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SECTARIAN IDENTITIES OR GEOPOLITICS?

THE REGIONAL SHIA–SUNNI DIVIDE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



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“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.” (Vali Nasr)¹

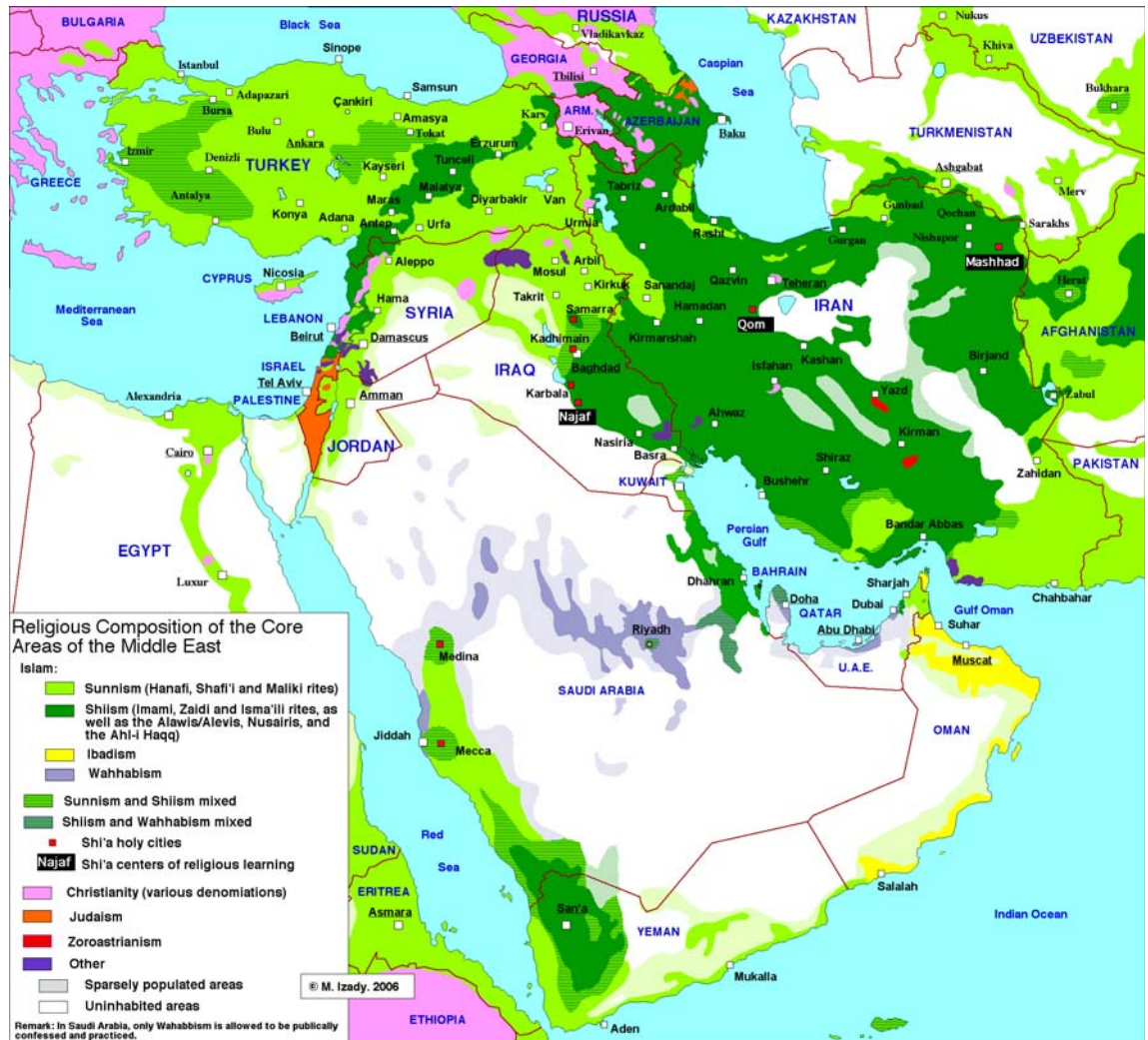
“Me against my brother; me and my brother against my cousin; me, my brother and my cousin against the Shia.” (Adaptation of an Arab proverb)²

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Map 1: Religions in the Middle East



Source: The Gulf/2000 Project, SIPA/Columbia University, 2006. Copyright M. Izady.³

Table 1: Shia Demographics (the Middle East)¹

Country	Total population	Shia population	Shia of total (%)
Iran	68.7 million	61.8 million	90%
Iraq	26.8 million	17.4 million	65%
Saudi Arabia	27.0 million	2.7 million	10%
Lebanon	3.9 million	1.7 million	45%
Kuwait	2.4 million	730,000	30%
Bahrain	700,000	520,000	75%
Syria	18.9 million	190,000 (+2.8 million) ²	1% (+15%)
The United Arab Emirates	2.6 million	160,000	6%
Qatar	890,000	140,000	16%

Source: Nasr: 'When the Shiites Rise'.

¹ Nasr's definition of 'Shia' includes Twelver Shiites and excludes Alawis, Alevis, Isma'ilis, and Zaidis, among others. Percentages are estimated. There are also large Shia populations outside the Middle East, the largest being: Pakistan (33.2 million, 20%), India (11 million, 1%), Azerbaijan (6 million, 75%) and Afghanistan (5.9 million, 19%). Nasr draws his figures from numerous scholarly references and from governments and NGOs in both the Middle East and the West.

² Despite Nasr's decision to exclude the Alawis from the figures, they are usually counted as Shias. They are estimated to constitute 11-12% of the population of Syria. In addition, there are also Druze and Isma'ilis in Syria. Leverett, Flynt: *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*. Washington D.C. Brookings Institution Press. 2005, p. 2. In addition, refugee flows from Iraq to Syria during recent years have increased the share of the Twelver Shia but there are no statistics available on these numbers.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to enhance understanding of the *new geopolitical situation* currently unfolding in Middle Eastern politics that has emerged since the onset of the United States-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The paper focuses on the notions of *the Sunni-Shia divide* and *the Rise of the Shia*.⁴

In this study it is argued that the present dynamics of the regional-level Sunni-Shia divide are reinforced and catalysed by both geopolitical considerations and the national security interests of states. History and identity alone are not sufficient to explain the logics of the divide at the regional level. The study seeks to explain *how and why geo- and power politics reinforce the present-day sectarian divide in the Middle East.* It also suggests that the divide has the potential to become an era-defining feature of the post-Saddam Middle East in the way pan-Arabism and pan-Islam have defined the past decades of the region.

The study takes as its point of departure the division of *Middle Eastern politics into two levels* of analysis: the domestic level and the regional level. Different kinds of geopolitical readjustments and power balancing take place at the two levels, on which different fault lines can be identified. The analysis in this study is concentrated on the regional level, where the sectarian dynamic or rhetoric is not yet as apparent as at the domestic level (in some states), where sectarian struggles have brought two states, namely Iraq and Lebanon, almost to breaking point.

The first two chapters try to *identify how and why sectarian considerations have appeared at the regional level and which theoretical or philosophical approach of International Relations can best explain these events.*

At the domestic level the fault line has been and will in most cases be drawn between the 'rulers' (the Sunni) and the 'ruled/oppressed' (the Shia).⁵ Sectarian divisions appear in different forms in different states, but there are some common elements: In states ruled by Sunnis, the Shia have often been regarded as heretics, enemies of the state ideology and/or a threat to internal stability. Due to the fact that in most Arab states the Shia are a minority, the division at the domestic level manifests itself most visibly as a conflict of power between the majority and the minority.

The Shia have practically always been the oppressed in Islam and, partly for this reason, are usually perceived as the more politicized of the two strands. This makes them a potential threat in the new geopolitical situation in the eyes of the Sunni Arab regimes in those countries that have a Shia population, either a minority (Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, most small Gulf states, Yemen and to some extent Jordan⁶) or a majority (Bahrain and Iraq).⁷ To what extent this tendency will become reinforced in the near future remains to be seen. The developments in Iraq, but also the regional status and external policies of Iran, will to a large extent determine the future of Shia-Sunni relations inside Middle Eastern states.

At the regional level the Sunni-ruled Arab states, and Saudi Arabia in particular, are increasingly challenged by Iran in the race for regional power. A region that has traditionally been ruled by Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo sees its fate falling into the hands of Washington, Tel Aviv and Tehran. Having to choose between the United States, the current regional hegemon, and Iran, the 'Shi'i challenger', the Sunni Arab states prefer the former. Sunni-led Arab states are also discovering that their security interests increasingly converge with those of Israel. Iran seeks to reduce the tensions between the Muslim countries in the region, but its recent behaviour concerning its nuclear programme, its increasing influence in Iraq and the 2006 war in Lebanon have been disadvantageous in this regard.

Concentrating only on the consequences of the historical rift in its current setting and on problem-solving leads to adopting a normative stance on the issue. Therefore, the study seeks to find out how the current fault lines in the region are explained by experts and only then proceeds to further questions, such as if 'the Sunni-Shia divide' and the 'rise of the Shia' at the state level are, in reality, equivalent to the geopolitical rise of Iran.

Explanations of and perspectives to the Sunni-Shia divide tend to reflect either the Constructivist, Neoconservative or Neorealist school of thinking in International Relations. These three are therefore applied in the study as the 'main narratives' of understanding the present regional changes, and the explanatory power of each is examined correspondingly.

Historians often argue that the present divisions between the Shia and the Sunnis in Iraq and beyond are still based on an ancient hatred that resurfaced after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime when the country's Shia gained power. Many others, scholars as well as political leaders, stress the significance of Iran and its 'Shia power': threatening the current status quo in regional politics by seeking to build a radical Shia alliance and dominate the region. These experts point, either in a *Constructivist* or a *Neoconservative* vein, to the transnational Shia identity, the close connections between Iran's and Iraq's Shia, to the revolutionary nature of the Iranian theocratic Shia state and Iran's notorious nuclear programme, interpreting them as warning signs to the region's Sunni governments of the rise of 'a Shia full moon'.⁸ Present-day political motivations and geopolitics should not be ignored either in the analysis of what is said and written about the post-Saddam Sunni-Shia divide. According to *Neorealist* explanations, the sectarianization of regional politics in the post-Saddam Middle East is a product of the readjustments of power relations that are now taking place inside Iraq and in relation to Iran as a consequence of the new geopolitical situation. The sectarian discord, which seems to be growing at the level of regional politics, is thus seen as a by-product of regional-level power balancing.

The third chapter of the study examines in more detail the formation of a regional, United States-led anti-Iranian 'alliance' and the motivations and objectives behind it. The possible implications of this alliance, if it were to develop further, for the sectarianization of the Middle East and for regional stability are also charted. It is in the interests of the United States (and Israel) to present the Middle East as undergoing a Shia Revival and as being threatened by a rising Iran in order to gain political support from the Sunni states in the region for the containment of Iran and its ambitions. At the same time, for various external and internal reasons, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni-led states have begun a subtle rapprochement towards Israel and have been engaged in incorporating sectarian rhetoric in their foreign policy discourse.

The main reasons for the Sunni states to reinforce their sectarian (state) identity are, first of all, the state elites' fears about Iran's regional power ambitions and, secondly, anxiety about possible increased calls for influence for their Shia populations. In the long term, this power game can possibly lead to a regional system divided into two spheres: the Shia and the Sunni – led by Iran and Saudi Arabia respectively. If this is the case, the United States and its Sunni allies will benefit from this regional dichotomy in many ways in the short term. In the long term, a sectarian divide is not beneficial for regional stability and should thus not be a desirable development for any Western actor.

The sectarian divide in Islam has the potential to become an era-defining feature of the post-Saddam Middle East, in the same way that pan-Arabism and pan-Islam⁹ did in the 20th century. Due to the weakness (of legitimacy) of political leaderships in

many Arab states and their lack of ability to create and maintain (nation-)state or collective identities, sectarian identity, along with other identities such as tribal and religious ones, will have increasing importance in politics inside the most fragile of these states.

¹ Nasr, Vali: 'When the Shiites Rise'. 2006, Vol. 85, Number 4, pp. 58-74.

² Rubin, Michael: 'Iran Against the Arabs'. *The Wall Street Journal*. 19 July 2006. Michael Rubin has applied the original proverb to the context of the Second Lebanon War in 2006 where the Sunni Arab states, forced to make a choice between the Jews and the Shias, chose to treat the Jews, 'the usual strangers', as the cousins and the Shias as the strangers.

³ Permission for use given by G. Sick/G2K.

⁴ The most correct form of transliteration for the word Shia would be **Shī'a**, but due to technical reasons, the form **Shia** is used.

⁵ There are no accurate statistics available on the proportion of Shia Muslims in the populations of Arab states. This 'sensitivity' with regard to sectarian identity is another indicator of the (power) political nature of the divide in the region. Most estimates put the Shia proportion at around 15% of all Muslims. For country-specific statistics, see Table 1.

⁶ Pakistan is also a clear example although not included in this study due to the fact that the region in focus is the Middle East.

⁷ Shias also constitute a demographic majority in Iran and Azerbaijan.

⁸ See for example Black, Ian: 'Fear of a Shia Full Moon'. *The Guardian*. 26 January 2007.

⁹ I.e. Islam as a state identity.

CHAPTER 1: THE REGIONAL SHIA-SUNNI DIVIDE IN THE POST-SADDAM ERA

In the post-Saddam Middle East¹⁰, the security environment of the Persian Gulf area has undergone a profound change. This has repercussions for the entire Middle East. The disappearance of a Sunni-dominated, strong Iraq has shattered the power balance between that country, Iran and Saudi Arabia and seems to have tipped the scale in favour of Iran. The region's powerful Sunni states are now realigning themselves in order to deal with a perceived Iranian challenge. Among the first signs of this were the formation of the Arab Quartet and the relaunch of the Arab League peace initiative of 2002 in early 2007 and the Annapolis peace conference later the same year.¹¹

The removal of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'th regime shook the power balance not only at the regional level but, apparently, at the domestic level. In Iraq, the Shia's rise to power put an end to the age-old power balance between the 'minority' and the 'majority' in a region that has seen only a few exceptions to Sunni rule in its history.

The political realignment along sectarian lines applies not only to Iraq but potentially, in the future, to all states in the Middle East with a considerable Shia minority or an oppressed Shia majority. In addition, similar redefinitions are said to be taking place at various levels of politics – domestic, regional and (semi-)international. The elimination of the Taliban and Ba'th regimes, the consequent fragmentation of Iraq and the 'rise of Iran', together with several foreign policy failures of the United States with regard to the Middle East, have served as catalysts for declarations about the emergence of a division in the region along sectarian lines, such as the one made by Asher Susser:

"In this new regional order, primordial identities play decisive roles not only in domestic politics but in inter-state relations as well. The dominant fault line between Middle Eastern states is no longer monarchies versus republics or pro-American governments versus pro-Soviet ones, but the Sunni-Shi'i divide. Likewise, fears of domestic subversion among Sunni Muslim ruling elites are no longer focused on threatening ideological currents – communist, socialist, nationalist or otherwise – but rather on Iran's support of its fellow Shiite communities, which constitute significant and problematic minorities in the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia..."¹²

According to Susser, the Sunni Arab elites' secular nationalist project has failed and Iran is now seeking to fill the void. This argument is most tangible in the case of Iraq, but Susser also foresees in the rise of Iran, and in that of the Shia, an existential threat to the entire state order of the Middle East. He goes as far as to suggest that:

"[t]he 'Arab world' is an evermore watery concept, in political terms, the Arab state system is in disarray and confident and ambitious Shiite Iran is intent on filling the resulting vacuum. Secular nationalism, Arab and territorial, is increasingly on the defensive, if not on the wane. [...] The formation of the League of Arab States [...] clearly represented Sunni Arab dominance in the Middle East, and marked a continuity with the older, Sunni Ottoman-dominated social and political order. Much of this is now in tatters: Arab nationalism is a spent force, and the existing state order and Sunni supremacy are both under serious threat."¹³

It may still be too precipitate to predict the end of the state order in the Arab world, however. Nationalism – excluding to a certain extent the pan-Arabist form of it – continues to exist to a large extent in practically all Arab states. Nevertheless, there are visible signs that the one-and-a-half-millennia-old regional Sunni Arab supremacy is increasingly giving in to the interests of non-Arab powers: the United

States, Israel and Iran. Even Turkey has recently begun showing interest in 'returning' to the Middle East and is becoming (again) an increasingly important player in the region.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the intensity of the post-Saddam Shia-Sunni rift, which seems to be currently unfolding, and its significance for the Middle East state order/system remains to be seen.¹⁵

Still, it is argued further on in this paper that the realignments among states and certain powerful non-state actors according to already visible sectarian lines are likely to become clearer and more significant in (regional) Middle East politics in the short and medium term.

The fragmentation of Iraq is believed to be resurfacing in different ways inside Middle Eastern states, but there are common problems related to it which all Arab states will potentially have to deal with: In states ruled by Sunni leaders, the Shias are often seen as an enemy of the state (ideology) and a threat to internal stability. Thus, inside such states as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and even Kuwait, the division is likely to manifest itself most visibly as a conflict between the 'rulers' and the 'oppressed'. Some recent examples of this have been seen in Lebanon. The future of Shia-Sunni relations inside Middle Eastern states will be largely determined by developments in Iraq, but also by Iran's and the United States' policies in the region. The United States, the regional hegemon, is already playing a central role in forging a sectarian divide among and inside states – both intentionally and unintentionally. In the following, the events that led to the re-emergence of the current sectarian rift at the regional level are examined.

1.1 The Modern-Day Sectarian Rift

Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria and, to a lesser extent, Jordan, Egypt and the small Gulf Arab monarchies now seem to be sliding into a Sunni-Shia conflict that has re-emerged during the last few decades and years in an unprecedented manner, but which has millennia-long roots. How and why did this happen?

Many trace the source of the current sectarian strife right back to the birth of Islam and to the 'major schism'. The separation of the Shia from mainstream Islam was, initially, a political question and only later became a question of faith.¹⁶ At first, the Sunni and the Shia communities were split fundamentally for political reasons and the divide was aggravated later, through centuries of warfare and fighting and by Sunni oppression of the Shia. The fact that the Shias have almost always been the oppressed and on the periphery of power in the Middle East is an important factor in the relationship between the two branches of Islam, which dates back to the first decades of the religion and has prevailed throughout history with few exceptions. In spite and because of their history of suffering, a typical characteristic of Shiism is the idea of (re)gaining power. Shiism was born as a party in a power struggle and it has never lost this original character.¹⁷ From a historical perspective, it therefore appears that the removal of Saddam Hussein has finally allowed the Shia, after several centuries, to get back at the Sunnis.

What is crucial to understanding the modern sectarian identities, according to Vali Nasr, is that they are not about what happened in the first century of Islam, but that they have been shaped in the modern era according to the rule that being Sunni or Shia defined "who has and who has not, who sits at the table and who does not". Nasr argues that Arab nationalism displays an inherent bias against the Shia and that the 'sectarian card' is usually played by the Sunnis, not the Shias. The Shia have always "wanted to belong", but they have nearly always been excluded from power.¹⁸ However, it is important to stress that although history alone does not

explain modern-day politics, nor even identities in the Middle Eastern Muslim states, it has to be taken into account because of modern-day references to the past that have considerable symbolic importance in the collective memory of different sectarian groups.¹⁹

For most of the 20th century, Shia-Sunni relations were characterized by a relatively peaceful coexistence in the Middle East. According to Nasr, for most of the century there was a common threat to Islam from secularism in the form of imperialism, which led to a period of Sunni-Shia harmony in the region. The Shias and the Sunnis also fought together against British colonial rule in Iraq in 1920 and aligned themselves against Israel after 1948.²⁰ However, Yitzhak Nakash has pointed out that, for example, despite their embrace of Arab and Iraqi nationalism, the Shias of Iraq continued to be greeted with suspicion by the Sunni leaders.²¹

The end of the century was different and, according to experts, it was marked by several clash points between the two 'sects'. A few major developments are said to have contributed to the re-emergence of the sectarian divide in the 21st century. Among them are: the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Iran-Iraq War in 1980-1988, Saddam Hussein's rule of Iraq, particularly in the 1990s, and finally the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.²² Dror Ze'evi also factors in the demographic aspect.²³

Arab states have been concerned since 1979 – if not always – about Iran becoming a regional power.²⁴ It was precisely the Iranian Revolution that emboldened the Shias in the Middle East, and especially in Lebanon, and that reinforced a trend of activism which continues today.²⁵ This is why Hizbollah, for example, was founded – as a result of Iran's geostrategic considerations – and it has been supported both militarily and financially by Iran ever since.²⁶ Another example is the way in which Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, would portray himself as the spiritual leader of the entire Muslim World, not only of the Shia. He appealed to the Arab Sunni street in the same way that Hizbollah's current leader, Hassan Nasrallah, did after the Second Lebanon War in 2006. This led Sunni leaders in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the early 1980s to emphasize the sectarian and ethnic divide by employing tougher anti-Shia discourse. Saudi Arabia also began investing in fundamentalist movements, which contributed to the growth and proliferation of radical Salafi Islamist movements²⁷ – including that of al-Qaida – who later turned against Saudi Arabia, the West and their old enemy, the Shia.²⁸

1.2 The War in Iraq: Tipping the Regional Scale

The fall of the Ba'th regime in Iraq "enabled the Shia to emerge as a powerful political force in the Arab world".²⁹ The war was indeed the origin of a new dimension of power balancing, namely that between the Shias and the Sunnis, in the Middle East. The imbalance had always existed beneath the surface but it had long gone unnoticed by Western observers and policymakers.

