Implications for the Middle East and U.S. Policy [2006]
80 Practically this would be identical with Jordanian King Abdullah’s version of the “Shiite crescent”, which was by the way vehemently objected by the Iranian leadership.
to one, 50.9% of the respondents thinks that among their neighbouring states it is Iran that is “most likely to instigate a civil war” in the country.\textsuperscript{81} Although these fears do not have any provable evidence, it is in itself very telling that many Shiites also view their Shiite neighbour so badly.

Since 2005 the most spectacular scene of Shiite rivalry has been Iraq. After the elections rivalry began between the main Shiite forces of the country: ISCI and al-Sadr’s Mahdi army. Additionally, since 2004 the Mahdi army itself has also changed significantly and split into various subgroups (Tavernise-Moore [2008]). Apparently, different visions and goals, as well as simultaneous power aspirations of certain groups make collaboration impossible even on an intra-state level.

Similarly, in Lebanon the situation has taken the same direction for several decades. The rivalry between Amal and Hezbollah divided the Lebanese Shiite community, creating splits even among members of the same family. Hezbollah took advantage of the departure of Palestinian fighters from southern Lebanon and the withdrawal of Israel to a narrow strip in the south. The organization became increasingly popular and the conflict led to fighting between the two movements during 1987-89, just when Lebanon was nearing the end of its long civil war (Nakash [2006]).

Contrasts within the Shiite community are not limited to a single country. In fact, there is a permanent rivalry among all three vertexes of the Nasrallah-Sistani-Khamenei triangle. There is also a divergence of opinions between Fadlallah and the Iranian leadership, let alone the questions of democracy and reform, which are important points of controversy within Iran as well. Apparently, Shiites are far from a political monolith and competition over power and authority will only multiply their differences. Therefore, I totally agree with Vali Nasr arguing that the prospect of a monolithic pan-Shiite block dominated by Iran is remote. “Iran will be an influential big brother but not a “heavy father,” much less a master” (Nasr [2006a] p. 184).

Brenda Shaffer and many other analysts think that the “Shiite crescent” is Washington’s new buzzword assuming that states sharing common sectarian ties tend to form alliances and choose cooperation partners accordingly. However, despite all its rhetoric on Islamic solidarity, Iran has rarely promoted cultural or ideological goals at the expense of its material interests – it has been manifested in several conflicts, where

\textsuperscript{81} 17% of the respondents named Syria, 13% Turkey, 11.3% Kuwait, and 3.8% Saudi Arabia. In greater detail, see: Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence? [2005]
Iran aligned with the non-Muslim or non-Shiite side\(^82\) (Shaffer [2007]). I fully agree with the arguments of Shaffer, except for that I think “Shiite crescent” has primarily become the buzzword of the Sunni leaders, not the U.S. Anyhow, it is undoubted that since 2004 the topic has received increased publicity in the U.S. as well.

To conclude, I would like to turn to Brenda Shaffer’s views again, which I completely share. “Culture has its limits: It is only one of the many forces that shape foreign policy outcomes and is not the defining element. We are not in the era of a “clash of civilizations” but only of a clash of rhetoric” (Shaffer [2007]).

6.3.2 The Division of Iranian Internal Politics – Reformists vs. Conservatives

Iranian domestic politics is extremely divided; it is characterized by the permanent competition of reformist and conservative forces for power, which also influences the country’s foreign policy to a huge extent. For this reason, it is important to mention the main factors defining internal political debates in Iran, as their outcome has an impact also on the development of the “Shiite crescent”.

Although the views of hard-liners and reformists differ in many issues, they can be traced back to a single fundamental difference: conservative forces originate power and authority in Allah, while reformists derive these from the people (Ablaka [2006]). In the centre of political debates stand the reform of religion on the one hand and the reform of politics and power on the other. These two are certainly closely intertwining, since both are present simultaneously in the life of Iranians.

