

Iran and The Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities

KAYHAN BARZEGAR
Assistant Professor
Islamic Azad University

IN 2004, KING ABDULLAH OF Jordan warned about the emergence of an ideological Shiite crescent from Beirut to the Persian Gulf. Ever since then, the debate on Iran's intentions to create a Shiite crescent has been a significant topic of debate for the panels and conferences held on the region's issues. Three presumptions center on Iran's role and intentions. A Shiite crescent is seen by the Arab Sunni elites as an attempt by Iran firstly to engage the masses in the region¹; secondly, to build an ideological belt of sympathetic Shiite governments and political factions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf region²; and, thirdly, to expand its regional role and power.³ These explanations are inadequate and unrealistic; none of them are compatible with Iran's real aims and strategies. In this article, I aim to analyze this issue from an Iranian perspective.

87

Is Iran trying to engage the Arab Shiite masses? Is Iran attempting to expand its regional influence by building an ideological Shiite crescent? What are Iran's aims in establishing friendly relations with the Shiite factions in the region?

With the new political developments in post-invasion Iraq, one should not dispute that there is an ongoing conflict between the Shiites and the Sunnis in the region. Yet my argument is that this rivalry is a pure inter-Arab world power-sharing conflict rather than an ideological Iranian-Arab rivalry. To examine this idea, I argue firstly that, given Iran's political dynamics and the existing cultural-societal and historical distinctions between the Persian and Arab masses, the realization of an ideology-dominated Shiite crescent, is rather difficult, if not impossible. I then argue that Iran's attempt to create a coalition of Shiite friendly governments is based on a strategic rationale and is pragmatic and not ideological. Iran's regional policies have always been affected by its

KAYHAN BARZEGAR is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Science and Research Campus, Islamic Azad University, Tehran. He is currently a Research Fellow at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. He is also an Associate Fellow at the Center for Strategic Research (CSR) and a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies, Tehran. Dr. Barzegar was a Post-doctorate Research Fellow at the London School of Economics (LSE) in 2002-2003.

Copyright © 2008 by the *Brown Journal of World Affairs*

KAYHAN BARZEGAR

geopolitical reality first and its ideology second. Lastly, I argue that Iran's presence in the region is a result of the need to make an alliance with friendly Shiite governments in response to security threats caused after the arrival of U.S. troops in the region. It is therefore defensive, not expansionist.

These arguments have significant implications for foreign policymakers to understand the roots of Iran's recent involvement with the Shiite issues in the region. Exaggerating the emergence of an ideological Shiite crescent should be avoided, because it will bring about unnecessary new rivalries and promote further distrust and threat perceptions in an already complex region.

THE SHIITE CRESCENT: WHY A THREAT?

Two groups of political and intellectual elites highlight the debates of an emerging threat of a regional Shiite crescent: (1) the Arab Sunni elites and (2) opponents of Iran's growing regional role in the West, especially in the United States.

The debate about the Sunni elites has three dimensions: (1) their own diminished power, (2) concerns about the growing political demands of their Shiite populations, and (3) Iran's expanding role in "Arab" affairs. Firstly, from the perspective of the Arab Sunni elites, the revival of Shiites in Iraq has unbalanced the bases of power and politics in the Middle East. This situation will consequently lead to a new dynamic where the Sunni elites' political positions in the regions' power division are off balance. Although the majority of Shiites have been a driving force for political-social movements and reform in Iraq and Bahrain, it was only recently that the Shiite factions found grounds to assert themselves in their politics. The rise to power of Shiites in an Arab state for the first time has made the Sunni governing elites extremely concerned not only by the demands of their Shiite populations (whether majority or minority) to acquire further socio-political rights, but also by a process that could eventually lead to the removal of the current Sunni elites from power in the so-called Shiite crescent areas.