Indeed, in recent years, many have asked what happened to the Iraqi nation – if it ever existed. How was Iraqi nationalism so rapidly replaced by sectarianism? According to Chris Toensing, "[p]ostmonarchy Iraq, indeed, offers the clearest examples of state sectarianism masquerading as secular, even progressive, Arab nationalism".³⁰ This was the case in Iraq under the Ba'th party rule and even before it. As a study carried out by the Hudson Institute showed, a bad account on human rights tends to correlate with religious intolerance.³¹ There is no doubt that although Saddam Hussein's circle of privileged ones did not reflect so much sectarian but rather tribal considerations and those of loyalty, this was the case in Iraq as well with regard to the Shia.

The Iran-Iraq War was portrayed by Saddam Hussein as an essentially anti-Persian, not anti-Shia conflict.³² During the eight-year war, instead of using sectarian rhetoric, Saddam applied ethnic discourse in his open contempt of the Persians and used Arab Nationalist rhetoric in order to gain the Sunni Arab world's support and also to keep the Iraqi Shias loyal to Iraq. Iraqi Shias, however, were implicitly included on the side of the enemy and treated by Saddam as potential traitors.³³ As a result, the war not only affected the relations between Iran and the Arab world, but also sectarian relations inside Iraq.

During the Iraq-Iran War and especially after the Gulf War in 1991, a shift took place in Saddam Hussein's rule, which was characterized by a move in image and rhetoric from Arab nationalist towards Islamic nationalist.³⁴ ³⁵ Simultaneously, and contradictorily, the 1990s in Iraq were characterized by harsh anti-Shia and anti-Kurd policies. The catalyst for these policies were the popular uprisings in Northern and Southern Iraq, which were encouraged by the United States after it had successfully ousted the Iraqi army from Kuwait. The uprisings in the Southern Shia areas were brutally quashed by the army and were followed by systematic mass killings and by targeting individual Iraqi Shia clerics; these occurred, it is estimated, in a far larger scale than in the 1980s. The persecutions were felt mostly in the Shia-majority Southern Iraq because the US had established safe havens only in the Kurdish areas, and they continued with varying intensity until the Second Gulf War.³⁶

Finally, the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 removed the Sunni Ba'th regime and brought the Shia majority into power, although nominally the government is based on a power-sharing agreement. No large-scale plan for post-war arrangements in power relations was made by the US and many fundamental aspects developed contrary to expectations: the Shia turned out to be unwilling to form a strictly opposite power pole to Iran and the Sunnis weren't content with their new role as the underprivileged minority. In addition, Iran found itself in an unprecedentedly powerful regional position which, paradoxically, is said to be constantly enhanced by overestimations to this effect in the United States.

The end of Saddam Hussein's era also brought to an end three decades of his adaptation of Iraq's Ba'th party nationalism. The country today seems to be comprised of 'tribes *without flags*'.³⁷ Al-Qaida and similar groups have intentionally sought to pit the Sunni against the Shia³⁸, and people who seek security amongst the sectarian fighting have been forced to pick sides. Most experts refer to the bombing of the al-Askari Mosque as the turning point which marked a significant increase in sectarian divisions and hostilities in the country.³⁹ Nasr, in turn, has reported that the rest of Saddam's Iraq in 2003 was actually a sectarian Iraq.⁴⁰ This holds true in the sense that when the United States believed they were liberating Iraq, in reality they liberated Iraq's Shias, a fact which soon became evident. The failed Iraqi ideologies – state and Arab nationalist – were replaced by ethnic and fragmented sectarian and tribal identities. The divisions in Iraq, according to Nasr, are caused by a religious identity which works as an ethnic identity.⁴¹ Indeed a division along sectarian lines – and inside and across these lines – is already perceptible in many regions, cities and places. Sectarian violence in Baghdad has forged a new pattern made up of parts of the capital that are only populated by one 'sect' – a pattern which is repeated in various other formerly 'mixed' cities.⁴²

Historians are fond of reminding us that there was no such thing as the Iraqi people: Great Britain and France shaped Iraq out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire and created an artificial nation state that comprises three ethnic and religious groups: the Kurds in the north, the Sunnis in the centre and the Shia in the south. Phebe Marr describes this non-existence of an Iraqi nation thus:

“The state of Iraq has existed only since 1920, when it was carved from the former provinces of the Ottoman Empire and created under [the] British aegis as a mandate. [...] If one can speak of an Iraqi state, it is not yet possible to speak of an Iraqi nation. Iraq's present borders incorporate a diverse medley of peoples who have not yet been welded into a single political community with a common sense of identity.”⁴³

Gregory Gause made an important point about the Iraqi national identity by arguing that if Iraqi Arabs think they are a country, one people and one state, they indeed are.⁴⁴ This is the case in modern-day Iraq as well: no Arab political party or leader has called for a partition of the country. In the autumn of 2007, several messages voiced by major Iraqi political forces and parties declared that they oppose the (US) plan to divide Iraq.⁴⁵ Although the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, SIIC, (formerly SCIRI) has proposed a nine-province regional government in the south and centre of Iraq, SIIC's leader, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, has declared it is not pursuing an actual partition of the country.^{46 47} The Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr's movement is equally against partition. No Sunni party has pushed for nor wants partition, and neither do the Sunni insurgents.⁴⁸ Gause concludes that both the Sunni and the Shia groups in Iraq want Iraq, not (a Sunni) Anbar and (a Shia) Islamic Republic in the provinces of Basra and Najaf.

Toensing has also rightly argued that Iraq's post-Saddam sectarian conflict is a product of contemporary history and, most importantly, of the events after the US occupation of the country.⁴⁹ Still, the debate in the West tends to replicate the dichotomously perceived sectarian divisions – although decreasingly so – and policymakers continue to pose the question of how to divide Iraq; by partition, ‘soft partition’ or ‘loose federalism’. Here, in a very tangible way, local and regional sectarian identities are reproduced extraregionally.

1.3 The War in Lebanon: The Wake-Up Call for the Sunni States

In many respects, the Second Lebanon War in 2006 has proved to be a decisive event in the emergence of the current regional Shia-Sunni tensions. The war was seen, both in the region and outside it, as a wake-up call and a warning of major sectarian clashes to come. In fact, Lebanon itself is, much like the war itself, a microcosm of the Shia-Sunni divide that is currently intensifying in the entire region. Without a doubt, in former times just as much as today, Lebanon has been the battleground when it comes to major and minor power interests in the region, the place where power politics and sectarianism in the Middle East most manifestly converge – apart from Iraq, of course.

According to Gary Sick, Hizbollah's fight against Israel was perceived in the region and outside it as an extension of Iranian power and its influence in the region, and even as an indirect battle between Iran and the United States.^{50 51} As a result of the war, the Shia-Sunni divide has surfaced both in Lebanon and, partly because of it, increasingly also across the Middle East. Susser saw the 2006 war as a battle between two non-Arab regional powers:

“[I]t was not, in the main, an Arab-Israeli war at all, but rather the first encounter between two non-Arab regional powers – Israel and Iran. The Arab states, apart from Syria, were mere bystanders. Indeed, some of them were actually rooting for Israel to trounce Hizballah, Iran's Lebanese proxy, far more decisively than Israel actually did. Israel's failure to rebuff, or even seriously damage the Iranian-Shi'ite thrust that had penetrated the very core of the Arab East (Mashriq) was thus a setback for Sunni Arab regimes as well.”⁵²

Inside Lebanon, the divisions run deep and the fault lines of foreign intervention are clear. The strongest tensions are manifest between Hizbollah with its allies under the March 8 alliance title and the Lebanese anti-Syrian factions under the March 14 alliance title. The former are openly backed by Iran and Syria⁵³ and the latter by the United States, the Sunni-ruled Arab states and the European Union. According to Eyal Zisser, the struggle between the Christian Maronites and the Muslims of the past has been replaced – partly as a consequence of the relative and absolute growth of the Shia population – by the struggle between the Shia community and the “rest”, who are now united in response to what they perceive as the ‘rise of the Shia’ in Lebanon.⁵⁴ Domestic sectarian tensions began to emerge in the months before and after the 2006 war and have escalated to date in two occasions. The first one was during a Hizbollah-organized sit-in, which was directed against the Lebanese government in January 2007, when four people were killed after clashes between students.⁵⁵ The clashes took place in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein’s execution, which was seen by the Sunnis across the region as a sectarian act of revenge by the Shia.⁵⁶ The more recent and worse explosion of violence took place in the end of January 2008 during opposition street protests over electricity rationing. This time several people were shot dead.⁵⁷ Although a new war is not in the interests of any party in Lebanon, the struggle for power will remain as a central topic in domestic politics and, consequently, sectarian tensions as well.

As far as foreign actors are concerned, the United States and its allies, both international and in the region, are now determined to prevent (what they perceive as) the domination of Lebanon by Syria and Iran, even if they cannot gain victory for their Lebanese allies.⁵⁸ For Saudi Arabia, Syria’s alliance with Iran has become a problem. Stopping Syria from regaining influence over Lebanon, mainly in the form of Hizbollah, has become the main objective of Saudi, US and French policy in the country. Iran, on the other hand, felt its power position grow after the Hizbollah-claimed victory in the war. According to Nasr, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia – Iran’s traditional rivals in the region – were not just weakened by the war; they were also uninfluential in the course of it and in brokering a cease-fire.⁵⁹ This was a powerful sign to all actors involved.

Currently, many claim that Hizbollah is in decline politically due to the fact that the sectarian divide is now being taken increasingly into account all around the Middle East.⁶⁰ After the 2006 war, and especially with anti-Shia sentiments rising among the Sunni Arabs in the region, the Hizbollah leadership has indeed worked hard to keep the political dispute inside Lebanon from turning into an even clearer sectarian one.⁶¹ Hizbollah’s Deputy Secretary-General Sheikh Naim Qasim said in an interview in August 2007 that the conditions for sectarian strife exist because “there are those who use sectarian language day and night to stir sectarian sentiment, and we know that the Americans are pioneers of ‘constructive chaos’ of which sectarian strife is one form.” However he held that this will not materialize because “there is a strong will on Hizbullah’s part, and on the part of the Lebanese opposition in general, to prevent strife among the Lebanese. We engage in counter-mobilisation.”⁶²

¹⁰ In this study the Middle East is defined as including the following states: Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Yemen.

¹¹ See for example Maddy-Weitzman, Bruce: *An Arab Quartet?* Tel Aviv Notes. The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. Tel Aviv University. 14 January 2007.

¹² Susser, Asher: *Iraq, Lebanon and Gaza: Middle Eastern Trend*. Tel Aviv Notes. The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. Tel Aviv University. 22 July 2007, p. 3.

¹³ Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁴ See for example Larrabee, Stephen: 'Turkey Rediscovered the Middle East'. *Foreign Affairs*. July/August 2007, Vol. 86, Number 4.

¹⁵ See for example Ehteshami, Anoush: *9/11 As a Cause of Paradigm Shift?* SGIA Research Working Papers. University of Durham. June 2007, p. 6.

¹⁶ The 'big schism of Islam' was political by nature: Shi'at 'Ali, the Party of 'Ali, was the name given to the partisans of 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, during the succession disputes after the death of the third caliph 'Uthman (35ah/656ad). 'Ali was the fourth caliph after the death of the Prophet Muhammad and is even today considered by the Shia to be the only legitimate successor of the Prophet. Nevertheless, his election was disputed from the start. As a result, a party of a political nature formed around 'Ali. The death of al-Husain, 'Ali's son and the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was possibly even more important in the formation of the Shia than the death of 'Ali. Even today, Husain's martyrdom is considered the most important event in Shia history. The symbolism of an innocent spiritual figure martyred by an unjust force which far outnumbered him is, according to Nasr, the force around which the Shia faith takes form and inspiration. Another important difference between Sunni and Shia Islam, which dates to this initial period, is the spiritual significance of the Imam in Shiism, which the clerics in Sunni Islam do not enjoy. For the Shia, 'Ali is the heir of both the political and religious power whereas in the (Sunni) Caliphates, these two powers were separated. Sources: Halm, Heinz: *Shiism (Islamic Surveys)*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press. 1997; Öhrnberg, Kaj: *Islamin peruskurssi*. University of Helsinki. 2003; Nasr: *The Shia Revival (Seminar)*.

¹⁷ Halm: *Shiism*.

¹⁸ Nasr, Vali: *The Shia Revival (Seminar)*. Seminar at the Council on Foreign Relations. 20 November 2006. Among the most famous exceptions to Sunni rule in the history are the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt and Northern Africa, the Safavid Empire in Persia, the Druze in what is now Lebanon and the Zaidi dynasties in Yemen.

¹⁹ Little has been known about the role of the Shia in the history of Islam until recently. They were virtually unheard of in the West until the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Although there are numerous studies at present on the Shia, not all are objective and some have even been written in order to create a negative image of the tradition. In addition, the concept of *taqiyya*, hiding the truth or telling a false story, is central to Shia Islam. The use of this defence mechanism became common because the Shia have often been considered as heretics in the eyes of the majority Muslims. Öhrnberg, Kaj: *Islamin peruskurssi*.

²⁰ Nasr: *The Shia Revival (Seminar)*.

²¹ Nakash, Yitzhak: *Reaching for Power. The Shia in the Modern Arab World*. Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press. 2006, pp. 82-94.

²² See for example National Public Radio: 'The Partisans of Ali. A History of Shia Faith and Politics'. Compiled by Mike Shuster. 9-16 February 2007.

²³ Ze'evi, Dror: *The Present Shia-Sunna Divide: Remaking Historical Memory*. Middle East Brief no.19. Crown Center for Middle East Studies. Brandeis University. April 2007, p. 3. According to Ze'evi, Shia populations across the Middle East have grown relatively faster than Sunni populations.

²⁴ Rubin, Barry: *Sunni versus Shia*. The Global Research in International Affairs Center. Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya. 25 April 2006.

²⁵ Nakash emphasizes, however, that there has been a shift in focus among the Shia of the Middle East during the 1990s from violence to accommodation and away from confrontation towards dialogue with the West. Nakash: *Reaching for Power*, p. 4.

²⁶ See for example Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal and Marina Ottaway: *Hizbollah and its Changing Identities: Policy Outlook*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. January 2007, p. 1.

²⁷ Archer, Toby: 'Historian koukerot muokkasivat radiaaialia islamia'. *Ulkopolitiikka*. Vol. 43(3), 2006, p. 42.

²⁸ Radical Salafi Islam regards both the United States and the Shia as enemies and usually looks upon the Shia as polytheists and heretics and thus denies that they are Muslims.

²⁹ Ehteshami, Anoush: *9/11 As a Cause of Paradigm Shift?*, p. 5.

³⁰ Toensing, Chris: 'Persian Ghosts'. *The Nation*. 2 July 2, 2007.

³¹ The Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom compared ratings for religious freedom with Freedom House's ratings for political rights and civil liberties and found out that religious freedom in a country correlates positively with its record of human rights in general. See for example Paul Marshall's presentation in *World Trends in Religious Freedom; Survey Files*. 9 July 2007.

³² Nakash: *Reaching for Power*, p. 96.

³³ According to Takeyh, Iraqi Shias see the Iran-Iraq War increasingly through a narrative which suggests "both Iraqi Shias and the Iranians were victims of Saddam's war machine". Ray Takeyh in Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: *After Iraq: U.S. Strategy in the Middle East After the Troops Come Home*. Seminar transcript. 17 September 2007, p. 6.

³⁴ Baram, Amatzia: 'Saddam Husayn: Between His Power Base and the International Community'. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*. Vol. 4, No. 4, December 2000, pp. 10-11. The most visible sign of this being the words 'Allahu Akbar' that Saddam Hussein added to the Iraqi flag in 1991.

³⁵ According to Gause, during the Gulf War, "Saddam Hussein raised both Arab-nationalist and Islamist banners [...] to delegitimize the Saudi regime and encourage Saudi citizens to rebel against their government." See Gause, Gregory: 'The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia' in Hinnebusch, Raymond and

Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds.): *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*. Boulder and London, Lynne Rienner Publishers. 2002, p. 197.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch: *Overview on Human Rights Developments. Iraq and occupied Kuwait. 1991. 1992.*

³⁷ The original term, 'tribes with flags', was coined by Ambassador Taseen Bashir, the former spokesman of President Anwar Sadat. He argued that only Egypt and Iran are genuine nation states and the other Arab countries are merely tribes with flags.

³⁸ See for example Ze'evi: 'The Present Shia-Sunna Divide: Remaking Historical Memory', p. 4.

³⁹ See for example al-Baydani, Ibrahim: 'Trial and Error: Washington and Iraq's Shiite' *Arab Insight*. Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 2007, p. 40.

⁴⁰ Nasr: *The Shia Revival (Seminar)*.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² President George Bush mentioned in his State of the Union Address in January 2007 that [e]ighty percent of Iraq's sectarian violence occurs within 30 miles of the capital. Bush, George: *State of the Union Address*. Washington D.C., 23 January 2007. It has also been suggested that the decreases in violence statistics during 2007 actually happened because certain parts of Baghdad had become 'religiously cleansed' and there was no further reason for sectarian clashes in those areas.

⁴³ Marr, Phebe: *The Modern History of Iraq*. Boulder, Westview Press; second edition. 2003, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁴ Gregory Gause's ideas in this paragraph are included in a message on the Gulf2000 Project mailing list on 10 September 2007 with the title 'RE: Who is representing the Iraqi nation?' Quoted with the author's permission.

⁴⁵ See for example Asharq Al-Awsat: 'Sunni, Shi'i, and Kurdish personalities reject the idea of dividing Iraq'. 26 September 2007.

⁴⁶ Asharq Alawsat English Edition: 'Iraq's Al-Hakim Discusses Proposed South Central Federation'. 23 October 2007.

⁴⁷ Gause has argued that even if the SIIC is not telling the truth about its ambitions, this must be because the leaders of the party believe their *constituents* do not want partition.

⁴⁸ Gause also reminds us that Iraqi parliamentarians have not introduced a bill calling for partition.

⁴⁹ Toensing: 'Persian Ghosts'.

⁵⁰ Sick, Gary: *Sick: Alliance against Iran*. Interview for the Council on Foreign Relations. 23 January 2007.

⁵¹ The conflict has also been seen as one between Saudi Arabia (claiming the leadership of Sunni Islam) and Iran (claiming the leadership of Shia Islam).

⁵² Susser: *Iraq, Lebanon and Gaza: Middle Eastern Trend*, p. 1.

⁵³ Hizbollah itself readily admits its strong ties with Syria and Iran but stresses its political autonomy and the *strategic* nature of the alliance. See for example Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal: *In Their Own Words: Hizbollah's Strategy in the Current Confrontation*. Policy Outlook. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. January 2007, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Zisser, Eyal: *An Israeli View: Rising Tensions in the Israeli-Hizbollah-Syria-Iran Relations*. Speech at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. 19 September 2007.

⁵⁵ Bakri, Nada and Hassan Fattah: 'Beirut University Dispute Escalates Into Rioting, Killing 4'. *The New York Times*. 26 January 2007.

⁵⁶ Slackman, Michael: 'Hangings Fuel Sectarian Split Across Mideast'. *The New York Times*. 17 January 2007.

⁵⁷ Bathish, Hani (M.): 'Suleiman promises speedy probe into riot deaths'. *The Daily Star*. 29 January 2008.

⁵⁸ Naoum, Sarkis: 'Lebanon, Scenarios for the Presidential Election'. *Arab Reform Bulletin*. Volume 5, Issue 7, September 2007. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁵⁹ Nasr, Vali: 'Lebanon Conflict Diverts Attention From Iran'. Interview for National Public Radio. 17 August 2006.

⁶⁰ See for example Zisser: *An Israeli View: Rising Tensions in the Israeli-Hizbollah-Syria-Iran Relations*.

⁶¹ See for example Abdel-Latif, Omayma: 'Counterblasts'. *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*. Issue No. 830. 1-7 February 2007. Saad-Ghorayeb (*In Their Own Words: Hizbollah's Strategy in the Current Confrontation*) has pointed out that Hizbollah regards national stability as a key to confronting Israel.

⁶² Abdel-Latif, Omayma: 'The resistance lives on'. *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*. Issue No. 858. 16-22 August 2007.

CHAPTER 2: EXPLAINING THE RISE OF THE SHIA

The picture of sectarian relations both inside states, mainly Iraq and Lebanon, and at the regional level in the Middle East is often oversimplified and even misunderstood in the West. As a consequence of the war in Iraq and the regional rise of Iran and the repercussions pertaining to it, a similar dichotomous interpretation of sectarian relations that has often been applied to post-Saddam Iraq in the West is being increasingly applied both inside and outside the region to the entire Middle East as a one-size-fits-all framework of analysis and policy-formation. The significance of this politico-religious divide in inter-state relations has been increasing since 2003, but it is only during the last two years that being labelled as either Shia or Sunni seems to have attained concrete importance in regional politics. Although sectarian identities seem to be in the ascendant, there is discussion and disagreement about the extent to which they can play a role in forging alliances and enmities. Another major point of disagreement revolves around which country is guilty of fomenting sectarian enmities and divisions inside the weak states of the region (Iraq, Lebanon and Palestinian territories) and among states in general: Iran or the United States. Equally interesting is the question of how countries apply sectarian rhetoric at the regional level.

