The Social Origins of Shia and Sunni Islamism

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Introduction

Islamism became an issue in international relations in 1979. The Islamic Revolution in Iran first, and the resistance to Soviet invasion of Afghanistan became breakthrough events marking the beginning of the end of the bipolar world. Though Islamism is not considered a determining factor of the end of Cold War, it certainly emerged as a challenge to the two dominant ideological worldviews with hegemonic presumptions: capitalism and socialism. "By the 1980s many of the social groups in the Islamic world from which left-wing parties had had recruited in the past –especially students and intellectuals- had begun to provide cadres for political Islamic, or *Islamist*, parties and movements. At the same time, many of these parties

also recruited from among those who had supported a Westernized form of development in the past, but who no longer felt that the meager economic results could weight up the loss of cultural autonomy that such development implied." (Westad 2005, 288) Thus, in its rejection of both the capitalist and socialist model of politics and society, Islamism appeared to propose an alternative to the secular modernization, and, as such, at least in its beginning, enjoyed sympathy even among some Western intellectuals, such as Michel Foucault (Foucault & Parham 2005).

Nevertheless, there has never been a single ideology of political Islam. Since its very emergence on the international political arena in the 1980s, Islamism was either Shia or Sunni. Alliances, mutual tolerance, and circumstantial sympathies or even cooperation notwithstanding, the political divide between the followers of Ali and its opponents at the Death of the Prophet in 632 escalated into an everlasting power struggle for the leadership the Umma as the successor, or Caliphe, of Mohammad that is inherent to the history of Islam. Islamism, therefore, was not only a rebellion against the Western secular modernization, but also, if not primarily, identity politics understood as a power struggle between Sunnis and Shias to dominate the leadership of the Umma. Since the U.S. military intervention and occupation of Iraq in 2003, this power struggle has become obvious through the now widely accepted phenomenon of the Iraqi "civil war," public warnings of Sunni leaders about the spread of a "Shia crescent" across the region, and Iran's ambitious assumption of leadership for Islamist resistance movements ("The Widening Gulf" 2007).

Within the context of the Cold War, and more precisely the end of the Détente period and the re-emergence of U.S.-Soviet tensions, Washington and Moscow interpreted Islamism through

their own strategic calculations. Interestingly, for none of the two superpowers the Sunni-Shia

divide of Islamism seemed to matter too much. Quite the opposite, both conceived the

phenomenon monolithically as "Islamic fundamentalism." Yet, while for the United States

"Islamic fundamentalism" became identical with the openly aggressive anti-American policy of

Teheran, Moscow chose to follow an approach toward the Islamic Republic of Iran following the

guideline of the then KGB chief Iurii Andropov, who advocated some form of compromise with

the leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini (Westad 2005, 297). Despite

the belief of some leaders about an eventual Left-turn in Iran for political guidance, the Soviets

in general did not expect an anti-imperialist alliance with Iran against the United States; hence,

they maintained a pragmatic relationship, which, to some extent, characterized the Russian

foreign policy toward Teheran after the fall of the Soviet Union up till nowadays.

The Islamist threat for Moscow was embodied in the Afghan Mujahedin to whom,

nevertheless, president Ronald Reagan recognized as "freedom fighters," and extended financial

and military support, including Stinger missiles, to help them fight the "evil empire." For the

Reagan administration, helping the Afghanis, and with the same token the Nicaraguan Contras,

was part of its "roll-back" strategy against a perceived over-expansion of the Soviet influence.

However, even before the electoral victory of the Republicans in the 1980 presidential elections,

hardliners in Washington, including the National Security advisor of president Jimmy Carter,

Zbigniew Brzezinski, were already advocating to make of Afghanistan a "Soviet

Vietnam." (Westad 200, 329) For that aim, Washington did not hesitate to actively encourage a

wide mobilization in the worldwide Muslim communities to support the Mujahedin, becoming,

tactically at least, an ally of the emerging Sunni Islamism. Since then, even when Al Qaeda and

Sunni Islamism became the biggest security threat for the United States, there has been no

substantial modification in Washington's policy toward Iran. Despite a shy attempt in 2000 by

the Clinton administration for a rapprochement with Teheran, and the occasional cooperation

during the military intervention in Afghanistan in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Iran soon

was characterized a country within the "axis of evil," as defined by president George W. Bush in

his annual address in the Congress in January 2002. The military invasion and occupation of

Iraq, and the 2005 election of the hardliner Mahmud Ahmadinejad as the president of the Islamic

Republic of Iran have since worsened the U.S.-Iranian relations. Moreover, the deepening

antagonism of Sunnis and Shias in the Middle East has only highlighted the dilemmas of the U.S.

policies in the region, and has left to Washington no choice other than a balance-of-power

approach with no foreseeable hope for a stabilization of the situation, let alone a reconciliation

between the two branches of Islam.

In this paper I borrow the concept of "social origins" from Barrington Moore, Jr. (1966)

and use it to trace the "routes" to Shia and Sunni Islamism. I use the concept in a broad

understanding of the conditions that defined the respective paths of both political projects. I

sustain that notwithstanding the anti-Western character of both Shia and Sunni Islamism, the

historical pattern of domination within the Islam, as well as the intervening factor of the

superpower politics in the Middle East, have defined two antagonist routes of an Islamist

political project, which has already defined the geopolitical fracture of the *fitna* –to use Gilles

Kepel's understanding of the conflict within the Muslim world (2004). It is along this

geopolitical fracture that a regional civil war is already characterizing the bloody identity politics

of Shia and Sunni Islamism.

To elaborate my view, in Part I, I analyze the Islamic Revolution as the worldwide

awakening of the Shia identity and I highlight its affinity with Third Worldist liberation

movements with strong sensitivity to issues related to social justice. In Part II, I trace back the

origins of Sunni Islamism to the main concern of saving the Caliphate in the context of the

declining Ottoman Empire by the end of the 19th century, as well as its conflictive relation with

Arab secular nationalism and, to some extent, Kemalism. I further elaborate this argument in my

analysis of the formation of modern days Sunni Islamist movements such as the Muslim

Brotherhood in Egypt and the Islamic Salvation Front of Algeria, which, as I explain, despite

being rebellions against oppression have not shown the same sensibility toward the social

question. Hence, as opposed to the Shia Islamic Revolution, Sunni global Jihadism has an

imperial perspective. It is important to underline that "revolution" or "imperial" in this paper do

not aim at any normative understanding of the concepts beyond their functionality in explaining

the social conditions of the rise of the two Islamist thoughts and their respective political

projects. I, then, in Part III, focus on the geopolitical fracture of the Shia and Sunni Islamism

highlighting the role of the intervening factor, mainly international politics and the Great Powers

interventionism in the Middle East with a special emphasis on U. S. policy. In my conclusion I

critically revise my hypothesis reviewing the theoretical framework; analyzing the complex

relationship between nationalism and Islamism, with a particular emphasis on the cases of the

Lebanese Hizbullah and the Palestinian Hamas; and viewing other possible trends of politics within the Muslim world.