Secondly, since such a revival is based on engaging the Shiite masses, it is ideological. As a significant force, the sentiments of the Arab street and especially the increased political-economic and social demands of the Shiite masses have always mattered for the Sunni governing elites in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Lebanon. In the course of history, the Shiite movements have been a driving force for Sunni populations in demanding more political reform, and human rights in the region. Since the early 1990s, the increased political reform and women's rights in Bahrain and Kuwait have affected the entire Persian Gulf region. Therefore, any attempt to politically mobilize the Arab masses (whether Shiites or Sunnis) and its subsequent effects have been a matter of great concern for the Sunni elites, particularly when it relates to Iran's

attempts to take on a larger role in the region. As once discussed by Hosni Mubarak: “The Shiites in the region are more loyal to Iran than their own countries,”⁴ which substantiates just how much the Arab elites are concerned by the Iranian Shiite influence upon the average people in their countries. The popularity of Hassan Nasrallah of Lebanese Hezbollah and President Ahmadinejad of Iran, two Shiite leaders, in the Arab streets is of great concern for the Arab Sunni elites.⁵

Lastly, and perhaps most worryingly, is that the driving force of this revival is Iran itself. Either as a justification for some of the Arab regimes’ policies—such as embracing foreign troops in the region⁶—or a fear tactic to cement Washington’s political and financial support for their regimes,⁷ or even as a matter of bringing inter-elite solidarity, the assertions to the world about an Iranian threat have long been present within the Sunni Arab regimes. By naming himself an Arab world hero and the guardian of the Arab world’s eastern gate, Saddam Hussein justified his war with Iran by claiming that it would block the Persian-Shiite influence. Subsequently, he gained the Arab Sunni elites’ comprehensive political and financial support.

As one of the most unnecessary wars in the history of the Middle East, the Iran–Iraq war occurred because of the rhetorical exaggerations of Iran’s traditional threat perceptions in the Sunni Arab world.

As one of the most unnecessary wars in the history of the Middle East, the Iran–Iraq war occurred because of the rhetorical exaggerations of Iran’s traditional threat perceptions in the Sunni Arab world. As Saud al-Faisal of Saudi Arabia states, “All Arab countries assisted Iraq to not be occupied by Iran (in the Iran–Iraq war), but now we are handing the whole country of Iraq over to Iran without reason.”⁸ Despite accepting today that past support for Iraq’s Ba’athist regime was a wrong and devastating policy, as of now, no one within the Arab Sunni leadership has ever formally apologized for that support. Today, the inappropriate depiction of Iran’s regional aims as attempting to establish a “new Safavid Empire” has roots in this kind analogy of Iran’s regional ambitions.⁹

Traditionally, the regional and particularly Persian Gulf politics have always been outweighed by a desire to maintain a balance of power between the region’s main actors. For many years, Iran and Iraq balanced each other’s power, thereby allowing other states of the region to feel more secure. With the current Iraqi crisis, the Arab Sunni autocrats feel frightened of an Iran that is clearly fulfilling the regional power vacuum. They believe Iran’s main forces for projecting its hegemonic interests in the region are its Arab Shiite friends, especially in Iraq. As one expert asserts, “From the Arab world’s standpoint, the prospect of Tehran dictating security and oil policy, and most worrisome, intervening on behalf of local Shiite populations, has Sunni rulers across the region pressing Washington to confront Iran.”¹⁰

The prevailing view in the United States is that Iran is the winner of the 2003 war in Iraq.¹¹ Some hawkish analysts argue that the evolution of Iran's regional role goes against U.S. interests and must somehow be restrained.¹² This debate has also three dimensions: (1) U.S. national interests, (2) the security of Israel, and (3) the legitimacy of the traditional Arab allies. Firstly, views in the United States tend to perceive that any empowerment of Iran's role in the region is in conflict with U.S. national and security interests.¹³ Presenting Iran as a regional or even super-regional power was first overstressed in the West to show that Iran, with its opportunistic ambitions, would try to fill the power vacuum in post-invasion Iraq. From this perspective, since a half century

Under the new regional circumstances, and by establishing a Shiite crescent, Iran will be able to expand its regional power and influence.