Consequently, the following pair of questions arises: Is the regional sectarian conflict actively promoted top-down, by the United States and the Sunni governments of the Middle East or is Iran taking advantage of its relations with the Shia in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere to expand its power in the region? Or is it a long-lasting, bottom-up-type struggle of identities that has resurfaced at all levels of politics and society because of the current war in Iraq? Different theoretical or philosophical approaches of International Relations provide three different answers to these questions. The ones examined in this study are Constructivism, Neoconservatism and Neorealism.⁶³

Expert analyses that seek to explain the contemporary Shia-Sunni divide at the regional level tend to draw on either one or two of the three aforementioned approaches of IR. The explanations that stress the transnational and even historical character of the Shia identity follow the Constructivist theory; those that, in addition to this, highlight the significance of the revolutionary Shia ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran generally usually embrace elements of Neoconservatism, whereas those that stress the states' need to engage in power balancing, protect their national interest and form alliances draw more on Neorealism. In the following subchapters, different analytical ways of understanding the same current political developments in the post-Saddam Middle East and criticisms levelled at each of them are examined. These particular approaches to the issue have been observed to be the most common ones, but they are obviously not exhaustive.

Constructivists believe that inter-state relations are contingent upon the way identity is constructed: supra-state and -national identities, such as the Shia identity, compete with state identity in the Middle East. These kinds of identities also produce trans-state movements and limit state-centric behaviour.⁶⁴ Therefore, a Constructivist line of explanation maintains that the bottom-up logic dominates in what is purported to be the Revival of the Shia.

As a distinction of this understanding, *Neoconservatist* explanations also stress the importance of identity and similarly believe that a supranational Shia identity exists, but add that Iran is actively promoting its regional interests by cleverly appealing to this identity by forging ties and directly funding Shia groups across the Middle East. Iran is alleged to be using the Shia identity in order to promote radicalism and extremism in the Middle East. Democracy and regime change are seen by Neo-conservatists as the only solutions to preventing wars and instability in the region,

and Iran and its allies are consequently seen as the major obstacles on the way to Democratic Peace.

Neorealists base their analysis on a clearly state-centric view of International Relations in the Middle East. It is a fact that in this region the basic features of Neorealism become most manifest: States base their actions on *raison d'État* (principally survival – of the ruling regime or elite – and security), which leads to a general lack of trust among them. As states seek to maximize their relative power, they do it on two levels: internally and externally. According to the Neorealist logic, the case of the evolving state-level Shia-Sunni divide consists of a more or less planned 'policy' and pertains to external balancing tactics: In essence, states use the sectarian (or alternatively anti-sectarian and pan-Islamic) label for the purpose of forging and forming alliances, engaging and containing their enemies. The US actions to contain Iran are a textbook example of how a hegemon uses economic sanctions and threatens to use military force in order to halt a rising power whose interests overlap with its own.

Neorealism naturally manages to best explain what is happening at the regional level. Constructivism, in turn, has its merits in elucidating the main features of the sectarian divisions resurfacing and evolving inside Middle Eastern countries – particularly in Iraq – and to some extent over state borders, between Arab and Muslim societies. Finally, Neoconservative explanations are useful in the sense that they shed light on (the current) US policy in the region.

As Hinnebusch notes, all analyses of the Middle East should incorporate an understanding of the identity-sovereignty dynamic of the regional system. He compares the explanatory power of Constructivism and Realism in the case of pan-Arabism thus:

“[A]s constructivist analysis shows, Pan-Arab norms deriving from a shared supra-state identity became as important in shaping Arab state behaviour as the distribution of material power stressed by realism. The contradiction between the global norm of sovereignty, in which state interests are legitimately the object of foreign policy, and the regional norms, of Pan-Arabism (or, to a lesser extent Pan-Islam) which expect these interests to be compatible with the values of the indigenous supra-state identity community, have caught Arab foreign policy making elites, [...] between the logics of *raison d'état* and '*raison de la nation*'. [...] For more ambitious states, supra-state identity presented the opportunity to assert regional leadership by championing the Pan-Arab or Islamic causes.”⁶⁵

Both the explanations that stress the importance of (historical) identity and the ones that place more emphasis on modern-day concerns of power can be, and are, applied in practice in two ways: as an analytical tool for understanding the new logic of regional politics and as a policymaking tool. In both cases, speaking about the Shia-Sunni divide or the Rise of the Shia produces and reproduces, as Social Constructivism asserts, social reality. The same applies to supra-national identities. Therefore, it is certainly a valid hypothesis that sectarianism has the potential to become the next 'pan-norm' in the Middle East, and that pan-Arabism and pan-Islam might lose to it more of their already faded appeal. However, stating this will not suffice alone to comprehend the dynamics of the divide.

Shia-Sunni relations as well as all pan-norms are, and will always be, affected and shaped by the (national) interests of the foreign policy elites and actors involved. Elites will continue to use them to manipulate and attain public support. In effect, sectarian language is, as will be shown in due course in this study, a policy tool that not only the US but also Sunni elites in the region use in order to deal with Iran's regional power and their relations with different Shia groups and populations across the region. Saudi Arabia, as the obvious example, is currently asserting its growing

regional status by employing all of these norms: pan-Islamic, and to some extent pan-Arab, in its foreign policy discourse and pan-Sunni as its unofficial foreign policy line.⁶⁶ Iran, in turn, applies pan-Islamic tones in its official foreign policy whereas, at the same time, the country engages in fostering pan-Shia links and the tacit support of Shias around the Middle East. On the other hand, in Iraq, the Shia leaders Ali al-Sistani and Muqtada al-Sadr have both called for Shia-Sunni unity in the country, obviously also for their own benefit.⁶⁷

2.1 Constructivism and the Resurgent Shia Identity

One way of understanding the 'newly-found' sectarian differences is, along Constructivist lines, that they are based first and foremost on conflicting social group identities. These kinds of explanations emphasize the transnational character of the Shia as a community. They stress the importance of the oppressive historical relationship between the Sunnis and the Shias in the formation of this identity, but also highlight that it is more political, social and economic by nature than religious. In other words, they hold that the age-old tension between the sects has primarily more to do with political power than with questions of dogma.⁶⁸ However, what is important is that the Shias' feeling of being oppressed and the stress on martyrdom and victimhood derives not from the historical experience alone but from more recent experiences as well.

Although modern-day Shia identity has been extensively shaped in the modern period, it draws heavily on the past. Oppression is one of the central concepts in Shiism and the 'supplanting' of 'Ali in the selection of the first Caliph and the martyrdom of his son Husain are still fundamental in the Shias' attitudes towards the Sunnis.⁶⁹ For their part, Sunni rulers have regarded the Shia as a lower caste, an underclass, or as misguided Muslims throughout history, while hardliners such as Salafi clerics condemn Shiism as heresy.⁷⁰ Nicknames such as 'Persians' and 'Safavids' are used even nowadays by Sunni Arabs for (Arab) Shias.

According to Vali Nasr, a leading Shia expert in the United States, three factors have contributed to, and are causing, the so-called Rise of the Shia: The empowerment of the Shia in Iraq, the consequent empowerment of the Shias across the region (in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates) and the 'Rise of Iran'. These three are mutually reinforcing and will in Nasr's view provide a more powerful voice for the Shia in Middle Eastern Politics. In the regional setting, this translates into Iran and its allies becoming politically stronger and posing a challenge of containment for the United States.⁷¹ However, Nasr argues that there is no such thing as pan-Shiism; the Shias are united rather by a coherent religious view and by other kinds of links:

"In addition to military and political bonds, there are numerous soft links between Iran and Iraq, forged mostly as a result of several waves of Shiite immigration. In the early 1970s, as part of his Arabization campaign, Saddam expelled tens of thousands of Iraqi Shiites of Iranian origin, who then settled in Dubai, Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria, and for the most part, Iran. Some of the Iraqi refugees who stayed in Iran have achieved prominence there as senior clerics and commanders of the Revolutionary Guards. [...] Throughout the 1980s and after the anti-Shiite massacres of 1991, some 100,000 Iraqi Arab Shiites also took refuge in Iran. In the dark years of the 1990s, Iran alone gave Iraqi Shiites refuge and support. Since the Iraq war, many of these refugees have returned to Iraq. [...] The repeated shuttling of Shiites between Iran and Iraq over the years has created numerous, layered connections between the two countries' Shiite communities. As a result, the Iraqi nationalism that the U.S. government hoped would serve as a bulwark against Iran has proved porous to Shiite identity in many ways."⁷²

Noah Feldman attributes to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini two important changes that are relevant to the present dynamism in the 'Shia world'. Firstly, he turned the clerics into political actors and thereby transformed Shiism into a political force. This is in contrast to the quietist nature historically attributed to the denomination. Secondly, Khomeini consolidated the status of the most senior Ayatollah as the most important source of rule in the 'Shia world', even though all senior scholars (including Ayatollah al-Sistani) haven't concurred with this.⁷³

Many scholars in the West have recently stressed the democratic nature of the Shia strand compared to mainstream Islam.⁷⁴ According to Nakash, for more than a century, Shia clerics in the Middle East have been advocating parliamentary rule and just governance.⁷⁵ Nakash writes that

"[u]nlike Sunnis, who in theory are expected to obey their rulers and even tolerate a tyrant in order to avoid civil strife and preserve the cohesion of the Muslim community, observant Shi'is recognize no authority on earth except that of the imam. In his absence there can be no human sovereign who is fully legitimate. [...] Whereas Sunni clerics are usually appointed and paid by the government [...], in Shi'ism the followers select the mujtahid⁷⁶ of their choice, [...] In this duality lies the essence of democracy: the freedom of ordinary people to play a prominent role in deciding who is to have religious authority [...] that in turn can be used to check the executive and hold rulers accountable."⁷⁷

Nasr sees the Shias of the Middle East as "an objective and a subjective democratic force."⁷⁸ In the context of competition for political power, this explains why also in post-Saddam Iraq – which, like most Arab countries, lacks a secular civil society – Shia clerics have been most vocal in the call for elections and a representative government – in addition to the fact that they form a demographic majority in the country, a factor which would be beneficial for them in a democratic political system. Nasr predicts that a new power balance will emerge in the region which will change it culturally and transform its countries into more pluralistic ones, allowing for a more equal distribution of power.⁷⁹

Shias in Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain and elsewhere have for decades been calling for more political representation and rights. However, the fact that Shias form a (relative) majority in these countries is often surpassed by reminders of Iranian influence on these populations. In reality, Shia identity does not usually mean alliance with or loyalty to Iran. Ray Takeyh has pointed out that after the Iranian revolution, local Shia communities in the Gulf countries did not seek to become subordinate to, or allies of, Iran. Instead, they "utilized the Iranian threat, [...] to try to renegotiate the national compact in their individual countries [and] to become more integrated..."⁸⁰ In Saudi Arabia in the 1990s, according to Madawi al-Rasheed, local Shia leaders stressed the centrality of the Shi'i cultural authenticity, an identity rooted in Arab culture and history, along with calling for human rights and respect for religious and cultural diversity.⁸¹ At present, the Shia of Saudi Arabia emphasize national unity because, according to an International Crisis Group report, they realize their community's survival depends on the al-Saud regime, although Nakash sees that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 re-energized Saudi Shias, who have now joined other Saudis in calling for reforms.⁸²

At the moment, according to Nasr, the Sunni states are pushing Syria and Hizbollah, as well as Shia communities in Sunni-dominated states, towards the embrace of Iran. Nasr sees, in a more Neorealist vein, that internal fissures in the 'Shia alliance' (at the regional level) will only appear when there is no common enemy.⁸³ This means that only the absence of one – that is, the United States-led anti-Iranian 'alliance' or even a hostile Sunni alliance – would lead to increasing differences between the Iraqi and other Arab Shias and the Iranian Shias, which would definitely

be in the interests of the United States and its Middle Eastern allies from a power political point of view.

Critique: The Lowest Common Denominator and Other-Than-Sectarian Identities

Many experts oppose the 'resurgent Shia identity theory' as described above. They point to the fact that Shia – as well as Sunni – identities are, on the contrary, fragmented and based on unpredictable loyalties. This is most visible in Iraq. Grasping this helps in comprehending why, according to many observers, a 'homogeneous whole' cannot be formed at either the national or the regional level on a sectarian basis.

According to Peter Harling and Hamid Yasin, the popular view of Iraq's sectarian fighting as a power struggle between Sunni and Shia Arabs overlooks the numerous objectives of the political actors in the country. In addition, it reduces highly diverse communities to their lowest common denominator. It has also led to a debate in the West on whether the Iraqi Shias are loyal to Iraq or to Iran.³ On the other hand, the power struggle debate has produced opposing arguments according to which Iraqi nationalism is still a stronger force than Shia solidarity.⁸⁴

However, Harling and Yasin affirm that

"[t]he rewriting of Iraqi history to allow for a Sunni-Shia dichotomy dispelled any idea of Iraqi nationalism. Iraqis of different origins have lost the points of reference they once shared. The key events of the recent past, such as the end of the monarchy in 1958, the Ba'ath takeover in 1968, the first Gulf war of 1991 or the Anglo-American intervention of 2003, are now giving rise to bitter disputes reflecting sectarian divisions. [...] People still say Iraq will surmount its divisions, but it is no longer clear what its national identity means. In practice, the arbitrary violence, nepotism and unprecedented corruption all demonstrate how important non-national loyalties have become. Nevertheless this does not mean that Iran is the nation, by default or by adoption, to which Iraqi Shia turn."⁸⁵

As the essence of Iraqi identity becomes increasingly indefinable and complex, the local Shia and Sunni identities are also becoming more dispersed and mixed with tribal ones, such as clan identities. According to Harling and Yasin, Iran recognizes this and is, contrary to many claims, not seeking to win direct allegiance among Iraq's Shia, but is working on different levels and with great subtlety to increase its influence as much as it can, while bearing in mind the various collective identities. Iran's methods include establishing links with all Iraqi Shias (not only with its allies but also for example with Muqtada al-Sadr), providing limited support to groups at the local level, distributing schoolbooks, working through the popular satellite channel Al-Alam, and investing economically in creating a positive image of itself.⁸⁶

On the other hand, it was not entirely clear either immediately before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, or even earlier than that, what constituted the Iraqi Shia identity. A few years before the war, Charles Tripp wrote that "... there is no more a single Shi'i narrative in Iraqi politics than there is an Iraqi one itself". Tripp noted that although the Shia constitute the majority of the country's population, different and opposing strands have marked Shi'i politics in Iraq. These have comprised Arab and Iraqi nationalisms, the (Shia) community, Islamism and even accepting a subordinated status.⁸⁷

In addition, it is important to keep in mind that each Sunni-ruled Arab country with a Shia population is a unique case in terms of how its Shia population relates to the Sunni population and rulers and vice versa. In Bahrain, for example, Shias form the

³ See subchapter 2.2 for examples of this.

majority of the population whereas in Saudi Arabia they form a small and politically weak group. In both countries, Shia demands and aspirations have practically always been linked to the domestic context.⁸⁸ In Lebanon the Shia currently form a dynamic and powerful political force that poses a serious challenge to the existing government, whereas the Yemeni Shias are mostly Zaidis who have no identity links whatsoever to Iran and who, like Saudi and Bahraini Shias, have demands concerning the local government only.⁸⁹ It is precisely because of this diversity and variety of Arab Shia communities that it is very hard to envisage a supra-state political alliance emerging among the different Shia governments, parties, groups, congregations and, on the whole, populations of the Middle East in the foreseeable future. As Terhalle has expressed it, paraphrasing Hedley Bull:

“Just as there was “no natural harmony between the working classes” of communist China and the Soviet Union in the 1970s, it appears that the answer to the core question of “whether Shiism should be a set of fixed religious values or a flexible identity shaped by the particular circumstances and environments in which Shiis live” appears to lean toward the latter conclusion.”⁹⁰

The popularity of Hizbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah among both Shia and Sunni Muslims in the region forms a different kind of example of the permeability of sectarian identity. Nasrallah gained support because of the Second Lebanon War, as was mentioned earlier, and he has been pushing for a united Arab front in confronting Israel and the United States. To some extent he has been successful, especially after the war in 2006⁹¹ although lately his popularity has been in decline, as was also mentioned earlier. Iran’s president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has equally won hearts and minds among Arab, Muslim and even Third World publics with his fervent anti-Israeli and anti-American discourse. Ahmadinejad has sought to appeal to the disillusioned in the Sunni street by pointing to the corrupt nature of their governments, who have aligned themselves with the United States and the West. A public survey carried out in several Arab countries in March 2007 demonstrated that the Arab street does not resonate with its Sunni leaders in their views of Shia Iran or President Ahmadinejad. Peter Kiernan draws on the results of the survey to conclude that there still “remains a strong current of opinion across the Arab world that is characterized by hostility toward U.S. policies in the Middle East, which overwhelms concerns about rising Shiite influence.”⁹²

In the Lebanon War of 2006, the initial response of most of the Sunni states was hesitant and they did not immediately condemn Israel’s actions against Hizbollah. Sectarian concerns regarding both the regional and domestic levels were visibly illustrated here. During the war, a Saudi Arabian Sheikh declared it illegal for Muslims to join, support or pray for Hizbollah because of the group’s actions against Israel. Even the governments of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia condemned Hizbollah’s actions. On the other hand, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, for example, pledged support to Hizbollah.⁹³

The popular Sunni support for Shia political leaders in the region shows that the identities of Arab publics do not always necessarily follow a strict sectarian dichotomy (Shia versus Sunni), nor even an ethnic distinction (Persian versus Arab). Identities in the Arab world are more complex than generally suggested, and the example of Iraq is one of the clearest indicators of this. Most importantly, the identities of the ‘masses’ are not equal to the identities created and maintained by political elites – be they national, supranational, ethnic, tribal or sectarian.

2.2 Neoconservatism and Neoconfrontationalism

Although explanations that stem from Neoconservatism as a philosophical school on the one hand, and the ideology of the present US Administration on the other, are to be kept apart, they share many common views in their explanation of the newly-found sectarian strife. Political leaders, most famously King Abdullah II of Jordan and President George W. Bush, have used 'sectarian talk' to advocate their foreign policy interests. King Abdullah expressed his concern in December 2006 about the Iraqi government turning into an Iranian puppet. According to him, a pro-Iranian Iraqi government could lead to the emergence of a new crescent of dominant Shiite movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The Shia Crescent would also alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects and pose new challenges to US interests and allies.⁹⁴ The Bush Administration shares this apprehension, which relates to what it perceives as the regional aspirations of a revolutionary and radical theocratic regime.

In this 'Neoconfrontationalist' view, the Iranian theocratic regime is seen as one of the two main enemies of US interests in the region – al-Qaida being the other – and it is held responsible for inciting a radical regional Shia revival. It is believed that sectarian strife in Iraq and elsewhere will disappear or at least diminish if Iran is forced to stop funding Shia networks, militias and terrorists both inside and outside its borders. The logical ultimate solution to the problem is thus either military intervention or a regime change in Iran. (These are both seen as solutions to the nuclear crisis as well.) The latter is usually believed to follow on from the former, although most specialists suggest that the military option would have contrary effects as it would bolster popular support behind the current administration.⁹⁵ However, military intervention still has its supporters in the current US administration and in the lobby groups and think tanks ideologically close to it, but their chances of making a credible case for their point during the second Bush Administration diminished considerably after the publication of the US National Intelligence Estimate on Iran in December 2007.⁹⁶

Those in Washington who, prior to 2003, believed that the independence of the Iraqi Shia from the Iranian theocracy would result in an Iraq that would serve as a counter-weight to Iranian power, pinned their hopes on the Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Ali Hussein al-Sistani, who is the leading cleric of the Najaf seminary⁹⁷ and the leading Shia cleric of Iraq. He is considered a *Marja('i Taqlid)*, a source of emulation in Shia Islam, and is popular not only in Iraq but in Iran as well and has the largest following of all contemporary Marjas. The separation of religious and political authority in the sense that clerics should remain outside the political system is central to Ayatollah al-Sistani's thought.⁹⁸ In other words, al-Sistani disagrees with the *Velayat-e Faqih*⁹⁹, the guardianship of the jurist, which constitutes the basis of rule in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Even at present, the clerical Shia establishment is transnational and the holy sites in Iraq bind the Shia together as a community across different state boundaries. Mehdi Khalaji, a Shi'i theologian himself, asserts that "the Shiite clerical establishment' is mainly under the Iranian regime's control" and that the regime has transformed it, since the beginning of the Iranian Revolution, into "a systematic political and financial network that works against US interests in the region"; the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in particular, has sought to expand his domination of Shiite networks and use them for his anti-Western policies.^{100 101}

Khalaji predicts that after al-Sistani it will be impossible in Iraq for a mujtahid to have any significant authority over a political movement or party. In this 'post-Marja era' Khamenei will expand the Shia network in Iraq by financing it, and create a large global network which he personally controls.¹⁰² Khalaji claims that by destroying the

traditional role of the clerical establishment “the Iranian regime intends to eliminate any possibility of political change from within, to marginalize civil society and democratic movements, and consequently to limit the West’s options in dealing with the Iranian government on different controversial issues.”¹⁰³ He warns that as long as the Iranian government continues financing this clerical establishment and the establishment carries on its political activities, the Middle East is threatened by Shiite extremist fundamentalism.¹⁰⁴

The US Vice President Dick Cheney has made it known that he thinks along the same lines. In his speech at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in October 2007 he explained the Iranian policy in Iraq through the sectarian logic:

“Fearful of a strong, independent, Arab Shia community emerging in Iraq, one that seeks religious guidance not in Qom, Iran, but from traditional sources of Shia authority in Najaf and Karbala, the Iranian regime also aims to keep Iraq in a state of weakness that prevents Baghdad from presenting a threat to Tehran. Perhaps the greatest strategic threat that Iraq’s Shiites face today in [...] consolidating their rightful role in Iraq’s new democracy is the subversive activities of the Iranian regime.”¹⁰⁵

Michael Rubin’s interpretation of the unfolding alliances puts more emphasis on geopolitics – and thus Neorealism – but also carries a Neoconservatist tone. According to Rubin, Iran is no status quo power and it has an ideological commitment to support revolution. He foresees that the Arab states will eventually choose Israel instead of the ‘Shiites’ because Jerusalem does not present a threat to the Arab states – unlike Tehran – and these will soon align with the United States and Israel in order to counter the ‘Shia threat’. In fact, the Sunni-ruled Arab states already ‘embrace the American umbrella’:

“[The] Arab leaders understand that the only countries the U.S. military has fought to protect in the Middle East were Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The tiny Gulf emirates are defenseless without U.S. protection. There is hardly a state on the Arabian Peninsula that does not train with the U.S. military or welcome a small U.S. presence. But with U.S. congressmen proclaiming the defeat and vulnerability of U.S. troops in Iraq, and the Islamic Republic drawing closer to its nuclear goals, Tehran’s stock is rising at U.S. expense.”¹⁰⁶

Those American experts and politicians who support regime change in Iran (including Rubin¹⁰⁷) believe that the Iranian theocratic regime only understands force and that it cannot be trusted under any circumstances. The fact that absolute power is not in the hands of the president, but – to a certain extent – in the hands of the Supreme Leader means that popular will and parliamentary institutions are irrelevant. In this thinking, the revolutionary nature of Iran’s regime is the source of the problem: It explains both Iran’s ambitions in Iraq and why Iran should not be allowed to further develop its nuclear programme. Ultimately, a nuclear-armed Iran is not the problem – the regime controlling it is.

