International Relations Theories and the *Shi'a* Crescent: A Tentative Explanation?

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ABSTRACT

As a subfield where International Relations and Comparative Politics intersect, Middle East Studies have always resisted single-variable theories because of the danger posed by reductionism and ethno-centrism. Globalization has further added greater explanatory complexity to the (sub)field**.** The goal of this paper is to emphasize the necessity of combining concepts taken from Realist, Marxist, Pluralist and Constructivist approaches in order to grasp the dynamics of Shi'a regional power. Why? Because reductionist explanations inevitably leave out key factors that underlie the place and influence Shi'a political actors play in the regional system. This is important because the systemic processes affecting the Middle East are heavily influenced by a variety of regional state and non-state actors within a context shaped by American hegemony, and the political outcome of such processes are heavily dependent on the complex interaction between strategic factors, political interests and identity motivations with the result that the future looks like an impossibly vicious cycle. A case in point is the U.S. attempt to exert hegemonic power to secure oil resources and install friendly regimes has not resulted in less instability but has instead exacerbated regional resistance, which in turn has generated even more foreign intervention. As the old adage put it: *plus ça change, plus c'est pareil*.

INTRODUCTION

Scope of discussion

This paper is not an historical analysis of political Shi'ism, nor will it look at any specific state or non-state policy or action. Its ambitions are more modest. It will try offer a tentative conceptual framework for a better understanding of the contemporary dynamics of international Shi'ism. The paper's main goal is to stress the diversity of the various key factors influencing this process, its complexity and evolutionary character in order to warn against explanations that are too ambitious and to suggest instead different research and interpretation possibilities.

Three methodological Assumptions

My presentation is based on three assumptions. First, group actions are essentially too complex to be grasped by any single variable. Second, Political Science and International Relations must adjust and evolve by taking into account research and findings in other disciplines such as sociology and psychology. Third, human actors do not come into contact with reality as neutral agents but subjectively define and interpret their actions, which means that their *a priori* values and interests are key in shaping their perceptions of reality.

I. A Note on the Historical Process of Internationalization and Politicization of the Shi'a Population

In recent history, Shi'as have gone through a process of internationalization, largely as a result of a favorable political context. Their status went from that of an oppressed and marginalized minority sect to that of a group powerful enough that its belief system has become a state ideology, strong enough politically to provoke a modern political revolution that still inspires and motivates powerful national and transnational political groups and organizations.

The earliest event in the process of Shi'a internationalization was in the rise of a Shi'a sect, the Ismailis, who founded the Fatimid dynasty that ruled medieval Egypt (909-1171). This event not only acts as an historical precedent for today's Shi'as but also explains the relative sympathy Shi'ism evokes among predominantly Sunni Egyptians. The second major event occurred in 1501 when Shi'ism became an imperial religion. The founders of the Safavid Empire masterfully exploited Shi'ism using the Qizelbāš, Shi'a Turcoman groups, against their rivals, the Sunni Ottoman Empire. This was an historical turning point which contributed to the rise of Shi'ism and to its blossoming in all sorts of domains like art, architecture (both religious and secular), religious learning and most importantly its relation to political (royalist) power. Shi'a sacred sites like Qom in Iran and Najaf in Iraq (then largely under Safavid rule) turned into great pilgrimage destinations around which religious schools later developed.

Through a leadership centered on these schools, well-funded, large-scale, tightly-organized hierarchical clerical networks emerged as the various institutional centers vied for support, material and human. In turn this stimulated the growth of a highly ritualized culture founded on popular piety, giving the Shi'a clergy the opportunity to become a major political force with transnational connections. In the heyday of European imperialism they eventually played a key role in opposition movements fighting European colonial encroachment in Iran and Iraq, eventually standing up to royalist regimes compromised with outside powers (the Pahlavīs in Iran and the Hashemites in Iraq) . In both Iran and Iraq Shi'ism played a key role in major domestic upheavals with strongly international overtones, namely the 1892 Tobacco Revolt and the 1904-1905 Constitutional Revolution in Iran, and the 1920 anti-British *Thawrat al- Eshrin* revolt in Iraq.

The third major factor that encourage the internationalization of Shi'ism was the emergence of a powerful revolutionary political ideology and movement under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini that toppled the Shah in 1979 and successfully institutionalized itself in the form of a theocratic Islamic Republic.

