

Shiism in the Modern Context: From Religious Quietism to Political Activism

Rainer Brunner*

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique

Abstract

The intention of this article is twofold. The first part tries to elucidate some characteristics of Shiism by briefly describing the background of this basic sectarian rift within Islam and its consequences for the Shiite worldview. The second part is a stocktaking of the situation of Shiites in the contemporary Muslim world and the role of Shiism in today's political landscape in the Middle East and beyond. Apart from Iran and the revolution of 1979 which has proved to be the decisive watershed in Islamic sectarianism, four regions are dealt with in particular: Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, Lebanon, and Pakistan. In conclusion, the transition from quietism to activism will be illustrated by several key concepts of classical Shiism and their modern implementation.

In September 2006, three and a half years after the fall of Saddam Husayn and in the face of a more or less open civil war in Iraq, there were newspaper reports that an increasing number of Iraqis had their first names changed, in order not to be easily recognisable as Sunnites or Shiites. Only a few weeks previously, Shiite militias had erected road blocks and shot more than 50 people after having identified them as Sunnites. As the *New York Times* put it: 'To stay alive, Iraqis change their names' (*NYT* 6 September 2006). Instead of being called after the early Islamic caliphs 'Umar or 'Uthmān, which had become highly dangerous, many Sunnites now preferred the neutral names Aḥmad or Muḥammad. This episode demonstrates in a concise way how this central conflict which reaches back to the first six or seven decades of Islamic history continues, nearly 1,400 years later, to affect the daily life of today's Muslims. Trying to understand what Sunnites and Shiites are quarrelling about so fiercely till this very day, one has to be aware of the background of the conflict that touches upon Islamic salvation history. To quote a dictum of Bernard Lewis: 'The names of 'Alī, Mu'āwiya, and Yazīd are as contemporary as this morning's newspaper, more so than yesterday's' (Lewis 1993, p. 159).

The Origin and Evolution of Shiism

On the face of it, the conflict between Sunnites and Shiites is a political confrontation concerning the succession of the Prophet as leader of the community (Momen 1985, p. 11ff.). The Sunnites focus on the status quo, according to which Muḥammad had died in 632 without having designated a successor, the secular power being thereby transferred to the so-called caliphs. In Sunnite historiography, this golden era of the first four caliphs who came to be called the rightly-guided ones lasted for 29 years, until the local governor Muʿāwiya, after some years of civil war, seized power in 661 and established the Umayyad dynasty. Early on, there was opposition against this egalitarian concept. A small group claimed that Muḥammad in fact had designated his son-in-law, ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, to succeed him. The latter, however, had been prevented, after Muḥammad's death, by his enemies, particularly by the first two caliphs Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, from fulfilling the Prophet's wish. Although ʿAlī did come to power more than 20 years later as the fourth 'rightly-guided' caliph, it was already too late to change track. His government was fraught with that civil war that finally brought the Umayyads to power; ʿAlī himself was murdered.

Contrary to modern apologists on both sides who take great pains to stress that the differences between Sunnites and Shiites are not greater than those between the Sunnite schools of law (*madhāhib*) and restricted more or less to irrelevant legal prescriptions (Brunner 2004, pp. 234–6), these events reveal a deep-reaching historical and religious conflict on three levels. First, a totally different access to salvation history. The Sunnites hold the opinion that Muḥammad's spiritual authority was transferred after his death onto the general Muslim community (*umma*) and conserved in the so-called *ḥadīth*, the collection of his sayings and deeds. The Shiites, on the other hand, claim that the world cannot exist without a living 'proof of God' in the form of a charismatic leader appointed and inspired by God. Therefore, the Prophet's spiritual authority, according to this conviction, devolved upon ʿAlī and his descendents from his marriage with Muḥammad's daughter, Fāṭima. Only by strict loyalty (*walāya*) to these omniscient and infallible Imams (and strict dissociation from their enemies), the believer may secure his salvation in the hereafter (Amir-Moezzi & Jambet 2004, pp. 131–8). This means, however, that the Sunnite corpus of *ḥadīth* is rejected nearly in its entirety and replaced by Shiite traditions that are, characteristically enough, not necessarily put down to the Prophet but to one of the Imams. The vast majority of the companions of the Prophet (*ṣaḥāba*), on whose authority the Sunnite traditions largely rest, are regarded as those who thwarted ʿAlī's claim to leadership and are thus rejected. The Shiite attitude towards the *ṣaḥāba* and the doctrine of the Imamate in general have proved to be the most important bones of contention between the two parties until today.