In its efforts to deter Iran from pursuing its nuclear and regional ambitions, the United States administration has also applied sectarian rhetoric. This has highlighted the only problematic part of applying the sectarian divide in regional politics for the United States, namely that of Iraq and the Iraqi Shia. The Shia axis would be a convenient enemy category were it not for the fact that the United States is supporting Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s government in Iraq. The logical solution has thus been to portray the Iranian regime as a corrupt and radical form of Shiism and to draw a line between it and the Shia in Iraq. President Bush has gone as far as to equate the Iranian regime to al-Qaida. In his speech on the Global War on Terror in September 2006 he declared that the two ‘represent different faces of the same threat’:

“As we continue to fight al Qaeda and these Sunni extremists inspired by their radical ideology, we also face the threat posed by Shia extremists, who are learning from al Qaeda, increasing their assertiveness, and stepping up their threats. Like the vast majority of Sunnis, the vast majority of Shia across the world reject the vision of extremists – and in Iraq, millions of Shia have defied terrorist threats to vote in free elections, and have shown their desire to live in freedom. The Shia extremists want to deny them this right. This Shia strain of Islamic radicalism is just as dangerous, and just as hostile to America, and just as determined to establish its brand of hegemony across the broader Middle East. And the Shia extremists have achieved something that al Qaeda has so far failed to do: In 1979, they took control of a major power, the nation of Iran, subjugating its proud people to a regime of tyranny, and using that nation's resources to fund the spread of terror and pursue their radical agenda.”¹⁰⁸

Drawing a line between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Shias has not been easy task for the United States Administration, especially in the case of Iraq. For example, Muqtadar Khan has seen that with the new US strategy in Iraq, announced in January 2007¹⁰⁹, President Bush practically and paradoxically declared a war on the Shia: the new enemies included the Mahdi and Badr militias and even Iranian and Syrian intelligence and commando units, whereas until then the US had been fighting mainly with the Sunnis.¹¹⁰ As to Iran’s Shia – who constitute around 90 % of the population – the US has implicitly drawn a line between, the regime and its supporters, on the one hand, and opposition groups and democracy activists, on the other.

Critique: Good Guys, Bad Guys

Another way to explain the present sectarian tensions at the regional level in the Middle East is to look at them as symptoms of changes in the geopolitical setting. Since the Iranian revolution, various characteristics have been attributed in the West to the Shia, such as terrorists, the oppressed majority/minority, a beacon of democracy and a threat to regional stability. Kiernan, for example, argues that all pundit interpretations on whether it is the Sunnis or the Shia who best serve Western interests in the Middle East have only served to rationalize policies.¹¹¹

Shia Islam is falling out of favour again, as Kiernan puts it. According to him, much of the expert commentary that attaches ‘good guy’ and ‘bad guy’ labels to the two ‘sects’ has not only been flawed but contradictory as well. The labels have been swapped according to the changes in geopolitical circumstances. According to Kiernan, in the 1990s, along with rising Islamic terrorism, Sunni Islam began to be seen as the problematic strand. The September 11 attacks were the culmination of this development, and that is when the Shia became popular again among US policymakers. The American Neoconservatives assumed up to the Iraqi invasion in 2003 that Iraq’s Shia would “inevitably rival Iran, be pro-Western, and perhaps even recognize Israel”.¹¹² Nothing of the sort transpired and now eyes have turned to the empowered and emboldened Iran: The tables have turned again.

The pattern becomes apparent when one looks at the images attached to the Shia in the West over a longer time frame. In the 1980s, the Shia gained international notoriety for such acts as the Iranian hostage crisis, the 1983 Marine barrack attacks in Lebanon, the bombing of the US embassy in Beirut and even the Iran-Iraq War. At the beginning of the 1990s, a different image appeared, namely that of the Shias of Southern Iraq, who were persecuted by Saddam Hussein after a failed coup-d’état which had been encouraged by the United States at the end of the Gulf War. In 2003, President George W. Bush was said to have ‘taken care of his father’s unfinished business’¹¹³ by ‘liberating’ Iraq’s Shias. Again, another image appeared: Iraq and its liberated Shia as a beacon of democratic change in the Middle East.

What the US Administration did not expect though was that the war would also unleash Iran's regional ambitions and that the Shia in Iraq would *not* see Iran's Shia regime as their direct rival. The most recent warning signal for those preoccupied with the new rise of 'Shia fundamentalism' was the war in Lebanon in 2006 in which the Iranian ally Hizbollah declared itself victorious before Israel, the region's most powerful military power. Hizbollah, Syria, Hamas and Iran have increasingly been seen as members of a malevolent Shia Crescent with far-reaching regional ambitions.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to categorically define The Shia Crescent (and its conceptual variants) because of the multiple meanings that are attached to the term. In actual fact, the famous Shia Crescent is a very vague concept. It can be used for different ends according to the speaker's interests, for example: 1) for referring to Middle Eastern states which have a demographical Shia majority or 2) as a warning to all Arabs of the "Persian enemy" or 3) as another collective expression for 'Islamofascists' or for the 'radical' Muslim states and groups that are hostile to US interests in the region. In all these cases the use of the term Shia Crescent is misleading. In fact, it is not a crescent at all in the geographical sense. The only countries with a Shia majority *and* with Shias in power in the Middle East are Iran and Iraq. Indeed, there are Shi'i minority groups in power or in powerful positions in Syria and Lebanon, as King Abdullah pointed out.¹¹⁴ However, those Muslim countries with a Shia majority such as Azerbaijan and Bahrain do not form a political block with Iran and are very unlikely to do so in the future either because the Shia in these countries do not have parallel political interests with Iran or because of the strong grip of Sunni governments on power. In the case of the current United States Administration and its Middle Eastern allies, however, the definition is easy: It is a nightmare vision of creeping Iranian influence that threatens these countries' political, economic and strategic interests in the 'Greater Middle East'.¹¹⁵

Indeed, some have claimed that the United States is attributing too much power to Iran.¹¹⁶ This perception creates what Sick has called a set of circumstances that increasingly let the US blame Iran for its problems in Iraq.¹¹⁷ Afshin Molavi has argued that Iran has won the two post-9/11 wars, but this has been possible only because of what the US has done in the Middle East to empower the country, including fostering the 'myth of Iranian power' by overplaying Iran's economic and military capabilities.¹¹⁸

2.3 Neorealism and the Common Interest Theory

Many scholars and analysts argue that after 9/11 the United States once again embarked on a mission of divide and rule, this time on a regional scale.¹¹⁹ Another possibility is to see the US post-9/11 Middle East and Persian Gulf policies as a readjustment of strategy for a volatile region with a high strategic importance for the country. As a consequence of the unexpected developments in Iraq and the strengthening of the regional power status of Iran, the US strategy has taken a new form despite the fact that its main long-term interests in the Middle East remain the same. Similarly, all states in the region are adapting their strategies to the new geopolitical situation and to 'the rise of Iran'; Arab states and Israel are trying to find ways to balance Iran's power, though always with their self-interest foremost in mind.

What is referred to in this paper as the "common interest theory" is a set of explanations which hold that geopolitics is behind the 'sectarianization' of regional level politics in the Middle East. These explanations lean more towards Neorealist thinking as they see the sectarian talk as a form of external balancing of regional actors. The crux of the idea is that the Bush Administration is currently building an anti-Iranian Arab-Israeli alliance that would help take care of all its main interests in

the Middle East: contain Iran, control Iraq, protect Israel, maintain stability in the global oil market and uphold the US hegemony in the region.¹²⁰ It is evident that forging this kind of an alliance is in the long-term interests of the United States so there is no conspiracy theory concealed in the argument. Some in the region, however, see it as a Western conspiracy of sacrificing Arab interests to those of Israel. Expressed in other words, Israel is alleged to emerge as the regional winner if/as stronger fault lines emerge between states in the region along sectarian lines. Yet, as will be demonstrated, there will potentially be other winners as well, in the short term at least, if this alliance of 'moderates' against 'radicals' materializes.

According to this view, the heart of the Shia-Sunni divide at the regional level lies in the Persian Gulf area and it is directly connected with the security concerns of the major players in the region. Persian Gulf security is, in turn, determined by its three large states, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and naturally, the United States. The US prefers a strong Saudi Arabia, for reasons explained below, whereas Iran and Iraq are the problematic duo. A strong Iraq is not desirable for the United States, nor for any state in the region because, historically, a strong Iraq has entailed wars. Still, a collapse of the state in Iraq is not desirable either. On the other hand, a weak Iraq means a strong Iran, which also goes against US interests in the region.

The United States has at least three major long-term interests in the Persian Gulf area. Firstly, its primary interest is to ensure a stable flow of oil from the region to the world. At the moment this is guarded by the long-term alliance with Saudi Arabia and by keeping a strong military presence in the Persian Gulf in order to prevent Iran from blocking the Strait of Hormuz and, in general, from increasing its influence in the region. Persian Gulf military bases are, therefore, also geostrategically vital for the US. Secondly, the fight against terrorism will be a long-term concern that is closely connected to the Iraqi paradox: staying in the country increases terrorism and internal instability, but leaving would plunge Iraq into chaos and turn it into a safe haven for terrorists – which it already is, to some extent.¹²¹ Thirdly, the United States always seeks to protect Israel and its regional position. This means that the US would never allow Iran to seriously intimidate Israel militarily which, in turn, means that an Iranian nuclear weapon is not acceptable by any stretch of the imagination.

As Kenneth Pollack has pointed out, in the 1970s the US strategy in the Persian Gulf was based on the twin pillars of Iran and Saudi Arabia; in the 1980s, the US supported Iraq against Iran and in the 1990s it resorted to dual containment. None of these strategies was totally successful and the result was three US interventions: Iran in 1987-88, and Iraq in 1991 and from 2003 onwards.¹²² Jessica Mathews has asserted that the war in Iraq has been “the turning point that has and will change the basic parameters of American security for [...] many decades.”¹²³

The original US plan after liberating Iraq's Shia included creating a government in Iraq which would be congenial to Israel and which would serve as a counterbalance to Iran's power. The American assumption was that Iraqi Shia clerics would not accept Iran's Velayat-e Faqih, the rule of the jurisprudent, and that they would ally themselves with the US against “Shiite fundamentalism”.¹²⁴ Conversely, the Post-Saddam, Shia-led Iraq did not turn out to function as “a barrier to Iranian expansionism”, as was implicitly admitted by the director of the CIA, Michael Hayden, in January 2007.¹²⁵ Iraq's current government is politically weak and it maintains cordial relations with Iran. As the prospects for Iraq's regional power position in the future look increasingly bleaker from the US point of view, the US is increasingly basing its strategy exclusively on the containment of Iran.

In the new regional context the United States recognizes that its Arab allies – with the exception of Iraq – are all Sunni-led. All share common interests, namely

preventing Iran from expanding its regional power via its Shia allies in the region and stopping it from acquiring a nuclear weapon. As Martin Indyk has said, the US is “adjusting itself to the point where [it] line[s] up with the Sunnis against the Shias in this broader sectarian divide”.¹²⁶ According to Sick, much of what is currently happening in the region is a reflection of the rise of Iran as a significant regional power pole which opposes Israel.¹²⁷ As a consequence of this, other states in the region are now adjusting their strategies to the new setting. Sick has pointed out that the irony is that the United States itself created the optimal conditions for Iran to strengthen its position: Iran’s rival Taliban and Ba’th regimes were removed and a Shia government was set up in Baghdad. Iran now has, instead of enemies, a potential ally as its neighbour.¹²⁸ With Iran seen as rising, the United States in turn perceives it is obliged to act.

All states construct external (and internal) enemies according to their strategic interests, and the regional policy of the United States is one of the driving forces in defining alliances and enmities between states in the Middle East. In this context, there are many facts that suggest that the emergence of Shia-Sunni rhetoric at the regional level is partly a by-product of the regional strategies of certain key players: the United States, Saudi Arabia, Israel and also Egypt and Jordan. The intentional use of sectarian rhetoric is first and foremost a strategy aimed at containing Iran’s power and strategic ambitions. Its second function is connected with other external and internal security concerns of the Sunni-led states in the region.

Some argue that the increasing sectarian dissension is as much an unintended result of US policies as the rise of Iran itself was. Gregory Gause has said that “Washington doesn’t think in these sectarian terms. [...] The danger is that they might not realize the intensity with which some people in the Middle East do think in these sectarian terms.”¹²⁹ An obvious example of an ‘outsider’s’ perception of the regional dynamics is how the current US administration has declared Iranian Shiism and al-Qaida, a Sunni organization, as equal enemies, two sides of the same mirror.

Before the invasion of Iraq, Western policymakers had paid virtually no attention to questions of history and sect; whether Syria’s ruling elite was Shia or Sunni, Alawi or Twelver Shi’i, and whether the Iraqi Shias were more loyal to their home country or to Iran. Now sectarianism is a fashionable media term that is often oversimplified in order to accommodate wide audiences in the West.¹³⁰ The events that have contributed to the current geopolitical rise of Iran, especially the Lebanese War in 2006, have been followed in the West by a wave of analyses and op-ed articles on inter-state Sunni-Shia tensions in the Middle East, many of which contain apparent policy goals or interests which are often only thinly veiled beneath simplistic good/bad guy labels.¹³¹

Nevertheless, in addition to the United States, regional leaders have also sought to gain a (geo)political advantage by applying sectarian language in their foreign policy discourse. They have various reasons for this: Sunni-dominated Arab states and Israel perceive that Iran is, on the one hand, reaching for political influence in the region by empowering local Shia minorities in Arab countries and by seeking to transform Iraq into a regional satellite state and, on the other hand, pursuing military weight by developing advanced nuclear capabilities and by arming Hizbollah in Lebanon.¹³²

Critique: Ignoring All But the State

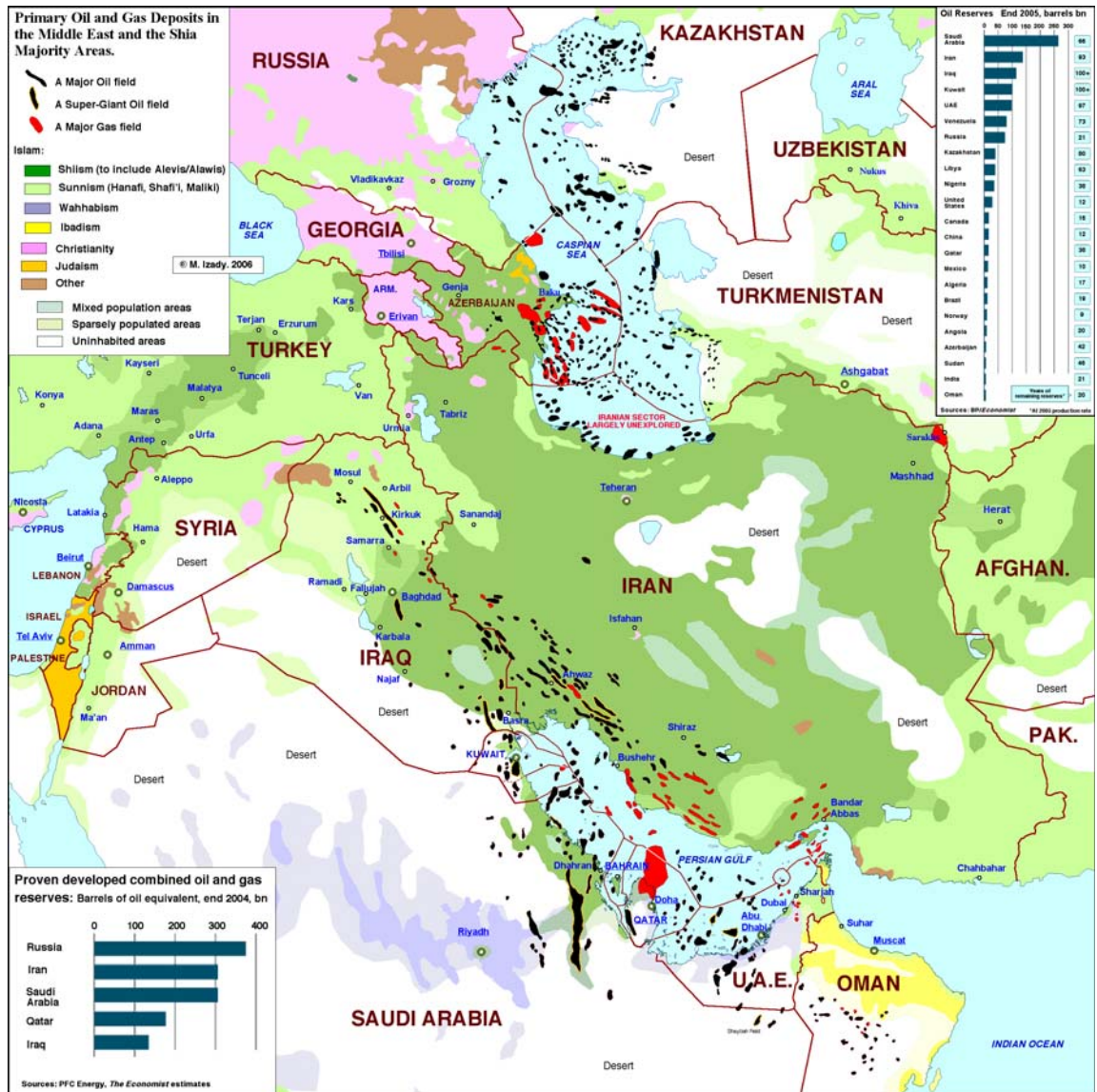
Despite the apparent explanatory power of the Neorealist argument at the regional level, it is clear that it has deficiencies that stem from the inherent problems of this theoretical approach. As experts have pointed out, Neorealism exaggerates state autonomy from domestic conditions, and the importance of structure, and does not

usually question the future of the status quo, that is, the Middle East state system. Also conversely, it underestimates the capability of states to change the international system.¹³³ Neorealism also ignores identity and assumes that actors are not social and that their interests are “exogenous to social interaction”. It also tends to ignore interest formation.¹³⁴ It is precisely here that Constructivism and even Neoconservatism, in the context in which they have been examined in this study, step in. Paying attention to local and transnational Shia and Sunni identities allows Western observers to understand something that does not seem an evident determinant of state behaviour at first, namely that sectarian identities can play an immensely important role in Muslim societies in the Middle East and elsewhere (as in Pakistan, for example). Moreover, especially in the case of the Middle East where historical memory is traditionally long – and bitter – Constructivism’s interest in history becomes decisive in understanding the logics of Shia-Sunni tensions in the region as well as why their re-emergence has been so intense.

There is yet another weakness in the Neorealist-influenced explanations of the sectarianization of regional-level politics. They tend to downplay, if not ignore, economic interests. Although economic growth and economic power are integral elements in the idea of power balancing, often only geopolitical, strategic and military balancing are at the heart of the Neorealist analysis of Shia-Sunni relations at the regional level. The interlinkages between economic interests, sectarian identities and geopolitics are a complicated and, in some respects, sensitive issue, which requires more attention from International Relations experts.

In this study the following points are made merely as observations: The correlation between Shia-populated areas and oil is a well-known fact: as much as 80% of the native population of the Persian Gulf region are estimated to be Shias.¹³⁵ Map 2 shows a graphic visualization of Shia majority areas and primary oil and gas deposits in Middle Eastern states. It places emphasis on two important issues. Firstly, Shias in the Middle East live mostly on the coasts of the Persian Gulf, an area of high strategic importance both in terms of energy resources and access to them by sea. Secondly, the Iranian government is currently the only Shia government that has de facto power over energy resources that lie inside its territory. All other oil resources in Persian Gulf states are controlled by governments that are US allies. As US estimates place Iraq’s oil resources among the top three in the world¹³⁶, the control of Iraqi oil has the potential – albeit a slight one – to turn in the near future into not only a domestic sectarian clash, but also a regional power struggle for strategic control over Iraqi oil.

Map 2: Shias and Oil Resources of Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea



Source: The Gulf/2000 Project, SIPA/Columbia University, 2006. Copyright M. Izady.¹³⁷

⁶³ Analytical discussion in Arabic and Farsi is not included in this paper due to the fact that the author does not have a working knowledge of written Arabic. However, some of the authors quoted are Middle Eastern scholars.