Since the early 1990s intense discussions have begun about religious reform\(^83\) in Iran. Several Shiite intellectual, including some clerics, have questioned the authoritarian nature of Khomeini’s velayat-e faqih and argued for both limiting the powers of Iran’s clerical leaders and reconciling religion with democracy (Nasr [2006a]). Ali Gheissari also argues that in today’s Iran the main thread of domestic politics is the struggle to build a democratic state – which means a balanced approach to state-building and democracy-building. The context of the democracy debate in Iran has been strengthened by several factors: demographic changes, decentralization of authority, civil society activism, voting, and mobilization of the population during

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\(^{82}\) For example in Afghanistan Iran is supporting non-Shiite groups.

\(^{83}\) Religious reform certainly does not mean turning away from religion, only returning to religious traditions that characterized Shiism before the era of Khomeini’s “Islamic governance” (Nasr [2006a]).
electoral campaigns. However, the positive developments of the reformist Khatami’s presidency (1997-2005) were crushed by the election of the hard-liner, conservative and populist Ahmadinejad in 2005. The presidential campaign was one of the most dynamic in Iran’s history, and it brought to the fore intense debates over various conceptions of government and social organization, economic development, and foreign policy. The presidential campaign prior to the election of 2009 was similarly vivid and innovative, followed by highly contested election results that led to violent clashes between protesters and government forces.

Apparently, more than a century after the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, Iran is still facing the problems of how to achieve a democratic state. But the verdicts of the two last elections strengthened the state and according to Gheissari they questioned the prospects of democracy in Iran (Gheissari [2006]).

Ahmadinejad’s rise to power really meant the empowerment of conservative and, in many respects, radical forces, but since then – not regardless of the Iraqi events – there have been significant changes in the Iranian society, which certainly influence political processes as well. The debate over reforms and democracy has further intensified, which was demonstrated very expressively by the controversial elections and subsequent events in the summer of 2009. Ahmadinejad’s victory was not cert at all, even though the former reformist president had stepped back from candidacy. Indeed, Ahmadinejad has proved to be a polarizing figure in Iranian politics, with some conservatives joining reformist critics in saying that his uncompromising approach on the nuclear issue has further isolated the Islamic Republic. But he has won crucial support from Iran’s most powerful figure, Ayatollah Khamenei, as well as hard-liner clerics and the army.84

Notwithstanding, the Iranian society would be responsive to change. Khatami’s announcement of his candidacy in the elections of 2009 prompted expectations in many people unsatisfied with Ahmadinejad. They hoped that a re-elected Khatami would ease Islamic restrictions and would be more likely to respond positively to U.S. attempts at engaging with Iran, which would reduce the country’s international isolation. However,

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84 Iran To Hold Presidential Election In June 2009 [2008]
Khatami finally stepped back, arguing that he would not like to divide reformist forces\(^85\) (Tait [2009]).

Internal political changes in Iran considerably have an impact on the further tendency of the “Shiite crescent” and Shiite revival. Since it is not likely that any of the two opposing forces can acquire such a great support that would knock out the other, a unified, single Iranian stand-point is not likely either. Consequently, if Iran is not even unified internally, how would it be capable of creating a monolithic Shiite block by uniting the many Shiite factions? I believe that in no way can the Islamic Republic realize such an endeavour because it is occupied with its own internal discords. Moreover, I assume that Iran’s social-political problems will be even multiplied in the future, especially if Iraq is able to set an example of a successful Islamic democracy next door.

Anyway, the direction of Iranian domestic political changes depends greatly on the stance of the U.S. and Western powers towards Iran. Too hard pressure can harm positive developments as well and can lead to the isolation of reformist forces (Ablaka [2006]).

Iran is unquestionably the region’s largest and most influential Shiite state. It is really trying to capitalize on any new opportunity that derives from the new geopolitical balance of the Middle East. It is certainly trying to have the maximum possible impact on the region’s Shiites and would be eager to take the leading position in a potential Shiite region-wide alliance. Yet, conditions to realize this scenario are lacking. Additionally, altogether I think that the previously mentioned limits of Iran and the Shiite community are more decisive in respect of the “Shiite crescent” than potential possibilities.