Still the Iranian Revolution, undoubtedly influential at both the regional and international levels, did not end Shi'as' marginal position in the Sunni-dominated Arab world. Indeed very few scholars if any in the field of International Relations looked at Shi'ism as an independent variable in the evolving regional picture. Middle East scholars have tended to rely instead on the prism of political Islam as an all-encompassing framework, barely discussing political Shi'ism, Shi'a communities in the region or even Khomeinism. When they did take the latter into account, they tended to simply view them within the broader context of pan-Islamism, albeit with Shi'a bent.

A fourth decisive event in this process was the rise of Shi'a power in Iraq after the United States invaded what has always been considered a core region in the Arab Sunni

world, occupying the capital of what at one point in time was the largest and longest-lasting Arab empires, that of the Abbasids (750-1258). The effect has been to break down the barriers that once separated Shi'as. As Nasr pointed out:

> Iraq's liberation has [. . .] generated new cultural, economic and political ties among Shiite communities across the Middle East. The increasing demographic and military power of Hizbollah in Lebanon and its alliance with Alawi Syria and Iranian Ayatollahs finally rang the bell for Sunni kings and leaders to talk about (2006, p. 1):

Thus Shi'as are now in the forefront of regional and international politics, making the terms Shi'a and its derivatives and variants part of the jargon in both academic and policy circles.

In this short historical note we have briefly contextualized the rise of Shi'a power within the region as well as described some of its unique features, in particular the role the Shi'a clergy has played and plays in Shi'ism's evolution. For some (Nakash 2006) the Shi'as' distinct history as a minority and an historical underdog, not mention its particular organizational features, suggest that they have the potential and motivational strength to take the lead in the contemporary struggle for political pluralism and democratization. This however remains to be seen, and personally I am not that optimistic (WHY?).

II. Shi'as, International Relations Theories and the Middle East in the 21st Century

Middle East Area Studies and their Challenges

As a group Shi'as are part of the wider Middle East regional system, which possesses a certain cultural and historical homogeneity but is also highly polarized along a set of dyadic relationships: ethno-linguistic (Arabs vs. Non-Arabs), ethno-religious (Sunnis vs. Shi'as), politico-ideological (secular vs. religious), socio-economic (opulent/rentier classes vs. pauperized masses). These polarities are theoretically and methodologically challenging to area studies and scholars so much so that some refer to research as being in a "deadlock" or simply a "failure" (Haliday 2005), incapable on inadequate to explain events with tsunami-like consequences. All we need to do is remember Lebanon' Civil War (1975-1990) and the Iranian Revolution of 1979 to realize the field's shortcomings!

Given the ontological particularities of the Middle Eastern system we may well be tempted to develop brand new theories to understand the region's endogenous political developments and its proper place in the wider dynamic of the international system. We might come to the conclusion, as we shall see later in this paper, that the Westphalian state-centered paradigm based on the assumption that political actors pursue relatively rational national interests, based on some form of nationalism as the dominant political ideology and economic liberalism as the main economic creed, is closer to a collection of Euro-centric normative precepts that are foreign to the Middle East than to a set of explanatory variables that can enlighten us on the region's ontological particularities.

This said, this paper will not try to re-invent the wheel and provide new models. Its methodological aim is more modest and is limited to arguing that a composite approach is a good starting point. As we will see in the next sections, it is simplistic and misleading to put a straight jacket on Middle East Studies and focus on one theoretical approach. Explaining the region's insertion in the global power system, the internal (regional and national) battle between tradition (itself a modern invention) and modernity (which is already a few centuries old), the never-ending complexities entailed by state-formation, the structural weakness of externally-oriented resource-based economies, and the endless conflicts both within and between regional states, not to mention the ever-present shadow of religion, require a more eclectic approach.

Even looking at Shi'as as a subsection of this wider canvass called the Middle East is an exercise plagued with problems because they, too, are highly diversified and complex. Whatever commonalities Shi'a communities may have—minority position in most places, theological unity, shared religious rituals, etc.—should not hide the fact that they too are split in terms of geopolitical interests, ethnic identity, political views, epistemic communities, (i.e. religious leadership), etc.

II. 1. The Realist Approach

State Actors, High Politics and the Partial Application of Realism

Realism posits a central role for state actors and high politics (security and survival). As such it is partially applicable to the region's politics since both play an important role. Middle eastern states play indeed a key role at both the domestic and international levels within the constraints of a post-1991 unipolar world, a condition which limits their margins of maneuver in foreign policy. Nuclear proliferation, the arms race, sectarian conflict and the Israeli-Arab conflict particularly occupy governments' agendas.

