

## « The Shiite *Marja'iyya* question »

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### Summary

The invasion of Iraq in March 2003, and the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime that followed, have led to an upheaval of the balance of political forces that had prevailed till then. Under the Iraqi dictator's regime, the country was ruled by a central government whose action imposed itself to most of the Iraqi inhabitants of the Iraqi territory – with the notable exception of the Iraqi autonomous Kurdistan in the North – but the American management of Iraqi political affairs will soon lead to an intensification of tensions.

The new Iraqi Parliament, which holds a Shiite majority, has worried a number of people living in as well as outside of Iraq. In a manner recalling the situation that prevailed around the time of the Islamic Revolution, the leaders of Iran, Jordan and Egypt, as well as some members of the Saudi political class, were quick to denounce the logic of an American policy in the Middle East which encouraged the establishment of a “Shiite crescent.” These declarations were symbolically very significant because they were spoken by countries believed by the United States to be among their closest allies. These declarations were based on a dual observation : based on the presence of an effective political affirmation of Shiite Arabs on the Iraqi political scene as well as the presence of important Shiite groups in several countries of the region. In addition to Iran, which has a Shiite majority, and Iraq, which holds about 60% of Shiites Arab, one can notice the great importance of this community in each of these countries : Bahrain (nearly 70% of the population), Lebanon (nearly 40%), Kuwait (25%), and even Saudi Arabia (about 15%). Adding to that figure is the presence in : Yemen,

Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, as well as in Asia : Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, without excluding Pakistan.

The current estimations in regards to the potential rise of a “Shiite crescent” are based most of all on political fears, many Sunni governments being frightened of the Iran’s current assumption of regional power. In addition there are historical and theological considerations that go much deeper in history. The severity of the contentious issues between Sunnis and Shiites are well known in the Muslim World. Their mutual existence of 1400 years has not helped to erase the fears that each of these communities has towards one another and these contentious relationships are the bases for the fear of most Middle East governments; domination by a Persian and Shiite regional strength. These governments are much more afraid of Iran than Occidental countries.

It is well understood that the theological and spiritual foundations and interpretations are part of the discourse that each of the Sunnis and the Shiites refer to in order to criticize the members of their competing communities. The original break occurred in 656, when Caliph Ali saw his political and religious prerogatives disputed by the Omeyyad governor Muawya. From then on, each of the Sunnis and Shiites has developed religious particularities that would become the basis of their respective theological *corpuses*. A notable characteristic within the Shiite discourse, for example, deals with the possibility – or not – for a religious leader to assume a political role. During the first centuries of Shiite Islam, religious prerogatives were concentrated in the hands of Caliph Ali and the Imam. But at the end of the ninth century, the “Occultation” of *Mahdi*, the twelfth Imam, suspended the specific Shiite succession modalities. The Community would have to wait for his “reappearance” on earth before being able to evangelise its own points of view to the other communities and religions of the world. Nonetheless, did this mean a renouncement of religious representatives in political prerogatives, so long as the *Mahdi* had not reappeared? The debate would first be opened at the end of the tenth century, when Shiite Buyids took power in Baghdad and would be partly put into effect with the Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeiny’s decree dealing with the

possibility for the *velayat-e-faqih* to practice political as well as religious prerogatives until the reappearance of the Twelfth Imam. But this revolutionary announcement was not be agreed on by everybody.

Still today, the possibility for an ayatollah to take on both a spiritual and a temporal role is not supported by all the *marja'*, or religious representatives. The number of these representatives is not precisely determined but equal about 100 in total. Specifically they represent the interests of the Shiites having chosen their *marja'iyah*, meaning that for edicts and points of view in matters religious, social, and even political. It is furthermore the followers of the *marja'* Ali Khamenei, current Supreme Guide of Iran, who cling to his guidance in issues as much spiritual as temporal. But, *a contrario*, the followers of Ali Sistani, for example, the ayatollah of Najaf, have until now respected its edicts in religious and social matters and leave all political issues to their respective governments. The followers of a Khamenei, much like those of a Sistani or any other *marja'*, do not draw followers from an exclusive territory. Each Shiite has, in effect, the possibility and the duty to follow the *marja'iyah* of his choice independently from any consideration of territorial order. Furthermore, these choices do not enter into contradiction with the foreseen conditions for the exercise of citizenship in a domain territorially and nationally given. The choice of Shiites of the Bahrain, of Saudi Arabia, or still of Lebanon for a *marja'iyah* of an ayatollah situated outside of their national borders, does not concern them nor does it necessitate respect of the laws which are imposed on them by their respective governments.

