

Don't Fear the Shiites

The Idea of a Teheran-Controlled »Shiite Crescent« over the Greater Middle East Is at Odds with Reality

MICHAEL BRÖNING

A specter is abroad in the Middle East: the specter of a Shiite threat. In recent months opinion-makers not only in Washington, but also in the region have discerned a fundamental threat to the status quo in the Middle East in the form of a global Shia, controlled from Teheran. But does this reference to the division of the Islamic community in the seventh century into Sunni and Shia really account for the regional power constellation in the twenty-first century? Or is the notion of a fundamental split in the region between »moderate« Sunnis and »aggressive« Shiites merely an overgeneralization – although one which could turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy?¹ We shall try to show that the thesis of an all-pervasive politico-religious conflict between Sunnis and Shiites, although plausible at first glance, does not stand up to closer examination. Detailed analysis of current developments shows that the notion of a Sunni-Shiite divide is rather a *politically* motivated way of looking at things. Although it chimes well with the interests of various US hardliners, not to mention the security needs of moderate Arab regimes, nevertheless it is of little use as a reliable guide for political action.

The Invention of the »Shiite Crescent«

In the context of current conflicts concerning the Iranian nuclear program, political power intrigues in Lebanon, as well as the continuing violence in Palestine and Israel, and in Iraq, two explanatory models have recently caused a stir: The first can be summarized in the idea of a Shiite Crescent, the second in that of a Shia Rise or Shia Revival.

1. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice defines »moderate states« in this connection as »likeminded states who are fearful of Iranian power, moderate states who don't want Iran to extend its power into the region.« Online: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/73176.htm>

The two formulations can barely be distinguished and refer to the same phenomenon. Although the notion of the Shiite crescent was developed in the Middle East, while the thesis of the Shia Rise was propagated mainly by US observers, they can be differentiated from one another as little as from the thesis that there is an all-pervasive Sunni-Shiite divide in the region. In sum, all the variants of this theme are based upon a conceptually vague threat analysis.

The concept of a Shiite crescent derives from a remark made by King Abdullah II of Jordan in December 2004 in an interview with the *Washington Post*, urgently calling attention to the potential threat constituted by an all-pervasive »Shia crescent.« The King vividly described a curve running from Hezbollah in Lebanon, through the Assad regime in Syria and the Shiite dominated government in post-Saddam Iraq, to Saudi Arabia and, finally, Teheran.²

As soon as it was published this thesis, presented as it was in an unusually open and insistent manner, was sharply criticized, and not only by Teheran. In various quarters of the Arab media voices were raised accusing the Jordanian King of encouraging sectarian tendencies. Abdullah II reacted to this criticism among other things by firing the head of the Jordanian secret service, who had been responsible for this choice of words, although he did not retract the substance of what he had said. He merely shifted the emphasis: To talk of a Shia crescent is too simplistic from a confessional standpoint, but it is a »political« reality.³

The theory was soon taken up, however, and in the process amplified and amended. Versions have since emerged that understand the Shia crescent to constitute a geopolitical axis of Shiite power extending to Pakistan, Azerbaijan, and »the poppy fields of Afghanistan.« Such a *Greater Greater Middle East* would constitute »the first Islamic state to achieve great-power status since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.«⁴

Egyptian president Mubarak subsequently took up the idea for political reasons, modified for a domestic audience, sweepingly describing

2. Wright, Robin and Peter Baker: »Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election from Iran,« in: *Washington Post*; December 8, 2004.

3. Cf. Black, Ian: »Fear of Shia Full Moon,« in: *Guardian*; January 26, 2007.

4. Cf. Butcher, Tim: »The Shia-Sunni Schism,« in: *Daily Telegraph*; March 7, 2007; and Walker, Martin: »The Revenge of the Shia,« in: *Wilson Quarterly*; Fall 2006. The thesis of the Shiite crescent was taken up among others by Joschka Fischer. Cf. Fischer, Joschka, Dan Diner, and Daniel Cohn-Bendit: »Islamismus, Iran und die Zukunft Europas,« in: *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*; 4, 2006.

the Shiite minorities in the region as a »disloyal« fifth column of Teheran. In a tv interview with Al Arabiya on April 8, 2006, Mubarak declared that »most of the Shias are loyal to Iran, and not to the countries they are living in.«