Realism and its Limits

But the Realist approach falls short in at least two respects. First, Middle Eastern states are not "rational unitary actors" and in none is there a nice fit between ethnic and political border. Second and as a corollary to the first condition, states are increasingly faced with competing sub-national or transnational players or both. The Realist assumption that states' external behavior is largely a function of their internal homogeneity in pursuit of security and survival in a largely anarchical world (where capabilities are unevenly distributed) is too broad for any useful explanation. As some have suggested (Noble 1991), the limited functional differentiation of the state apparatus from underlying societal realities means that "unit properties" are important in the dynamics of the regional system since they have shaped local state-formation. What are these properties? Two main ones come to mind: structural weakness inherent in postcolonial states and the persistent strength of religion and religiously-defined social groups.

Many a scholar have observed that in the Middle East modern statecraft is still perceived a foreign object brought in the saddle bags of colonial powers (Badie, 1992). At the same time though, the development of oil-based economies has enabled some traditional elites to consolidate (read freeze) traditional social institutions and patterns of social organization so that secular modernizing regimes in places Egypt, Iran, Iraq or Syria have had limited success in sinking roots. Even Turkey is to some extent faced by this situation despite attempts by Turkish elites to anchor the country in the European continent. This has led to the "chronic instability of regional politics".

Another factor to consider are "relational properties," that is the impact of society on the state actor and its consequent effect on regional politics (Gause III, 2002). As much as the region is split along certain dyadic polarities, within most states a certain idea about homogeneity and the nature of each state prevails, reflecting the influence of domestic forces. Whether they concern internal (Shi'a or Sunni identities, Arab or Non-Muslim, theocratic or secular state) or regional issues (the Palestinian cause, Lebanon, the U.S. invasion of Iraq), the writing of political agendas tends to be seen and played out as zero-sum game with given views dominating and few concessions for others, favoring relatively uniform stands on issues like the peace process with Israel or the status of Islam in society. These "relational properties" undermine the analytical model based on the Westphalian order rooted in formally equal territorialized states. Seen from the outside, the conduct of the foreign policy in this region appears clumsy to say the least (if not worse)—at a deeper level, it reveals that opposing orders are in fact at work. Raison d'état might sound reasonable in post-Westphalian Europe where actors play on a single chess board, but in the Middle East the systemic game is played on more than one. In this

context, the state is but one board; the others are the region itself (against outside interests), religion (Islam vs. others), confessionalism (Sunni vs. Shi'a), economics (redistributive policies). The tensions among these sets of organizing principles have created dysfunctional polities suffering from severe legitimacy and efficiency crises.

A high degree of cultural homogeneity coupled with political regimes relatively permeable to social influences and new opportunities created by globalization, and you have a window of opportunity for non-state actors to challenge the role states play in domestic and foreign policy (Hezbollah is one example, but not the only one).

Interestingly, Realists have tended to react to this kind of criticism by revisiting and reinterpreting the more classical approaches, but in doing so they have ended up recognizing the limits of their own theories in the context of economic globalization.

II. 2. Structural Neo-Marxism
Neo-Marxism, Dependency Theory and the Politics of Oil
Neo-Marxists and World-System theorists like Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein and Robert Cox have tried to explain the conundrum called the Middle East by emphasizing its peripheral status in the global capitalist system. In neo-Marxist terms, the political developments of the region are better understood in terms of the colonial (centre-periphery) relationship that developed between local elites, whether traditional or technocratic, and outside metropolitan interests, in which the former develop vested interests in the system ruled by the latter. In oil-rich countries elites have built *rentier states* allowing them to rule without accountability to their respective society, thanks to high, single-commodity rents, largely generated by oil and gas.

Instead of being anarchical as the Realists would have us believe, the world order is just that, ordered, based on a multi-tiered capitalist system where some states are more equal than others. What Realism cannot explain, unequal economic relations and their consequences, Dependency Theory can, or so it is thought. Research by scholars loosely labeled New Left emphasizes the key role of oil and its strategic importance to the U.S. strategy of global dominance. It is this strategy that is said to be the driving force behind the invasion of Iraq in 2003 but also the reason for Anglo-American intervention in Iran in 1953 and for British intervention in the region in 1915-1922. Both source of immense wealth and bane on the region's peoples, hydrocarbons are a key geo-strategic resource that cannot be left out of any analysis of the Middle East. The need for cheap oil and gas resources, but also the perceived need to control those resources, have always shaped the interaction between regional and world politics. As already noted the 1953 coup against Iran's nationalist government under Mohammad Mosaddeq is a case in point. Under the Shah restored to its throne, Iran is said to have played a key role as a regional policeman for outside interests.