\(^{85}\) It is questionable whether and to what extent he was influenced by the fact that Iran’s most influential pro-regime newspaper had warned him that he risks being assassinated like the late Pakistani political leader, Benazir Bhutto, if he stands in the forthcoming presidential election.
7. Back or Forth? The Future of Shiite-Sunni Antagonism

7.1 Shiite vs. Sunni: War or Reconciliation?

Answering to the question is not simple at all. In an extreme case, practically both scenarios can come true, but still I think that an extensive war would require far more grave antecedents. This is certainly not to say, however, that the Shiite-Sunni opposition is not a serious source of conflict. Indeed, armed clashes are certainly expected, but I assume that these will remain within state borders and will not necessarily occur between Sunnis and Shiites, but rather between elites being on power and the constantly growing – not only Shiite – opposition forces.

According to Ray Takeyh, nowadays the split between Shiism and Sunnism, that is, religion is the main source of division in the Middle East. On the other hand, I think that in the centre of the conflict there is a much more complex problem, though after the Iraqi War it was really the religious dimension that has come to the foreground, at least apparently. In fact, the Shiite-Sunni conflict can be defined as two communities struggling for power. It certainly includes religious power as well, but in no way can we speak about a war of religion. Now, it seems that the Shiites are in a more advantageous position and in a certain sense the Shiite-Sunni conflict is a zero-sum choice, because the price that the Sunnis want would be to put the “Shiite genie back in the bottle.” As by now it is practically impossible, many will depend on the Sunni regimes’ conflict management methods.

Shiite-Sunni reconciliation and peace seem to be very distant in the region, since we are just at the very beginning of the conflict and its culmination, as well as subsequent changes are still unpredictable. Personally I would only see chance for any kind of compromise if the Muslim world was threatened by such an outsider power that would compel the region’s states to cooperate, though it is very unlikely in the near future. Nevertheless, it is certainly an essential factor influencing the development of the conflict how the United States and Iran is able to react upon this new Middle Eastern balance.

86 A Shia Crescent: What Fallout for the U.S.? (Transcript) [2005]
87 Iran and the Shia Revival in the Middle East (Transcript) [2006]
7.1.1 The Role of the U.S. in the Process

Although its positions have been deteriorated in the region, according to Richard N. Haass the U.S. will continue to enjoy more influence in the Middle East than any other outsider power. However, it will be increasingly challenged by the foreign policies of other outsiders, such as the European Union, China, or Russia (Haass [2006]).

Another challenge for U.S. foreign policy is the fact that in many Sunnis’ view the U.S. has simply made a choice and instead of the Sunnis it sided with the Shiites in the Middle East. The main challenge of the present situation in the region is therefore to satisfy Shiite demands while placating Sunni anger and alleviating Sunni anxiety at the same time. This delicate balancing act will be central to Middle Eastern politics for the next decade and it will also redefine the region’s relations with the U.S.

As for Washington, it would be especially important to build bridges with the region’s Shiites, which would, however, also mean engaging Iran, as it is the country with the world’s largest Shiite population. In fact, President Barack Obama did make steps towards Iran, but these attempts do not seem to be part of an overall radical rapprochement strategy. Still, the fear of Sunni elites concerning Iran has been further increased by the new American administration’s willingness to follow a different policy vis-à-vis Iran, abandoning the Bush administration’s policy of confrontation and total isolation. While the Arab states do realize that the U.S. needs Iran to play a constructive role in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Arab-Israeli arena, they are really scared of a potential U.S.-Iranian strategic collusion. Actually, this has led to the belief in Arab circles that a rapprochement between the United States and Iran will negatively influence Arab countries and it can happen only at the expense of the Arabs (Aarts-Duijne [2009]). Therefore, Washington must also pursue a balancing strategy towards its Arab allies and Iran, delicately trying to find such an optimal level of cooperation with Iran that would not yet jeopardize relations with the Arab countries.