Part I. The (Islamic) Revolution is Shia

The triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which started in 1978 and ended with the twin events of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi's escape on January 16, 1979, and the return of Khomeini on February 1 of the same year, marked also the awakening and empowerment of the Shia identity. So far, and despite some Muslim dynasties such as the Fatimids in Egypt (10th century) or the Sefevids in Iran (17-19th century) claimed their legitimacy from Shiism, there has never been a Shia political thought, less one that called for emancipation. For, ever since the beginning of Muslim history, Sunni Islam has been the official doctrine of power and conquest of the Caliphs, whereas Shiism has been the doctrine of the opposition, of the dispossessed (Zahar 1991, 18). Only with Khomeini did Shia thought come out of its quietism and passivity and advocated a world-vision of political engagement. In what follows, I focus on the characteristics of Shia political thought (section 1); then I analyze its impact on the institutionalization of the Islamic Revolution (section 2); finally, I underline its importance as the driving ideological force of the awakening of Shia identity in general (section 3).

Section 1. Islam, nationalism and social justice in Shia political thought

Early signs of Shia Islamist thought appeared during the 1963 rebellion against the Shah's ambitious White Revolution, when the 63-year-old Ayatollah, so far known as an expert

on Islamic mysticism, "began publicly warning the Shah that he was compromising Islam and Iranian sovereignty" (Westad 2005, 291). Analysts have correctly seen that the reaction of the Iranian clergy, usually reluctant to interfere in politics, was due to the direct challenge to their influence and authority they felt with Shah's modernization projects. Nevertheless, the development of the Shia political thought and the future Islamic revolution cannot be circumscribed merely to the corporate interests of the clergy. In fact, three elements are at the bases of this thought: Islamic identity; Iranian nationalism; and social justice.

All three had deep roots in Iranian politics and society. Shia Islam provided the source of legitimacy and differentiation the Sefevids needed in their struggle with the rival Muslim Ottoman Empire, where the Sultan claimed to himself the title of Caliph. Iranian nationalism goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century and the process of modernization of Iran with, first, the revolution of 1906 that established a Constitutional order, and, then, the short period of Prime Minister Mossadegh and his attempt to nationalize oil in the name of sovereignty. As for the social justice, it is rooted in the tradition of a strong presence of the Left in the country and its active opposition to Shah's right-wing grandiose reforms in the detriment of the peasants and lower classes in society.

The social concerns Shia Islam thought are the byproduct of the 1963 rebellion, which was the event that triggered Khomeini's powerful criticism to the Shah, and of the inspirational source for the organizational ideas for the Islamic revolution – "the left-wing opposition to the shah" (Westad 2005, 291). Pedro Brieger sees essentially an anti-imperialist drive in the anti-U.S. rhetoric of "The Great Satan" in Khomeini's discourse. He draws a parallel between the

Farsi concept of "mostazafin" —the disinherited—and Franz Fanon's "the wretched of the

Earth" in his analysis of the national liberation culture of the struggle of the Algerians against

French colonial rule to explain the reason why "this revolution has been welcome in the whole

Third World despite its religious rhetoric or the repression of Leftist movements [in

Iran]" (Brieger 2006, 16).

Finally, the link between Shia and Iranian national identity was reinforced during the

Iraq-Iran war of 1980-1987. When Saddam Hussein launched the military offensive against Iran

on September 1980, he called the campaign "Qadisiat Saddam" following the historical battle

during which the Arabs conquered Persia and converted its people to Islam. The Iraqi move was,

of course, a carefully calculated one playing on both the Arab and Sunni sensitivity to insure the

effective support of the Arabs, and, specially, the Gulf countries. It, hence, inevitably provoked a

backlash of an even closer association between Shia and Iranian nationalism.

Section 2. The Institutionalization of the Revolution

This ideological combination of Islam, nationalism and left-leaning sensitivity for social

justice ruled out both the total islamization of Iranian politics in the sense Khomeini wanted, and

the expansion of the Islamic Revolution in the wider Sunni Muslim world. In fact, as Zahar

correctly sustains, the Islamic Revolution is a Modern phenomenon though it certainly differs

from the Western secular idea of Modernity. It is the rebellion of excluded masses empowered

with the ideology of Shia Islamism against a repressive regime, as well as an alternative, more

inclusive, political project from the forced modernization of the Shah, which hitherto served only

to a privileged class of the Iranian society (Zahar 1991, chapter II). The Islamic Revolution

spoke a language proper to Third-Worldist liberation movements with a strong accent on social

justice. Moreover, it is a Modern phenomenon also because the main actor is the Iranian youth

by then alien to the reactionary dimension of the project that was in the mind of the clergy, yet

willing to assume a political engagement and self-expression. "The late autocratic and repressive

modernization [of Shah's regime] had certainly a great influence upon the emergence of the

political moment at the beginning of the Revolution. The new youth, main actor of the

revolutionary movement, wanted freedom and was unable to conceive political relationships in a

democratic context"[1] (Khosrokhavar 1993, 327).

Because of this Modernity inherent to the Islamic Revolution, its institutionalization, the

Islamic Republic of Iran, created a state structure pretty close to a presidential regime with an

Islamic Supreme Court (Maila 1995), as well as the condition that allowed the future evolution

of the Iranian society. While the Islamic Republic of Iran is not a liberal democracy, it,

nonetheless, is more representative and participative than any other non-secular regime in the

Muslim world. In this sense, it is much closer to the Mossadegh regime than the Imamat –as

opposed to the Caliphat- Khomeini and the clergy wanted to establish after the fall of the Shah.

Section 3. Beyond the Islamic Revolution: The Awakening of Shia Identity

The previous ambition of the Islamic Revolution was to spread the wave throughout the

whole Muslim world. As early as 1980, Khomeini's message, which Iranian pilgrims brought to

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[1] Original text in French. Unofficial translation of the author. The same procedure will be followed for all non-English quotes.

Mecca, was: "Restore the glory of Islam, and abandon your selfish disputes and differences, for you possess everything!" (Westad 2005, 330). Indeed, the anti-imperialist revolutionary message of the Islamic renewal in Iran echoed through the Muslim world from Afghanistan to Lebanon, Palestine and Algeria inspiring Afghan Islamists (Westad 2005, 307-308), Lebanese Shia emancipation (DerGhougassian 1996), the rise of the Palestinian Hamas and the formation of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (Brieger 2006, 20-28). Obviously, Iranian leaders wanted to seize the moment of the worldwide prestige of Khomeini to pose him as the supreme leader of a revolution that had internationalist pretensions. "However, from the first moment on the Sunni-Shia division within Islam conspired against the acceptance of the Iranian leadership by all other Islamic movements" (Brieger 2006, 17). Therefore, it is mainly, if not only, in Shia communities that the message of Islamic Revolution became a concrete political project of emancipation and struggle for power.