But in an odd twist of fate, the three regions with the largest known oil reserves happen to be inhabited by Shia majorities in Iran, Iraq and in north-eastern Saudi *al-Hasa* region. As such, this has raised concern about the potential rise of a Shi'a economic juggernaut and the consequences that that might entail, especially for local actors like Saudi Arabia but also outside players like the United States.

Limits of Neo-Marxism and Dependency Theory
Omitting economic factors as Realists tend to do is one thing; reducing politics to economics as Neo-Marxists do is another. Structural Neo-Marxism correctly stresses the constraints imposed by the world economy on the Middle East regional system but like Realism it overlooks unit properties and the process of state-formation and the role played by non-Westphalian factors in intraregional state rivalries.

To reduce states to the status of mere instruments in the hands of elites, in both center and periphery, is to exaggerate the importance of material power and underestimate how embedded cultural and social factors are. It also underrates non-states agents in influencing the political process. The rise of Arabism, Islamism or Shi'ism cannot be easily reduced to the workings and trappings of the global capitalist structure. As non-state-centered ideology Islamism fills the gap left wide open by the apparent failure of nationalist and secular ideologies. Islamists exploit issues such as the failure of

modernization, the lack of political representation, Israel's position in the region, etc., to offer alternative strategies based on identity politics.

In short the global resurgence of Islam, the region's deep sectarianism and their impact on international relations cannot be exclusively explained by reference to statocentric or economic approaches.

II. 3. Pluralist and Constructivist Approaches

Pluralist and constructivist scholars have called into question the Waltzian Structural Realism which sees the state "as a rational unitary actor" and insist instead on the need to consider both non-economic factors and non-state players. They posit that the validity of the rationality assumption is dependent upon the process of state formation. Hence in a world of asymmetrical threats and suicide bombers, civilizational differences and variable group identities bring in long neglected subjectivities into political analysis.

The Sociology of International Relations

Sociological approaches to international politics are informed by two basic assumptions. First, as pointed out earlier, states are anchored in societal relations. Decision-makers inevitably adopt a variable set of policy strategies (cooperation, alliance, cooptation, coercion, etc.) in response to the domestic pressures. Thus we must consider how the state apparatus interacts with its own society if we want to open the way to different research paths, and depart from Realist rationality assumptions based on the supposedly anarchical structure of the international state system. Secondly, sovereignty as a legal concept may still carry some weight but few inside and outside the academic world believe that it is what it was historically purported to be. Its significance has been eroded at both the supra and sub-national levels; more importantly, non-state actors like multinational corporations, civil society groups, NGOs, organized crime syndicates, as well as terrorist groups operate, depending on the circumstances through, despite or against state controls. Greenpeace, Amnesty International, Evangelical Christian groups, the Muslim Brotherhoods or al-Qaeda, just to mention a few, have this one thing in common: they are all stateless international political actors that engage in influential transnational strategies, each affecting in their own way the existing system, either for or against the hegemonic system or with a neutral impact.

In the Middle East non-state actors, unrestrained by states agendas and more socially rooted, are challenging the regional order. Their revisionist views and anti-system motivations are mainly related to identity politics. As Robert Malley (2006) suggests a group like Hezbollah, a militarized Lebanese Shi'a political organization, has successfully imposed itself as an important *regional* actor by challenging the Israeli and Lebanese governments. Israel's 2006 attack may have been disproportionate in fire power and material damage but it was not indiscriminate since the Israelis knowingly targeted Hezbollah and Shi'a areas; hence the term Hezbollah-Israel War. And yet as asymmetrical as the fighting might have been, the final score was a stalemate, which on the Arab street at least means a Hezbollah victory.

In constructivist terms, this war shows how political actors do not always search to maximize their immediate self-interest or perform certain functions in the interests of global capitalism. It also does show that national interest is not an objective notion, especially in a deeply divided society; culturally-filtered perceptions can and do influence how interests are understood and pursued. By the same, norms and values are important for the understanding of the political process.