Additionally, Washington cannot exclude the potential of some sort of relation with Hezbollah either, as presently Hezbollah is the most influential and most popular Shiite organization in the region.

The Shiite revival can also create conflicts between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Namely, Saudi Arabia must face a decline in its regional dominance and religious legitimacy, and it cannot easily posture as defender of the Sunni prerogative to power in
the region without supporting forces that happen to resist U.S. role, as it was just the case in Iraq (Nasr [2004]).

Steven A. Cook also argues that the U.S. should not see Shiism and Shiite empowerment in itself as a threat. What should concern Washington is how the rise of Shiite political power will affect domestic politics within the region’s Sunni countries. Sunni Arab leaders definitely perceive Shiite political power as a threat, thus what should be of concern to the U.S. is how these governments respond to increased Shiite consciousness. Similarly, Shiite empowerment should not be disturbing to Americans, but rather to the Saudi elite. Moreover, if this empowerment compels the Sunni ruling elites toward some degree of political reforms, it is not necessarily a bad thing at all.88

The Shiite-Sunni balance of power is key to regional stability. At the same time, it must be recognized that Shiite-dominated countries are better positioned to achieve economic growth and political reforms than their Sunni neighbours. Moreover, the most thorough and lively debates about the place of Islam in the modern world including its relation to democracy and economic growth are taking place among Shiite Muslims living in Lebanon, Iraq and Iran, not among Sunnis; let alone the fact that in many respects Iran is the most democratic state of the region. The Shiite countries will play a key role in bringing about change in the Middle East, and the reality that must be recognized is that this process will produce a convergence of interests between the United States and Shiism sooner than between Washington and the Sunni countries (Nasr [2004]). Change is therefore taking place despite difficulties, but the culmination of the process depends to a huge extent on the adaptability of U.S. foreign policy, as well as on how far it is able to fulfil the role of the balancing power between the two rival religious sects.

7.1.2 The Role of Iran in the Process

Iran’s role in shaping the events is just as important as that of the U.S. In many respects Tehran also has to pursue a balancing policy because Iran can achieve great power status only if it can reduce Sunni resistance to the Shiite revival (Nasr [2006a]). Accordingly, Iran denies and refuses every accusation that assumes that Tehran is heavily working on the establishment of a “Shiite crescent” or a “Shiite theocratic

88 The Emerging Shia Crescent: Implications for the Middle East and U.S. Policy [2006]
empire”. Anyhow, Iranian domestic political developments will definitely have an impact on the future of the conflict.

Elections are always important indicators of changing political processes in a given country. Accordingly, many were expecting the 2009 Iranian elections with great enthusiasm and as Khatami had pointed out before the elections, in the 30th anniversary year of the revolution Iranians were deciding over the future of the Islamic Republic.  

Although the elections did not, the events following the results, including the oppressed “Green revolution”, made it clear that change has really begun in Iran, though the prospect of radical reforms is still successfully being kept under control. Anyhow, the question of the “Shiite crescent” also raises the question of future Iran, since Tehran also has to react somehow to this new situation and has to find the most beneficiary strategy to cope with the newly come opportunities.

On the long run, U.S. and Iranian interests may well converge; at least concerning Iraq. Namely, both powers are interested in a lasting stability in the country: Washington, because it wants to justify the reason of bail out; Tehran, because stability in its backyard would secure its position at home as well as its influence throughout the region (Nasr [2006b]). Additionally, for preventing the escalation of conflicts in the future, the cooperation of the two powers is definitely indispensable. In fact, it is much easier to prevent a potential problem than trying to fight the fire in the midst of the trouble.