ago, U.S. policy in the Middle East and especially in the Persian Gulf has been to maintain a balance of power while preventing any regional supremacy.¹⁴ Under the

new regional circumstances, and by establishing a Shiite crescent, Iran will be able to expand its regional power and influence. And if this new dynamic were to exist, Iran would be able to dictate its own terms and conditions to the international community and especially to the United States on such crucial issues as international energy security, oil prices, and even with respect to Iran's policy on its nuclear program.¹⁵ In addition, Iran's continued involvement with Arab world politics, as was the case in Lebanon and the Hezbollah–Israel war in summer 2006, has been a source of continuing tension and itself conveys a great impending danger for regional and international security.¹⁶

Secondly, creating such an ideologically based crescent in a region comprised of Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq will endanger the security of Israel. Protecting Israel's security is one of the most significant pillars of U.S. Middle East policy.¹⁷ Since it has already suffered from an ideological war with Hezbollah, the Israeli regime is currently concerned about the lasting effects of the Iraq war, arguing that the war has so far benefitted Iran. Some experts even argue that the Israel lobby has attempted to convince the Bush administration to stay longer in Iraq, since any possible power vacuum during the post-withdrawal window will inevitably be filled by Shiite political factions sympathetic to Iran and starkly against Israel.¹⁸ Thirdly, Iran's growing ideological role and influence in the region will weaken the position of the conservative Sunni elites, who have been traditionally in line with U.S. policies in the region. At several stages, these elites have welcomed U.S. troops in the Persian Gulf wars. Especially now, with anti-American sentiments growing among the masses, the political legitimacy of these elites will be questioned more and more as they have previously agreed to the U.S. presence in the

region.¹⁹ This position has also been a major pretext for terrorist groups targeting the Saudi and Jordanian governments in recent years.²⁰

IRAN AND THE SHIITE CRESCENT

Given the points outlined, crucial questions that remain include whether Iran is trying to build such a Shiite crescent at the level of the masses, whether it is attempting to expand its regional power by establishing such an ideological belt, and whether there are other more strategic reasons behind Iran's policies.

A COALITION AT THE LEVEL OF THE MASSES OR THE STATES?

The idea of an emerging Shiite crescent, at the level of masses, can be challenged in two aspects. First, one must question whether such an ideological-religious coalition is actually feasible in the mentioned areas. Experts on Middle East issues tend to agree that it is the factor of national identity rather than religion or ideology which acts as a force of unity and solidarity in the region.²¹ Today, Middle Eastern issues are mostly centered along the lines of the cultural, political and geopolitical demands of identity—e.g., the Persians, Arabs, Turks, Kurds, et cetera—and these have basically become consolidated due to their common language, territorial proximity, and historical origins. Accordingly, the Iraqi Shiites, Lebanese, and Syrians are first Arabs and only then Shiites. Moreover, the Iranian Shiites are first and foremost Persians. It was for this reason that Iraqi Shiites actively joined the Ba'athist regime's war against Iran, seeing it as their national duty.²²

Even today, despite Iran's support, members of the Iraqi Shiite leadership, from the far extremists to the more moderate and independent sides, have their own views about how Iraq should be governed. Although there is a religious and cultural issue posed by mutual travel to Karbala and Najaf, as well as to Mashad and Qom—which matters considerably for both the Iranians and the Iraqis respectively—there is a larger picture. The people, given their cultural-societal and historical backgrounds, will find it hard to build a coalition between Iranians or elites with any other Arab nation. This feeling of cultural distinction and unique identity exists on the Arab sides, mostly because of the long absence of interaction at the level of people as well as the misinformed policy of the Sunni governing elites and outside powers which today define Iran as the region's major threat.