The utterances of the King of Jordan and the President of Egypt, who in US terms are »moderate« Arab leaders, encountered enormous political interest in the USA. They were picked up by the conservative establishment, but also by critics of US policy in the Middle East who denounced the new threat from »Shiite radicals« of various stripes as a direct consequence of President Bush's failed policy. The perception of the Shia crescent was taken up and developed academically by presidential advisor Vali Nasr who introduced into the debate a detailed analysis of regional developments pointed up as »the rise of the Shia.«⁵ Although the Bush government has so far not used these formulations publicly the thesis of a »Shia rise« has had a considerable influence on the current national security strategy, in which Shiite Iran is not by chance described as the »greatest challenge« to the security of the United States.⁶

The assessment of an all-pervasive threat from a global Shia controlled from Teheran is also shared by prominent Israeli decision-makers, apparently borne out by President Ahmadinejad's constant threats. Although Ehud Barak's recent warning of a »Shiite banana« (sic) in the region was mocked even in Israel's right-leaning media on account of its unfortunate phrasing the idea has quickly caught on. For example, Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz recently warned against returning the Golan Heights to Syria since, in view of the existing »front of extremists,« this would lead to an »Iranian presence« not only in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, but also on the Syrian–Israeli border. Even the Israeli General Staff recently described the Shia crescent as »one of the three main driving forces of radicalism and extremism in the region.«⁷ As the thesis of the Shia cres-

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5. Cf. Nasr, Vali: »When the Shiites Rise,« in: *Foreign Affairs*; July/August 2006. For Nasr the US invasion of Iraq upset the »sectarian balance« both in Iraq and the region as a whole. However, he regards this as an opportunity for the USA to engage with Iran in direct political talks. In subsequent versions of the thesis of the Rise of the Shia these subtle shades have generally been lost.
 6. The White House: »The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,« March 2006, Washington: 20 f.
 7. Ben-Horin, Yitzhak: »Minister Mofaz: The return of the Golan Heights to Syria« (in Hebrew), in: *Yedioth Aharonoth*; April 28, 2008; and Nehusthan, Ido: »How Will the IDF Confront Regional Threats? A Strategic Overview,« in: *Israeli Security*; Vol. 7, No. 36, March 2008.

cent continues to spread it is scarcely surprising that its advocates have at their disposal a large quantity of convincing evidence, at least at first glance. But what about the details?

The Shia Rise as a Threat

The main witness of the supposed threat from a Teheran-controlled increase in Shiite power in the region is the current developments in Iraq, where the Shiites have undergone an all-pervasive political resurgence since the fall of the Saddam regime. Although Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki officially heads a government of national unity it is supported only by an alliance of the two Kurdish parties, the KDP and the PUK, as well as by the two Shiite parties, Al Dawa and SIIC.⁸

In the view of Washington and also in the region the elimination of Saddam indirectly left Teheran as the new dominant power in Mesopotamia. For example, Saudi foreign minister bitterly complained about the »reckless handing over of Iraq to Iran.«⁹ Advocates of the Shia crescent thesis consider that the continuing high level of endemic violence in Mesopotamia and constant discrimination against the Sunni minority are the consequences of Iranian activities in Iraq. The continuing rejection of the elected Iraqi government by Sunni-majority states may also be explained against this background. In this context President Ahmadinejad's brief visit to Baghdad was understood as a demonstration of Iranian power par excellence.

The well-known structural discrimination suffered by Shiite Iraqis at the hands of the Saddam regime means that inter-confessional tensions are by no means new in Iraq. However, in recent months these tensions have taken on a new quality. The expulsions, abductions, and murders justified on a quasi-ethnic or -religious basis that have been going on for months, perpetrated by various actors (Al Qaida in Iraq, the SIIC's Badr Brigade, Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, and so on), attest to the penetration of the private sphere by confessional differences. This is something

8. It remains unclear whether the internally discussed return to the government of the Sunni *Tawafuq* bloc in the case of actual government participation will last, or is merely a short-term attempt to improve its image before the regional elections.