7.2 Sensitive Balance: The Question of Future Stability and Possible Solutions

According to an Arab Human Development Report from 2004 – that was emphatically made by Arab authors – the Arab world has fallen into a developmental crisis, primarily because of the lack of good governance and basic freedoms. Although in some countries there have been reforms, these have not altered in any way the fundamental dictatorial structure characterizing Arab states (Csicsmann [2008] p. 72). Marsha Pripstein Posusney argues that intermittently organized elections based on political participation have led to the constant rotation of power elites. However, according to László Csicsmann, political changes (liberal initiatives coming both from above and below) do exist and they are very important, therefore they should not be disregarded (Csicsmann

89 Iran’s Khatami to Run for Office [2009]
By the way, change is not alien from Shiism at all. John L. Esposito argued already in the 1990s that the issue is not change but the amount, pace and direction of change. The flexibility of Islamic tradition has been demonstrated by Khomeini’s interpretation of the doctrine of velayat-e faqih, as well as by the constitution of the Islamic Republic accepting a constitutional/parliamentary form of government (Esposito [1992]).

I also think that change is in progress, but its volume and dynamics are questionable. In the forthcoming years further tensions are definitely expected between Shiites and Sunnis, with which all countries of the region have to cope, to a smaller or larger degree. According to Richard N. Haass Arab regimes will resist reform and remain authoritarian, as well as they are likely to be less tolerant in religious terms (Haass [2006]). My view is more optimistic than that. Although I do not expect a fundamental turn in Middle Eastern power relations, I think that authoritarian regimes will be softened to some degree due to the growing pressure. At least, this would be the most optimal solution for everybody, because given that present regimes stick to power, an escalation of violence is highly probable and the oppression of tensions will not be possible beyond a certain point.

Paradoxically, democratic tendencies in the Middle East may have dangerous consequences for the Western leaders, since old, stable and predictable regimes can be replaced by more shaky governments reflecting people’s wish, which can lead to the drying up of oil resources and economic and political crises (Speidl [2005b]). Graham Fuller even thinks that it is possible that a more liberal and democratic grouping within the Muslim world will emerge that perceives its interests totally differently than do authoritarian states and will move in independent directions (Fuller [2003]).

Anyhow, it is sure that the biggest challenge for the West is to decide which forces to support in the Islamic world: West-friendly but non-democratic regimes, or democracies by all means, even if it can result in Islamist forces coming to power. In this respect, it is also questionable whether the West can accept that neither Islam nor Islamism is irreconcilable with the concept of democracy (Rostoványi [2004c]). In fact, it seems that they are actually reconcilable and the time has come when Western discourse on democracy must accommodate itself to the changed situation – without this, it is impossible to understand and influence on-going processes in the Middle East.

It is also vital that Iran, the most predominant participant of the “Shiite crescent”, be recognized as another player in the international community. If its security concerns
were being acknowledged, Iran would not have a reason to become adventurous in the region. Similarly, 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, but rather address them regardless of how complex they are (Haji-Yousefi [2009]).

Concerning the future of the region, resolving the conflict is essential. Vali Nasr also thinks that before the region can arrive at democracy and prosperity, it will have to settle both ethnical and religious conflicts. The Middle East will have to achieve sectarian peace before it can enter a new developmental phase. Accordingly, peace and stability will come to the Middle East only when the distribution of power and wealth reflects the balance between different communities and the political system includes all and provides for peaceful ways of resolving disputes (Nasr [2006a]).

The transition will not be easy and free from violence, but “this is the conflict that will shape the future” (Nasr [2006a] p. 254). Or, in my opinion, it is rather the way of conflict resolution that will define the future of the Middle East. Resolution can consist of various steps, but first and foremost it is necessary to enhance dialogue between the two communities and widen the rights of Shiites in every field of life. It is needed to alleviate feelings of suspicion and hostility towards each other and besides this to insist on the importance of common traditions, common Muslim belief, and the sense of common “nation” within respective states. Namely, it is important to achieve that instead of “otherness” the feeling of “oneness” come to the foreground. For this, it is certainly indispensable that ruling elites change their set of dividing rhetorical tools used with the purpose of mobilization. I think that this is the most difficult task in terms of dispute resolution and this is the one that is the most unlikely to change in the future, as scapegoating is the most comfortable way of diverting responsibility.