Religion as the Bedrock of Identity,

One main implication of identity theories is to question Realist rationalism. Realists reduce states to material power maximizers with interests and rationality defined as exogenous to the actors' subjectivity (Alexander Wendt. 1999, see also Lapid and Kratochwil 1996). But as we shall see this is hardly a factor in explaining the rise of the Shi'a in the Middle East. By contrast, a constructivist approach is heuristically more promising.

A first point that must inform research is the need to explain the secular-religious divide and its dynamics. While there are in politics secular-oriented Shi'a groups like Iraq's *al-Dawa*, the bulk of Shi'a groups aim at renegotiating the relationship between politics and religion in the latter's favor. Notwithstanding theological differences between Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Sayyid al-Sistani, Sheikh Fazlollah in Lebanon and Iran's Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamene'i over *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship by Islamic Jurists) all agree that secularism is bad as a philosophical and political model (see Hurd, 2007). Shi'a leaders' use of elections under secular rule to overturn their oppressed minority status in both Iraq and Lebanon does not change their religion-driven agenda.

A second factor that also needs some explaining is the triad defeat-humiliation-revenge as a returning motif in shaping domestic alliances and foreign policy as well as state and non-state Shi'a groups' position in the broader international political picture (Harkavy 2000). In the modern Middle East the Palestinian tragedy or *Nakba* conjures up all sorts of ideas and emotions associated with the memory of what is seen as an utter and total defeat in the Arab and the wider Muslim world. The humiliation inflicted upon the Arab nation and the Muslim *Ummah* in Palestine embodies the dejected status of a once mighty civilization that now had to endure military defeat, long-term domination and even colonial and demographic conquest. The opportunity that secular Arab nationalism had to overturn that defeat and undo its consequences came to naught; the 1967 defeat swept it away, creating a vacuum that Islam came to fill as a political force and ideology.

A third factor that needs to be explored is the challenge posed by religion in the 21st century. Far from withering away, religion seems to be in a global resurgence, challenging the secular dispensation that seemed established once and for all, domestically and internationally, in many parts of the world. (see Haynes, article on Religion and IR, in 2004, look also Shakman Hurd's book on Politics of secularism in IR, 2007, see also Hallaward 2008). Even though secularists might not be on the run, more and more scholars are of the opinion that theoretical and methodological research in International Relations must take into account this resurgence if we are to understand what is going one in the world today; indeed religion is as much a challenge to hitherto dominant views about International Relations as globalization was right after the end of the Cold War.

III. INTEGRATIVE APPROACH
Key Concepts: US Hegemony, State Formation and Identity
     The brief survey of the main theoretical approaches was meant to show their strengths and weaknesses. What is clear is that the rise of Shi'a power in the context of a globalizing Middle East makes it difficult to accept parsimonious, and somewhat simplistic theories like Neo-Realism or Neo-Marxism. Many have sought to modify, reinterpret and revise such approaches (Rynning and Ringmose 2008). Here I shall make an attempt, albeit a modest one, to look at alternatives to grand theories or relativism. An integrative approach to the evolving Shi'a regional order (or disorder depending on one's point of view) can perform at least two useful functions: broad description and limited theory-building.

     The concept of anarchy has undergone different interpretations. "Different qualities of anarchy" as the ordering principle of state system informs this shift in Realist research. What this means is that the Middle East can be seen as a system that represents a mature situation of anarchy where political actors have strikingly much in common and exhibit a degree of homogeneity not found in other regional systems. Methodologically this takes a first step away from Kenneth Waltz' concept of anarchy as the flip side of the Westphalian order of sovereign states and opens it up to other shifts at the "second image level".

     The revisionist concept of "unit properties" refers to the impact of state-formation on the regional system. For example, as the built-in weakness of post-colonial Arab states declines, inter-states tensions and interference tend to decrease as well. This means the principle of *Raison d'État* is actually prevailing insofar as few existing borders are questioned. Yet despite the consolidation of the post-colonial order, by sheer inertia if for no other reason, the region remains permeable to outside structural pressures. Secondly, the unit properties of the various states opened up Pandora's Box insofar as it allowed emerging elites to make an instrumental use of contending theories to justify their power and policies.