⁶⁴ Hinnebusch, Raymond: 'Introduction: The Analytical Framework' in Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (eds.): *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*. 2002, p. 2.

⁶⁵ Hinnebusch, Raymond: *The International Politics of the Middle East*. Glasgow, Manchester University Press. 2003, p. 5.

⁶⁶ For Pan-Islam discourse, see for example the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington D.C.: 'Saudi Leadership calls for Muslim unity in Eid Al-Fitr address'. 11 October 2007; for Pan-Arab discourse, see for example BBC: 'Saudi: US Iraq presence illegal'. 29 March 2007; for Pan-Sunni and anti-Shia discourse, see later in this study.

⁶⁷ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: 'Top Shi'ite Cleric Calls for Protection of Sunnis'. RFE/RL Newline 29/11/07, Vol. 11, No. 220. Also from the same: 'Iraq: Radical Shi'ite Cleric Calls for Shi'ite-Sunni Unity', 26 February 2006.

⁶⁸ I.e. these types of explanations tend to emphasise the instrumentalist approach to collective identities instead of the primordialist approach.

⁶⁹ I would like to thank Kaj Öhrnberg for this comment (by e-mail on 19 June 2007). Öhrnberg has also noted that in Sunni Islam there has been a tendency (especially in the 11th century) to emphasize Shiism as being constituted by foreign influence (mostly Persian) in Islam. According to him, for example the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s was still fought in the local media with concepts and names originating from the first century of Islam. Equally, as Nasr has noted, Saddam Hussein compared the American conquest of Baghdad of 2003 to the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258 implying that "just as the Shia had betrayed Islam in 1258, [...] they were betraying it again in 2003". Nasr, Vali: *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. New York. W. W. Norton. 2006, p. 82.

⁷⁰ For example, Toensing notes that "Salafi religious scholars from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have repeatedly excused armed attacks on 'Shiite heretics' including terror bombings claimed by the likes of the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, with reference to "the sons of al-Alqami" – implying that in 2003 Shiites left the gates of Baghdad open to foreign invaders just as the medieval slur said they did in 1258." Toensing: 'Persian Ghosts'.

⁷¹ Nasr: *The Shia Revival (Seminar)*. Nasr has gone as far as to claim that there is no returning to the previous status quo and that a new paradigm is now needed for the region. Nasr asserts that the real threat to the United States will, however, come from transnational al-Qaida terrorism, both in Iraq and outside it.

⁷² Nasr: 'When the Shiites Rise'.

⁷³ Noah Feldman in 'The Emerging Shia Crescent Symposium: Understanding the Shia' at the Council on Foreign Relations. 5 June 2006. More on the rule of the jurispudent, *Velayat-e Faqih*, appears in subchapter 2.2.

⁷⁴ See for example Chaulia, Sreeram: 'Shia Democracy: Myth or Reality?' *Worldpress*. 16 February 2007.

⁷⁵ Nakash: *Reaching for Power*, p. 6.

⁷⁶ A person who applies *ijtihad*, that is, makes legal decisions by independent interpretation of the legal sources of Islam.

⁷⁷ Nakash: *Reaching for Power*, pp. 5-6.

⁷⁸ Nasr: *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, p. 180.

⁷⁹ Nasr: *The Shia Revival (Seminar)*.

⁸⁰ Ray Takeyh in 'The Emerging Shia Crescent Symposium: Is Shia Power a Cause for Concern?' at the Council on Foreign Relations. 5 June 2006.

⁸¹ Al-Rasheed, Madawi: 'The Shia of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Cultural Authenticity'. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Volume 25, Issue 1, May 1998, pp. 130-131. The Saudi Shia community was, however, deeply inspired by the Islamic Revolution of Iran during the so-called confrontational phase, which lasted until the early 1990s. Source: Nakash: *Reaching for Power*, pp. 50-52.

⁸² International Crisis Group: *The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia*. Middle East Report No. 45, 19 September 2005, p. 5. Nakash: *Reaching for Power* p. 13. According to the ICG, the regime alone is able to mediate between various and competing groups in the country and thus guarantee that most extreme (and anti-Shia) elements are kept at bay. The 'National Dialogue' of the then Crown Prince Abdullah was also an important step towards engaging the Shia. For more on this, see for example Terhalle, Maximilian: 'Are the Shia Rising?' *Middle East Policy*. Vol. XIV, No. 2, Summer 2007, p. 71.

⁸³ Nasr: 'When the Shiites Rise'.

⁸⁴ Harling, Peter and Hamid Yasin: 'Iraq's Diverse Shia'. *Le Monde diplomatique*. September 2006.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Tripp, Charles: *A History of Iraq*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 2000 (2002), p. 3 and 296.

⁸⁸ See for example Terhalle: 'Are the Shia Rising?', pp. 71-72.

⁸⁹ According to Sami Dorlian, "Zaidis are keen to single themselves out from any other Shia sect by taking

distance from the regime in Tehran religiously as well as politically". Dorlian, Sami: 'The Zaidi Rebellion in Yemen'. In-house talk at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Beirut. 17 July 2007. The Zaidis, or the Houthis, "have an opaque set of aims, but their campaign appears to have been fuelled by their perceived marginalisation and anger at the government's co-operation with the US". The Economist Intelligence Unit: *Country Report: Yemen. Yemen at a glance 2008-09*. November 2007, p. 8; International Crisis Group: *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge*. Middle East Report No. 40, 6 May 2005.

⁹⁰ Terhalle: 'Are the Shia Rising?', p. 79. Terhalle's second quote is originally from Nakash.

⁹¹ See for example Howaidy, Amira: 'A Turning Point'. *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line*. Issue 804. 20-26 July 2006; Tabler, Andrew: 'Catalytic Converters'. *The New York Times*. 29 April 2007.

- ⁹² Kiernan, Peter: 'Middle East Opinion: Iran Fears Aren't Hitting the Arab Street' *World Politics Review*. 1 March 2007.
- ⁹³ United Press International: 'Saudi sheik issues fatwa against Hezbollah'. 21 July 2006.
- ⁹⁴ Baker, Peter and Robin Wright: 'Iraq, Jordan See Threat To Election From Iran'. *The Washington Post*. 8 December 2004; al-Hussein, Abdullah II bin: 'Interview with HM King Abdullah discussing politics in the Middle East' MSNBC. 8 December 2004.
- ⁹⁵ See for example Sadjadpour, Karim: *Guidelines for Approaching Iran*. Policy Outlook. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. June 2007; Crisis Action: *Time to Talk: The Case for Diplomatic Solutions on Iran*. 5 February 2007; Sunday Times: 'Diplomacy Can Still Win'. 4 February 2007.
- ⁹⁶ According to the NIE, "with high confidence [...] in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program; we also assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons." The NIE also stated that Tehran's decision to halt its nuclear weapons programme suggests it is less determined to develop nuclear weapons than the United States had surmised since 2005. National Intelligence Council: *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities. National Intelligence Estimate*. Released on 3 December 2007, p. 5. However, many experts have suggested that, on the contrary, the publication of the NIE in question will lead to an increasingly unstable and dangerous situation in the region both in the short and medium term. Both Israeli and Arab experts and journalists have expressed their concern about the United States 'abandoning Israel' or 'abandoning the Arabs'.
- ⁹⁷ Najaf and Qom are the two most important centres of the Shia faith. According to Khalaji, the Najaf seminary currently consists of almost 2500 Shia clerics. Khalaji, Mehdi: *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*. Policy Focus No. 59. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. September 2006, p. 13.
- ⁹⁸ According to Nakash, Sistani "like his mentor, Abu al-Qasim Khoei, [...] has accepted the political reality of a modern nation-state led by lay politicians. He sees Iran's theocracy as a departure from centuries of Shi'i thought..." Nakash: *Reaching for Power*, p. 8.
- ⁹⁹ Also: Wilayat-Faqih, Vilayat-i Faqih, Velayat Faqih, Valiyat-e faqih etc.
- ¹⁰⁰ Khalaji: *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*, p. v.
- ¹⁰¹ Khalaji predicts that al-Sistani is the "last Marja". In his post-Marja scenario, the Shiite religious network becomes politicized and the Iranian regime gains increasing power outside Iran. Shia religious authority will fade after al-Sistani and there will be a polarization between *mujtahids* who distance themselves from politics and those who will seek to become official Marjas of the Iranian government. The end result will be a minimal role for the clerics in the political sphere and the empowerment of fundamentalism led by a few clerics and different military and armed groups and institutions. *Ibid.*, p. 5 and pp. 32-34.
- ¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35. Khamenei has already taken control of most clerical networks in the Gulf, and outside Iran and Iraq, there is only one Marja, Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah of Beirut.
- ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. v.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. v. Khalaji's policy recommendations include a cultural and intellectual campaign against the Iranian regime and supporting liberal and democratic secular intellectuals in the region. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ¹⁰⁵ Cheney, Dick: *Vice President's Remarks to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. 21 October 2007.
- ¹⁰⁶ Rubin: 'Iran against the Arabs'.
- ¹⁰⁷ See Rubin, Michael: 'Don't Blink, Don't Back Down'. *USA Today*. 2 July 2007.
- ¹⁰⁸ Bush, George: *President Discusses Global War on Terror*. Washington D.C. 5 September 2006. A similar message was repeated in August 2007: "The other strain of radicalism in the Middle East is Shia extremism, supported and embodied by the regime that sits in Tehran. Iran has long been a source of trouble in the region. It is the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism. Iran backs Hezbollah, who are trying to undermine the democratic government of Lebanon. Iran funds terrorist groups like Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which murder the innocent, and target Israel, and destabilize the Palestinian territories. Iran is sending arms to the Taliban in Afghanistan, which could be used to attack American and NATO troops. Iran has arrested visiting American scholars who have committed no crimes and pose no threat to their regime. And Iran's active pursuit of technology that could lead to nuclear weapons threatens to put a region already known for instability and violence under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust." Bush, George: *President Bush Addresses the 89th Annual National Convention of the American Legion*. 28 August 2007.
- ¹⁰⁹ Bush, George: *President's Address to the Nation*. 10 January 2007.
- ¹¹⁰ Khan, Muqtedar: 'To "Save Iraqi Democracy," Bush's War Will Target Shias Too'. *The News Journal*. 11 January 2007.
- ¹¹¹ Kiernan, Peter: 'Misreading the Sunni-Shia Divide'. *World Politics Review*. 8 August 2006.
- ¹¹² Kiernan: 'Middle East Opinion: Iran Fears Aren't Hitting the Arab Street'.
- ¹¹³ See for example BBC: 'Bush and Saddam: Unfinished Business'. 17 June 2002.
- ¹¹⁴ King Abdullah has reported to have said later that he had referred to 'political alignments' and had not used the term in a sectarian sense. Black, Ian: 'Fear of a Shia Full Moon'.
- ¹¹⁵ The Shia Halfmoon, as the Arabic term "al-Hilâl al-Shi'i" has been coined in German, could actually be a more suitable term to describe the shape of the Iranian alliance of Iraq's Shia, Syria and Hizbollah on the map. However, even this term ignores Iran's Sunni ally Hamas. Therefore the term is deemed to be irrelevant since it does not precisely describe any political or religious alliance of states and political groups or movements. Still, the Shia Crescent has gained political significance due to the mere fact

that it has been used so frequently by political leaders and the media in both Sunni-led Arab states and in the West.

¹¹⁶ Afshin Molavi, for example, has criticized the “myth of Iranian power” by stating that Iran’s economy is in bad shape, its oil reserves are diminishing and its military abilities are also overlapped in the US. Molavi, Afshin in ‘The Future of the Middle East: Strategic Implications for the United States’. Middle East Policy Council Symposium. *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIV, No 3, Fall 2007, pp. 8-9.

¹¹⁷ Sick, Gary in ‘Experts: Middle East Turmoil Defined by U.S., Iran. All Things Considered.’ National Public Radio. 17 January 2007.

¹¹⁸ Molavi, Afshin in ‘The Future of the Middle East: Strategic Implications for the United States’, pp. 8-9.

¹¹⁹ For one example see Luttwak, Edward: ‘Two Alliances’. *The Wall Street Journal*. 14 January 2007.

¹²⁰ Sick adds one more function to the alliance: Focusing increasingly on Iran also serves to divert attention away from the catastrophe in Iraq. Sick: *Sick: Alliance against Iran*. For an excellent description of this strategy, see Sick, Gary: ‘A Policy that Dare Not Speak Its Name.’ E-mailed on the Gulf2000 Project mailing list on 25 November 2007.

¹²¹ See Pollack, Kenneth: ‘Securing the Gulf’. *Foreign Affairs*. July/August 2003, Vol 82, Number 4.

¹²² Pollack: ‘Securing the Gulf’.

¹²³ Mathews, Jessica: *Six Years Later: Assessing Long-Term Threats, Risks and the U.S. Strategy for Security in a Post-9/11 World*. Congressional Testimony. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 10 October 2007, p. 2. According to Mathews, “the events of 9/11 had far less of an effect on the real world than that day had on the American psyche”. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹²⁴ See for example Khalaji: *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism* or Porter, Gareth: ‘Shi’ite power a law unto itself’. *Asia Times*. 8 February 07.

¹²⁵ Hayden, Michael V. in *Hearing of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Annual Threat Assessment*. 11 January 2007, p. 37.

¹²⁶ Martin Indyk’s comment in ‘As Mideast Realigns, US Leans Sunni’. *The Christian Science Monitor*. Vol. 99, Issue 219. By Howard LaFranchi. 10 September 2007.

¹²⁷ Sick, Gary: *Iran and the United States - Is a Military Clash Inevitable?* Lecture Series: The Middle East after the War in Lebanon. The Middle East Center. The University of Utah. 27 November 27 2006.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ National Public Radio: ‘The Partisans of Ali. A History of Shia Faith and Politics’.

¹³⁰ For example, an often used comparison in Western media likens Sunni Islam to Catholicism and Shia Islam to Protestantism.

¹³¹ Neoconservatist expert analyses (see for example subchapter 2.2.) are an obvious example. Toensing has also shown how Nasr (according to Toensing) uses his book *The Shia Revival* to “persuade Washington to downgrade its alliances with the Sunni Arab regimes and forge friendlier ties with the rising Shiites of the Middle East” by comparing the Shia several times to the Christians, Jews and Hindus and by creating an alienating image of the Sunnis. Toensing: ‘Persian Ghosts’.

¹³² However, Terhalle has argued along Neorealist lines that “international relations and the pursuit of national interests have severely restrained the extension of a transnational movement based on a common belief system”. Terhalle: ‘Are the Shia Rising?’, p. 79.

¹³³ Burchill, Scott: ‘Realism and Neo-realism’ in Burchill, Scott et al.: *Theories of International Relations*. Second edition. New York, Palgrave. 2001, p. 99. Burchill’s quote from Linklater.

¹³⁴ Reus-Smit, Christian: ‘Constructivism’ in Burchill et al.: *Theories of International Relations.*, p. 213.

¹³⁵ National Public Radio: ‘The Partisans of Ali. A History of Shia Faith and Politics’.

¹³⁶ See for example The United States Government: Energy Information Administration. International statistics for 2006.

¹³⁷ Permission for use given by G2K.

CHAPTER 3: THE SECTARIANIZATION OF REGIONAL POLITICS

The examination of the three most common lines of explanation of the Sunni-Shia divide at the regional level has shown that history and identity alone are not sufficient to explain the re-emergence of the Shia-Sunni rift at the regional level, where it is the states – the leaders, elite and even the media – that employ sectarian (or alternatively anti-sectarian) rhetoric to further their power political interests. Neorealism provides an appropriate framework for understanding the US and the Sunni Arab states' anti-Iranian policies and the current regional realignment against Iran, but the approach is not able to explain the influence of sectarian identity on the political action of states – if there is any.

Taking into consideration the difficulty of studying the effect of this 'identity-factor' on foreign policies, this chapter will analyze the motivations behind sectarian alliances and their formation from a Neorealist, 'common interest' perspective, which seems to be the approach that offers the best explanation for the sectarianization of Middle Eastern politics at the regional level. The focus in the first part of this chapter is on why and how the United States and especially its allies Saudi Arabia and Israel are seeking to contain Iran. In the second part of the chapter, the future implications of the potential sectarianization of regional-level politics are examined.

According to many analysts, an informal coalition of states that are concerned about Iran is now concretizing into a strategic alliance.¹³⁸ As will be demonstrated below, the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel, as well as Jordan, Egypt and the small Gulf states, have clearly sought benefit from (using) the notions of the Shia-Sunni divide and the Rise of the Shia, among the functions of which are containing Iran and its allies, and seeing to it that those Sunni Arab regimes which are friendly to the US stay in power. It is, up to a certain point, in these countries' interests to maintain at the regional level, to some extent, an arbitrary dichotomical divide of 'Sunni states' and 'Shia states' or 'moderates' and 'radicals'. Parallel to, and as an indicator of the 'sectarianization' of politics at the regional level, the presence of 'sectarian talk' in regional politics and in the media has been observable and intensifying since 2006, although the emergence of this type of discourse was originally strongly prompted by the current war in Iraq.

According to Ayellet Yehiav, the common denominators of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan are:

1. The perception of the threat posed by Iran and its allies, whether the threat is real or [...] perceived.
2. The importance each country attributes to the Iranian nuclear issue; viewing the Iranian nuclear campaign as a way to achieve hegemony, involvement, and security in the region.
3. Urgently calling together [...] the countries defending themselves against the challenge of a new representation of the regional narrative...¹³⁹

Evidently, Israel and the United States share the same concerns with regard to Iran, as does the Middle East to a large extent. United by the same perceived threats, the Sunni-ruled Arab states are now deciding whether they should see Israel as the lesser of the two 'enemies' (Israel and Iran); as the Arab proverb says: those with shared enemies make friends. The following subchapters explore in more detail the motivations of the members of this recent anti-Iranian and anti-Shia 'alliance' of the United States, Sunni-ruled Arab states and Israel for containing Iran, and the potential benefits these states would gain from (inciting) a regional Sunni-Shia divide.

3.1 The Anti-Iranian 'Alliance' Examined

The United States

As Robert Hunter has put it, the United States will be “deeply and directly engaged in the Middle East for as far ahead as anyone can see”.¹⁴⁰ In other words, the Middle East will continue to be a vital area of US national interest, and the entire region, especially Iraq, will remain a key component of US national security.¹⁴¹ The United States is, and will most probably continue to be for several years to come, the only external power in the Middle East and in the Persian Gulf that “concretely influences the security, politics and objectives of regional players.”¹⁴² For the US, Iran, a ‘middle power’¹⁴³ is on the rise and threatens both regional stability and the security status quo, and challenges the American hegemony in the region.

Ehteshami has stressed that the aspiration for regional supremacy is not a new feature of Iranian foreign policy.¹⁴⁴ In the new geopolitical situation, however, this stands out more clearly than before. The Iranian nuclear programme is apparently the most visible sign of Iran’s regional aspiration for power. In the international context, the United States and the large EU countries have similar aims in their approaches towards the programme: They all seek to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The difference is that the EU-3 (Germany, France and Great Britain) see Iran’s nuclear programme as the problem, while the US administration regards the Iranian regime as the source of all trouble. Since the United States has not succeeded in gaining the backing of the United Nations Security Council for tougher diplomatic measures, the administration has resorted to several simultaneous strategies: prevention and isolation (by sanctions), regime change (by funding different opposition movements), rollback (i.e. threatening the use of military force) and containment (through alliances).¹⁴⁵ Up to now, the United States has not been successful in demonstrating that the Islamic Republic is seeking to build a nuclear weapon and has therefore mostly opted for blaming Iran for intervening in Iraqi affairs and supporting radical Shiism across the region.

In the given circumstances, the most effective strategy for geopolitically containing Iran is to assemble all its regional enemies in a common front. This is exactly what the United States has decided to seek: It is strengthening the coalition of its traditional Arab allies, led by Saudi Arabia, and Israel in order to counter Iran. According to Sick, the new strategy entails the United States granting certain benefits to the parties of the new anti-Iranian coalition. These include laying aside calls for democratization (already infamous in the region) and taking a more active role in the Arab-Israeli peace process. According to several analysts, the peace process – including the Annapolis conference in November 2007 – provides the Sunni Arab states with a ‘cover’ for cooperating with Israel.¹⁴⁶

Another benefit for the parties of the ‘new’ alliance⁴ is military aid. In July 2007, the United States announced plans to provide around 50 billion dollars worth of military aid and arms deals for Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Israel over a period of several years.¹⁴⁷ According to analysts, the aim of the arms sales is “to reassure local countries that they can defend themselves better against any possible Iranian military ventures [...]; to reassure the local governments of long-term US support, even as the US looks for ways to reduce its military engagement in Iraq [...] and to try forging as many countries in the Middle East as possible into an anti-Iranian coalition.”¹⁴⁸ Karim Sadjadpour has noted that the plan appears “to take a page out of Ronald Reagan’s Cold War playbook” by simultaneously attempting to “contain Iran and force it to spend money on an arms

⁴ The word ‘alliance’ is used here in a loose meaning. Other terms used by experts, each with different connotations, include ‘front’, ‘bloc’ and ‘coalition’.

race instead of developing its moribund economy, intimidating it into bankruptcy.”¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, another purpose of the military assistance ‘package’, according to Anthony Cordesman, derives from a view that a militarily strong Israel produces more regional stability than a weak one, which would be more prone to resort to pre-emptive strikes and overreacting.¹⁵⁰ Finally, in addition to the containment of Iran by military means and enhancing Israel’s security, an obvious advantage of the regional strategy, if it produces the desired outcome, is the stability of production and exports in the global oil and gas markets by virtue of fortifying the current alliance with Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states.