As for the concrete steps, I agree with the resolution proposals of an International Crisis Group report that analysis the Shiite question in Saudi Arabia, though completing it with an important remark, that is, I regard the steps outlined in the report as being valid and necessary throughout the entire region. According to the study, moving forward will require first and foremost a long-term commitment to combating domestic hate-speech and violence against each other, as well as to political and social integration, including: expanding Shiite presence in government institutions; lifting remaining restrictions on Shiite religious rituals and practices; encouraging tolerance;
eliminating anti-Shiism and rhetoric of sectarian hatred; promoting diversity and emphasizing national unity.\textsuperscript{90}

Additionally, it can also be an important factor to foster the region’s more balanced economic development. Indeed, Shiites are not only disenfranchised in a political, but also in an economic sense. I believe that if this unequal situation was altered somehow, one of the sources of the conflict would be eliminated, or at least moderated. Bobby Ghosh also argues that a massive economic program could help both in Iraq and in the entire region, since the improvement of services and supply would divert attention from conflicts. If people were busy working and making money they would not have enough time to deal with past and present grievances (Ghosh [2007]).

Still, it is highly questionable how such a program could be realized in the midst of permanent conflicts. This is in fact such a vicious circle that is very difficult to break. Even if it was successful, the other, and in my opinion, much more serious source of conflict would remain, that is, political discrimination, which is almost impossible to brake, or at least presently I see very little chance for it.

It is difficult to tell what would be the incentive that persuaded authoritarian elites to make a change. I believe that the Shiite revival in itself is not enough to provoke a radical shift, considering numerical proportions and the fact that Shiites themselves are especially divided. Nevertheless, Shiite revival together with moderate Islamist movements and unsatisfied people in general can bring about changes in the region by creating a “critical mass”. This is a far real prospect that can jeopardize the rule of the existing regimes. For this, it is certainly needed that Shiites and other opposition groups join forces to achieve the common goal – but even this can prove to be insufficient without some kind of support, or at least silent consent of the U.S. and the West.

\textsuperscript{90} The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia [2005]
8. Conclusion

Based on the facts and results presented in the thesis, I believe it can be declared that the “Shiite crescent”, as imagined by King Abdullah, that is, in the form of an Iranian-led Shiite block will not be materialized. Therefore, the short answer to the question of the thesis’s title is that the “Shiite crescent” proves to be a fiction. It proves to be a fiction in the sense that neither Iran nor any other power in the region is able to unite the Shiite community, and especially not able to guide it according to its own interests. For this reason, I believe that, as opposed to Sunni assumptions, it is not Iran, who is putting together the elements of the “Shiite crescent”; sooner or later they are going to emerge, but independently. Iran can only capitalize on the process, but it will never be capable of creating a monolithic Shiite fortress, which therefore remains just an illusion. The elements of the “crescent” are so different that one can only speak of Shiite crescents that are more or less intertwined, but essentially independent.

In this sense, therefore, the Shiite revival is not a fiction because in recent years the region’s Shiite organizations and inhabitants have really become active instead of passive resignation – as their election turnouts and results have demonstrated – and they can really threaten the power of Sunni regimes.

As for the future of the Shiite-Sunni conflict, there are at least three possible scenarios to calculate upon. One possible option is that we are going to experience a regional civil war. I do not think that such a full-fledged war or any similar, wide-scale threat is imminent. Armed conflicts are definitely to be expected on a local basis, but those will not turn into an extensive war, especially not into a Middle Eastern “war of independence.” Another possible scenario is that after tensions calm down everything remains the same and ancient regimes manage to stabilize their power. The third probable option, which I regard as the most realistic one, is that political reforms will be introduced everywhere to a certain degree, giving power to the Shiites as well. In Bahrain it can even lead to a regime change, while elsewhere, where the Shiites constitute a minority, it can result in different degrees of political liberalization. Kuwait is also an exception in this respect, here regime change is hardly to be expected, but further liberalization is likely. Anyhow, I believe that real change can only happen with the approval of the existing regimes and it should be based on a wide consensus, otherwise it is to be feared that the new regimes, if there will be any, are going to be
practically the same, only with different actors.