The second difference is about Shiite eschatological expectancy. The Imams' physical presence came to an end in 874 when the twelfth Imam, according to Shiite conviction, went into occultation. He will return at the end of days as the so-called Mahdī (the 'rightly-guided') in order to establish a just government and prepare the Last Judgement (Sachedina 1981). While such ideas about redemption play only a secondary role in Sunnite Islam, they guarantee for Shiism the certainty of salvation. Even the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran refers to the Mahdī, stipulating, in article 6, that 'during the occultation of the Lord of the Ages (another epithet of the Mahdī) the leadership of the community devolves upon the just and pious *faqīh*', that is, the religious jurist whom Khomeini's political theory entrusts with the political power.

The third point, finally, touches upon the deep Shiite conviction to have suffered historical wrong. The central symbol of this suppression is the martyrdom of 'Alī's son, the third Imam Ḥusayn, who, together with his companions, was killed on the orders of the caliph Yazīd by an Umayyad army in Karbalā' (in today's southern Iraq) on 10 Muḥarram 61 (10 October 680; the day is called *'āshūrā'*). What until then had been a historically rather indistinct oppositional current, now evolved into the actual nucleus of Shiism. As is noted by Halm (1994, p. 28): 'The death of the third Imam and his companions is the big bang which creates and sets in motion the Shiite cosmos that was quickly expanding.' What is more, the remembrance of Karbalā' generated a culture of mourning that is unique in Islam. This not only holds true for the annual drama-like performances of Ḥusayn's passion and the processions on *'āshūrā'* day (which sometimes reach their exalted climax in the self-mutilations and flagellations of the participants; cf. Norton 2005). To no lesser a degree it also applies to the veneration of the graves of the Imams, all of whom, according to Shiite belief, had been murdered, and of their relatives. Some of these places – Najaf, Karbalā' and Sāmarrā' in Iraq, Qom and Mashhad in Iran – became important Shiite theological centres.

This is not the place to give a detailed description of the historical evolution of the Sunnite-Shiite antagonism. Suffice it to say that the establishment of the Safavid dynasty in Iran (1501–1722) in particular was a decisive turning point. For the first time, Shiism was declared an official state religion, and in the course of several wars against the Ottoman empire that regarded itself to be the guardian of Sunnism, the hitherto largely theological and social conflict got the tinge of power politics that has been its hallmark ever since (Momen 1985, p. 105ff.). Moreover, Shiite doctrine itself underwent important changes; while it had previously been generally accepted that during the occultation of the twelfth Imam any form of government could at best be legitimate with considerable reservation, the religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) now claimed more and more prerogatives of the Imams for themselves, especially the right to make independent legal decisions (*ijtihād*). The consequence of this development

was an enormous increase in power on the part of the *'ulamā'* and the establishment of what – in the Shiite context much more than in Sunnism – may aptly be called a hierarchical clergy. It was reinforced by the outright legal and political incapacitation of the common people who were constrained to pledge their loyalty to one of the highest religious dignitaries (who came to be called 'source of emulation', *marja' al-taqīd*) and follow his decisions. The way was paved for a political doctrine that put the leading *'ulamā'* in place of the Mahdī and vested them with far-reaching secular authority as well. This process that more or less turned the initial Shiite tenets upside down and transformed an esoteric religion into a political ideology came to a (preliminary) end in Āyatollāh Khomeini's doctrine of the 'guardianship of the jurisconsult' (*welāyat-e faqīh*) that forms the basis of the political system in today's Iran (Arjomand 1988).