This is particularly true in the case of the Lebanese Shia community. Officially, the Shias were considered the third community in the Lebanese sectarian political system, and in virtue of the National Pact they traditionally assumed the Presidency of the Parliament where they were represented mostly through politicians issued of wealthy landlords in the South and the Bekaa valley without any real connection with their constituency. Unlike the Sunnis, who from the 1950s on embraced Nasser's Panarabism, or the Christian, especially Maronites, who identified themselves with the West, Shias lacked any political identity. Usually from the poorest strata of the society, they formed the proletarian class of the excluded, and though their youth seemed to

be attracted by the tiny Lebanese Communist Party nonetheless they never assumed its

leadership (which traditionally was hold by an Orthodox Christian).

The Shia awakening of Lebanon is the combination of three main factors: the social and

political activism of the Lebanese-Iranian Imam Musa Sadr in the 1960s and 1970s; the rise of a

Shia middle class with the return of formerly poor emigrants from African countries where they

made their fortune; the impact of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The differences, including in

terms of class, between the two major political parties/movements that institutionalized this

awakening within the national context of the bloody struggle for power among the Lebanese

communities in the civil war of 1975-1990 notwithstanding, at the heart of the Shia mobilization

lies, first, their consciousness of being "disinherited," a term that Mussa Sadr used in his attempt

with the Christian priest, Grégoire Haddad, to put forward a movement of the poor and

marginalized in Lebanon; and, second, their disappointment of both Arab nationalism and the

Left. After all, Imam Musa Sadr "vanished" in Libya in 1978 on his way back from Rome to

Beirut. The disappearance of the Imam, which provoked huge manifestations in Lebanon, was

both a powerful religious symbol drawing a parallel with the Shia hope for the return of the 12th,

and last, "vanished" Imam to restore justice, and distanced definitely the community from Arab

nationalism and the Left that Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, a Sunni, desired to monopolize and

replace Nasser. Hence, the Shia awakening in Lebanon, contemporary to the Islamic Revolution

in Iran, shows the close relationship of an Islamic political identity with the consciousness of and

aspiration to social justice. In the 1980s and 1990s, Hizbullah's leadership in the struggle against

the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon would provide the third, nationalist, or rather patriotic, element of this awakening (Ajami 1986; Derghougassian 1996; Saad-Ghorayeb 2002).

Part II. The (Global) Jihad is Sunni

Despite the impact of the Islamic Revolution in Iran on the rise of Sunni Islamism, and despite some affinity of early Sunni Islamist thinkers like Sayyid Qutb with social justice issues, explicit in the very title of one of his most important books, *Social Justice in Islam*, the essence of Sunni Islamism, and with the same token its political project, is imperial. No doubt, elements of Afghan patriotism lie at the heart of the Islamic resistance to Soviet occupation, and political repression explain the emergence of the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria and the reactivation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Hafez 2004). Moreover, the repulsion of Western culture and civilization, especially the United States, of the same Qutb, or Ossama Bin Laden's hatred to the Palestine Liberation Organization's leader Yasser Arafat because he was a secular despite Bin Laden's concern of the fate of the Palestinians as Lawrence Wright narrates (2006), shows a commonality of Sunni Islamism with Shia Islamism in their engagement in terms of 'Islam vs. the rest.' In other words, like Shia Islamism, Sunni Islamism's primarily concern is an identity in crisis, whether in decline or rise, and politics, including violence, emerges from this concern. Finally, as the media reported during the June 2006 war between Israel and Hizbullah, Sunni Islamists occasionally admire and praise Shia determinism in the battlefield against a common enemy despite the deep cultural bias they felt for centuries about Shias to whom they defeated militarily and, therefore, disdained in an arrogance proper to victors.

However, Sunni Islamism was born and developed in social conditions different from Shia Islamism in three important ways. First, the original concern of Sunni Islamism has been the salvation of the Caliphate, hence the preservation of their historical domination of the Umma. Second, Sunni Islamist political parties and movements emerged as an alternative to the secular project of the Arab *Nahda* —awakening—and, especially, to the Left-leaning populist component of the same such as Nasserism, Baathism, and the National Liberation Front, or, though not in the Arab context, Kemalism. Third, unlike Shia Islamism, which rose from the bottom as a defiance to the secular and exclusive State, Sunni Islamism always maintained an ambiguous relationship with it; in a way or another, Islam has always been, a source of legitimacy to both populist/progressive and conservative Sunni regimes, even when they fought Islamists. This ambiguous relationship with the State has created deep controversies for Sunni Islamists.

These different social origins of Sunni Islamism provide a prime explanation of the persistent rivalry with the Shias —along with the Great Powers politics in the Middle East, as I will analyze in Part III— and not only the historical and doctrinal division within Islam. After all, nothing a priori could have forbidden a rapprochement, if not a strong strategic alliance, in the name of Islam between the Sunnis and the Shias in their struggle against the secular West in general, and the United States in particular.

In the three sections of this second part of the essay I successively analyze the three arguments, underlined above, that differentiate Sunni Islamism from Shia Islamism.

Section 1. For the Salvation of the Caliphate

Islamism, understood as the political ideology of Islam –hence, a Modern phenomenon-, is Sunni in its origins. In other words, first Islamist thinking and documents, as well as political activism, were put forward by Sunni scholars and activists, in Sunni Muslim societies. Analysts, usually, traces back the origin of Sunni Islamism to the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928 under the strong influence of Hassan al Banna's writings. Hence, they view the phenomenon as a reaction to English colonialism and its puppet regime of King Farouk in Egypt. While the anti-West drive is all too clear in original Sunni Islamist thinkers and activists, two issues tend to be overlooked when discussing the Brotherhood as the origin of Islamism. First, Islamist thinking questioned, and ultimately rejected, secular Arab nationalism as much as it rose as an anti-West project. In this sense, in it developed as a competitor with secular nationalism, and, as such, to some extent has been manipulated by the British colonial power. Second, Islamist thinking in the 1920s did not emerge in a vacuum. It is somehow the updated process of an initiative that goes back to the end of the 19th century and the crisis of Muslim intellectuals conscious about the speeded decadence of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, as Albert Hourani has shown, the first Islamist thinker and activist is Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1991, chapter V). While the decadence of the last Islamic State, the Caliphate for the believers, goes back to the 18th century, and concerns, both official and non-official, are at the heart of Ottoman politics whether in terms of reform projects, as the Tanzimat, or rebellions in the name of Islam against the Sultan in the Arabian peninsula first, and Egypt then, what makes al-Afghani original in his quest for the revolutionary salvation of Islam and the Caliphate is "this mixture of religious and national

sentiments, and European radicalism [that were] incarnated in the strange personality of a man" (Hourani 1991, 111).

In addition to his known intellectual debate with Renan about Islam and Christianity, two aspects of al-Afghani's performance are of particular interest for this paper. First, his belief that the salvation of Islam from the aggressive expansion of the West could not come from one leader, one Muslim autocrat, who pretended to embody the unity of Islam. Moreover, the salvation of Islam has no relationship with the concerns of the preservation of any dynasty. Al-Afghani appears on the scene when Sultan Abdul Hamid II had already moved away from the timid Tanzimat reforms, and was thinking about a panislamist mobilization for Jihad against the Western powers as the mean for the salvation of the Ottoman Empire. But al-Afghani refused to be just another courtesan for the Sultan, or any other Muslim leader. His close relation and cooperation with many of them notwithstanding, al-Afghani thought about the Jihad against the West as a popular phenomenon, a movement that would forge the unity of the Umma, an idea totally alien to the then ruling class in the Muslim world. Within this unity for Jihad, and here comes the second aspect of al-Afghani's thought and work, is his fundamental concern of the Sunni-Shia divide within Islam that he saw mostly through the lens of the Ottoman-Sefevid rivalry in the Middle East. In this sense, al-Afghani is somehow the first Muslim utopist in the political understanding of the concept, as his ultimate goal was the Sunni-Shia reconciliation for which he even thought about a political project.