The genuine prospect of establishing a Shiite ideological coalition is yet to be institutionalized in Iranian or Arab societies and therefore has little weight in regulating Iran's foreign policy. Therefore, although ideology does form a significant part of the Islamic republic's world-view, there exist a number of facts that demonstrate Iran's

actions are motivated primarily by pragmatic considerations. The governing elites in Iran perceive the Shiite-Sunni issue in the broader context of the Islamic world. To avoid any tension, the late Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Islamic revolution, announced the “Week of Unity” in the Iranian calendar. Since the revolution, other Iranian officials have followed this line of thinking. For instance, in his recent trip to Saudi Arabia (June 2008), Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, ex-president and the head of Iran’s Expediency Council, expressed the necessity of keeping unity between Shiites and Sunnis in the region.²³

The issue of Iranian Shiite influence in the region is more centered on Iran’s actual engagement with the affairs of neighboring Arab countries. Iran’s policy in this regard has been quite clear. Like any other major revolutions that were at the start influenced by revolutionary excitements and then shifted to pragmatism, Iran, except for a few years in the early 1980s and immediately after the Islamic revolution, has always followed a pragmatic policy towards its neighboring Arab states. In this context, however, there are other Iranian viewpoints which tend to agree that, given the two sides’ distinctive regional aims and security concerns, too much engagement with the Arab world’s politics works neither to the benefit of the country’s national interests nor, as history shows, to the appreciation of the Arab Sunni elites.²⁴ Therefore, the perspective among analysts in Iran seldom pushes for the creation of such a Shiite crescent at the level of the masses due to its incompatibility with Iran’s substantive power and politics. It is thus very “Non-Iranian” to even discuss the possibilities of establishing an Iranian Shiite crescent.

Secondly, since the end of the Iran–Iraq war and especially since the early 1990s, the Islamic republic has made a strategic decision to pursue balanced relations with its Arab neighbors in order to preserve Iran’s national interests.²⁵ Although Iran made several efforts toward détente and confidence-building policies, the region’s political developments, i.e. the first Persian Gulf in 1990 and subsequently the foreign presence in the region, never allowed Iran to fully develop or act on this policy. Yet again, there is evidence that the Iranian government believes that building trust and advancing relations at the regional level requires establishing cordial relations with Arab governments.²⁶ This necessity is especially important given that the elites in the Arab world form their countries’ foreign policies and relations. Iran’s first attempt to establish close relations with the masses immediately after the 1979 Islamic revolution was rather unsuccessful and resulted in tensions, especially with Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. Given its geopolitical, cultural-societal, and political-economic characteristics, Iran has more or less attempted to establish good relationships with the Arab world.²⁷ By implying an “accommodating foreign policy” which endeavors to establish good and close relations with the main actors of the region, namely Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Iran enhances its

regional status and political-security integration in the region. Geopolitical and political security realities in the region will force Iran to continue this policy in the future.

IDEOLOGICAL OR PRAGMATIC?

Is the Shiite ideological force the main stimulus for an emerging Shiite coalition? The creation of such an alliance based on ideological orientation is unrealistic, since it is incompatible with the geopolitical nature and current demands of the governments in such a coalition. As reflected in Iran–Syria relations, experts tend to agree that such an alliance depends more on the two sides' common strategic threat perceptions, as posed by the United States and Israel in this case, rather than the Shiite origins of their ruling elites.²⁸ Although Shiite culture has not significantly influenced the closeness of the two governments, the combined hostility of the supposedly secular leadership of the Sunni

Arab countries has reinforced their religious bonds. In fact, relying on each other to tackle threats in crucial moments has mattered for both sects, especially in a region in which they feel alone and encircled

Ideological forces do, of course, act as a stimulus in connecting people morally and in winning hearts and minds, as well as in obtaining their occasional mutual political support.

by enemies. In addition, Iran will not forget the vital Syrian support it received during its war with Iraq. Syria also considers Iran a source of political and logistical support and a friend at crucial moments. By contrast, in the case of Iraq, ideology has never been a force to bring the two sides' policies together. Syria and Iran support rival Sunni and Shiite political factions, respectively. The ideological factor never acted to create a Shiite crescent in this manner. Although partly an exception, the Iran–Hezbollah relationship shows a more strategically oriented alliance for tackling the same enemy's military security threats and as a means of outweighing their rivals regionally and internationally. Ideological forces do, of course, act as a stimulus in connecting people morally and in winning hearts and minds, as well as in obtaining their occasional mutual political support.