All this further deepened the rift between Sunnism and Shiism, and it is quite characteristic that it was only in the twentieth century that first steps were undertaken in the direction of a cautious rapprochement. On the whole, this ecumenical movement (on whose history, cf. Brunner 2004) proved to be a failure, mainly on the grounds that it came soon to be instrumentalised for political purposes and, at the same time, never really moved beyond the stereotypical declaration that there existed basic unity between both groups, while differences of opinion were only restricted to secondary legal questions and furthermore instigated by the 'enemies of Islam'. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that this discussion stayed largely within a limited group of *'ulamā'* and failed to exert any lasting repercussion in the wider Islamic world – except for some temporary outbreaks of fierce anti-Shiite polemics, whose authors suspected that the Shiites were only intent on infiltrating Sunnism. As long as Shiite Islam was confined more or less to its minority position (some 10–15% of today's Muslims belong to Shiism) without real political power anywhere, the conflict was not perceived to be of primary importance. This changed, however, thoroughly after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and both Sunnite anxieties and Shiite influence have dramatically increased since then. The following remarks try to shed some light on this development by focusing on the main areas of conflict: Iran, Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, Lebanon and Pakistan.

Shiite Activism and Politics since 1979

The significance of the Iranian Revolution both for the intellectual history of Shiism and the sectarian relations with Sunnism can hardly be overestimated. At least for the modern history of Islam, it is no less than a watershed. Already since the 1960s, a politicisation and a growing consciousness of Shiite identity could be observed in many places (e.g. in Lebanon). The events in Iran, however, set a tremendous dynamics going

that reached far beyond Iran and resulted in a political sectarianism in nearly all countries with a mixed population. In the end, it was external, that is, Sunnite, pressure that ensured Shiite mobilisation everywhere, either in the form of the latter's economical and/or political disadvantage (Lebanon), religiously motivated discrimination (Saudi Arabia, Baḥrayn), fundamentalist exclusion (Pakistan) or plain oppression (Iraq before 2003). And more often than not, nowadays a tendency towards moderation and accommodation to existing systems is noticeable on the part of the Shiites, after a period of violence and revolt.

To a certain extent, this also holds true for Iran herself. Here, there was no Sunnite regime at work, but large parts of the population would no longer perceive the Shah's hubris – he finally even replaced the Muslim calendar with the old Iranian one – to be Shiite, or as a matter of fact Muslim at all. The deeply rooted feeling of historical injustice was the more easily translatable into revolutionary activism as the Shiite tradition provided the adequate model, namely, the remembrance of Ḥusayn's suffering in Karbalā'. This re-interpretation of a passive and quietist passion narrative as an activist ideology was by no means exclusively achieved by theologians. Often, it was leftist intellectuals influenced by Marxism and Third World solidarity such as 'Alī Sharī'atī (d. 1977) who attacked the traditional clergy over political issues and who saw Ḥusayn's martyrdom as the revolutionary way out of oppression. The slogan 'every day is 'āshūrā', every place is Karbalā'' that was coined by Sharī'atī proved to be the most successful catchword of the Shiite awakening and came to be quoted also elsewhere and at different times, notably in the context of the nascent Hizballah in Lebanon and its struggle against Israel (cf. Norton 2007, p. 50ff., 66, 85). According to this logic, Ḥusayn did not suffer a crushing military defeat, but actively fought a numerically superior enemy, and, through his readiness to undergo martyrdom, set an eternal role model for the suppressed Shiites everywhere.

No-one, however, was even remotely as successful as Āyatollāh Rūḥollāh Khomeinī (Moin 1999, p. 92ff.). Driven into exile after the unrest of 1963, when he made his first public appearance, he devised, in Najaf around 1970, his aforementioned political doctrine of the 'guardianship of the jurisconsult' (*welāyat-e faqīh*). According to this theory, the highest *marja' al-taqlīd* is authorized in a very concrete way to exercise political power during the Mahdī's occultation. On the one hand, this is the logical completion of the historical process – briefly outlined above – in whose course the Shiite 'ulamā' assumed more and more prerogatives of the hidden Imam. On the other hand, however, Khomeini's doctrine amounts to a flagrant break with classical Shiite doctrine, for not only the 'ulamā' – save for very few exceptions – had always stayed quietist in political matters, but – even more important – no *marja' al-taqlīd* had previously ever claimed supremacy over any of his peers. The implications of this tenet became obvious only after being embodied in the Iranian constitution in