9. Cited in Takeyh, Ray: »Iran's New Iraq,« in: *Middle East Journal*, Volume 62, No. 1, Winter 2008: 23.

of a novelty in Iraq. In the context of urban districts that have been ethnically and religiously homogenized and thousands of inter-confessional marriages that have been dissolved one can justifiably speak of a thoroughgoing Sunni-Shia divide in the country. The *political* segregation by religious confession pursued by the Saddam regime has been transformed into a personal and everyday segregation that is more visible to the average citizen. This new dimension of *sectarianism* explains the perception of many Iraqis that ethnic-confessional tensions have emerged in Iraq for the first time.

Alongside the case of Iraq the only recently settled tensions aroused by the presidential election in Lebanon offer an example of the destabilizing influence of a Teheran-directed global Shia. In Lebanon the Shiite Hezbollah plays a key role, with various kinds of support from Syria and Iran. From December 2006 Hezbollah supporters besieged the Parliament in Beirut and in May this year occupied large parts of the Lebanese capital in a surprise military coup. Based on the considerable demographic changes of recent years Hezbollah is demanding a change in confessional proportional representation, which determines the distribution of cabinet and parliamentary positions. Within the framework of these disputes the May 19 presidential election was postponed before agreement could be reached on Michel Sleiman as the new president on May 21 in Doha.

The background to this was Hezbollah's ability to present itself, at the latest since the second Lebanon war in summer 2006, as an effective vehicle for the defense of Lebanese sovereignty. In Western security debates Hezbollah is regularly described as Teheran's »second strike capability« in relation to an imminent Israeli military strike against Iran. This way of looking at things recognizes in Hezbollah a strategic reserve for the Islamic republic in the event of escalation, which can be deployed at its discretion in pursuit of its political interests. In conjunction with Lebanon's domestic tensions, for advocates of the Shia Rise theory, a long-term pro-Syrian, pro-Iranian, decidedly anti-Israeli and so specifically *Shiite* threat has emerged on Israel's northern border. The fact that this perception is certainly shared in the so-called moderate Arab states can be seen in the deafening silence with which individual Arab states and the Arab League greeted the war in 2006. The »moderate states« condemned the escalation only half-heartedly and partly blamed Hezbollah itself for the conflict.

If a strategic threat due to the growth in Shiite power in Lebanon is disturbing, further south, in Saudi Arabia, it is considered to be virtually

catastrophic. In Saudi Arabia Shiites constitute a minority that is structurally discriminated against and whose precise demographic size is politically disputed – estimates vary from 12 to 25 percent. Even so, the most important oilfields in the Kingdom are to be found in areas where Shiites constitute the majority. For example, the two biggest oilfields in the world, Al Qatif and Al Ghawar, from which Riyadh draws a major part of state revenues, lie at the heart of Shiite minority territory. Possible Shiite control of this vital nerve of the Saudi monarchy would understandably be regarded by the country's Wahhabi elite as a *casus belli*, particularly against the background of the Shiite unrest in the east of the country in 1980 in the wake of the Islamic Revolution and the attempted coup by Shiite forces in Bahrain in 1981.

In the Saudi view an armed rebellion is at present unlikely, but rather Shia advancement by democratic means after the examples of Iraq and Lebanon. The Saudis viewed in particular the minority's involvement in the local elections in 2005 with considerable concern, when the Shiites – encouraged by the Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani, which was not without significance from the Saudi perspective – were able to chalk up a relative election victory. The reason for the political success in the oil-rich regions was the enormous voter mobilization. The Shiites' electoral participation rate was almost double that of the Sunnis. Even a last minute texting campaign that warned of an overwhelming Shiite victory could not change anything.¹⁰

For the Saudi ruling dynasty all this amounts to a Teheran-directed strategy for seizing power that threatens its very foundations. A long-term challenge from the extremist Al Qaida and Shiite forces could sooner or later bring down the regime.¹¹ Against this background the elections due in 2009 are viewed with trepidation.

For adherents of the Shia rise theory the current situation at the southern tip of the Saudi peninsula is similar. 30 percent of the population of Yemen are Shiite Zaidis. In the north of the country, predominantly populated by Shiite tribes, there has been a series of revolts in the Sa'ada region since 2004 by the Al-Shabab al-Mumin (Young Believers) movement. The Yemeni government accuses Teheran of supporting the insurgents with the aim of strengthening the global Shia and building

10. Cf. Nasr, Vali: »The Revival of Shia Islam,« Event Transcript, Pew Forum, Washington D.C.; July 24, 2006.

11. Friedman, George: »Iraq, Iran and Saudi-Arabia,« in: *New Republic*, June 2004.

another anti-American front, and has deployed the Yemeni army in the north of the country.¹² The movement denies being close to Teheran.