93

In Iran–Iraq relations, because of long historical, cultural and religious connectedness, Iran will support Shiite-dominated governments in Iraq. The vital interest for Iran, though, is to block the emergence of an unfriendly Iranian regime (no matter Shiite or Sunni) in Baghdad, rather than supporting a Shiite government of any kind, such as Iyad Allawi (a secular faction), which might itself be merely a regional rival some time in the future. This sensitivity is due to both the existence of past war and the historical threat perception that exists among the Iranian statecrafts. In this respect, Iraq should be watched carefully, as it has the potential to pose a new kind of

military extremism and threat to Iran. Iran's current support for the Al-Maliki Shiite government emanates from the sense that such a government could never in essence be unfriendly toward Iran in the future. If otherwise, then Iran's policy would understandably change quite quickly.

In addition, being encircled in a Sunni neighborhood, having less sympathetic neighboring states, and for balancing its domestic politics and regional relations, a Shiite government in Iraq would inevitably seek Iran's political support. Therefore, ideology is only one factor among many that unifies Iran and the Iraqi Shiite government. In the same vein, Iran welcomed the Afghan Karzai government, despite its Sunni base and strong American support, because a nationalistic Afghan government—given the two sides' strong historical-cultural connectedness—could not in its nature be unfriendly toward Iran.

Since the last two to three centuries, the presence of unfriendly foreign powers (Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and Britain) and regimes in the region has been costly and a source of great tension, war, and instability across Iran's national boundaries.²⁹ The Ba'athists and Taliban regimes are only two notable examples in recent time. A sense of insecurity from the unstable neighborhood is today a part of Iran's political culture. As a strategic standpoint, therefore, it is understandable that the Iranian elites would and should work hard to support a new generation of friendly political elites, factions, and governments in their own backyard. This policy will prevent Iran from facing similar sources of instability and hostility in the future, such as those imposed by countries with either anti-Iranian policies or who let their soil be used by foreign troops that pose a military threat.

AN EXPANDING REGIONAL ROLE OR TACKLING SECURITY THREATS?

The most controversial part of the debate over the supposed Shiite crescent centers on Iran's expansionist policy to make best use of the new situation in post-invasion Iraq for empowering its regional role. I argue instead that Iran's desire for an active presence in the region's politics is mostly defensive and is aimed at tackling security threats. As discussed earlier, the presentation of Iran as a spoiler regional power as a result of the Iraq crisis was first spread by Western analysts and later welcomed by the Sunni elites. This image depicted Iran as the new ideological threat to the region and even the world.

These kinds of drawings have simultaneously brought about new constraints for Iran at both the regional and international levels. Iran is a regional power politically and militarily and a developing country economically, from both the sense of growth and progress. It is currently attempting to find a more genuine and balanced position in the region as well as in its relations with the international community. Showing Iran's

attempt to acquire nuclear weapons, advancing military strength and missile capability, and holding the current assumption of “Iran rising to power” only asserts Iran’s destructive role in the region.³⁰ One should instead argue that Iran’s sources of power are more based on its geo-strategic position, size and energy sources, skilled population and big middle class, and vast economic potentials, rather than its military forces, which are only one factor among others. Activating Iran’s potential power bases requires a decisive and positive engagement in the region, both for securing its immediate security circle and creating economic opportunities for its progressing economy.

Iran’s regional policies have always been affected by two significant elements: geopolitical reality and ideology. These elements have led consistently to Iran’s either pragmatic or ideological foreign policy orientations in the region. As one renowned expert of Iran’s foreign policy argues, over the course of past history, these two factors have struggled hard to balance each other.³¹ Although there is no doubt they are substantively different and both remain constant to some degree in Iran’s foreign policy, the geopolitical factor will continue to regulate Iran’s relations with the other regional states. Since the last century, the most prominent duties of the Iranian political elites have been to tackle security threats and promote Iran’s pace of economic and political development. Iran’s Strategic 20-Year Plan (2005-2025) asserts that: “Iran is a developed country ranking the first in the region economically, scientifically, and technologically.”³² Today, the common perspective among the Iranian elites is that achieving this ambitious plan requires a stabilized and peaceful periphery on the one hand and the creation of economic opportunities in the region on the other. No rationale as strong as this could justify Iran’s presence in the region.