For the United States, ‘picking a sectarian side’ in the new regional power setting has been easy because its traditional allies are on the Sunni side. One of the few problematic pieces in this almost solved ‘puzzle of regional hegemony’ in these new circumstances is Iraq. First of all, the United States wants Iraq to be strong enough to balance Iran, but this seems problematic in the current context where the US supports Prime Minister al-Maliki’s Shia-dominated government which, on the one hand, is weak in the Iraqi context and, on the other hand, is reluctant to pursue a tougher policy towards Iran. Another problem regarding Iraq is posed by the vague attitude of Saudi Arabia towards vigilance on its borders with Iraq, which allows Sunni groups (many of whom are Jihadist, including al-Qaida) that are mainly hostile to the US presence in the region to enter the country. Also, private funding is allegedly being channelled into the Iraqi Sunni insurgency from Gulf Cooperation Council countries.¹⁵¹ A third problem with the US strategy to date has stemmed from the fact that while the country has been diverting all its efforts into blaming Iran for fuelling the sectarian fighting in Iraq, it has not been capable of proving that the Iranian government is supplying arms to Iraqi Shia factions. Finally, but by no means least importantly, Sadjadpour has pointed out that the United States is concentrating more on the military containment of Iran and not on addressing the major challenges which are posed by Iran’s soft power and its proxies in the region.¹⁵²

Saudi Arabia (and other Sunni-led Arab States)⁵

For the United States, Saudi Arabia is currently the most important Arab ally in the region.¹⁵³ Saudi Arabia, as well as other Sunni states, also has concrete influence on US policies in the region.¹⁵⁴ Therefore it is relevant to look at the country’s regional position vis-à-vis Iran from the point of view of the new US strategy of containing Iran. As Gause has written, “while Saudi regional policy can best be apprehended through the lens of classic balance of power politics, Sunni-Shi’i sectarian tensions overlay that policy and, perhaps more importantly, are the lens through which much of the Saudi public sees the regional situation.”¹⁵⁵

Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy, the fundamental goals of which Gause has identified as protecting the country from foreign domination and/or invasion and safeguarding the al-Saud regime¹⁵⁶, relies on a strategic – economic and military – alliance with the United States. This alliance makes the two countries interdependent: the United States on the stability of Saudi oil production (not imports to the US) and Saudi Arabia’s elite on American military support. This is the main reason why Saudi Arabia, despite domestic resistance which it seeks to appease with anti-American rhetoric, usually supports US policies in the region.

Gause has pointed out that the United States and the Saudis share the same overarching interest in blocking Iran’s regional ambitions, but they do not share the same views on how to achieve them. The clearest example is the US support of the al-Maliki government, which Saudi Arabia sees as a direct extension of Iran’s interests in the country and in the region.¹⁵⁷

⁵ From now on also referred to as the ‘Sunni states’.

According to Yehiav, there seems to have been a conscious decision before the Lebanon War in 2006 among the Arab states not to “deal with the threats of the Shi’a axis and to avoid confrontation with Iran.”¹⁵⁸ After the war, it was clear that among the Sunni states, Saudi Arabia principally took a more active role in the region.¹⁵⁹

In addition to an increasingly clearly-stated competition with Iran for regional power, there are three key concerns that have propelled Saudi Arabia towards a more dynamic regional policy. These are: Iran’s nuclear ambitions, Iraq and its Shias’ relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia’s own Shia minority.

- Regional (Muslim) leadership: The chaos in Iraq, the war of 2006 in Lebanon, the increasing regional influence of Iran and its allies (most visibly Hizbollah and Hamas) and the gradual lessening of that of Egypt have created a leadership vacuum in the Arab Middle East. Saudi Arabia now seeks to fill this space. After a passive period in its foreign policy, followed by the 9/11 attacks, Saudi Arabia has in a short time risen as the leading country of the “Arab Quartet” that was officially formed at the beginning of 2007 to represent the Arab side in the Arab-Israeli peace process.¹⁶⁰ One of the most visible examples of the Saudi invigoration was the relaunch of the Arab Peace Plan in the Arab League’s Summit in Riyadh in March 2007.

According to Gause, Saudi Arabia perceives that Iran is trying to use the Arab-Israeli conflict to gain political support in the Arab world.¹⁶¹ This partly explains the Saudi efforts to revive the peace plan. The same summit, as well as the Mecca Agreement in February 2007, which led to the establishment of the short-lived Palestinian unity government of Fatah and Hamas, were widely seen as a demonstration of the efforts of Saudi Arabia to counter the Iranian regional influence by asserting itself as the new diplomatic and political leader of the Sunni Arab Middle East.¹⁶² As Terhalle has noted, “[p]ublic and international policy aimed at avoiding further escalation does not contradict but complement Saudi strategy.”¹⁶³

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which since the 1990s had been showing increasing improvement, deteriorated after 9/11.¹⁶⁴ The main reasons for this have been the Iranian nuclear programme and what the Sunni Arab states perceive as Iran’s meddling in Arab affairs. Still, Saudi Arabia does not pursue direct confrontation with Iran and, with only a few exceptions¹⁶⁵, the Saudi government has been cautious in its statements about the country.¹⁶⁶ In the past 12 months there have been confidence-building measures between the two countries.¹⁶⁷

Meanwhile, Saudi newspapers have been growing increasingly critical of the rise of Iranian power in the region. Only recently, in November 2007, two Saudi columnists proposed both a joint defence plan for the Gulf Cooperation Council states “in order to confront Iran’s aspirations in the region and in order to create a minimal balance of power in the Gulf”.¹⁶⁸

- Iran’s nuclear programme: Since 2003, the Gulf Cooperation Council states have grown increasingly concerned about the Iranian nuclear programme. Mustafa Alani has held that the GCC states could not, under any circumstances, accept Iran’s regional ambitions as they perceive them. The good economic relations established with Iran during recent decades have been overshadowed by two nightmare scenarios, which are Iran as a nuclear power and Iraq under the control of Iran. According to Alani, the GCC states see Iran as an aggressive and expansionist state and are convinced that a nuclear capacity-equipped Iran would constitute a major challenge to them.¹⁶⁹

There have been various kinds of ideas put forward in the past concerning a collective security arrangement for solving the Persian Gulf security dilemma. There are indeed obvious points of convergence on the political and strategic agendas of all Persian Gulf countries that give plausible reasons for both sides on this kind of an arrangement. They include membership of OPEC and of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and combating terrorism.¹⁷⁰ The GCC has also been calling for a Weapons of Mass Destruction-free zone (WMDFZ) in the Gulf region.¹⁷¹

Even Iran has been calling for a similar regional or sub-regional collective security arrangement, with Israel's nuclear disarmament as a precondition for joining, however.¹⁷² Still, the GCC states, and especially Saudi Arabia, simply do not trust Iran and its official rhetoric. For example, the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, Prince Saud al-Faisal, has publicly called for Iran to stop inciting 'futile regional arms races'.¹⁷³ In what has largely been seen as a response to Iran's nuclear programme – or to Iranian behaviour relating to it¹⁷⁴ – and as a sign of the GCC states' determination to balance Iran's power by creating a strategic challenge – in December 2006 the GCC states announced their plans to conduct research on a collective peaceful nuclear programme.¹⁷⁵

Other Middle Eastern and North African states have also joined the 'club' of countries seeking nuclear power. During recent years, practically all Arab countries with a Sunni majority have announced plans or a wish to develop peaceful nuclear programmes.¹⁷⁶ As Joseph Cirincione and Uri Leventer have written, the main message to the West from these countries is political: "You are failing to contain Iran and we need to prepare."¹⁷⁷

- Iraq and Iran: According to Gause, Saudi Arabia's stance on the crisis in Iraq is driven primarily by concerns about the regional balance of power. Saudi leaders fear Iran will try to influence Iraq and the entire region, if and when the United States leaves the country.¹⁷⁸ The worries associated with Iraq have a close connection to similar ones regarding Lebanon and even the Palestinians. However, compared to Lebanon and the Palestinian issue, Saudi Arabia has chosen a relatively passive policy towards the events in Iraq, and it is only in the past year that it has been more vocal, even menacing, in its calls for the United States not to leave Iraq too precipitately.¹⁷⁹ This has included King Abdullah's statement that Saudi Arabia would support the Sunni community in Iraq in the event of a civil war breaking out after the US troops' withdrawal and an expression of strong opposition to diplomatic engagement by the United States with Iran.¹⁸⁰ At the same time, Saudi Arabia has supported the Arab League's efforts to convene an Iraqi reconciliation conference since 2005.¹⁸¹ The country, however, does not trust the Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and regards him as biased towards both Iraqi Shias and Iran.¹⁸²

The Saudi leadership realizes the problems its relationship with and support for the Iraqi Sunnis could bring to its relationship with the United States. Influential Saudi figures and religious scholars have recently been calling for direct political and security assistance for Iraq's Sunnis in confronting Iran's influence in the country.¹⁸³ In November 2007, a collection of biographical sketches seized by American forces in a raid on an insurgent cell's tent camp close to the Syrian border revealed that most of the foreign fighters entering Iraq were, in effect, Saudi Arabian and Libyan.¹⁸⁴ Although there are no signs of the Saudi government directly allowing Sunni insurgents to enter Iraq – as there has been no proof of the Iranian government equipping Shia insurgents – and although most of the foreign insurgents are assumed to enter Iraq through Syria, several unconfirmed accusations have been made by both Iraqi and US officials regarding Saudi policies and support to Sunni groups in Iraq. Also, as was already mentioned, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah has pledged support to Iraq's Sunnis in case of a civil war.¹⁸⁵ Drawing

a line between insurgents and non-insurgents or supporting them and not preventing them from entering Iraq from its neighbouring countries are thus judgements that are becoming increasingly politicized: Who is held 'guilty' depends on one's standpoint in the new sectarian balance of power game in the region.

- Saudi Arabia's Shia minority: Iran's potential influence – direct or indirect – over Shia populations in Sunni-led states, such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Lebanon, has become an increasing source of concern for the Sunni governments in the region. It is not, however, the kind of direct influence that Iran has on some Iraqi groups, nor is it the kind of (mostly strategic) alliances that Iran has with, for example, Syria and Hizbollah that worries the Sunni states but other forms of 'echoes' that the regional rise of Iran – and a Shia government in Iraq – are thought to produce relating to Shia populations around the Middle East. Sadjadpour and Nasr have both argued that Iran's preferred method of spreading its power and influence throughout the region is, ironically, through democratic elections and it will push for transparent and accountable elections in all countries with an 'oppressed' Shia population.¹⁸⁶

In the past, Saudi Arabia has engaged its Shia through force: incorporation, adaptation and cooptation.¹⁸⁷ It has opened the political sphere to a certain, rather limited extent for the Shia in the recent decade and a half. After 2003, both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have started a dialogue with their Shia communities and have passed some limited reforms.¹⁸⁸ In April 2007, King Abdullah warned that fuelling sectarian tensions would threaten the country's unity and security.¹⁸⁹

At the same time though, public anti-Shia sentiments are not actively discouraged. Saudi mosques frequently voice negative statements about the Shia and even call for jihad against them.¹⁹⁰ According to Blanchard and Prados, "[a]nti-Shiite sectarian rhetoric has been a consistent feature of statements on Iraq and Saudi affairs from [...] Saudi clerics..."¹⁹¹

No matter how subtle, playing with anti-Shia sentiments is like 'Ali's sword; it has two edges. As Gause has expressed it:

"[The a]ppeal to sectarian loyalties – whether actively encouraged by the government behind the scenes or simply tolerated – contains its own dangers for the Saudi government, both in terms of its own domestic politics of dealing with the Shi'i minority in Saudi Arabia and in terms of its policy toward Iran. While hoping to blunt Iranian influence, not only in Iraq but throughout the region, Riyadh wants to avoid a direct confrontation with Teheran and remains open to cooperation with the Iranians. To the extent that political tensions in the region become increasingly and rigidly sectarian, the Saudi government loses the flexibility necessary to both block and engage Teheran simultaneously – that is to say, to play the classic balance of power game."¹⁹²

This problematique applies to other Sunni-led Arab states as well. Ze`evi for example calls the (sectarian) strategies deployed by Saudi, Egyptian and Jordanian governments short-sighted in considering only the short-term political advantages. The dynamics, according to Ze`evi, "may lead Sunni publics to adopt more anti-Shia positions, and that sentiment may be reciprocated by the Shiites of Iraq and by other Shiite groups in the region."¹⁹³

Israel

Israel has, up to now, been a relatively passive, but beneficial partaker in the anti-Iranian alliance. Israel's interests have been proven to have a direct influence on the US Middle East agenda/policies; only the extent and source of this influence are contested.¹⁹⁴ Israel agrees with the present US policy in the region, as it safeguards

Israel's security and is in line with the country's regional interests. These include ensuring that Iran does not manage to acquire a nuclear weapon, weakening Iran's allies and proxies (Syria, Hamas and Hizbollah) and, in general, containing Iran in every way possible and on all fronts. Most importantly, Israel's regional interests are fundamentally 'asectarian' in essence, although Israeli foreign policy discourse often includes similar sectarian elements to those of the United States and Sunni Arab states.¹⁹⁵

Israel's problem with Iran is related to two broad issues and is thus easily definable: firstly, Iran's nuclear ambitions and secondly, Iran's proxies and allies. While Iran's allies and proxies cause 'constant trouble' and pose serious security threats to Israel, mostly in the form of guerrilla and other types of asymmetric warfare, a nuclear weapon in Iran's hands would mean a fundamental change in Israel's regional power status: It would not only produce a nuclear deterrence balance in the region (which would not necessarily mean a less stable Middle East) but it would also considerably weaken Israel's weight in the eyes of all regional actors.

Israel's policy towards Iran therefore "is to present the threat of a nuclear Iran as a challenge to the whole international system."¹⁹⁶ Both the current United States Administration's policies and anti-Iranian rhetoric as well as Iran's President Ahmadinejad's own rhetoric have actually been beneficial for Israel from this point of view. As a Chatham House report has noted, "Ahmadinejad's statements from the second half of 2005 that Israel should be 'wiped out' and that the Holocaust was a historical fabrication have played into the hands both of members of the Israeli government and of pro-Israeli supporters of the Bush administration who argue that Iran represents the greatest threat to US and Israeli interests in the Middle East."¹⁹⁷ Iran's fierce anti-Israeli rhetoric also strikes a chord with the Israeli public, which largely regards Iran as a truly 'existential threat' to the state of Israel.

Israel's response to the regional rise of Iran has also included enhancing its military deterrent. The United States' military aid package was one dimension, another has been preparing for a worst-case scenario in which Iran continues developing a nuclear weapons capability and acquires mastery of the enrichment process. Officially Israel has assured the public it is determined to stop Iran from doing this by any means, military strikes included, despite the obvious logistical problems it would involve.¹⁹⁸

Israel has also participated in the US strategy to contain Iran by warming up its relations with the Sunni Arab states. During 2007 there were unconfirmed reports of Saudi officials holding meetings with Israeli officials. At the Saudi elite level there is no kind of 'phobia' regarding Israel, but it is impossible for Saudi Arabia's elite to announce any kind of dealings with Israel since it has no official diplomatic relations with Israel and even more so because of domestic opposition.¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, Jordan's King Abdullah publicly announced to the Knesset in April 2007 that "we are in the same boat, we have the same problem. We have the same enemies", allegedly referring to Iran, Hizbollah and Hamas.²⁰⁰

As already mentioned, the renewed Israel-Palestinian peace process, according to many analysts, is designed to serve as a carrot for Iran's allies in the region, as a reward for those who 'behave themselves'. Another interpretation has been given by Yehiav, according to whom the Sunni-led Arab states:

"would be very interested in being not only the United States' stick toward Iran and toward Iran's allies in the region, but also to present a positive agenda, to be a carrot for a certain purpose, if you will; and they do not hide this. [...] Their goal is to encourage as much contact as possible between Israel and the Palestinians and to urge the peace process on the Palestinian side and press them to reach solutions – the sooner the better, and not necessarily according to the Road Map."²⁰¹

In the longer term, all Arab states fear an American-Iranian reconciliation, which would result in a profound reshuffling of power relations in the region and allow for a Middle East ruled by non-Arab states (that is, the US, Israel, Iran and Turkey). Because of this, all policies and strategies that go against Iran, and which push Iran away from engagement with the United States, including the pejorative use of the term Shia, are to a certain extent considered useful by the Sunni states. Sectarian rhetoric, however, also has a national function in the Arab countries, which is related to controlling the Shia populations, be they majorities or minorities, appeasing or rebellious towards the local governments. At the same time, Sunni elites exercise great caution in their moves with regard to Iran due to the fact that a direct confrontation with the country is still the least desirable outcome for both Saudi Arabia and all the other Sunni-led states in the region.

3.2 The Future of Shia-Sunni Relations in the Middle East

What would a further sectarianization of regional level politics mean then for the Middle East? The question of leadership – both regional and national – is at the heart of the current regional Shia-Sunni struggle. Although the Arab publics still do not regard Iran as a threat to their security, as they do with Israel and the United States, their opinion does not count in foreign policymaking, and when it does, it is toned down one way or another. The Sunni elites are increasingly aligning themselves with the United States and Israel in order to counter what they call ‘the Shia challenge’ that materializes in the nuclear ambitions of Iran (which is believed to be seeking nuclear weapons capacity), in the country’s ability to exert influence in the region through its allies in Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories, and in the possibility that Iran would start voicing demands for free elections in the Arab countries – or that the proper Shia populations of these countries would demand them. These considerations have led Saudi Arabia to seek a leading role in Arab politics, while keeping other Sunni states on their toes. The new alliance will, however, be beneficial for all Sunni-led states, Israel and the United States, but only as an interim solution.

The United States is determined to maintain its relative power in the Middle East. Playing a significant role in regional politics includes engaging in alliances in order to balance with different enemies. Bringing sectarian divisions to the surface has been a by-product of this game of power balancing at the regional level, and the United States has engaged in ‘the sectarian game’ both intentionally and unintentionally. The divisions forged by the United States are based on whether a country is perceived as an ally or an enemy (in the ‘US camp’ or in the ‘Iran camp’). For this purpose, the current administration has introduced the terms ‘moderate states’ and ‘radical states’ as attributes of its own allies and Iran’s allies respectively. The rhetorical style is the same as that of the War on Terrorism: with us or against us.

All in all, the current realignments that partly follow old alliances are paving the way for a new regional setting based on sectarian identities, in which the latter are used as tools of foreign policies but in which they also play a determining role in foreign policy formation. The anti-Iranian strategy of the United States and its allies in the Middle East is likely to translate rhetorical expressions, such as the Rise of the Shia, the Shia Crescent and the Sunni-Shia Divide, into political reality. It is not too far-fetched to claim that sectarianism within Islam also has the potential to become a new ‘pan-norm’ for the Muslim Middle East both inside and between states, but this is more due to power considerations than the fundamental rift in Islam.

Nevertheless, other factors point to a possible and even likely opposite scenario. As table 2 shows, the anti-Iranian alliance and the Shia-Sunni divide are not parallel to each other since the former does not take fully into account either radical Sunni

groups/actors, such as the Jihadist al-Qaida that act against the regional interests of the United States – and other states in the alliance – or moderate Shia actors, such as the present Iraqi government, which are US allies. The Shia crescent and the anti-Iranian alliance, in turn, are not equivalent because the former ignores the fact that Hamas is Sunni, not Shia. Therefore, because of the inherent incoherencies in the sectarian division of Middle Eastern regional politics with regard to US interests in the region, there is a possibility that the forthcoming presidential elections in November 2008 will introduce a new kind of tone and a new set of dynamics in the country's Middle East policy. This might include a lessening of anti-Shia rhetoric and concentrating in a more pragmatic way, on the one hand, on the challenge Iran poses to the US and the region in geopolitical and military terms and, on the other hand, on fighting terrorists and other radical groups and movements.

Table 2: US Allies and Enemies in the Post-Saddam Middle East during the Bush era. Muslim States/Actors.

	'RADICALS'/'TOTALITARIAN THREAT'	'MODERATES'/US ALLIES
SHIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iran • Hizbollah • Syria⁶ • Radical Shia groups in Iraq and elsewhere 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iraq
SUNNI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al-Qaida • Hamas (Gaza) • Other radical/Jihadist Sunni groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saudi Arabia • Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon • Other GCC-states⁷ • Yemen • Fatah (West Bank)

Note: In the table, the name of a country/territory refers to its government.

In any case, the importance of the 'Iraq factor' cannot be overemphasized in the potential sectarianization of regional politics in the Middle East. Both the United States and the stability of the neighbouring countries will be deeply affected by the developments in Iraq for years, if not decades, to come. Events in Iraq will also undoubtedly have a significant impact on how regional Shia politics are shaped. This, in turn, will have an effect on the Sunni states' policies towards the Shia both regionally and domestically.

There are also those who postulate that the US support of the Shia in Iraq is neither incoherent nor problematic and that the situation is actually beneficial for the US. Edward Luttwak has pointed out that key Arab protagonists on both the Sunni and the Shia side have now come to actively seek American support:

"The Iraq war has indeed brought into existence a New Middle East, in which Arab Sunnis can no longer gleefully disregard American interests because they need help against the looming threat of Shiite supremacy, while in Iraq at the core of the Arab world, the Shia are allied with the U.S. What past imperial statesmen strove to

⁶ The Syrian ruling minority elite is Alawi, which is usually classified as a Shia strand but which is sometimes excluded in statistics, for example.