What makes al-Afghani Modern in this aspect, is his constant reference to Europe and its successes without ever abandoning the deep conviction that Islam should look to its own strength

to rise again, and not copy the West. The "revolutionary" characterization of al-Afghani's Islamism comes in the sense of the Modernity of his project in terms of a Jihad conceived as a popular mobilization, and a political project aiming at an Islamic identity beyond the internal rifts and the great Sunni-Shia divide. The parallel with the process, and social construction, of the Western Nation-state albeit on a wilder scale is all too clear. Not surprisingly, therefore, al-Afghani ended up alienating all the Muslim leaders with whom he worked. For, no Muslim leader in that time was ready to any concession, not even intellectual, that could risk the preservation of the dynastic rule by empowering the people. Nor, basically for the same reason, would they make an effort to overcome the internal divisions for the sake of Jihad. Else, nothing in al-Afghani's thinking shows any connection of the "revolutionary" aspect of his thinking in the social-progressive sense of the concept that, as argued above, appeared in the Shia Islamic thought.

Yet, even within his Modernity, al-Afghani remains essentially a Sunni Islamist thinker engaged with the imperial vision inherent to it. His idea of a popular Muslim unity for Jihad aims at the salvation of the Umma and the institution of the Caliphate. He never thought about anything that could come close to a republic, and his project of Sunni-Shia reconciliation included the recognition on behalf of the Persian Shah the Caliph as the supreme authority of Islam; in turn, his own independence would be recognized by the Sultan, and his authority would be expanded to the holly cities of the Shia in Iraq (Hourani 1991, 120). Nor was his idea of a popular mobilization for Jihad a conspiracy against the institution of the Caliphate; he, therefore, always tried first to engage Muslim leaders, and only when they deceived him did he turn to the

people to question the moral authority of the leader. The salvation of the Caliphate remains at the center of Sunni Islamist thought and the highest aim of its political project.

Those who followed al-Afghani, from his disciple Mohammad Abdoh, to Ali Abd el-Razeq and Hassan al-Banna, continued to build on this thesis with ideas like the need of a righteous despot to ensure the renaissance of the East (Abdel-Malek 1970, 64-65); the "prestige, strength and attractive power" of the political institution of the Caliphate established by Abu Bakr to forge the unity of the Umma (Abdel-Malek 1970, 66); and the Sunnah of the Prophet as the sole guide of the law of Muslims (Abdel-Malek 1970, 73). Not surprisingly, Sunni Islamists consider Mustapha Kemal's abolition of the institution of the Caliphate in 1924, which the Turkish National Assembly approved, as the greatest disaster for the Umma. No wonder, then, its resurrection had become the highest aim of nowadays Jihadists, and is increasingly gaining sympathy through the Muslim world in general (Vick 2006). The very nature of the institution of the Caliphate is imperial, as is its geopolitical spectrum, unless Sunni Islamist thought moves toward the conceptualization of an Islamic Republic as an alternative political institution overcoming the intellectual resistance of recognizing/legitimizing internal divisions within the Umma across the current geopolitical map of the Muslim world, which is precisely what the Jihadists are fighting.

Section 2. Sunni Islaimis as the Anti-Nahda?

As in Shia Islamism, the Modernity of Sunni Islamism is a very peculiar one. In the sense that it emerges against Western modernization though it borrows elements from it and apply for

Islamist renewal. It rejects Modernity, though it uses it for the sake, the glory, of Islam. There

still is no historical experience to show whether Sunni Islamism rejects all together Modernity

with the exception of some of its achievement in the field of armament and finance the way the

short-lived Taliban regime did in 1996-2001. Whether the brutality of this regime is proper to the

Afghan context, or, furthermore, to the Taliban, is not all too clear yet. Its primitive and violent

aspects notwithstanding, the regime certainly enjoyed support and wide sympathy in Sunni

Muslim. Yet, could, let us say, the Gulf Arab societies bear such a denial of the advances of

Modern civilization had the Islamists come to power in these countries? For sure, however,

Sunni Islamist Modernity emerged as an alternative to the secular project of the Arab Nahda –

renaissance.

This latter, as Lacouture, Tuéni, and Khoury explain, is nothing less than the "discovery"

of a national identity based upon the commonality of the Arabic language culminating to the first

all-Arab Congress in Paris in 1913 (2002, chapter 1). In this sense the Nahda implied a dual

distance the new Arab identity tried to take from, first, the acceptance of the legitimacy of the

Turkish rule just because the Sultan is recognized also as the Caliph of the Umma; and, second,

from the identity of the Umma itself, as with the decadence of the Ottoman Empire it is the status

of Millet –ethnic or religious nationalities- that is questioned and replaced with the modern

notion of "nation." Indeed, it is in the 19th century that biblical denominations, historical entities,

and geographical locations such as Lebanon, Egypt and Syria, started to gain a political

dimension. This distance from the traditional identity of the Umma is seen even within the

Turkish modernizers by the end of the 19th century albeit for entirely different aims than those

pursued by Arab intellectuals. This is the main reason why the Nahda had such a close relationship with the West, especially when the latter still was not the colonialist project, but rather the promises of the Enlightenment, whereas Islamists –and they mainly were Sunnis-rejected it with its inherent secularism.

No wonder then that along with Western-educated Muslims, mostly Christians and even Jews showed special interest and enthusiasm for the Nahda taking the lead in the educational process first, and, then, the political projects. The Nahda, if consolidated, would have given them an egalitarian status, and would have been an opportunity to political emancipation, which, within the dominant frame of the Sharia, they did not enjoy since the advent of Islam. It is, however, incorrect to consider the Nahda as a Christian initiative against the domination of Islam, or a Western conspiracy that ended up with the fragmentation of the Middle East, as the narrative of contemporary Islamists often sustains. It would first underestimate the level of the decadence of the Ottoman Empire, and, with the same token, the strength of Modernity as a promise of salvation. Second, any denial of the vanguard role of Muslims in the Nahda ignores, following Lacouture et al. the input of Mohammad Abdo recognized also as a Muslim reformist, of Syrian, Palestinian and Lebanese "progressive" Muslim thinkers, or of Taha Hussein whose public statement of Arabic being a language spoken before Islam provoked a violent reaction in Egypt and elsewhere (2002, 32). In fact, though according to Ghassan Tuéni, the Nahda failed because it "did not derive into an Islamic reformation that did not happen" (Lacouture et al. 2002, 29), nevertheless its challenge to the Umma identity cannot be underestimated. After all,

what the Muslim Brotherhood aimed at the 1920 was a "re-Islamization of Arab," to stop "the

access to Arabism to Christians and other minorities" (Lacouture et al. 2002, 36).