From a strategic point of view, Iran’s delicate geopolitics, substances of power, and political-cultural dynamics are such that it is forced to be present in the region. Iran’s geopolitics brings both opportunities and challenges. Given the fluctuating political situation of its immediate borders in the Persian Gulf region, particularly with Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran has to be pragmatic in its regional policies. Meanwhile, given the nature of threats that emanate from the region such as the spread of civil war, ethnic-religious rivalries, population displacement, a power vacuum, refugee issues, al-Qaeda terrorist activities, and narcotics trafficking and kidnapping, Iran has to develop good relations with neighboring states to ensure stability within the region.

In order to preserve its national interests, any Iranian government will inevitably be against a neighboring foreign presence or occupying power, both of which would be a source of tension and an impediment to Iran’s economic growth. In this respect, intense U.S. presence in Iraq since 2003, as well as the Bush administration’s attempt

Iran’s desire for an active presence in the region’s politics is mostly defensive and is aimed at tackling security threats.

to establish military bases in Iraq, have provided further pretext for violent groups such as al-Qaeda, Sunni extremists, and Ba'athists to seek political tension, sectarian violence, and civil war which will spur Iraqi instability and raise the spectre of destabilizing Iran and the entire region. The Bush administration's policy in Iraq has also worked to deny Iran's economic and trade activities in Iraq. In another instance, the arrest of an Iranian official by U.S. troops in the Kurdistan area in 2007 cut the trade activities at the provincial level between Iran and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for some time.

With this strategic rationale, Iran has asked foreign troops to gradually leave Iraq and the Persian Gulf region. In order to effectively counter the threats to the country posed by spreading instability in the region and in order to secure Iran's national interests and security, the Iranian elites argue that there should be a reasonable and positive Iranian presence in the region's politics. For instance, by supporting the Shiite political factions in Iraq that are friendlier today towards Iran, Iran has attempted to coax Iraq into fulfilling the role of a strategic partner in the region. Viewed in this context, establishing bilateral and mutual economic, cultural, and political-security agreements with Iraq will lead the region toward greater stability and mutual cooperation.³³ Yet, the controversial issue in Iran's foreign policy is to what extent should Iran be engaged in the region's politics. Some analyses tend to perceive that engaging too much in the region's politics has even been costly for Iran's vulnerable geopolitical situation and should therefore be avoided.³⁴

Similarly, Iran's size and great economic potential can best fill the regional markets' demand, thereby creating economic opportunities for Iranian trade companies and young industries. Being situated at the crossroads of the world's main energy consumption, production, and transferring routes, Iran has attempted to connect its economic potential with the region and world economy. The transit of energy sources; the geopolitics of pipelines and other sources of energy transfer; and the fulfillment of economic demands of regional markets, namely in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and the Persian Gulf are all significant parts of Iran's presence in the region. Having a greater regional role requires establishing close political-strategic relationships with the neighboring governments. The political reality, considered from this perspective, shows that any attempts by the Iranian government to secure its immediate neighborhood is based on this strategic rationale.

CONCLUSION

The debate about the emergence of a Shiite crescent has three dimensions: (1) it is an attempt by Iran to mobilize the masses, (2) it is an attempt by Iran to build an ideo-

logical belt of friendly Shiite governments, and (3) it is an attempt by Iran to expand its regional power.

However, because of the cultural-societal and political distinctions, the creation of a Shiite coalition based on the Persian and Arab masses is rather difficult. The revival of the Shiite ideology in Iraq is the natural consequence of the country's political-societal realities following recent political developments. In addition, it is a manifestation of the Shiite factions' struggle to establish a new political order in Iraq's power division, in which they hope to strengthen their positions in an era of power transference; it would therefore be present in the region's politics in the future. Consequently, given the political-cultural connection, Iran will naturally have more political-economic weight among the Iraqi Shiites.