     It is within this context that the expression 'Shi'a Crescent' has emerged. As such it involves different levels of analysis in which state, non-state and international levels interact and shape the nature and perception of the Crescent itself along which Shi'a power is purported to embody. Each level of analysis can be further broken down along specific axes such as energy politics, epistemic communities, identity factors, etc. But all of these levels of analysis are mutually interconnected, both reinforcing and undermining each other.

     The Iranian revolution of 1979 and the rise of a Shi'a-controlled Iraqi government had an unprecedented impact on Shi'a communities across the region. Saudi Arabia is a case in point. What was once a closed society is now revealing itself to be in turmoil as the Shi'a communities in the eastern part of the kingdom exhibit greater activism and strong propensity towards political militancy and resistance to Riyadh's centralizing policies. Here demands for recognition and pluralism can no longer be silenced and as a close Bush ally the Saudi government can hardly ignore or brutally suppress them.

     Iran's desire to exert greater influence in the region is a second example of this interconnectedness as Tehran tried after the Iran-Iraq War to cast its shadow more widely in order to re-establish itself as a regional power. Many students of Iranian diplomacy

have observed that as much as mullahs tried to be accepted in the past, they never got very far. In regional forums in Central Asia (see Edmund Herzig 2004, *Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia*), the Caucasus or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, attempts by the Iranian regime to be integrated as a key strategic partner in security and economic affairs have generally met with lukewarm reception. Tehran's appeals to shared regional or historical identities largely fell on deaf ears. Iranian wooing of the Arabs (starting with the Arab League) to its west did not come to fruition.

This state of affairs changed after 2001. Post-Taliban Afghanistan and post-Saddam Iraq freed Iran from the need to engage in two-front strategy of "Mutual Containment." Two of Tehran's fiercest rivals were gone, courtesy of the US Armed Forces. This opened up opportunities for Iran to become the linchpin of the emerging Shi'a Bloc in Middle East, connecting to Syria and Lebanon through Iraq. Iranian cultural, economic, political and military influence in this bloc is now undeniable (Iranian money goes into religious schools, holy sites and a vast network of clients and NGOs, etc.). But far from being new some of these ties go back a long time, centuries even. Indeed, while Hezbollah might have been founded in the 1980s, Iranian political and religious links to Lebanese Shi'as go back to Safavid times (16th c.) (Shehabi ed., *Distant Relations, Iran and Lebanon in the last 500 years*, 2006). In fact, Hezbollah as well as Iraq' Shi'as are natural clients for Iran. The strategic alliance struck between Iran and Syria (Fred Lawson 2007) has also strengthened the Iran-Hezbollah axis. This cooperation is based on common identity and Western political and military circles recognize this fact. The Iraqi Study Group chaired by James Baker and Lee Hamilton, a bi-partisan panel appointed by US congress (2006), stressed the necessity for including Iran and Syria into any diplomatic solution to the Middle East crises. Even in the current Democratic presidential primary elections, the idea of negotiating with Iran is gathering support. Conversely, the more the Iranian regime feels isolated with its survival at stake, the more likely it will see a threat in what from Tehran seems to be a U.S.-Sunni axis. Such a perception will neither help nor stop its nuclear ambitions, nor moderate its foreign policy in the region.

Foreign intervention is another factor in shaping the multilevel variables. In integrative approaches to the study of the Middle East (see Hinnebusch 2003), external intervention is seen as generating four types of reactions—identity frustrations caused by arbitrary borders, anti-imperialism, tensions over the Palestinian issue and hydrocarbon politics—,each operating on four distinct levels: communal, state, regional and international. As mentioned international and local (communal, state and regional) levels are mutually reinforcing as foreign encroachment generates local resistance which in turn reinforces the need for external intervention to avoid exclusion and loss. There are echoes of 'Who lost China?' here. This is especially true for communally-based, non-state actors who are less constrained by the international order and its rules and more likely to mobilize support and gain legitimacy by appealing to more relevant transcendental identity markers (i.e. religion and language). For local, self-styled resistance groups existing states and elites and the international hegemon, i.e. the United States, are legitimate targets. Arab governments are caught in a quandary because most of them must accommodate Washington while appeasing the Arab streets in order to maintain an even course between the demands of world realpolitik and the need for domestic political legitimacy, stability and survival based on a balance between identity and autonomy.

However, the Iraq invasion has changed all this, unleashing the power of sectarianism with consequences unseen in recent history; and this has far-reaching implications for the present and future of Shi'a power. It also demonstrates how interdependent variables are and how unpredictable consequence-wise they can be. In fact Shi'a regional political actors are of several minds when it comes to U.S. power. If Hezbollah remains dead-fast opposed to the United States and at war with its main regional ally, Israel, Iraq's Shi'a-dominated government has to closely cooperate with Bush administration.