The end of the Shiite crescent, according to its advocates, lies in Bashar al Assad's Syria. Assad's Alawite regime is regarded as a close ally of both Hezbollah and Iran. The US government accuses Syria of supporting the insurgents in Iraq against the Multinational Forces with both personnel and materiel, as well as of refusing to continue peace negotiations with Israel. This perception of Syria as a proxy for Teheran is shared by many Arab decision-makers, reflected most recently by the absence of the »moderate« Arab leaders of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, who pointedly boycotted the summit meeting of the Arab League in Damascus in March 2008.

Appearance Determines Consciousness: What Does the Threat Amount to?

As we have shown, the thesis of a rising Shiite crescent rests on a number of elements that together are extremely persuasive. More detailed examination, however, shows that the thesis is not a convincing interpretative template.

The core argument of advocates of a dangerous Shiite crescent in the region naturally refers to Teheran itself. However, an assessment of Iran as some sort of brutal hegemon in the Gulf can scarcely be justified – notwithstanding President Ahmadinejad's frequent gaffes. Teheran's current foreign policy is undoubtedly *also* aimed at asserting itself more forcefully in the region, but this cannot automatically be regarded as an attempt on Iran's part to set itself up by force as hegemon among the region's Shiites. On the contrary, Teheran abandoned the policy of exporting revolution in the 1990s.¹³

In fact, despite Teheran's increasing willingness to flex its muscles there is no sign of a revolutionary masterplan to overthrow »moderate« Arab regimes or of an extensive campaign on the part of Shiite Iran against

12. »Yemen Accuses Iran of Backing Shi'ite Rebels,« in: *Reuters*; May 24, 2007.

13. Cf. Steinberg, Guido: »Im Schatten des Irakkriegs: Saudi-Arabien zwischen innenpolitischer Unsicherheit und schwierigen Nachbarn,« in: Schoch, Bruno (ed.) (2007): *Friedensgutachten 2007*. Münster: LIT Verlag, 177.

Sunni Arabs.¹⁴ As regards both Iranian foreign policy and domestic policy developments in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon there are, instead, many indications that such a Manichean conflict situation is out of the question.

Teheran's View: Ahmadinejad as Popular Hero

One of the main reasons for the mistaken views of many Western observers is their neglect of public opinion in various Arab states. At present, Teheran is by no means considered a threat by a majority of Sunni Arabs, but in the main is viewed rather sympathetically. As early as 2006 – the highpoint of escalating violence in Iraq – a mere six percent of a representative sample of interviewees in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and Lebanon regarded Iran as the greatest threat to their security. The same survey showed that in these states President Ahmadinejad was considered less as a dangerous agitator than as a recognized statesman: Among those asked he was considered the third most popular figure in the region.

To be sure, the vox populi is fickle. General popularity on the Arab street can be lost as quickly as it is won. However, the statistics confirm a trend that can be perfectly well explained politically: The majority of Arabs do not share the view of Iran as an all-pervasive threat because the very rhetoric of an Ahmadinejad, not to mention the constant declarations of revolutionary leader Khamenei confirm Iran's position as the sole remaining voice of an uncompromising – originally pan-Arabian – resistance to an imperialistic Western policy of aggression. *Persian* Teheran, ironically, has for years acted as a mouthpiece for an uncompromising *Arab* nationalism and its public statements are more Arab than those of Arab regimes themselves. In contrast to what the declarations of »moderate« Arab governments would lead us to believe, this state of affairs is well understood by large parts of the Arab street.¹⁵

14. On this point see, for example, Marcus, Yoel: »Go to Damascus,« (in Hebrew) in: *Haaretz*; March 25, 2008. Online (in English): <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/968092.html>

15. Cf. Sadjadpour, Karim: »Reading Khamenei – The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader,« Carnegie Endowment Report, March 2008: 21 f.

Reactively Pragmatic rather than Revolutionary? Iran's Foreign Policy

There is considerable evidence that Teheran, despite extreme provocation, is pursuing a pragmatic policy line largely free of religious influence.