The ongoing Shiite-Sunni rivalry in the region is a pure inter-Arab world power-sharing conflict, rather than an ideological Iranian-Arab rivalry. Iran's presence in the region is more pragmatic rather than ideological. Iran's regional policies have always been affected by two significant elements, namely its geopolitical reality and its ideology. Geopolitical considerations will dictate Iran's foreign policy and regional strategy. Using ideology as an effective factor in foreign policy conduct in the region would cause excessive tension in Iran's relations with the neighboring Arab countries as well as with the international community, particularly the United States—contradicting Iran's path of advancement, which needs integration with the regional and world economy.

Finally, Iran's aims are more defensive and pragmatic than expansionist. It is not attempting to become the only regional power through empowering the friendly Shiite factions in the region. Iran's aims are primarily oriented at building a secure environment at its immediate borders on the one hand and creating economic opportunities for strategic purposes on the other. As a major nation-state, Iran has strategic state-matters interests in the region. While the mainstream debate on the Shiite crescent points to Iran's destructive projection of power in the region, my arguments suggest instead that the creation of a Shiite crescent is by nature a non-Iranian concept that is also incompatible with the region's power structure and politics. Exaggerating the emergence of an ideological Shiite crescent of violence and destruction should therefore be avoided, since it has the potential to obfuscate attempts to make sound policy in a complex region. 

NOTES

1. I refer to remarks expressed by Hosni Mobark, which caused anxiety among Shiite communities in the Arab world and Iran, Baztab, 21 Farvardin 1385, 10 April 2006, www.baztab.ir (in Persian).

2. Robin Wright and Peter Baker, "Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election From Iran: Leaders Warn Against Forming Religious State," *The Washington Post*, 8 December 2004.

3. Saud al-Feisal voiced Saudi Arabia's concern about Iran's increased role in post-invasion Iraq as

unbalancing the traditional power structure in the region. Edward Gnehem, "Iraq: A View from the Neighborhood," 23 February 2006, <http://www.gwu.edu/elliott/news/transcript/shapiro5.html>.

4. Baztab. 21 Farvardin 1385, 10 April 2006, www.baztab.ir (in Persian).

5. In a recent survey, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, increased his popularity as the most admired leader in the Arab world (26%). Shilbly Telhami, 2008 Annual Arab Public Opinion Poll, March 2008, Brookings Institute, <http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/Files/events/2008>; "Seeing Iran Through an American Prism," Brookings Institute, May 14, 2008.

6. Stephan Zunes, "US Policy toward Political Islam," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 12 September 2001, available at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/11479>.

7. Fouad Ajami in Fouad Ajami, Vali R. Nasr, and Richard N. Haass, "The Emerging Shia Crescent Symposium: Implications for the Middle East and U.S. Policy" (panel meeting, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 5 June 2006), http://www.cfr.org/publication/10866/emerging_shia_crescent_symposium.html.

8. For an analysis on Saud al Feisal's remarks, see Edward Gnehm, "Iraq: A View from the Neighborhood" (lecture, George Washington University, Washington, DC, 23 February 2006), <http://www.gwu.edu/~elliott/news/transcripts/shapiro5.html>.

9. This analogy has been increasingly expressed by American officials and the Sunni Arab elites. See one analysis by Robert Dreyfuss, "The Shia Fellas," *The American Prospect*, 20 May 2007, http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_shia_fellas.

10. Vali Nasr, "Behind the Rise of the Shiites," *Time.com*, 19 December 2006, <http://www.belfercenter.org>.

11. See Zalmay Khalilzad's recent remarks at Columbia University. See "Iran Should be Thankful to U.S." February 2, 2008, <http://www.panarmenian.net/news/eng/?nid=24729>.

12. See Norman Podhoretz, "The Case for Bombing Iran," June 2007; and "Stopping Iran: Why the Case for Military Action Still Stands," February 2008, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com>.

13. This school of thought is the official line of the Neo-Conservatives in the Bush Administration. Dick Cheney, Vice President and John Bolton, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations are the two most significant figures in this line. American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) are the two main institutes for picturing Iran in this way; see Michael Rubin, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq" (lecture, University of Haifa, Israel, 13 March 2007), http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.26500/pub_detail.asp.