But behind this cross-cutting split hides another, which is even more troublesome because it constitutes a far older division within Islam itself. Largely papered over, this division was *reopened* when U.S. forces entered Baghdad. Like a cultural san Andreas fault, the Sunni vs Shi'a split is deep, going back to Islam's early history with deep roots in the Shi'a and Sunni psyche (at least in the Mashriq), largely reflected in the two sects' theology, jurisprudence, religious rituals and politics.

As late as the 1980s for most Sunnis both Israel and Iran were threats. With Israel several short wars were fought, but under Saddam Hussein, Iraq fought an eight year war which for many Sunnis was a war against the Shi'a threat. But with the old Ba'athist dictator gone, the anti-Shi'a bulwark has collapsed and the enemy is now within the gates. Indeed, it was Jordan's King Abdullah II who in December 2004 in an interview with the *Washington Post* first raised serious concerns about what he called the "Shi'a Crescent," sentiments later echoed by the Saudi ambassador in Washington.

In Sunni Islam Shi'ism is viewed as a heresy. In Sunni Arab political culture, it is perceived as a source of division, a potential fifth column dominated by the Arabs' arch-enemy, the Persians who might have abandoned Zoroastrian fire-worship but are still the 'Other.' Since the 1980s The intense radicalism found among Sunnis in the region and in its Muslim periphery (Afghanistan, Pakistan, etc) was aided, abetted and funded by Saudi Arabia as a way to curb Iranian, read Shi'a influence. Al-Qaeda is but a morphed offspring of early anti-Shi'a groups. And given its transnational character, sectarianism fuels clashes and violence between Sunnis and Shi'as outside the Arab world as well, especially on Islam's borderlands in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 did not create this sectarian divide, but it exacerbated it; in turn this makes U.S. plans to reconstruct Iraq and the Middle East along desirable lines (at least in Washington) at best a pipe dream, at worse a nightmare which we can only image. Ironically, by making a bad situation even worse, the U.S. is forced to get even more involved to avoid an even greater disaster.

In Iraq itself Sunnis have become a proxy for Sunni regimes who do not want a second Shi'a dominated country, especially one as oil-rich as Iraq. With outside encouragement, including that of the Arab League, Iraqi Sunnis have been playing this role, but for the benefit of Saudi and the Persian Gulf petro-monarchies who do not want to lose out in any new regional balance of power. However, in doing so they have been helping al-Qaeda and its scorched-earth policy against US and Shi'as targets in Iraq. From al-Qaeda's perspective, greater Sunni resistance to U.S. hegemony is meant to turn a localized civil war into a region-wide conflagration. The U.S. military surge and its attempt to woo Sunni tribes into new power arrangements have had some success, but for how long? Lest we forget that was tried before under Nixon and its proxy collapsed anyway.

One fallout from this deepening Sunni-Shi'a sectarian conflict is the weakening of the traditional pan-Islamic front against Israel. In 2006 Arab Sunni governments were quite timid in their support for Hezbollah's resistance to Israel despite the Party of God's attempts to portray itself as continuing the Arab battle against Israel.

This ambivalence towards the Lebanese Shi'a movement was more of an elite phenomenon, something which brings us to another important factor to take into account, namely the role and peculiar features leadership and clerical leaders have among Shi'as. In Iraq for example (but also in Lebanon, not to mention in Iran), clerics have great influence on the political process and its outcomes. Unlike Sunni religious leaders, Shi'a clerics are having a great impact on the U.S. enterprise in Iraq.

Epistemic community

As you will find out from other presentations in the panel today, Shi'ism is much more structured, centralized and homogenous than Sunni Islam. Although less discussed, epistemic communities are very influential in determining the political evolution and dynamism of Shi'ism's regional power.