1979 (Arjomand 2001, p. 301ff.). For the first time in history, Shiite conceptions of public order – and what is more, those of a single scholar – now became formally codified state law. Nevertheless, Khomeini managed to push his claim for leadership through only within Iran. Among Shiites in the wider Islamic world, he was always only recognised as one out of several ‘sources of emulation’, and hardly as their highest. Although Khomeini went one step further and in 1988 claimed the right to ‘absolute’ leadership and the authority to suspend even religious duties like prayer, fasting and the pilgrimage, his death, only one year later, made it obvious that the theory of *welāyat-e faqīh* was a garment made to fit only Khomeini in his capacity as charismatic leader. As he had, a few months previously, forced his successor designate, Āyatollāh Montazerī, to resign, now the constitution had first to be changed in order to pave the way for ‘Alī Khāmene’ī. The latter was formally appointed Āyatollāh only upon his election, but in the following years he never so much as succeeded in being recognised in Iran as the sole *marja’ al-taqlīd* (Arjomand 2001, p. 314ff.). This struggle for leadership (spiritual more than political) showed that Khomeini’s re-interpretation of classical Shiite doctrine was not undisputed and that the quietist tradition continued to stand its ground. Still, Āyatollāhs such as Abū l-Qāsim al-Khū’ī (d. 1992) or ‘Alī al-Sīstānī in Iraq, but also the Lebanese Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh act as a counterbalance to the Iranian governmental clergy who, moreover, are not even unchallenged at the religious universities within Iran.

The Iranian Revolution and Khomeini’s theory in particular polarized the Islamic world. Only in the very beginning there were positive, even enthusiastic voices, who saw the fall of the Shah as a portent for a general upheaval and a change of the political paradigms in the Islamic world (Matthee 1986, p. 247ff.). This support of the revolution was to be found especially among two groups: On the one hand, with leftist critics of the system and intellectuals such as the Egyptian philosopher Ḥasan Ḥanafī, who defended Khomeini’s theory of state as a kind of Islamic counterpart to absolute monarchy and published an edition of it for the Egyptian public. The other – and more important – group consisted of Islamist authors and the Muslim Brotherhood who hoped to gain from the Iranian model some impetus to their struggle against their own government. Thus, the Palestinian Faḥī ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Shiqāqī wrote, as early as 1979, a book entitled *Khomeini, the Islamic Solution and Alternative* (Hatina 2001, p. 23ff.). This enthusiasm, however, abated quickly, when the specifically Shiite character of the Iranian revolution became more and more obvious, and the Muslim Brothers, too, dissociated themselves from Shiism after a short while (Buchta 1997, p. 205ff.).

The first Gulf War (1980–1988) between Iraq and Iran as well as the increasing ‘Shiitization’ of the Iranian revolution resulted in a veritable flood of polemical literature directed against Shiism. Referring to classical heresiography, but also to modern authors of the twentieth century, such

as Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb, who had been one of the most outspoken adversaries of the ecumenical movement, these writers saw it as their noblest task to open their readers' eyes and show that contemporary Shiism was even more dangerous than that of past centuries (Ende 1990; Brunner 2004, p. 255ff. and 331ff.). A large part of this polemic enjoyed the financial and logistic support of (neo-) wahhabite circles, especially in Saudi Arabia; today, in the age of the internet, there are virtually no more boundaries to the dissemination of these pamphlets (Hasson 2006).

It goes without saying that under these circumstances an institutionalised ecumenical dialogue is hardly possible anymore. The Azhar university in Cairo, which from 1947 until the early 1960s had hosted the most noticeable ecumenical association (the *Jamā'at al-taqrīb bayn al-madhāhib al-islāmiyya*), took a highly critical view of the Shiite awakening from the beginning and sought increasingly a closing of ranks with the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia (Brunner 2004, p. 385ff.). A rather half-hearted re-opening of the ecumenical association in 1992 did not produce any consequences, and it remains to be seen whether the latest step in this direction, a heavily advertised second re-opening in March 2007, will be more successful.