14. See, for instance, Henry A. Kissinger, "The Next Steps with Iran," *The Washington Post*, 31 July 2006; Henry A. Kissinger, "A Nuclear Test for Diplomacy," *The Washington Post*, 16 May 2006; Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Been There, Done That," *The Los Angeles Times*, 23 April 2006; Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Do not Attack Iran," *The International Herald Tribune*, 26 April 2006.

15. Nasr, "Rise of the Shiites." Note 10.

16. See Efraim Inbar, "How Israel Bungled the Second Lebanon War," *Middle East Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (Summer 2007); Ibrahim Nawar, "Iran's Expanding Influence," *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 22–28 November 2007, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/872/focus.htm>.

17. John Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The War over Israel's Influence," *Foreign Policy*, July–August 2006.

18. Referring to the recently published book by John Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

19. Kayhan Barzegar, "The Middle East and the New Terrorism," *Journal on Science and World Affairs* 1 (Summer 2005): 115–117.

20. See Abu-Massab Zarqawi's statement in <http://www.Elaph.com/Elaphweb/Politics/2005/7/77159.html>; "Excerpts: 'Al-Qaeda tape' threatens attacks," *BBC News*, 6 April 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3605593.stm.

21. Mahmood Sariolghalam, "The Shia Revival: A Threat or An Opportunity," *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2007): 205; F. Gregory Gause in Ajami, Nasr, and Haass, "The Emerging Shia Crescent Symposium."

22. Graham Fuller, *The Center of the Universe: The Geopolitics of Iran* (New York: Westview Press,

1991).

23. Iran Strives for Muslims Unity: Rafsanjani," June 8, 2008, *IRNA*, <http://www2.irna.com>

24. Ahmad Naghibzadeh, "Rectification of Iran's Foreign Policy Shortcomings during Khatami's Presidency," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 3, no.3 (Winter 2002): 85-100.

25. Since the early 1990s Iran's formal foreign policy orientation towards the Arab world and especially in the Persian Gulf region as expressed by high-ranking Iranian officials has been based on détente and confidence-building. For further information on this issue, see Kayhan Barzegar, "Détente in Khatami's Foreign Policy and its Impact on Improvement of Iran-Saudi relations," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 163-164.

26. Ibid.

27. See Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *Iran's Foreign Policy 1941-1973: A Study of Foreign Policy in Modernizing Nations*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975).

28. Esther Pan, "Syria, Iran, and the Middle East Conflict," *CFR.org*, 18 July 2006, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/11122>; Mona Yacoubian, "Syria's Alliance with Iran," *USIP.org*, May 2007, http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2007/0531_syria_iran.html.

29. A historical example in this regard is the way the Soviets used Azerbaijan's territory to pressure Iran through establishing the Gillan Socialist Movement (Gillan is a northern province in Iran). Another example is the invasion of Iran by the Allied Forces during World War II. The imposition of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war was also perceived by the Iranian government as a plot by great powers supporting the Ba'athist regime to outweigh the Islamic revolution and Iran's regional role. Today a major concern among the Iranians is the United States' use of bases in Iraq and Afghanistan to attack Iran.

30. See "Vice President's Remarks to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy," speech, Lansdowne, VA, 21 October 2007, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/10/20071021.html>.

31. Rouhollah K. Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal*, 58, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 550; see also David Menashri, "Iran's Regional Policy: Between Radicalism and pragmatism," *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2007).

32. The 20-Year Strategic Plan was ratified by Iran's Expediency Council. The Persian version of this document is available at the website of Iran's Majlis Research Center at <http://law.majlis.ir>

33. Assertions on enhancing bilateral and mutual economic and political-security cooperation have always been initiated by Iran's officials: see for instance president's Ahmadinejad's 12-Article Initiative presented in the recent GCC summit in Qatar at: www.rajaneews.com; see also the 10-Article Plan presented by Hassan Rohani, former secretary of Iran's National Security Council at: www.csr.ir

34. Naghibzadeh, "Iran's Foreign Policy Shortcomings."

Copyright of Brown Journal of World Affairs is the property of Brown University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.