Nahda's secular nationalism explains also the violent opposition of Sunni Islamists to

Nasserism despite their cooperation to topple the monarchy: "Nasser's political dream was of a

pan-Arab socialism, modern, egalitarian, secular, and industrialized, in which individuals lives

were dominated by the overwhelming presence if the welfare state. His dream has little to do

with the theocratic Islamic government that Qutb and the Brothers espoused. The Islamists

wanted to completely reshape society from the top down, imposing Islamic values on all aspects

of life, so that every Muslim could achieve his purest spiritual expression. That could be

accomplished only through a strict imposition of the Sharia, the legal code drawn from the Quran

and the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, which governs all parts of life. Anything less than

that, the Islamists argued, was not Islam; it was *jahiliyya* –the pagan world before the Prophet

received his message. Qutb opposed egalitarianism because the Quran stated: "We have crated

you class upon class." He rejected nationalism because it warred with the ideal of Muslim

unity" (Wright 2006, 27). In fact, the trial and execution by hanging of Qutb on August 29, 1966,

marked not only the irreconcilable antagonism of the two visions but also radicalized Islamism

as Qutb always wished.

Section 3. The Dilemma of the Territorial State for Sunni Islamism

Finally, the re-emergence of Sunni Islamism is essentially the consequence of the 1967

Arab military defeat, which, as Ajami has shown, triggered the crisis of the Arab nationalist

project (1992). Sunni Islamists built on this failure broader than just on the battlefield to proclaim, "Islam is the solution." If we consider that the regimes that claimed of secular nationalism were also Left-leaning in social terms, the reason why in Sunni Islamist discourse, in opposition to Shia Islamism, the social question is at most secondary becomes understandable. In order to take distance from these regimes, Jihadists have mostly ignored the issue of social justice, which was at the core of the reformist projects of all those who came to power after the end of French and British colonization of the Middle East. In Algeria, for instance, Islamic identity and grievance for the political repression and corruption has been the main arguments of the Islamic Salvation Front; not social justice, economic reforms and so forth, of which the National Liberation Front in power has claimed its legitimacy.

Yet, though Sunni Islamism emerged as an alternative to a secular national identity, it nevertheless maintained an at least an ambiguous relationship with the political embodiment of that identity –the territorial state. Nothing illustrates this ambiguous relationship better than the alliance between the followers of the 18th century Muslim revivalist, Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahab —commonly known as Wahabists, though they rather use the term Muwahhidun —unitarians-— or Salafists in reference to the companions of the Prophet—, and the ibn Saud tribe. Whereas the latter provided the political guidance, Salafism created the bases for the legitimacy of what would be born in 1924 as modern Saudi Arabia through the struggle of Abdul Aziz for the territorial unification of the Peninsula. The Salafist vision of an Islamic revival could never possibly accept the territorial circumscription of the Umma; nor could the Saudi monarchs pretend to fully realize this revival, which would be, as Islamists aim at, the

resurrection of the Caliphate. Nevertheless, and despite constant problems and even violent confrontations, the Salafist-Saudi alliance held strong throughout the history of the Kingdom. Nor, probably, the advent of al-Qaeda had or could dismantle this alliance, which is almost the "essence" of the existence of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, one can even hypothesize that contemporary Sunni Jihadism is a combination of an already existing context of Islamic revival, Salafism, in Saudi Arabia, and the intellectual input of Islamists from the rest of the Arab world, especially Egypt.

The Salafi-Saudi alliance explains the active support of the Kingdom to Islamists who fought Nasser –and other Arab secular regimes. It also explains the leading role of the Saudis in the organization of the Islamic support to the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, not to speak of the formation of the Brigade of Strangers, mostly Arab fighters recruited by bin Laden, of which later will born al-Qaeda. Finally, this Salafi-Saudi alliance understandably denies any legitimacy of the Shia within Islam. In practical terms, this rejection of the Shia as heretics meant the active support to the secular Baath in Iraq during the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s, and is seen even more abruptly today on both the societal level, especially in discourses and Fatwas, and state level with the support of the Kingdom to Jihadists in Iraq and its active contention policy of the regional pretensions of Iran.

However, the ambiguous relation of Sunni Islamism with the state is not a phenomenon that is circumscribed within the phenomenon of Salafi-Saudi alliance. What is central to the Nahda movement, explains Tuéni, is "to overcome the notion of community, or Millet, to reach the concept of nation. Nevertheless, there has always been an inherent confusion within the

concept of an Arab nation due to its relation with the Umma: Was [the Arab nation] an Umma without the religious connotation of it in the term Ummat al-Islam according the Quranic, and, hence, strictly Muslim, understanding of the term?" (Lacouture et al. 2002, 20). In fact, the confusion between an Arab ethnic identity and a Muslim –Sunni- one, which comes from the lack of the Arabic for an exact translation of the Western understanding of 'nation', not only would persist but Arab secular, even Left leaning, regimes would constantly manipulate it. The most obvious example is Saddam Hussein's repression of the Iraqi Shias to whom he considered "Persians," not Arabs, and played with the sensibility to both the ethnic and sectarian identity the Arab regimes from Egypt to the Gulf had, to assure their support in his war against Iran.

An episode during the Lebanese civil war illustrates the Shia-Sunni clash in terms of the ambiguous relationship of Sunnism with Arab nationalism. Until the emergence of the Shia identity with the formation of Amal and Hizbullah, the dominant militia in Western (Muslim) Beirut, along with the Palestinians -until the Israeli invasion of 1982- and the Druze, was the Murabeetoon, a Nasserite pan-Arabist organization, which also claimed to represent the Lebanese Sunnis. As in other parts of the Arab world, Nasser's popularity was immense among Lebanese Sunnis who in 1958 fought the first Lebanese civil war with the Christians in the name of Nasserism. The Murabeetoon emerged as a paramilitary/political organization and a leading force of the Palestinian/Muslim/Leftist coalition against the Christian camp when the civil war broke in 1975. Following the Israeli invasion of 1982 and the dismantlement of the Palestinian armed presence, for a short-lived period Beirut was brought under the control of the then elected President Amin Gemayel who, nevertheless, failed in his attempt to bring a final solution to the

conflict. On February 1984, Muslim/progressive forces once again gained control of the Western Beirut. Nevertheless, in the changing landscape of the power-players, it was the Shia Amal organization that this time had taken the lead of the rebellion against Gemayel's political project. Soon after ending the control of the Lebanese army under the command of the President in Western Beirut, a violent clash irrupted between Amal and the Murabeetoon in which the Sunni militia was defeated, and, practically, dissolved. The episode seems a minor detail of a power-shift in the Lebanese political spectrum. Nevertheless, symbolically at least its significance goes beyond the dispute for the control of the streets of Beirut. The defeat and dissolution of the Murabeetoon ended a long ideological dispute between the Western-prone Maronite Christian elite and the pan-Arabist Sunnis, the two pillars of modern Lebanon. From the emergence of the Shia identity on, pan-Arabism and its cultural Sunni character has vanished from the Lebanese political landscape. The Shia vision of Lebanon, as I discuss in the conclusion, is still anti-Western, without, nevertheless, any pan-Arabist project on its horizon.