As for the role of Iran, it seems rather obvious that the idea of the “Shiite crescent” was to create a “Shiaphobia” and “Iranophobia” (Haji-Yousefi [2009]) in order to distract attention from internal problems and democratization in the Arab world. Vali Nasr also argues that the present Shiite empowerment, as opposed to the Iranian-led processes of 1970s, is not happening in a centralized form being led by one single place (Tehran) and its essence lies not in the emergence of a monolithic Shiite block, but in the replication of what many in the region refer to as the Sistani model, namely, “one man, one vote”; call for pluralism, power-sharing and redistribution of power, which will in many cases benefit the Shiites.91

It is uncertain how the ruling regimes will be able to respond to the new challenges. What is for sure is that the idea of a “Shiite crescent”, as it was made up by King Abdullah and was later reinforced by Sunni elites, 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 (Haji-Yousefi [2009]). If Sunni regimes try to insist on their own vision of power and governance rigidly and by all means, it can eventually lead to their defeat, as it is not only the Shiites who are resisting their oppressive rule, but also Sunni opposition groups, which can together put a huge pressure on the existing regimes. Consequently, further local conflicts are highly expected. The fight by now is not merely about religious rights and the recognition of equality, but about more and more people – both Shiites and Sunnis – being fed up with authoritarian leadership. Thus, it is also questionable how far can existing regimes resist the “Shiite threat” by relying on religious rhetoric and how far can they stir up and activate the Sunni part of the society. In fact, arguments are slowly becoming exhausted and it would be far more profitable to reverse this lose-lose policy into a win-win one.

The thesis has made an attempt to take into account the most important aspects concerning the “Shiite crescent”, but this does not mean, however, that every single factor has been examined thoroughly. The primary reason for this is due to the criteria of coherence and relevance. I did not intend to present every aspect of the question in full detail, only those ones that are the most relevant in terms of the thesis. Accordingly, countries very much outside the sphere of the “crescent” but at the same time belonging

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91 Iran and the Shia Revival in the Middle East (Transcript) [2006]
to the broader Middle East (such as Pakistan and Afghanistan) were not analysed because they are not closely connected to the subject of the thesis, though one can certainly find Shiite inhabitants in large numbers in these countries as well. Besides this, the author concentrated mainly on recent events, and mostly on those features and tendencies that constitute an important part of the Shiite revival, not touching upon historical events and detailed domestic political processes in the respective countries. Similarly, the events of the “Arab spring” were not covered in detail because they are part of a wider tendency within the Middle East. Namely, they cannot be interpreted within the frame of Shiite-Sunni dichotomy, though their future development is especially interesting and important from the Shiite question’s point of view as well.

In case of Shiism, I tried to present the diversity of the community as much as possible, whereas in case of the Sunni sect, I took the opportunity of simplification: I did not take into consideration that probably Sunnis are just as much divided as Shiites. Nevertheless, I think that this has not influenced considerably the final conclusions of the study.

In spite of the inevitable limits and simplifications I believe that the envisaged aims, that is, relative objectivity and comprehensive analysis of the question have been successfully attained. Still, the subject is far from being complete and it definitely provides possibility for further research.

It would be especially important to examine the problem in full detail, namely to analyse for example how certain Sunni groups view the question of the “Shiite crescent”. The thesis mainly focused on Sunni leaders’ attitudes, who are necessarily biased in this subject and their expressions rather remain on the level of rhetoric. Thus, it would be interesting to analyse Sunni opinions more extensively.

Additionally, it would be important to further examine the future prospects of the region’s Sunni countries, as well as the regional hegemon’s, that is, Iran’s possible domestic and foreign policy changes, for which time is definitely a decisive factor.

As I have already mentioned, questions analysed by the thesis are far from being closed, therefore I definitely have the intention to carry out more research on the topic. In fact, future can provide many surprises and I also believe that “this is the conflict that will shape the future”\(^\text{92}\) – at least the future of the Middle East for sure.

\(^{92}\) Nasr [2006a] p. 254
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### Data and Statistics