The national cadre present in each of the Middle Eastern countries, have until now avoided the question of the *marja'iyah* entering into contradiction with the sovereignty exercised by different Middle Eastern governments. But how long will this situation continue? If the Islamic Revolution of 1979 did not push the Shiites Arab in the region to depart from the action and guidance of their respective governments, with the exception of some peripheral cases and quickly led to failure, the current crumbling of the Iraqi government sphere begs the question of whether the lack of Iraqi executive power could cause an affirmation of the *marja'iyah* becoming a full and complete political actor. This question is asked particularly in a context where the ayatollah Ali Sistani has the reputation of being the most popular *marja'* in the Shiite world, which includes Iraq, Iran, and other areas in the region.

The *marja'iyah* is a dogmatic system and will remain like this. Its continuation could come to mean the desire to have a central and complete role within the political system. Much here depends on the intentions and guidance of each of the *marja'* seeing himself confronted by a weakening of power of the government action representing the national and citizenry interests on a given territory. If, in Iran, the *marja'iyah* of Ali Khamenei take part in the national political system in complete coexistence with the established *marja'* of the same territory and some times demands of the conceptions of the exercise of the strongly divergent power, it will go differently in the case of Iraq where until now the *marja'iyah* have been seen as playing the role of a political and social stabiliser and does not contradict the guidance of the Iraqi government nearly as often. As for the rest of the countries in the region, with the notable exception of Lebanon, they do not seem to welcome important *marja'* living officially in their territories. In other words, the spiritual references of all Shiites within the Middle East are from the *marja'* established in Lebanon, in Iraq, and in Iran, the conditions of exercising national power depends on their share of the legislative and constitutional measures.

In this context, for the time being, one can not pretend that the question of the *marja'iyah* is far from causing an upheaval of the nature of relationships between existing political forces within the Middle East. Nothing will prevent this situation from evolving in the future, and in a way possibly more rapid than predicted. But the circumstances of such a change are not yet clear as there are no concrete examples to back this up. The problems posed in Iraq today are first foremost political even political-religious rather than related to the *marja'iyah*. Iran, for its part, naturally searches to make a profit from the Iraqi deal, just until given the impression of wanting to take into consideration, all of its parties, Kurds or Arabs, Sunnis as Shiites, for purposes more political than religious. It seems established; therefore, that Tehran is in the process of carefully handling the suggestions of Ali Sistani on the Iraqi scene. What this means, for one, is that the precise capability of Iran to influence the actions of certain Shiite members of the Iraqi government, as well as its attachment, for another, to prove its good intentions towards the ayatollah of Najaf. But finally, what is there as proof of the constitution already acquired from a Middle Eastern "Shiite Crescent" which would have Iran as the leader? Things seem to be not so simple. The current period seems more like an attempt on the part of Iran to confirm its regional position by strengthening its influence wherever possible. The Iraqi domain is a favourable target because of proven difficulties by the government which is working hard to promote development. Also, the

tendencies of certain Iraqi politicians to form agreements with Tehran as well as the will indirectly suggested by Washington of seeing Iran play a stabilising role where it can in Iraq. But despite appearances, Iran plays an Iranian card and not a Shiite one, and that, for the time being, shows its area of application to be limited only to the Iraqi scene. In view of the regional policy deal, it seems to be incapable of getting past this topic of Iraqi borders as long as strong governments are maintained in the other countries in the region, and as long as possible Iraqi civil war will not generate collateral damages through for example an uprising of the communities living in the neighbouring states. Furthermore, in this case, the remote control by Tehran of the Arab Shiites present on the Middle Eastern scene will remain dependant on the abilities of those in power to form with an actor perceived as Persian rather than Shiite. A situation which is far from being realised, for the time being, and which there is much a possibility of a “trans national Shiite Caliph” having the power to take form.