Part III. The Geopolitics of the *Fitna*

The Shia-Sunni divide is primarily identity politics. Nevertheless, it involves a violent power struggle, which inevitably leads us to consider the issue within a geopolitical perspective. The geopolitical approach implies two considerations. First, the power projection in terms of territorial domination of the Sunni and Shia Islamist projects; and, second, the role of the third factor, mainly Great Powers politics in the Middle East, in the exacerbation of the Sunni-Shia divide. Following the logic of the "social origins" theoretical approach to the issue, the

geopolitical analysis of the struggle within Islam is explained first by its proper dynamics, and not as the consequence of foreign intervention. In other words, the power struggle within Islam existed long before modern Western expansionism to the Middle East, and the role of Great Powers politics is best conceived as an intervening factor.

Nevertheless, given the importance of the Middle East in international politics from the 19th century and the emergence of the Oriental Question on, the impact of the outside, intervening, factor is almost as important as the independent factor –the power struggle within Islam. Thus, since the Franco British colonialist project of defining the territorial borders of the states after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in virtue of the secret Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916, the behavior of the Great Powers followed the logic of the politics of balance of power. The primary concern of this politics until the end of the Cold War has been the rivalry of the Great Powers. Alliances were thought beyond local concerns, which gained interest only when they were functional to the international balance of power concerns. With the advent of the unipolar world, and the rise of the United States as the only superpower, the balance-of-power approach to Middle Eastern politics lost its importance. American politics in the post-Cold War Middle East, therefore, took a unilateral course in pursuit of policies of missionary nature embodied in terms such as "New World Order," or the Bush administration's drive to democratize the region.

What the Iraqi military intervention and occupation has shown, however, is the inability of the United States to impose a unilateral agenda. The natural boost of Iran's potential as a regional power broker, and the active quest of it by Teheran; the fear of conservative Sunni regimes in the Levant of a rising "Shia crescent;" and the escalation of the violence in Iraq to a

full-scale civil war between the Sunni insurgency dominated by Al Qaeda and the Shias in power

from the breaking point of the Samara Mosque bombing in February 2006, had made all too

clear the existence of an uncontrollable internal dynamics proper to the Muslim world in the

Middle East and beyond. Hence, Washington had little if any choice other than redefining its

Middle Eastern policy in balance-of-power terms. Central to this approach is, as I argue in this

part, the consideration of the dynamics of the Shia-Sunni divide and the power struggle along

this line of fracture within Islam.

I develop my argument about the emerging geopolitical struggle along the Shia-Sunni

dividing lines in three sections. Section 1 critically revises the term Fitna and discusses its

contemporary expression; section 2 makes an argument about the geopolitical rationale of the

intra-Islam fracturing lines; section 3, finally, analyzes foreign intervention, mainly the U.S.

Middle Eastern politics, beyond the Orientalist cultural bias.

Section 1. The 21st Century Fitna…

When Muslim scholars thought about the concept of *Fitna* they did not have specifically

the Shia-Sunni divide in their mind. *Fitna*, as Kepel explains, is the opposite of *Jihad*; whereas

the latter refers to the effort of propagating Islam outside the Umma, hence is an entirely positive

concept, *Fitna*, or "discord," is the moment when Jihad turns inside, against fellow Muslims, and

threatens the implosion of the Umma. Muslim scholars have always been well aware of the

permanent tension between these two opposite poles. Fourteen centuries of Islamic history,

sustains Kepel, is this constant flux and reflux of the Muslim civilization between Jihad and

Fitna (Kepel 2004, 281). The concepts, on the other hand, are not exempt of a gender

connotation, with Jihad in Arabic being a masculine term, and Fitna a feminine one. Hence, the

discord within the Umma has been related to the power of seduction. Muslim scholars have been

"haunted" by an ill-conceived Jihad that would lead to Fitna (Kepel 2005, 26). The ethical/

philosophical dimension of this conceptualization of the Jihad-Fitna permanent tension in the

theological discourse of Muslim scholars is translated in political terms as the power struggle for

the domination of the Umma. Except for relatively short periods of the history of Islam, the Fitna

did not consider the Shia-Sunni divide, mainly for the relations of domination that existed

between the two communities. The power struggle did not follow any defined geopolitical line of

fracture. It rather was the quest of becoming Caliph, and, thus, denoted personal ambitions rather

than collective/communal political projects. Within this perspective, historically the Fitna has

characterized the fragmentation of the Umma, and not necessarily the revival of the initial

dispute about the succession of the Prophet.

The Sunni-Shia divide as a characteristic of the Fitna is proper to the emergence the

Islamist projects within the context of the decline of the last Muslim empire and, eventually, the

end of the institution of the Caliphate, the ultimate political reference of the Umma. Moreover,

the geopolitics of the Fitna understood as both the dynamics of the Shia-Sunni rivalry and the

intervening third factor, Great Powers politics in the Muslim world, is a phenomenon closely

related to the emergence of Islamism on the international agenda in 1979. Following the

controversial thesis of Samuel P. Huntington's "clash of civilizations," however, the

contemporary geopolitics of the Fitna still is as fragmentary as it was in the past. "The absence of

an Islamic core state is a major contributor to the pervasive internal and external conflicts which characterize Islam. Consciousness without cohesion is a source of weakness to Islam and a source of threat to other civilizations" (Huntington 1996, 177).

The emergence of Al Qaeda seems to confirm this conceptualization formulated long before the emergence of the phenomenon. Indeed, Al Qaeda could well be understood as the consequence of the absence of a core state to lead the Islamic civilization in international politics. According to Olivier Roy, Al Qaeda's followers "are not within a "civilizational" space. Quite the opposite, their specificity lies in their deculturalization and deterritorialization" (2006, 32). From this perspective, Al Qaeda is nothing else than a network, a movement of activists, but not a revolutionary project. Exacerbation under a form of victimization is what drives Muslim masses worldwide to look to Bin Laden as a "Robin Hood" or "Che Guevara." As for the founder of Al Qaeda, all he is after is the leadership of an all-Muslim army to fight the Jihad, hence he competes with other Islamists, mainly Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary general of Hizbullah who, according to Roy, is the real hero in the Middle East: "He is a real religious man, who, driven by a logic of unanimity that includes even Christians, fights against Israel" (Roy 2006, 33).

Section 2. ...and its Geopolitical Rationale

There are, however, two arguments for the conceptualization of the current situation of Fitna as a power struggle of a geopolitical logic and vision. First, Iran's quest for a regional role challenges Huntington's statement about the lack of a core state in the Islamic civilization; at least, a potential one. The main reason for this is, as mentioned above, the almost natural boost of

Iran's power potential with the fall of the Saddam Hussein (Sunni) regime. Mahmood

Ahmadenejad's public provocations taken to the extremes of denying the Holocaust and Israel's

right of existence is a calculated strategy to win the hearts and minds of all Muslims. Yet, Iran is

a Shia country. Moreover, it is not an Arab country. Hence, its power projection could reach no

more than the loyalty of the Shias in the Middle East, eventually bringing them under its control.