In the meantime, the Iranian government had taken the initiative and announced, in spring 1990 (i.e. after Khomeini's death), the establishment of a 'World Society for the Reconciliation between the Islamic Sects' (*al-Majma' al-ālamī li-l-taqrīb bayn al-madhāhib al-islāmiyya*, cf. Buchta 2001, p. 333ff.). This assembly has been very active since then and organised a large number of international conferences (the twentieth meeting took place in Tehran in April 2007), but its closeness to the regime and the latter's political goals is unmistakable. As ever, one can hardly speak of a veritable dialogue and an ecumenical atmosphere between the Muslim denominations. Only in January 2007, it became clear how irritated the tone is today even among participants in 'ecumenical' gatherings, when more than 200 theologians, jurists and intellectuals from 44 countries assembled in Doha (Qatar). The confrontation came to a head, after Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, one of the most influential figures in contemporary Sunnite Islam, directly attacked the secretary general of the Tehran World Society, Āyatollāh Muḥammad 'Alī Taskhīrī. In a deliberately outspoken tone, he demanded that the Shiites should finally stop slandering the Prophet's companions and give up their missionary activity in predominantly Sunnite countries (Brunner forthcoming).

As far as the international political level is concerned, the echo among Sunnite regimes to the Iranian revolution was characterised by undisguised rejection, motivated primarily by the fear of an Iranian export of the revolution and an uncontrollable destabilization of the whole region or at least individual countries. The Iraqi dictator Ṣaddām Ḥusayn, who had good reason to be anxious about a mobilization of the Shiites in his country, tried to forestall this danger and to consolidate his own hegemony

in the region. His attack, in September 1980, of the neighbouring state that was seemingly weakened by the revolutionary aftermath met with open approval by the West and most Arab governments. But his calculation to quickly remove the Iranian regime fizzled out during a war of attrition over eight years, as did, on the other side, Iranian hopes that the spark of the revolution could also spread to Iraq. The Iraqi Shiites (still) proved to be loyal to their Sunnite government and fought against their Shiite co-religionists in Iran.

The ideological main rivals during the 1980s, however, were Saudi Arabia and Iran. The yardstick of their tensions was the pilgrimage to Mecca, which was used by Iran on a regular basis for political demonstrations. The confrontation culminated in 1987, when more than 400 pilgrims were killed during clashes in Mecca (Kramer 1996a, p. 173ff.). It was only at the end of the 1990s that relations between the two countries returned to normal. Political considerations thereby outweighed sectarian principles, as both states had a vested interest in containing Iraq and in establishing a regional balance of power.

The Iranian revolution had an enormous influence on Shiites living outside Iran and on their conflicts with Sunnites in many countries, both directly and indirectly. Even if the political mobilization of the Shiites had begun already in the two decades preceding the revolution (like in Lebanon or in Iraq), the development after 1979 assumed a new kind of dynamics. In basically all conflicts that broke out in the Middle Eastern states within the last 30 years, the sectarian identity of the parties involved has been playing a decisive role. In April 2006, the Egyptian president Ḥusnī Mubārak said in an interview that the loyalty of all Shiites in the region was not directed towards their respective countries but to Iran. Already in December 2004, Jordanian King ʿAbdallāh had made a similar statement, warning of a ‘Shiite crescent’ stretching from Syria and Lebanon in the West until Iraq, Iran and the Gulf states (Nakash 2006, p. 154). Both comments show the deep distrust against Shiism on the part of Sunnis. The upheaval in Iraq as well as the Shiites’ claim to more rights and a growing share in power in Lebanon and the Gulf states are thus easily ascribed to alleged Iranian influence and keep the fear of an export of the revolution alive.