As far as the Gulf States are concerned, relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have improved considerably in recent years. In fact, Teheran is not seeking confrontation in the Gulf but rather rapprochement with its neighbors. This approach is reflected by the GCC states, the majority of which have no interest in a confrontation with Iran.¹⁶

In the north of Iran religious considerations have been sidelined entirely. For example, in the smoldering conflict between the majority Shiite neighbor Azerbaijan and the majority Christian Armenia Teheran supports the Armenian government in Yerevan. This is against the background of continuing US support for Azeri President Aliyev.¹⁷

Teheran's policy towards Iraq, meanwhile, is more multilayered and complex. Basically, it includes diplomacy, infrastructural support for Shiite, Kurdish, and Sunni groups, economic penetration, and religiously and politically motivated support for individual elements of Iraqi Shia. The extent of Iran's engagement can be at least partly explained by the continuing de facto boycott of the Iraqi government by »moderate« Arab states.¹⁸

Although there is considerable military support for militias, analysis of Iran's interests in Iraq shows that, for all its influence, Iran has so far scarcely played the omnipotent role often attributed to it by the Western – and Arab – media. At present a multilayered and partly contradictory policy is being pursued towards Iraq that has so far refrained from all-out exertion of influence. Basically, this policy is determined first and foremost by reactive-defensive and entirely legitimate security considerations.

Set against the background of the bloody conflicts of the first Gulf War Iran's dominant strategy in Iraq is to render any future threat to Iran from

16. Koch, Christian: »The Changing International Relations of the Gulf Region,« in: *Orient*, 48/4, 2007: 8 f. However, it is up for question whether Iran's current policy in relation to the GCC is motivated by strategic or merely tactical considerations.

17. Sidikov, Bahodir: »Aserbajdschan: Rammbock der USA gegen Iran?,« in: *inamo*, No. 50, Summer 2007: 20 ff.

18. Cf. Takeyh, Ray: »Iran's New Iraq,« in: *Middle East Journal*, Volume 62, No. 1, Winter 2008; International Crisis Group: »Shiite Politics in Iraq – The Role of the Supreme Council,« *Middle East Report*, No. 70, November 2007: 21.

Iraq impossible. In Teheran's view, this basic Iranian interest would be endangered not only by the outbreak of an unrestrained ethnic-confessional civil war, but also by the development of a Shiite clerical government to rival the Iranian Shia. As a result, there can be no talk of exporting revolution to Iraq at present.

Sunni vs Shia? Intraconfessional Tensions in the Region

The confessional dimension of regional conflict is repeatedly exaggerated because intraconfessional tensions are neglected. However, it is precisely these that exhibit the greatest political momentum in current developments and disprove the perception of a uniform Shiite bloc.

The continuing violence in Iraq is currently taking place within the framework of ethnic and confessional categories with the result that minorities such as Chaldeans, Yazidi, Turkmens, Roma, Assyrians, and Mandaeans are subjected to brutal acts of violence. Apart from that, tensions between Sunni and Shiite Iraqis in recent months have ensured an extensive confessional homogenization of the country. This is partly responsible for the stagnating or relatively diminishing level of violence, although in the medium term it will not make it any easier to deal with conflict. Alongside this ethnic-confessional violence, however, there are political faultlines in Iraq too and precisely *within* confessions.

Tensions between Shiite groups that in the last few months have broken out repeatedly and recently escalated are more significant than developments in the Sunni sphere.¹⁹ Although the increasing significance in Iraq of Shiite actors of various stripes is undeniable the Iraqi Shia is far from being a homogenous bloc.

Not only should mention be made here of the still important secular Shiites, who are regularly left out of account, but also – and primarily – the fundamental differences between the Iraqi government parties Al Dawa and SIIC, and the supporters of Al Sadr. Although it cannot be denied that both factions receive support from Teheran, that also applies to non-Shiite forces in Iraq. The basic political conflict between Al Sadr and the Al Maliki government is connected to the federal division of the

19. Worth mentioning here is first and foremost the Sunni militias usually known as *Awakening Councils*, which were originally set up in the western Al Anbar province against Sunni Al Qaida insurgents in Iraq. Although observers refer constantly to the dangers of arming these tribal militias support for the Councils plays a major role in the new US security strategy.