Currently Iran does not have any competitor in the Muslim world in this potential drive to

become the core country in the Islamic civilization. In no other countries Shias are in power and

independent from outside, mainly U.S., control. Nor are Sunnis. Potentially, Saudi Arabia, Egypt,

and, to a lesser extent, Jordan could pretend to play the role of a core country.

Outside the Arab world, the two Muslim countries with the same potential are Turkey and

Pakistan. Yet, none of them would be acceptable for Sunni Arab Islamists. For, first, Salafism, as

seen, was born out of the concern of the corruption of the institution of the Caliphate controlled

by non-Arabs; and, second, the reluctance of the Sunni Arabs to be controlled by non-Arab

Muslims, even if Pakistan has the nuclear bomb, when they own the oil, the key factor of power

in the Middle East. The problem with Saudi Arabia and Egypt is that the regimes that rule these

countries are too dependent on Washington either for economic or for security reasons. Hence, al

Qaeda, within this logic, is the drive to define a core Sunni country in the Islamic civilization. In

fact, despite the overall belief of al Qaeda acting with the logic of a network which overlooks

any territorial aim for the sake of a global Jihad, a careful analysis of its politics in a broad

understanding of the concept, and not narrowing it to the terrorist enterprise, makes visible its

geopolitical vision.

Indeed, there are three strategic countries for al Qaeda in its quest of the reunification of the Umma and the resurrection of the Caliphate: Saudi Arabia, the land where Islam was born; Egypt, where the Islamist thinking was shaped; and Pakistan, which is the only nuclear Islamic country. Therefore, if Iran pursues a State policy to win the hearts and minds of the Umma, al Qaeda relies on spectacular actions challenging the West and trying to capitalize politically the results until Islamists overthrow the regime in place in any of the three mentioned Muslim countries to raise its project on the State level. This struggle defines the geopolitical contours of the current Fitna the inner dynamics of which is shaped out of the Shia-Sunni divide.

Section 3. Beyond Orientalism: The (Bloody) Politics of Balance of Power

Since Edward W. Said's development of the concept of Orientalism (1979), the cultural bias at the heart of Western politics toward the Muslim world is all too clear. The Orientalist perspective of power politics in the Middle East, is found not only in state-centric frames of analysis such as the "clash of civilizations," but also in the broader Western quest for global hegemony after the Cold War. Following John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge's perception of a deterritorialized world order of the "hegemony of transnational liberalism," hegemony after the Cold War is "no longer an extension of the political and military power of the territorial state but [is] now rooted in global flows of technology, information, knowledge, and economic growth" (Murden 2002, 7). Within this perspective, Islamic revival in the 1970s, "a consequence of social failure in Muslim societies" (Murden 2002, 12), represents a different ontology from Western liberalism. "Islam is about the worship of God. Western thought sold out to humanism

and materialism long ago. Islam is a vision of community and social control, whereas liberalism is a vision of individual choice, economic liberation, and the removal of constraints. Islam tends to frown on the idea of individual autonomy and consciousness. Indeed, many Islamists were wedded to the idea of an overarching Islamic state that enforced illiberal injunctions on consumption, criminal law, and the rights of women, youth, and minorities" (Murden 2002, 14). Hence, Islam has become the last frontier of the Western global hegemony, and the struggle within the Muslim world is as strong as the violent reaction to the outside pressure of neoliberal globalization.

Yet, the effort to understand the U.S. policy in the Middle East and Washington's approach to intra-Islamist fracture needs a perspective narrower than the broad frame of Western global hegemony. The narrower perspective helps to locate better the Orientalist element of this policy and its role in explaining different aspects of U.S. Middle Eastern policy. Thus, following Said's concept, American Orientalism, as Douglas Little explains, is "the byproduct of two contradictory ingredients: an irresistible impulse to remake the world in America's image and a profound ambivalence about the peoples to be remade" (2002, 3). In brief, the early stereotypic vision that the Puritans had of Muslims —and, at least until the 20th century, Jews— as the inhabitants of a romanticized Holy Land, and, later in the 19th century, the accounts of the American missionaries, tourists and merchants "amazed by the Christian relics and biblical landscapes but appalled by the despotic governments and decadent societies that they encountered from Constantinople to Cairo" (Little 2002, 9), underlined the rationale of U.S. policies in the Middle East. "The diplomats, oil men, and soldiers who promoted and protected

U.S. interests in the Middle East during the twentieth century converted these earlier cultural assumptions and racial stereotypes into an irresistible intellectual shorthand for handling the "backward" Muslims and the "headstrong" Jews whose objectives frequently clashed with America's" (Little 2002, 9-10). American orientalism evolved in the second half of the twentieth century to accept Israel as part of the Christian civilization, and ended up centered on the exclusive cultural bias toward Islam.

Orientalism, however, falls short in explaining the U.S. Middle Eastern policy with respect the Shia-Sunni divide. Of course, American orientalists knew little, if any, of this divide, and for sure it did not matter much to policymakers. At least until 1979. Since then, nevertheless, and the episode of Sadat's assassination notwithstanding, the United States considered Sunni Islamists allies, whereas in general Shia Muslims, by extension of Washington's conflict with Iran, were viewed as enemies. The official rhetoric, of course, never made such a difference. The dividing line has always been "terrorists," or "fundamentalists," and others, and with the same token rogue states, supporting terrorism, and others. Little, if any, of this approach changed with the emergence of al-Qaeda and September 11. The occupation of Iraq, and the consequent escalation of the civil war, however, has made the question of the U.S. policy with respect the Shia-Sunni divide inevitable.

The argument of orientalism and the cultural bias toward Islam is not enough to inquire about the U.S. policy as the intervening factor in the Shia-Sunni fracture. Beyond this bias, the overall rationale of the U.S. policy in the Middle East provides a better explanation. Thus, as in other parts of the world, the strategy of Contention explained the rational motivation and the

design of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East during the Cold War. After 1967, 1973, and

1979 successively, and still within the context of the bipolar world, three other elements were

incorporated to the general framework of this Grand Strategy: the special relationship with Israel,

the need to secure oil supplies, and the enmity with the Islamic Republic of Iran following the

hostage crisis. With the end of Cold War, the rationale of the strategy of Contention lost its

momentum, albeit it continued shaping the U.S. foreign policy rhetoric, as Clinton's policy of

"double Containment" toward Iraq and Iran shows. Instead, the concern of avoiding the rise of a

regional power that could dominate and monopolize the access to the Middle Eastern oil reserves

gained priority. The rationale of this concern, for example, explains the U.S.-Israeli special

relationship: the Jewish state is the only state in the Middle East that cannot possibly become a

regional power, and less dominate the oil reserves; hence, it can be a reliable strategic partner

even if it possesses nuclear weapons out of Washington's control and command system.