In *Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination* Peter Haas first introduced the concept of epistemic communities in 1992. When he used the term he was referring to modern technocrats who share a common paradigm of knowledge and experience. I am going to use the concept as well but in a much broader sense to describe the community of Shi'a leaders, and this for the following reasons. First, they form a network of experts who share a paradigm of knowledge (in the field of jurisprudence, normative principles and shared view of their interests) that is distinct from the Sunni paradigm. Second, their leadership is institutionalized, based on their status as scholars and experts. Their place and function are consensually accepted; they are by right prominent in the wider community of religious schools and among the laity. Third, the clerical leadership's power is based on a well-developed network of schools, mosques and *husainiyyah,* etc. with financial backing by a variety of charities and NGOs. exercised through the Institution of Emulation, With such institutional foundations linked together to form powerful networks, Shi'a clerics constitute epistemic communities with great capacity for mass mobilization. Thus they have an important impact on the political process and its policy outcomes.

Again the Iraq case is very significant in this regard. Ayatollah al-Sistani has played a key role in the rise to power of Shi'as, in their political alliance and cooperation with the U.S. and Britain, and in engaging the Americans in political arm-wrestling. In June 2003 for example he successfully stopped the Americans from launching a quick process in constitution-making. Instead he insisted on direct elections, one man one vote, which in the 2005 parliamentary elections brought Shi'as to power as Iraq's dominant political community, in charge of both the executive and legislative branches of government. He was able to play good cop-bad cop, staging mass pacific demonstrations in Baghdad at one time and encouraging Iraqi Shi'as to choose self-restraint at others. Upon U.S. request, he even got radical Shi'a leader Moqtada al-Sadr to hold back his Al-Mahdi army. As Fareed Zakarya pointed out, Shi'a leaders have masterfully exerted an "extraordinary restraint" in Iraq, which is a sign of political maturity and a first step in shaping Iraqi politics and create a Shi'a political model. For Zakarya, if this is pulled off it would be a revolution for the entire Arab world.

A power shift from Sunni to Shi'a in the heart of the Arab world has not yet been achieved. Much will depend on how ongoing Sunni-Shi'a conflict unfolds. Their competition, as Nasr put it, will "define the Middle East and shape its relations with the outside world" for a long time. Once more this means that the U.S. will have to readjust its diplomacy and integrate Shi'a actors in order to control radicalism in the region. So far the existing U.S.-Sunni regional axis has failed to contain extremism. In Iraq this means doing the opposite, i.e. control Sunni radicalism, if the situation is to be stabilized in the country. Should Shi'as emerge as a moderate force, it may on the long run effect some positive changes in the direction of more representative government in other parts of the Middle East. How close or far the latter may be from the Westminster model or Jeffersonian democracy is anybody's guess.

Non-State Actors: Hezbollah

Since the study of International Relations clearly recognizes the plurality of actors in world politics, transnational and non-state actors are no longer seen as marginal. In the Middle East such entities are increasingly challenging states' functions in a context of globalization (new information technologies, human exchanges, regional networks, etc.). Hezbollah is a prime example of that. It has developed as a quasi state within the state of Lebanon and imposed itself as a key political force, claiming to defend Shi'as (Lebanon's largest community: 40 to 45%) in particular, and Muslims in general from Israeli aggression. Whatever one may think of Hezbollah, it cannot be disregarded . . . or dismissed. The U.S. must deal with it, so must Israel and the Lebanese government.

As Stniland says (2005) in the case of transnational insurgents, Hezbollah successfully built up a power base and armed forces, organizing its home front, developing a material infrastructure and gaining momentum to establish its authority through alliances with the Iranian and Syrian states and in building a large social support network across Lebanon and around the region, even outside Shi'a communities. But much of its success lies in its military operations. As a military force it has successfully mastered the art of asymmetrical warfare relying on suicide bombers to achieve its end as it did in 1983 when its attacks against the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and the French base also in the capital, accelerated their pullout from the country. Similarly, by systematically harassing Israeli forces in southern Lebanon it forced its archenemy to pull out in May 2000 from the buffer zone it had created. Lastly in 2006 Hezbollah could portray itself as a political victor against the Jewish State despite the heavy losses suffered by the civilian population and the infrastructure.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to make a case against relying on single-variable analyses to understand the Middle East in general and the Shi'a power in particular. Our brief overview of contending theoretical approaches illustrated some of the advantages but especially the weaknesses and limits the former have when used to explain the nature and dynamics of Shi'a power in the Middle East. Instead our approach sought to exploit their advantages in an integrated approach using an interdependent multilevel analysis. The interconnectedness of hegemonic power, state and non-state actors and contending identity motivations (and their respective conceptual derivatives), when related to one

another, can better explain the evolving dynamics of Shi'a power in the region. Hopefully it can better inform future research.

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