⁷ Oman is governed by, and most of its population adheres to, the Ibadhi strand of Islam, which is neither Shia nor Sunni.

achieve with much cunning and cynicism, the Bush administration has brought about accidentally. But the result is exactly the same."²⁰²

Iran's leaders, especially President Ahmadinejad, in turn, fervently seek to appeal to the pan-Islamic, anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments of the Arab street in order to get the Sunni Arabs on their side. The Iranian leadership has avoided the use of sectarian terminology in foreign policy statements. This tactic, however, is bound to be poorly received by the leading Sunni elites in charge of the foreign policies of the Arab states in the region. As Sadjadpour has remarked, "Muslim solidarity has never transcended the Arab-Persian divide."²⁰³

How would a further sectarianization of regional-level politics affect Iran's regional status? It is true that Iran has not been too successful in its relations with the Arab countries, neither in the past nor at present. Many argue that despite the fall of the regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, the new geopolitical conditions cannot be deemed a success from Iran's point of view: Rafael Fernández has noted that in addition to the de facto legitimacy of Israel's nuclear arsenal in the eyes of the international community, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have allowed the United States to consolidate its military presence in the two neighbouring countries of Iran and extend it in others, such as Kuwait, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the case is not so apparent. If the United States has consolidated its military and strategic presence in the region and around the country, Iran, for its part, has managed to take advantage of the situation: Proximity also renders the United States and its interests more vulnerable. Iran's tactic has been, as Chubin has expressed it, to treat the US as a 'potential hostage', that is, to keep the country involved in the conflicts of the region so as to divert attention and efforts away from preventing the advancement of Iran's nuclear programme.²⁰⁵

There is yet another dimension to the current geopolitical struggle which is important to distinguish, namely the bilateral aspect of US-Iran relations. As Toensing has pointed out, neither a more profound understanding of Shia-Sunni tensions nor of the Shia aids in comprehending US-Iranian relations and the current confrontation between the countries.²⁰⁶ Currently, the two countries are so deeply engaged in a game of chicken, which paradoxically strengthens the Iranian Ultraconservatists' grip on power, that it is difficult to envisage an abrupt change of policy on either side. As a solution to the strained relations, analysts in the US have argued that the country should pursue a policy of engagement with Iran; the remedy is seen to reside in either talking to the current regime or engaging and assisting the more moderate or pragmatist elements. The different approaches have a common element: the goal is ultimately to defeat the Ultraconservatists. Another aspect of US-Iranian relations is, as Takeyh has pointed out, that Iran's core foreign policy objectives have, in fact, not changed during the Ahmadinejad era²⁰⁷, which means that they are not likely to change after Ahmadinejad either. This also applies to the nuclear programme.

In its relationship with the United States Iran is, as Heidi Huuhtanen has expressed it, "negotiating on its accommodation in the new Middle East according to rules dictated by itself", that is: on the inviolability of its government, security guarantees and a recognition of its regional power position. The US, however, sees that Iran should adapt to the rules dictated by the country or it will be forced to adapt.²⁰⁸ It is therefore unlikely that the United States and Iran will strike a deal 'behind the Arabs' backs' in the near future. One indicator of this is that none of the leading presidential candidates for 2008 had ruled out a military strike as a policy option by November 2007²⁰⁹, despite the fact that, as a result of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) released in December 2007, it might take years, at the least, or alternatively a significant advance in Iran's nuclear capabilities for the threat of a US military attack to regain the credibility it had during most of 2007.

Unexpected events during the latter part of President Bush's term in office, however, might change the course of regional politics. In addition to the military threat, the danger of an involuntary escalation of tensions was clearly in evidence for most of 2007, and if a US or Israeli military strike in Iran ever materialized, it would have devastating implications for the entire region and outside it (for example, for the global economy), as the overwhelming majority of experts in the West affirm. Most importantly, experts also insist that regime change would not be among the outcomes of a military attack against Iran, but that this would only strengthen the leadership's grip on power.

However, the likelihood of a planned military strike in the short term on behalf of the US or Israel saw a dramatic decrease in December 2007 after the release of the National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, which was deemed to have constituted a severe blow to President Bush and Vice President Cheney's 'war policies'.²¹⁰ In addition to this, several other facts point to a more balanced relationship between the two countries in the near future. Among these are the slight Realist turn in US Middle East policy that has been said to have taken place since the Congressional elections in 2006; the gradual strengthening of the position of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who is a well-known (Neo)realist, in the Administration, as well as the fact that the United States needs Iran in its endeavour to 'solve Iraq'. Although not publicly admitted, the rounds of ambassador-level talks with Iran over Iraq, which started in 2007, are the strongest indicator of this.²¹¹

The new anti-Iranian alliance has even been claimed to have already broken down at the end of 2007, as a result of the NIE on Iran, Qatar's invitation for President Ahmadinejad to join the GCC summit and Saudi Arabia's invitation for him to join the *hajj*, all in December 2007.²¹² However, no major visible signs of a clear change in this regard had yet appeared by the beginning of the year 2008. It is possible that the publication of the NIE and its aftermath will mark a period of relative appeasement between Iran and the United States and Israel, and especially between Iran and the Sunni-led states. According to some analysts, there are signs that the GCC states, impatient with the current US approach towards Iran and its nuclear programme, disillusioned about the peace process and fearful of a US-Iranian compromise, have now admitted the new geopolitical realities and are doing their best to adapt to them in the most beneficial way possible and, ultimately also, doing their best to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

So far, the crux of the problem with Iran for the US and other states in the region isn't the country's geopolitical position nor its nuclear programme, but the government (or regime) and its policies, its revolutionary rhetoric and what are perceived by other states as its regional ambitions.²¹³ Therefore, from a geopolitical, geostrategic and even an economic perspective, the Iranian nuclear crisis will not be resolved by the current US policy of sanctions and demands for zero enrichment because the probabilities of a radical regime change (provoked by internal logics and forces) and a subsequent radical change of foreign policy are negligible. The forthcoming presidential elections in the United States in 2008 and in Iran in 2009 might produce a positive change in the way in which the governments perceive and act towards each other. Still, before the elections anything can happen in the game being played by the hegemon and the challenger. The North Korean path could be one possible scenario. Other great powers, mainly Russia and China, might also introduce unexpected changes in the way in which Iran's relations with the international community develop.

Finally, an important issue in determining the course of regional politics is the US Middle East policy, which currently comprises a number of inherent problems and paradoxes: First of all, a transnational Shia identity is very unlikely to serve as a

basis for political alliances. Therefore it is argued that it is neither realistic nor viable to construct policies on scenarios that include Shia Crescent-type visions. One paradox is that the more the US pushes for democracy and minority rights, the more the Shias (and/or Islamists) in Sunni-governed countries will become empowered. This also translates into more regional influence for Iran, which is one of the reasons why it is likely that US calls for democracy will continue to be toned down in the future. This, in turn, is expected to lead to tighter authoritarianism in the region. Another paradox is that, despite the fact that the US and Iran tend to believe that their power ambitions cancel each other out, the two actually have quite parallel interests in the region: Both want the current Iraqi government to succeed, but do not want it to become strong enough to pose a threat to its neighbours. Both would also benefit from a better status for the region's Shia populations. For Iran, the benefits are evident; for the US this would translate into more democracy in the region. The US and Iran also want a peaceful and stable Afghanistan and they even share the same ideas about how to achieve this. They are equally concerned about the political situation in Pakistan and are fearful of the consequences of the potential rise of Sunni fundamentalists to power. Both even share a common enemy – al-Qaida, which regards both the United States and the Shia as its enemies. And ultimately, despite the findings of the NIE of 2007 on Iran's nuclear programme, the US has still not solved the 'Iranian nuclear puzzle', which seems increasingly likely to linger as a legacy for the next Administration. These are the kinds of problems that the next US administration will face – and should seek to tackle – while adjusting its policies for Iran and for the 'New, post-Saddam Middle East', which will certainly be a *Sectarian* Middle East as well by all accounts.

¹³⁸ See for example Sick: *Sick: Alliance against Iran*; Alani, Mustapha: *Iran, Iraq and the Gulf Region*. Speech at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. 27 February 2007.

¹³⁹ Yehiav, Ayellet: 'The Anti-Iranian Front: Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan'. *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*. Volume 11, No. 1. March 2007, p 7. Yehiav states that the attitudes of the Sunni regimes towards Iran and its allies are mostly voiced through the press, not by the political establishment.

¹⁴⁰ Hunter, Robert: 'US Middle East Policy' posted on Gulf2000 Project mailing list on 22 August 2007. Permission for the quote given by the author.

¹⁴¹ For example Alterman, Jon: *Current U.S. Policy in the Middle East*. Speech at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. 30 August 2007.

¹⁴² Aliboni, Roberto: *Europe's Role in the Gulf: A Transatlantic Perspective*. Gulf Papers. Gulf Research Center. 2006, p. 8.

¹⁴³ On the definition of a middle power, see Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Raymond A. Hinnebusch: *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*. London, Routledge. 1997.

¹⁴⁴ Ehteshami, Anoushiravan: 'The Foreign Policy of Iran' in Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (eds.): *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, p. 286.

¹⁴⁵ Partly from Chubin, Shahram: *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*. Washington D.C., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2006, pp. 84-85.

¹⁴⁶ For example Sick: *Sick: Alliance against Iran*; Sick: 'A Policy that Dare Not Speak Its Name.'; Aguirre, Mariano and Mark Taylor: 'Annapolis: How to Avoid Failure'. openDemocracy. 12 November 2007.

¹⁴⁷ Cloud, David: 'U.S. Set to Offer Huge Arms Deal to Saudi Arabia'. *The New York Times*. 28 July 2007; American Forces Press Service: 'Military Sales Package Aims to Boost Long-Term Stability in Middle East'. U.S. Department of Defense. 1 August 2007.

¹⁴⁸ Hunter: 'US Middle East Policy'.

¹⁴⁹ Sadjadpour, Karim: 'The Wrong Way to Contain Iran'. *The International Herald Tribune*. 3 August 2007.

¹⁵⁰ Cordesman, Anthony: 'Weapons of Mass Preservation'. *The New York Times*. 16 August 2007.

¹⁵¹ It was stated in the Baker-Hamilton report of 2006 that individuals from Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries have been funding Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq. Baker, James and Lee Hamilton (co-chairs): *The Iraq Study Group Report*. United States Institute of Peace. December 2006, p. 25.

¹⁵² Sadjadpour: 'The Wrong Way to Contain Iran'.

¹⁵³ Gause classifies Saudi Arabia as an 'unconventional power' because the country is militarily weak and has a relatively small population compared to its regional neighbours but it is the largest economy in the Arab world and the Guardian of the Holy Places of Islam, which gives it a special role in the Muslim world. Gause, Gregory: 'The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia', p. 193.

¹⁵⁴ For example Ibrahim Said al-Baydani has asserted that “[t]he American position towards the Shiites of Iraq is influenced by that of Sunni Arab States”. Al-Badrani: ‘Trial and Error: Washington and Iraq’s Shiite’, pp. 40-41.

¹⁵⁵ Gause, Gregory: ‘Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectarian Question’ *Strategic Insights*. Volume VI, Issue 2. March 2007.

¹⁵⁶ Gause, Gregory: ‘The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia’, p. 193.

¹⁵⁷ Gause, Gregory: *Gause: U.S. Trying to Soften Saudi Hard Line toward Maliki Government*. Interview for the Council on Foreign Relations. 6 August 2007.

¹⁵⁸ Yehiav: ‘The Anti-Iranian Front: Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan’, p. 6.

¹⁵⁹ Gause has said that “[i]t appears that the debate over the Iraq Study Group report in the US, in late 2006, galvanized a more active Saudi policy. The Saudis were clearly worried that the ISG report might lead to an American withdrawal from Iraq, leaving the field open for the Iranians. High level Saudi officials urged Washington to avoid doing anything precipitously, while hinting that the kingdom might have to intervene directly in Iraqi politics if the US left. Even though the ISG report did not lead to withdrawal, it seems that the debate around it convinced Riyadh that, eventually, the US would be leaving Iraq. It was then that Saudi diplomacy became more activist.” Gause, Gregory: *Saudi Arabia and the Proposed Arms Sale*. Testimony before House Committee on Foreign Affairs. 18 September 2007.

¹⁶⁰ According to Gause’s analysis, “the Arab Quartet means different things to different members. For Egypt and Jordan, it consolidates the leadership role they see themselves occupying in the Arab world, a role that declined after their own peace treaties with Israel. For the United Arab Emirates, support for the Arab Quartet gives them a higher regional profile [...] For the Saudis, however, the Arab Quartet is an important tool through which they seek to manage relations with Iran and its surrogates.” Gause, Gregory: *The Arab Quartet*. Gulf Roundtable. Speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. April 2007.

¹⁶¹ Gause: *Gause: U.S. Trying to Soften Saudi Hard Line toward Maliki Government*.

¹⁶² Luomi, Mari and Sampsa Peltonen: *Mihin vie Saudi-Arabian ajama uusi arabiyhtenäisyys?* Mediakooste. No. 06/2007. The Finnish Institute of International Affairs. 26 March 2007.

¹⁶³ Terhalle: ‘Are the Shia Rising?’, p. 69.

¹⁶⁴ EU Institute for Security Studies: *Iran: Between Co-operation and Confrontation*. Seminar report. 19 January 2007, pp. 3-4.

¹⁶⁵ According to Al-Jazeera English, Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah had said in an interview with the Al-Seyassah newspaper in January 2007 that “attempts by Iran to spread Shia beliefs in Sunni communities would fail” and that “the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be solved by ‘Arabs alone’”. Al-Jazeera English: ‘Saudi Warns ‘Interfering’ Iraq’. 27 January 2007.

¹⁶⁶ Gause, Gregory: *Saudi Arabia and the Proposed Arms Sale*.

¹⁶⁷ In March 2007, President Ahmadinejad visited King Abdullah, amid assumptions in the press that the main thrust of the discussion was the situation in Lebanon. The meeting resulted in a joint statement on “stopping any attempt aimed at spreading sectarian strife in the region”. See for example Fattah, Hassan: ‘Iran President Meets Saudi to Discuss Mideast Issues’. *The New York Times*. 4 March 2007. Another important event was when President Ahmadinejad was invited to the Gulf Cooperation Council summit in December 2007. See for example Gulf News: ‘Text of final communiqué of the 28th GCC Summit’. 5 December 2007. Yet another was Saudi Arabia’s historical invitation for President Ahmadinejad to attend the *hajj* in Mecca, equally in December 2007. Haaretz: ‘Saudi king invites Iranian President Ahmadinejad to Mecca for hajj’. 19 December 2007.

¹⁶⁸ MEMRI: ‘Saudi Columnists Call on Gulf States to Form Anti-Iran Front’. No. 1769. 20 November 2007. The comments came in response to what were perceived as threats directed towards the GCC countries from high-ranking Iranian officials, including a claim that Bahrain belonged to Iran. There have also been several unconfirmed accounts about Saudi talks with the United States to significantly lower oil prices by increasing production. This would potentially harm the Iranian economy. See for example Mouawad, Jad: ‘Saudi Officials Seek to Temper the Price of Oil’. *The New York Times*. 28 January 2007.

¹⁶⁹ Alani: *Iran, Iraq and the Gulf Region*. Alani has even said that the six Arab states in the Gulf would even prefer a United States military attack on Iran over having to live with Iran as a nuclear weapons state.

¹⁷⁰ See for example Kaveh L Afrasiabi: ‘Saudi-Iran tension fuels wider conflict’. *Asian Times*. 06 December 2006.

¹⁷¹ According to Nicole Stracke, “[t]he idea for sub-regional cooperation originates from the assumption that the GCC threat perceptions differ from those of other Arab states. The GCC threat perceptions have evolved out of the regional conflict with Iran or the current situation in Iraq.” Stracke, Nicole: ‘Is the Gulf heading toward a nuclear arms race?’ *Gulf in the Media*. Gulf Research Center. 18 February 2007.

¹⁷² For example, in April 2007 Iran announced a 10-point blueprint for a Persian Gulf Security and Cooperation Organization, which comprised the GCC countries, Iraq and Iran and included cooperation in the fields of security, economy, commerce, culture, politics and energy – including a joint nuclear enrichment consortium and the establishment of a WMDFZ in the Middle East. See for example Mehr News Agency: ‘Iran proposes establishing Persian Gulf security and cooperation body’ 4 October 2007.

¹⁷³ “While we support the rights of all countries to the peaceful use of nuclear energy, including acquiring knowledge and nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, we call on Iran and all the

countries of the Middle East to strictly respect their obligations under current international conventions and treaties that include specific safeguards to all nuclear programs. We hope that Iran cooperates positively with international efforts that aim to ensure a peaceful and swift end to the Iranian nuclear issue, and to spare the region from futile arm races and serious environmental dangers.” Al-Faisal, Saud: *Address to the U.N. General Assembly*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. 29 September 2007.

¹⁷⁴ Stracke: ‘Is the Gulf heading toward a nuclear arms race?’

¹⁷⁵ The research was completed by the International Atomic Energy Agency in November 2007 and the announcement was accompanied by assurances by the GCC Secretary General Abdul Rahman al-Attiyah on the peaceful purpose of the Council’s involvement in nuclear technology. Gulf News: ‘Gulf States Get Draft Study on Nuclear Energy’. 20 November 2007.

¹⁷⁶ These countries include Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (under the Gulf Cooperation Council), Yemen, Algeria, Morocco, Libya and Tunisia. All are parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

¹⁷⁷ Cirincione, Joseph and Uri Leventer: ‘The Middle East’s Nuclear Surge’. *The International Herald Tribune*. 13 August 2007.

¹⁷⁸ Gause: ‘Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectarian Question’.

¹⁷⁹ For example, Nawaf Obaid, adviser to the Saudi government and an adjunct fellow at the CSIS in Washington, was sent home by the Saudi Ambassador to the United States, Turki al-Faisal, (who himself resigned after only 15 months in the post) after he wrote in the Washington Post that if the United States leaves Iraq uninvited, “one of the first consequences will be massive Saudi intervention to stop Iranian-backed Shiite militias from butchering Iraqi Sunnis”. See Obaid, Nawaf: ‘Stepping into Iraq’. *The Washington Post*. 29 November 2006. This, according to many observers, both in Saudi Arabia and in the United States, indicated there was disagreement on Saudi Arabia’s Iraq and Iran policies (between a confrontational Iran policy and one of more diplomacy). Others saw it as a warning that Saudi Arabia might become more active in safeguarding its interests in Iraq. See for example Prados, Alfred and Christopher Blanchard: *Saudi Arabia: Current Issues and U.S. Relations*. CRS Report for Congress. 13 April 2007, p. 13.

¹⁸⁰ See for example Cooper, Helene: ‘Saudis Say They Might Back Sunnis if U.S. Leaves Iraq’. *The New York Times*. 12 December 2006.

¹⁸¹ Prados and Blanchard: *Saudi Arabia: Current Issues and U.S. Relations*, p. 11.

¹⁸² According to The New York Times, Saudi officials have presented Zalmay Khalilzad (the US ambassador at the UN, acting as the US envoy) with documents, one of which purported to be an early alert from al-Maliki to Muqtada al-Sadr “warning him to lie low during the coming American troop increase” and the other claiming to provide proof of al-Maliki being an agent of Iran. Cooper, Helene: ‘Saudis’ Role in Iraq Frustrates U.S. Officials’. *The New York Times*. 27 July 2007.

¹⁸³ Prados and Blanchard: *Saudi Arabia: Current Issues and U.S. Relations*, p. 12.

¹⁸⁴ According to The New York Times, the insurgent cell raided by US troops is believed to have been responsible for smuggling up to 90% of all foreign fighters to Iraq. Of the 700 biographies recovered, 305 were of Saudi and 137 of Libyan citizens. Opiel, Richard: ‘Foreign Fighters in Iraq Are Tied to Allies of U.S.’ *The New York Times*. 22 November 2007. For more reports on Saudi fighters in Iraq see Prados, Alfred: *Saudi Arabia: Current Issues and U.S. Relations*. CRS Issue Brief for Congress. 24 February 2006, p 7.

¹⁸⁵ According to Al-Jazeera, Iraqi officials have accused Saudi Arabia of supporting opponents of the al-Maliki government. The US ambassador at the UN, Zalmay Khalilzad has accused Saudi Arabia of pursuing destabilizing policies in Iraq. Al-Jazeera English: ‘US: Saudi Arabia destabilizing Iraq’. 29 November 2007. In addition, the Guardian and the New York Times have reported that US Administration officials have seen evidence of Saudi financial support for opponents of al-Maliki. The Guardian: ‘US accuses Saudis of telling lies about Iraq’. 28 July 2007; Cooper: ‘Saudis’ Role in Iraq Frustrates U.S. Officials’.

¹⁸⁶ Sadjadpour: ‘The Wrong Way to Contain Iran’. and Nasr: *The Shia Revival (Seminar)*.

¹⁸⁷ Terhalle: ‘Are the Shia Rising?’, p. 71.

¹⁸⁸ See for example *ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

¹⁸⁹ Asharq Alawsat English: ‘King Abdullah Warns of Sectarian Strife’. 15 April 2007. According to Asharq Alawsat, King Abdullah told the opening session of the Shura council that “[t]he king’s remarks appeared to be alluding to the relation between the kingdom’s dominant Sunnis and the Shiite minority”.

¹⁹⁰ For example, according to The New York Times, “[i]n December [2006], a top religious leader close to the Saudi royal family, Abdul Rahman al-Barak, said that Shiites, whom he called rejectionists, were worse than Jews or Christians.” Slackman: ‘Hangings Fuel Sectarian Split Across Mideast’. See also: United Press International: ‘Saudi Sheik Issues Fatwa Against Hezbollah’. There have also been several unconfirmed media reports on fatwas issued by leading Saudi Wahhabi muftis calling for the destruction of the holy Shia shrines in Iraq.