country. While Al Sadr – like various Sunni actors – emphasizes a centralized state structure, SIIC, Al Dawa, and the Kurdish parties favor a strong federalist order accommodating their endeavors towards autonomy in the north and the south of the country. This basic internal Shiite conflict is crisscrossed by numerous specific political issues, such as the future of the oil-rich region of Kirkuk, but also the legal constitution of Iraqi regions. The military clashes between Al Sadr and Al Maliki in March and April 2008 made clear that these conflicts are not ethereal debates but rather substantial intra-Shiite struggles over distribution. They will intensify due to the abovementioned regional elections in the second half of the year.

Against the background of these tensions in mid January 2008 a »unity alliance« of Sunni and Shiite MPs was formed, across confessional boundaries, to stand up for centralized state management of mineral resources. The platform, which according to estimates includes 100 of the 275 MPs, left questions about a possible parliamentary coalition open, but it was able to break through the Sunni-Shia dichotomy fairly easily.

This is not the only example of Arab nationalism and Iraqi patriotism overcoming confessional identity models. The strong emphasis on confessional categorization means that it is often overlooked that Arab nationalism is a decisive factor even for parties that are ideologically close to Iran, such as Al Dawa and SIIC. As a result Iranian support for Shiite parties can usually be given only in secret since Iraqi public opinion would not approve of open financial support from Iran. Against this background it appears absurd to view the Iraqi Shia categorically as a Teheran-directed monolithic actor whose loyalty is to Iran.

Generalizations lead to false interpretations not only in Iraq, however, but also in Lebanon. Here too »the Shia« does not act as a uniform bloc, but is characterized rather by numerous internal tensions and lines of conflict, among others between secular and religious Shiites and their relationship to Syria.²⁰ Hezbollah's relationship to Syria and Iran is also regularly exaggerated in this connection. The International Crisis Group rightly speaks of »caricatured exaggerations« of existing relations and even in the country itself the multilayered interests that contradict the sweeping thesis of a Shiite crescent are well known.²¹ In a survey by the

20. Even though in recent months a *Gather around the Flag Syndrome* has boosted Hezbollah's position as the country's sole representative of the Shiites. Cf. International Crisis Group: »Hisbullah and the Lebanese Crisis,« *Middle East Report*, No. 69, October 2007: 7.

21. *Ibid.*: 21 f.

Beirut Center for Research and Information (BCRI) almost two thirds of those asked stated that they consider the Shia crescent as nothing more than a groundless fantasy.²² Sets of posters that present Hassan Nasrallah, Bashar al-Assad, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as partners in the anti-Zionist struggle, despite their appeal, represent only a minority view.

In this context the assignment of Syria to the Shiite crescent appears anything but convincing. Although cooperation between Damascus and Teheran cannot be dismissed out of hand, the extent to which such cooperation confirms the thesis of a supposed *Shiite*-based agreement between Teheran and Assad's secular-socialist regime is questionable to say the least. It could at least be argued that this entente is rather a forced marriage than a love match that is persisted in pro tem for lack of feasible alternatives. To take this political cooperation as a basis for allocating Syria to a Shiite crescent, however, is unrealistic, not least because in Syria Shiites constitute a mainly marginalized minority. The country is 74 percent Sunni and controlled by an Alawite minority (12 percent) whose membership of the Shia is disputed. Current Foreign Ministry estimates put the number of (non-Alawite) Shiites in Syria at around 60,000 – a figure that should be revised upwards given the large influx of Shiite refugees from Iraq.

The same applies to the alleged Shia rise in Yemen: The supposed Sunni-Shia divide loses credibility when one considers that President Ali Abdullah Saleh, a Shiite, has run the country for more than 30 years, but that the majority Sunni population believes that his confession has never been a factor. Even the Zaidi uprising in the North of Yemen can be explained better by the region's continuing underdevelopment rather than by religious conflict.²³ If there is an ideological-religious threat in Yemen it comes rather from Sunni extremists who at present constitute a much greater challenge to the Saleh regime than the Shiite tribal population in the North. Alongside the constant threat posed by Al Qaida the Sunni Al Masri Brigades have also announced that, with the help of local Islamic groups in Yemen, they will draw the USA into a »third swamp« and follow the example of Afghanistan and Iraq.²⁴

22. Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal: »What the Moderate Arab World is,« in: *Al Abram Weekly*; May 3, 2007.