For sure, Iraq in March 2003 was not on the verge of rising as a regional power, as indeed

was Saddam Hussein's intention in 1991. Nor was it a national security threat to the United

States as the two false arguments that justified the intervention, weapons of mass destruction and

support to terrorism, stated. The intervention in Iraq followed the guideline of the 2002 National

Security Strategy and aimed at establishing a military base to preempt any Islamist uprising in

Saudi Arabia. As, to some extent, aims the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan with respect to

Pakistan. In other words, a potential Sunni strategy to overthrow the regimes in these countries

has probably not been out of the spot of U.S. strategists even before September 11, 2001.

Nevertheless, the emergence of a hostile Sunni Islamist regime aiming at the resurrection of the

Umma and the Caliphate powerful enough to threat Middle Eastern oil supplies and U.S. interests in the region is for the moment less imminent than the potential that Iran has to fulfill that role using the Shia factor as a legitimization of a drive to become a regional power broker. Therefore, the Iraqi intervention did not signify a shift in the U.S. Middle Eastern policy in terms of a new alliance with the Shia to counter al-Qaeda's Jihad.

To what extent the special relationship with Israel played a role in rejecting this shift, especially when considering the intellectual source—the Neocons—of Operation Iraqi Freedom and their engagement with the Likud, is debatable; as is the rather subjective factor of the Bush administration self-confidence on military superiority as a determinant dissuasive element. What does not seem questionable is the fact that the military occupation of Iraq meant also to dissuade Iran from any regional pretension. The overruling of any division of the Iraqi territory explains also the concern –among others- of avoiding any room for an active Iranian activism in a territory under the strict control of Shias. Hence, the underlining logic of the U.S. policy in the construction of the post-Saddam Hussein Iraq has pretty much followed the British colonial design of an artificial country where the Shia and Sunni—and, of course, Kurdish—coexistence holds on by virtue of an internal pact and its inherent coercive element, albeit whereas the British entrusted the Sunni minority the use of this coercive element, the Bush administration had no other choice but to bring to power the Shia.

The post-Saddam Hussein design of Iraq was performed under the missionary impulse of democratization (DerGhougassian 2005). Did the Bush administration believe really that the key for success lied in a democratic Iraq, hence were "living in another world," and was the whole

enterprise "a good idea that has been badly handled," as Francis Fukuyama thinks (2007)? The fact remains that the outcome of the military intervention was civil war in which not only did the Shia-Sunni divide deepen but also threatened to spread across the Middle East. And, despite its rhetoric or perhaps even serious conviction, either by default, or by design, the U.S. intervention in that civil war from Iraq to Lebanon followed the guideline of balance of power politics the ultimate aim of which is to prevent the rise of a regional superpower. Even if the price to pay is the ongoing bloodshed that threatens to get out of control as violence has entered a vicious circle where the only stake is to raise again and again the level of horror.

Conclusion: The Future of Shia-Sunni Divide

There are three main critical considerations when reviewing the argument of the social origins of Shia and Sunni Islamism to make a point about the future of the fracture within Islam. The first consideration concerns the validity of the concept as an analytical framework for the topic; the second is about the nationalism factor inherent to Islamism; the third one, finally, refers to alternative evolutionary paths for Islam. All three considerations suggest further inquiry of the topic to test the validity of the argument made in this paper.

With respect to the first consideration, Barrington Moore's idea of social origins did not develop a specific comparative frame applicable to topics other than the one he deals with in the book *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Moreover, he says very little about the contours of a possible frame when discussing at the end of the book the conceptual generalizations of his comparative analysis of different revolutions. In this sense, borrowing

from Barrington Moore the mere idea of "social origins" as a conceptual framework is almost an invitation to an epistemological discussion in view of a well-developed framework of comparative analysis for topics related to historical social movements marking the path of history. There are, nevertheless, two arguments that justify the use of "social origins" as a conceptual frame for the study of Shia and Sunni Islamism. The first is the commonality of the topic, more explicitly the making of the Modern world of Islam; the second is the hypothesis of social origins as an explanatory independent variable for the diverging paths of the peculiar Modernity in Islam.

As for nationalism and Islam, Georges Corm makes a convincing case when looking to Hamas and Iran's support to the Palestinian Islamist organization underlines the nationalist logic beneath the religious-driven discourse and politics (2006). Indeed, the Shia-Sunni divide seems not to bother the alliance of a Jihadist organization and the would-be core country of a potential Shia "civilization" in Huntingtonian terms. Moreover, after winning the elections in the Palestine in January 2006, Hamas rejected al-Qaeda's offer to extend help and support in its struggle. Hamas' behavior can be explained only when considering the movement's struggle in national liberation terms and not in quest for the resurrection of the Caliphate. A similar nationalist argument could be made in the case of the Lebanese Hizbullah. Roger Shanahan (2005) and Amal Saad-Ghorayeb and Marina Ottaway (2007), among others, have shown the multilevel identities of Hizbullah as an emblematic case of the Lebanese Shia identity and the dynamics of its evolution. However, the "Islamic nationalism," as Corm characterizes it, so far has failed to develop any intra-Islam alliance against a common enemy, whether the United States specifically

or Western global hegemony in general. Not even in Iraq, where, as argued in this paper, the Shia-Sunni divide escalated dramatically in spite of the foreign occupation. Hence, the conceptual ground of a Shia-Sunni divide following the logic of different "social origins" still holds stronger than any nationalist ground for an Islamic challenge to foreign threat.

Finally, other paths of evolution for Islam breaking the vicious circle of the Shia-Sunni divide should not be ruled out altogether. There are at least two arguments sustaining this consideration. The first one is the conviction of some scholars of Islam that an Islamic Reformation is well on its way (Aslan 2006). If so, there are a priori no reasons to overrule a path of secularization for Islamic politics similar to the one the Christian world followed after the Religious Wars in Europe in the 17th century. The second one is the gradual strengthening of state policies leading to an overall arrangement to downsize the level of the conflict in the Middle East to the point of containing free-driving trends. Key to this perspective are a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the framework of a general Arab-Israeli agreement; a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement; and the inclusion of Islamists in national politics accepting their rise to power within a democratic contest for votes. In fact, The Iraq Study Group Report (2006) has explicitly recommended a regional solution for the conflict of the Middle East instead of the case-by-case approach. Another sign at the same direction could be seen in the Saudi initiative in 2002, repeated in March 2007, to propose an Arab-Israeli peace agreement at the heart of which lies a "land for peace" solution to the Palestinian question and the recognition of Israel on behalf of all Arab countries. The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement could be successful only as much as the capacity of each to contain Sunni and Shia groups fighting in Iraq, or exercising influence in the

internal political process of Lebanon. Finally, the inclusion of Islamists in national politics will not necessarily means a drive to democratization in Algeria, Egypt or elsewhere as much as the nationalization of Islamist politics, and, therefore, its socialization within the rather limited context of national politics, as a way of avoiding the spread of transnational loyalties along the Shia-Sunni fracture line. These trends would not necessarily lead to the end of conflict hypotheses in the Middle East; nevertheless, they could contain the politics of balance of power within the limits of the political struggle avoiding the bloodshed.

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