¹⁹¹ Prados and Blanchard: *Saudi Arabia: Current Issues and U.S. Relations*, p. 13.

¹⁹² Gause: *Saudi Arabia and the Proposed Arms Sale*.

¹⁹³ Ze’evi: *The Present Shia-Sunna Divide: Remaking Historical Memory*, p. 6.

¹⁹⁴ Walt and Mearsheimer’s ‘The Israel Lobby’ and the discussion it has sparked is an obvious example of this.

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- ¹⁹⁵ An interesting observation is that Israeli scholars and analysts (see for example the sources used in this study) tend to promote the use of the Moderates-Radicals dichotomy and are also generally vocal about predicting a strict division of the Muslim Middle East into two mutually hostile sectarian spheres.
- ¹⁹⁶ Meikelberg, Yossi: *Israel and Iran: From War of Words to Words of War?* Middle East Programme paper. MEP 07/01. The Royal Institute of International Affairs. 2007, p. 2.
- ¹⁹⁷ Lowe, Robert and Claire Spencer (eds.): *Iran, its Neighbours and the Regional Crises*. Middle East Programme Report. The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2006, p. 15.
- ¹⁹⁸ See for example The International Institute for Strategic Studies: 'Israeli Military Calculations towards Iran. A Looming showdown?' *IISS Strategic Comments*, Vol. 12, Issue 9, November 2006, p. 2.
- ¹⁹⁹ Gause: *Gause: U.S. Trying to Soften Saudi Hard Line toward Maliki Government*.
- ²⁰⁰ Haaretz: 'Jordan's Abdullah tells Israel: We share the same enemies'. 21 April 2007.
- ²⁰¹ Yehiav: 'The Anti-Iranian Front: Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan', p. 9.
- ²⁰² Luttwak: 'Two Alliances'.
- ²⁰³ Sadjadpour: 'The Wrong Way to Contain Iran'.
- ²⁰⁴ Fernández Ruiz, Rafael: 'La excusa nuclear Iraní. La aspiración hegemónica de los ayatolás'. Printed presentation in the XVI International Electronic Symposium of Centro de Estudios Internacionales para el Desarrollo. October 2007, p. 9.
- ²⁰⁵ Chubin: *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, for example pp. 114-115.
- ²⁰⁶ Toensing argues that Iranian nationalism should be the focus instead. Toensing: 'Persian Ghosts'.
- ²⁰⁷ Takeyh, Ray: 'Ahmadinejad isn't the issue'. *The Boston Globe*. 2 September 2007.
- ²⁰⁸ Huuhtanen, Heidi: 'Lähi-idän on sopeuduttava Yhdysvaltain hegemoniaan'. In Heikka, Henrikki (toim.): *Yhdysvaltain Hegemonia.. Messiaaninen suurvalta ja sen vastavoimat*. Ulkopoliittinen instituutti. 2005, p. 23. Translation by the author.
- ²⁰⁹ Reuters: 'FACTBOX-U.S. 2008 presidential candidates on Iran'. 7 November 2007. For a more comprehensive compilation of key quotes from US presidential candidates on Iran see The New York Times: 'The Presidential Candidates on Iran'. 2007.
- ²¹⁰ See for example Farhi, Farideh: 'The U.S. and Iran After the NIE'. *The Audit for Conventional Wisdom*. 07/23, December 2007. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- ²¹¹ On the US Neorealist turn, see for example The Economist: 'Weakness—or a New Realism?' 26 April 2007. On the strengthening of Rice's position: Bumiller, Elisabeth: 'Rice, now willing to press Bush, gains influence over U.S. policy'. *The International Herald Tribune*. 25 November 2007. On the need to talk to Iran, see for example Baker and Hamilton (co-chairs): *The Iraq Study Group Report*.
- ²¹² See for example Yehoshua, Y.; I. Rapoport, Y. Mansharof, A. Savyon and Y. Carmon. 'The Collapse of the Saudi Sunni Bloc against Iran's Aspirations for Regional Hegemony in the Gulf'. *Inquiry and Analysis Series*. No. 416. The Middle East Media Research Institute. 11 January 2008.
- ²¹³ As US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns has stated, "[o]ur view is that Iran is a generational challenge. It is not a challenge that is going to be episodic or fleeting; it will likely be on the front burners of our foreign policy in 2010, and 2012, and probably 2020. It is the largest country in the Middle East. It aims to be the most powerful country in the Middle East, and it always will, no matter what type of government it has. But it does have a radical government. It is radical by our definition. It is a mullahcracy." Burns, Nicholas: 'Carrots and Sticks'. *Boston Review*. May/June 2007.

CONCLUSIONS

By way of conclusion, the set of issues and questions that this paper has touched upon will be discussed below.

The point of departure for the study was the observation that the Shia-Sunni divide in the Middle East seems to be worsening in general, and the analysis itself concentrated on the phenomenon at the regional level. First, it looked at what the so-called Shia Revival stands for, how it has developed in the past few years and what this 'revival' means for the region. First of all, it is evident that the entire post-Saddam Iraq is in the middle of a complicated and multifaceted sectarian – and tribal – clash. Partly as a result of the events in Iraq, the regional politics of the post-Saddam Middle East also seem to be in the midst of a Shia revival: Iraq is ruled by a Shia-controlled government, Hizbollah came out of a war with Israel declaring victory, and Iran is acting with a new and bold assertiveness.

Nevertheless, the shape of the phenomenon, and the way in which the related developments at the regional level are explained, have many dimensions depending on the viewer's theoretical or philosophical background, political interests and sensitivity to questions of identity. Different meanings are attributed to the term Shia Revival: It can translate into the Rise of Iran or a Shia Crescent, which threaten the current regional status quo, or it can mean a chance for greater democracy in Arab states. The term also carries a normative dimension: Is 'Shia power' good or bad for the region? The answer depends on both the identity and political interests of whoever is evaluating the issue. Therefore there is no right or wrong answer to either part of the question; the Shia Revival means many things at different levels of politics and it can be viewed both as a negative and as a positive development.

At the moment it is impossible to determine either the outcome of the war in Iraq or the Iranian nuclear crisis, and to predict what the US Middle East policy will look like in a few years. These and other factors will shape the political context between and even inside countries in the region and will determine to a large extent how the Shias will find their place in it.

Secondly, the central question of the study was why the Shia-Sunni divide seems to be strengthening at the regional level. The main objective of the study was to identify which theoretical or philosophical school of International Relations provides the best explanation for the sectarianization of politics at this level.

Of the three theoretical/philosophical approaches of International Relations that were examined in the paper, Neorealism was able to provide the best answer: The talk about a Shia revival at the regional level is essentially a response of the United States, the Sunni states and Israel to the new geopolitical situation that unfolded as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The long-term desire for regional supremacy of Iran has become increasingly manifest in the post-Saddam Middle East. As a response, the United States has resorted to a strategy of geopolitical containment and it counts in the support of all its allies in the region to achieve this. Observed through the Neorealist framework, the United States has external reasons and the Sunni-led Arab states have both internal and external reasons for participating in creating a regional divide along sectarian lines.

The study therefore suggests that the emergence of Shia-Sunni rhetoric at the regional level is partly a by-product of the regional strategies of certain key players: the United States, Saudi Arabia, Israel and also Egypt and Jordan. It is in these states' interests to maintain at the regional level, to some extent, an arbitrary dichotomical divide of 'Sunni states' and 'Shia states' or 'moderates' and 'radicals'. This strategy aims primarily at containing Iran's power and strategic ambitions. Its

second function is connected with domestic distribution of power and other external and internal security concerns of the Sunni-led states in the region.

Sectarian identity is not so one-dimensional, however. As the Social Constructivist school enables us to see, there is a two-way relationship in employing sectarian identities in regional politics. On the one hand they are used as a tool of power politics, but on the other hand they create realities, which then replicate themselves. IR Constructivists, in turn, stress the importance of identity over other considerations and emphasize the power of identity politics. Moreover, without an understanding of the history – both religious and social – of the Middle East, it will be impossible for Western actors to establish a coherent policy for the region. Sectarian divisions have surfaced in all Arab states in the aftermath of the war in Iraq, and they can no longer be ignored in policymaking. The contribution of Neoconservatism to an understanding of the sectarianization of Middle East politics, for its part, stems from the resemblance the current US policy in the region bears to it. Or conversely, at the moment this policy is still very much steered by a view of the Shia identity that is influenced by Neoconservatism.

To summarize, despite the explanatory power of the Neorealist argument, the three different lines of explanation examined in this paper are, in fact, complementary and together allow for a broader understanding of the events currently unfolding in the region. In short, history and identities are mixed with, and in, geopolitics and are, as a result, producing a new set of dynamics for regional politics in the Middle East.

The final question is whether it is possible that the Shia-Sunni divide will become an important factor in shaping state behaviour in the Middle East. The answer contains a caveat: It is possible and even probable that sectarian identity – both social and religious – will become a new pan-norm in the region, *but* other identities will still continue to play a role; some (tribal, religious, family) more, some (pan-Arab, nation-state) possibly less. The weaker the state, the more likely it is that sectarian and other competing identities will gain ground.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of a 'Sectarian Strategy'

The second part of the study (Chapter 3) examined the formation of an anti-Iranian alliance according to a theoretical framework inspired by Neorealism called 'the common interest theory'. Below, some further observations will be made on potential future consequences of the anti-Iranian alliance, should it materialize as such. A normative approach (good/bad), partly influenced by Western values, will guide the analysis here. The question is: what are, on the one hand, the potential advantages of this 'sectarian strategy' for the anti-Iranian alliance and, on the other, the disadvantages of a further 'sectarianization' of regional politics in the Middle East? Most of the advantages and disadvantages are linked to regional stability/instability; others have to do with Western democratic values.

While examining the motivations inherent in the anti-Iranian alliance along the lines of the 'common interest theory', one must ask, *how the United States and its allies (hope to) benefit from the divide?* Why would these countries want to pursue a sectarianization of Middle Eastern politics? There are numerous (potential) advantages:

- The United States is determined to secure access to the Persian Gulf by maintaining the alliance with Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries. Emphasizing the existence of a 'common Shia enemy' contributes to maintaining a power balance and a security order in the Persian Gulf which are in line with US interests in the region. This is because 'the Shia' provides an easy collective name for states and groups that go against US and Israeli interests in the region:

Iran, Syria, Hizbollah and, to a certain extent, pro-Iranian Shia groups in Iraq and the Sunni Hamas.

- The Rise of the Shia rhetoric is a helpful rhetorical tool for the United States in seeking support for its policies from key Sunni governments, especially Saudi Arabia. These states have parallel interests in containing Iran's nuclear plans and its regional power ambitions, but are just as concerned about their local Shia populations as they are about the situation in Iraq, or US and Israeli aggression against Iran.
- By building an alliance of 'moderate' Sunni governments, the United States also hopes to align them not only against Iran, but to have them on the same side as Israel – peace between the Arab states and Israel being a final objective.
- The United States would never in the foreseeable future end its alliance with Israel, and therefore positioning the Saudis and Israel on the same side against Iran, Syria, Hizbollah and Hamas – the main enemies of Israel in the region – is a logical solution to the problem. The alliance of the 'Moderates against the Radicals', which the US administration is currently forging, is therefore designed to cover Israel's security and regional interests.
- Israel has seen its regional position strengthen as a result of the recent geopolitical changes and is now ready to negotiate with both the Palestinians and Syria. Partly as a consequence of the rise of Iran and its allies, the importance of the Israeli-Arab conflict on the foreign policy agendas of the Arab states looks likely to diminish as less international attention is paid to the conflict. (On the Bush Administration's agenda the conflict has only recently become a top priority.) As a consequence, the likelihood of a negotiated solution slowly increases.
- Highlighting and exaggerating the Iranian influence on the Shia populations of Sunni-dominated Arab states helps the Sunni governments justify repressive domestic measures. From the elite's point of view, this increases stability for the governments in these states and reinforces continuity of Sunni rule in the region.
- There have been fears that Persian Gulf states might turn to other suppliers of weapons and related technology if the United States does not increase its sales to Saudi Arabia. Here again, a common enemy, Iran, is used to justify the deal. A stronger military also makes the al-Saud Royal Family more powerful domestically.²¹⁴
- Forging an anti-Shia alliance will not turn the GCC leaders' heads regarding an attack on Iran, in which they would not directly participate by any means. However, as long as they perceive that the United States is on their side and against Iran, they are not in a position to object to any kind of military operations, although they might be the first to feel the direct effects of an Iranian retaliation (for example in the form of Shia sleeper cells).
- As long as the Arab states are on the same side as the United States, the latter will allow the former to pursue their nuclear programmes without similar attention to that commanded by the Iranian programme. It still remains to be seen though whether the US will allow Saudi Arabia (/GCC) to acquire a nuclear weapon. A lot will depend on developments in the US-Iranian and Israeli-Iranian relations and, most importantly, on whether the US and Israel will go all the way to stop Iran from building a nuclear weapon.
- Finally, as Constructivists point out, a common enemy is needed in order to form an identity-based group or to strengthen national identity. Enemizing the Shia also has this function inside Sunni-ruled Muslim states in the region. This aspect can be seen as a positive outcome from the point of view of regime stability.

However, there are just as many problems for the anti-Iranian alliance – both actual and potential – as there are potential advantages in forging anti-Iranian and anti-Shia policies in the region. The negative impacts include the following:

- The crisis caused by the Iranian nuclear programme will not be solved by waging sectarian divisions.²¹⁵
- The nuclearization of the 'Muslim Middle East' is likely if the Shia-Sunni divide at the regional level continues to evolve. This is because the current setting motivates Iran to pursue nuclear weapons, which will prompt Sunni Arab states to do the same. However, this scenario will only unravel if the US, Europe and Israel fail to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. In addition, nuclearization does not necessarily mean the region will become more unstable.
- According to some analysts, additional military armament will have negative outcomes in the long run because it is likely to increase the arms race in one of the world's most volatile regions.
- Drawing attention away from the Israeli-Palestinian problematique will increase frustration and cause further radicalization among the Arab publics although, on the other hand, diverting attention might eventually allow for an Israeli-Arab deal over Palestine. This might be a disadvantageous deal for the Palestinians, with Israel becoming the winner in this scenario.
- The current alliance is based on a strong US presence in the Middle East and in Iran's neighbouring countries. The US military presence in Middle Eastern countries correlates with the rise of radical and Jihadist Islamism, mostly Sunni.²¹⁶
- The US needs Iran in solving the crisis in Iraq, Lebanon and even in Palestine because of Iran's close links with Shia groups in the two countries and with Sunni Hamas in Gaza.
- The Shia-Sunni divide, as currently observed at the regional level, does not take into account the influence of other great powers in the region. In the future, the latter will increasingly counterbalance US power, especially in the Persian Gulf – the clearest example of this being the Russian and Chinese relationships with Iran.²¹⁷
- Visible American support (political, diplomatic, military and financial) for its Arab allies tends to delegitimize them in the eyes of the publics. Examples of this are the Abbas government, the Siniora government and the post-Saddam governments in Iraq. Visible US support can also constitute a rallying point for the country's enemies and those of the local governments. Examples are constituted by Iran, Hizbollah and Hamas.
- The Arab street still hails Hassan Nasrallah and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as heroes and shuns a stronger, if any, alliance with the United States. This is certainly the case as far as Israel is concerned. Sunni governments will have to work hard in order to justify their alliance with the US and Israel, if such an alliance is going to materialize more visibly.
- Finally, perhaps the most worrying consequence of anti-Iranian and anti-Shia policies is the deterioration of human and political rights and liberties for Shias in *all* Muslim countries. In Sunni-dominated states, governments will be able to take stricter measures against their local Shia populations. The democratization drive of the Bush Administration has failed and security first-thinking is on the rise both in the West and in the (Middle) East. Combined with these facts, the Arab Sunni governments will use the fight against Iran's regional influence as a means of justifying domestic anti-Shia and anti-Islamist policies, and this cover will suffice for the United States, even at the expense of moral considerations. Anti-Iranian policies, in turn, harden public opinion in Iran and enable the Iranian government/regime to justify hard-line policies against opposition groups as well as ordinary people.

Despite the possible short-term stabilizing advantages, promoting sectarian regional politics is not a desirable development in the long term for any international actor that is seeking liberal democracy in the region. Around 60 per cent of the population of the states of the Persian Gulf are Shia²¹⁸, and Iran, with a population of almost 70 million, is around 90 per cent Shia, but the Middle East is still predominantly Sunni

and Sunni-ruled. Regional sectarianization – promoting it either actively or passively – would translate into hard times for Shias in all Muslim countries. At the same time, it would mean increasing instability all around the Middle East, mainly because of Iran’s responses to what it perceived as American/Israeli/Sunni aggression against its interests in the region. Saudi Arabia would also lose its ability to use the ‘sectarian divide card’ for both engaging and containing – an important leverage it now has vis-à-vis Iran.

Therefore, although participating in inciting sectarianism through an anti-Iranian alliance/coalition might now seem to be a convenient solution for the United States and its allies, in the long term, if things do not go according to US plans – as has tended to be the case in recent years in this specific region – this can potentially have very negative consequences for regional stability, as well as for democracy in the Middle East. Using sectarian rhetoric is definitely in the interests of most ruling elites in Sunni-governed states, but these elites and governments need to be careful not to provoke internal disorder or an Iranian counter-reaction inside their borders. Because of the strengthening of Iran’s geopolitical position in the Middle East, the region now needs Iran in order to recover regional stability. On the other hand, Iran’s future geopolitical success depends on other regional actors with conflicting interests regarding the region, especially the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Sectarianism, were it to develop into a pan-norm, has the potential to precipitate the end of the present state system in the Middle East, no matter how strong this system might seem at present. In this sense, Iraq, with its many different tribal and sectarian rifts, has the potential to become the beginning of the end. If the Shia-led government succeeds in holding the state together, Iraq could mark the beginning of a new, more democratic Middle East, or at least secure the continuation of a relatively strong regional state order.

²¹⁴ However, Israel fears “that a rogue pilot armed with one of the bombs could attack on his own or that the Saudi government could one day be overthrown and the weapons could fall into the hands of a more radical regime.” Cloud: ‘U.S. Set to Offer Huge Arms Deal to Saudi Arabia’. In any case, any major threat to regime stability is most likely to come from (Sunni) Salafi Islamism, not from the Shia minority.

²¹⁵ Chubin, for example, maintains that to solve the nuclear crisis, Iran’s nuclear policies should be understood in the context of Iran’s regional political and strategic ambitions. Chubin: *Iran’s Nuclear Ambitions*, p. 10. Sectarian considerations play a role in this but they aren’t the real reason behind Iran’s recent ‘rise’.

²¹⁶ Toensing points out that even “Islamization” has had a sharp sectarian edge, most of it consisting of the spread of (Sunni) Salafi radicalism. Toensing: ‘Persian Ghosts’.

²¹⁷ Paul Rogers asserts that in addition to the domestic arms industry, the unintended beneficiaries of the recent military aid plan will be Russia, China and al-Qaida: Iran will increase arms purchases from Russia, which is beginning to redevelop its aircraft industries. China would also be willing to sell more weapons to Iran. It is already supplying Iran with a range of missiles and the two countries have also concluded long-term supply deals for Iranian oil to China. Al-Qaida in turn will be able to use the arms deal party-nexus for its own propaganda ends. Rogers, Paul: ‘Weapons of mass consequence’. *openDemocracy*. 3 August 2007.

²¹⁸ 63.6%. Calculated from Wikipedia ‘Demographics of Islam’; statistics on Iran, Iraq and the six GCC states.

Additional note on terminology

Policymakers, the media and all relevant actors in the West should be aware of the different connotations that the use of the word 'Shia' carries in Middle East Politics and International Relations in general. In the narrowest sense, the term 'Shia' can be understood at the regional level as an alliance of states, and in the widest sense it refers to all adherents of Shiism in all Muslim countries. The Constructivist 'transnational Shia identity label' and the Neoconservatist warnings about the 'Rise of the Shia' have been attributed in a collectivizing sense to at least:

- 1) states that have a Shia government or a powerful Shia group,
- 2) Shia populations, often minorities, inside Sunni-ruled states,
- 3) states with a Shia majority or even
- 4) simply Iran(ians) or Persia(ns) (usually by Sunni Arabs/Arab states).

Two examples of the confusion about what constitutes the 'Shia Revival' are the famous 'Shia Crescent' interview of King Abdullah of Jordan (mentioned and described in this study itself) and the equally famous quote by Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak who, in 2006, accused the Shia in an interview on Al-Arabiya of being almost always loyal to Iran instead of their own countries. President Mubarak's remarks provoked a storm of denunciations from Shia leaders and compelled him to declare that he was referring to spiritual rather than political allegiance.²¹⁹ In any case, Mubarak was clearly referring to Shias all around the region, not just to those in Iraq, Syria or Lebanon. The way in which the term Shia Crescent is usually applied also ignores the power potential of Shia minorities in some Arab countries (and in Pakistan) even though it includes an implicit warning of possible Iranian influence on them, which in most cases is not relevant at all. It is therefore important that the three categories outlined above – states with a Shia government or a powerful Shia group, states with a Shia majority and states with Shia populations in general – are always kept separate and distinguished from each other because they not only carry very heavy historical connotations, they also imply very different things.

²¹⁹ Khalaf, Roula: 'Resurgence of Shia arouses ancient fears among Sunni'. *Financial Times*. 2 May 2006.

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^h [e] – An electronic source was used; no exact page number was available.

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