23. The Zaidis, due to their long isolation from other Shiite centers, practice their own form of Shiite Islam, which is close to the Sunni Shaff'i school of jurisprudence.

24. McGregor, Andrew: »Shi'ite Insurgency in Yemen: Iranian Intervention or Mountain Revolt?,« in: *Global Terrorism Analysis*, August 2004.

Conclusion: Reality or Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?

Although the thesis of an all-pervasive Shia rise directed from Teheran has gained prominence in the last few months complex reality renders it unconvincing. There are certainly signs of a recalibration of Sunni-Shiite power relations and also of a growing self-confidence on the part of Iran, but analytically this cannot be understood in terms of the nightmare vision of a pro-Iranian Shiite crescent.

Alarmist reports to the contrary there are as yet no grounds for declaring an insurmountable cleft between Sunnis and Shiites in the region. Iraq is a special case, though even there the Sunni-Shia divide constitutes only *one* aspect of political reality. The confessional »cleansing« and widespread forced conversions by militias are brutally eloquent in this connection, but this in no way justifies an automatic repositioning of Iraq on an imaginary Shiite axis. What are the alternatives?

Against the background of widespread – though, as already mentioned, by no means complete – suppression of non-confessional patterns of identity, in the current situation in Iraq the only feasible policy is one that takes these identities as a basis for political action. Only if decision-makers take up the issue in this way can the current division be overcome. One example of such an approach is the deliberate reintegration of Sunni Baathists in the political process. Under US pressure the Iraqi Parliament passed a law on this in January that would not have been realized in the absence of confessional categories.²⁵ A well-meaning denial of confessional tensions, in contrast, would in the current situation make possible a dictatorship of the majority that would be far from well-meaning.

In the special case of Iraq above all the causes of this development must be sought. For what reasons did confessional categories become such an important identity marker after the fall of Saddam? A satisfactory answer will undoubtedly include aspects of a resumption of ethnicity and religious self-assurance in the face of threats to survival and a far-reaching breakdown of the rule of law. Also important is the inadequacy of secular political parties in comparison with religion-based groups in Iraq. Another

25. The so-called *Justice and Accountability Law* was passed unanimously on January 12, 2008. To be sure, differences remain concerning the law's effectiveness. Cf. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung: »Zwischen Boykott und Benchmarks: Das Abgeordnetenhaus in Bagdad und aktuelle parlamentarische Arbeit im Irak,« in: *Fokus Irak*, No. 3, April 2008.

important reason that cannot be dismissed out of hand is the mistakes of the US government immediately after the breakdown of the regime. The *Coalition Provisional Authority's* (CPA) mechanical use of confessional categories ultimately fostered sectarian violence rather than hindered it.²⁶ This experience from Iraq proves that a categorical emphasis on abstract differences can catch on quickly in the political realm and emphasizes previously irrelevant lines of division to the same extent as it attempts to overcome them. There are lessons to be learned here.

Given the almost apocalyptic situation in individual regions of Iraq adherents of the Shia crescent theory consider Mesopotamia a portent for the region.²⁷ More detailed study of regional conflict from Lebanon through Syria to Saudi Arabia and Yemen, however, confirms that apart from Iraq there can be no question of a clear and all-pervasive Sunni-Shia divide – at least so far. At the same time, there is the risk of fostering tensions by applying a confessional template to the situation. German and European decision-makers must at all costs avoid *conjuring up* a Sunni-Shia divide unintentionally.

But it is important to understand that the thesis of a Sunni-Shia divide in the region is frequently perceived as an external import. Mention should be made, for example, of the criticisms of Iranian decision-makers. Western observers – but also apologists for the Shia rise in the region – understand Teheran's policy as an undisguised attempt on Iran's part to pursue a Shi'ite client policy at the expense of Islamic unity. In Teheran, however, such accusations are routinely rejected. In fact, it is clearly in Iran's interest, given demographic realities in the region and overwhelming Sunni majorities, to present itself not as a *Shi'ite* power but as a *pan-Islamic* actor. For example, in January 2007 Ayatollah Khamenei warned of the »USA's dangerous plan to position the Islamic Republic as the opponent of the great Sunni community.«²⁸ In this context the perception and propagation of an insurmountable division of the region into Shi'ite and Sunni is felt to be driven by a perfidious divide and conquer policy on the part of Western and pro-Western actors.

26. Against this background Thomas F. Farr's argument in *Foreign Affairs* that in the run up to the elections the US government did not pay sufficient attention to religion as a determinant factor in Iraq is to be firmly rejected. Cf. Farr, Thomas F.: »Diplomacy in an Age of Faith,« in: *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2008: 119.

27. Council on Foreign Relations: »The Emerging Shia-Crescent. Implications for U.S. Policy in the Middle East (Transcript),« New York, June 2005.

28. Cf. Sadjadpour, op. cit.: 25.

It is important to understand as regards the current alarmism that the fashionable distinction between »moderate« Sunnis and »threatening« Shiites can be explained in terms of the overall political climate.²⁹ Perceptions have certainly changed: After the fall of the Shah in Iran the Shia came to be seen as the »hostile and militant face of Islam,« while Sunni extremism in Afghanistan and elsewhere was tolerated as a legitimate counterweight against Soviet endeavors to impose their influence.³⁰ The September 11 attacks, mainly carried out by Saudi citizens, changed things briefly as the Shia enemy was temporarily substituted by »Sunni« extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Against the background of the current nuclear conflict with Iran, however, the traditional attributes of US antagonists, such as irrationality and unrestrained striving for hegemony, are now once more ascribed to global Shia. This perception says little about the situation in the region – but it does say something about the interests of its advocates.

It is not by chance that warning voices concerning a Shiite crescent are to be heard almost exclusively in Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, as well as in Israel. That is, in those states that (except from Saudi Arabia) traditionally receive extensive ODA, or military assistance, from the USA. Although of course this coalition is not a formal one – as suspected in the Arab media, for example – these actors share the same view.³¹

US observer Fouad Ajami gets to the heart of the matter when he asks about the background to King Abdullah II's emphatic warnings of a Shia rise and immediately provides the answer: The reference to the Shiite crescent, in pragmatic terms, is ultimately an urgent plea for continuing US support.³² The same applies to Egypt and Saudi Arabia; current warnings in Saudi Arabia follow a policy line that has generally been pursued

29. Cf. Eikenberg, Felix: »Sunni-Shia-Divide – Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?,« February 2008. I would like to thank Felix Eikenberg for providing me with the manuscript.

30. Yamani, Mai: »Der Aufstieg des schiitischen Petrolistans,« in: *Project Syndicate*, March 2004; and Eikenberg, op. cit.

31. Shahab, Ali: »That's how the regional coalition against Iran and the ›Shiite crescent‹ was established,« (in Arabic) in: *Al Akhbar*; December 22, 2007. It is also striking that statements critical of Iran by leading Arab figures receive considerable attention in the Israeli media. Cf. Ravid, Barak and Yoav Stern: »Mubarak. The tensions in Gaza bring the Iranian threat nearer,« (in Hebrew) in: *Haaretz*; March 26, 2008.

32. Cf. Council on Foreign Relations, op. cit.

since the 1980s. Confronted by the appeal of an ambitious and charismatic Shiite leader who, as he saw it, spoke to the whole region, Riyadh played the confessional card after the Islamic Revolution in order to eliminate Khomeini's influence over the Sunna through the accusation of Shiite heresy.³³ In the face of Ahmadinejad's rhetoric and the fundamental threat posed by an alleged Iranian nuclear program this approach is now being repeated at regional level. This threat perspective is mirrored in the USA, which also uses the nightmare vision of an ambitious Shiite crescent to sustain a regional coalition against Teheran.

Whether Iraq will in future prove to be a blueprint for the region or a tragic exception in relation to Sunni-Shiite relations is likely to depend, among other things, on the views of international decision-makers. It is up to them to recognize the thesis of a dangerous Shiite crescent over the Middle East for what it is: an inconclusive theory intended to ensure the status quo of »moderate« Arab regimes, which could, however, become a self-fulfilling prophecy and further undermine the stability of the whole region in the medium term.

33. The Saudi establishment brands the Shiites as »unbelievers« far more severely than Christians, which seems politically ill-advised given the close cooperation with the USA.