Neither in Egypt nor in Jordan there is a noteworthy indigenous Shiite population, but both countries are affected indirectly by events in Iraq insofar as they received a considerable share of the well over 2 million refugees who have fled the country since 2003. Furthermore, Jordan is the country of origin of numerous Sunnite suicide bombers who in recent years backed the anti-Shiite riots in Iraq (Nasr 2006, p. 227ff.). And the Egyptian example shows that the presence of a larger group of Shiites is not even necessary in order to trigger off sectarian strife: The small Shiite minority in the country (probably less than 1% of the total population) is composed mostly of Sufis and former Islamists who converted to Shiism

and who are anything but in agreement with each other. Sporadic claims to recognition as a religious minority have repeatedly resulted in polemical attacks in the press, and although there is no danger for the state emanating from this group, arrests and probably torture are commonplace (Brunner forthcoming).

The state, where the inner-Islamic sectarian conflict has the by far most serious consequences, both on the national and international level, is Iraq (Nakash 2006, p. 72ff.). Contrary to what might be expected in view of the contemporary situation, sectarianism in Iraq is a comparatively new phenomenon. Only after the bulk of the Sunnite Arab tribes had converted to Shiism during the nineteenth century, Shiites came to be the majority population (Nakash 1994, p. 25ff.). Although they participated in the revolt against the British Mandate in 1920 by the side of the Sunnites, the establishment of a (Sunnite) monarchy under King Fayṣal de facto excluded them from power. It was not before 1947 that a Shiite politician became Prime Minister for the first time. Nevertheless, debates would for a long time revolve around national identity, the Shiites advocating an Iraqi-nationalist position, while the Sunnite rulers leaned more towards the idea of Pan-Arabism.

During Ṣaddām Ḥusayn's rule (who assumed power in July 1979), the rift between Sunnites and Shiites gradually widened. As early as April 1980, after a series of bomb attempts, he had the popular Shiite scholar Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr (who in 1958 had founded the Da'wa party, the first Shiite political party) and his sister executed. Later on, during the first Gulf war, he presented himself to be the defender of Arab identity against Persians and Zoroastrians. In the wake of the second Gulf war, finally, he had the Shiite rebellion of March 1991 crushed in a bloody way that cost between 30,000 and 60,000 lives; additional tens of thousands lost their existence when the marshlands in Southern Iraq were systematically dried up. The spiritual leaders were persecuted (Āyatollāh Khū'ī died under house arrest in 1992, Muḥammad Ṣādiq al-Ṣadr, the successor of his cousin Muḥammad Bāqir as leader of the Da'wa party, was killed in 1999), while at the same time, Sunnite Islam was instrumentalised for conveying legitimacy to the regime.

These acts of violence notwithstanding, one can hardly speak of a systematic policy of sectarian discrimination against Shiites under Ṣaddām Ḥusayn. The Sunnite Kurds had to suffer to no less a degree, and especially during the 1990s, the regime pursued time and again a strategy of a carrot and a stick towards the Shiites. The organised and institutionalised form of sectarian politics was, rather ironically, only the result of the attempt to establish a new order after the American invasion in spring 2003 (ICG 2006, p. 8ff.). The purges in the security forces, the Ba'ṯh party and, above all, in the army (which most Iraqis had regarded as a national and exactly not as a sectarian institution) hit the Sunnites particularly hard and marked the beginning of a deep sectarian clash that has been threatening

since then to tear the country apart. It proved to be especially fatal that the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, renamed Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, ISCI, in 2007) took over the ministry of the interior after the January 2005 elections that had been largely boycotted by the Sunnites. This organisation had been founded by the Iraqi scholar Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ḥakīm in exile in Iran in 1982, with the backing of the Iranian rulers; Ḥakīm himself was assassinated after his return to Iraq in August 2003 (Nasr 2006, p. 192). The SCIRI and its so-called ‘Badr’ militias seized the opportunity to start a retaliation campaign against the Sunnites that in turn led to Sunnite counter terror (ICG 2006, p. 17ff. and ICG 2007, p. 11ff.). Yet, it has to be stressed that the Iraqi Shiites are anything but a homogenous group. The biggest ideological rival of the SCIRI/ISCI, which tries to rid itself of its reputation of being the Iranian henchman, is the movement of a son of the aforementioned Muḥammad Ṣādiq al-Ṣadr who was assassinated in 1999, Muqtaḍā al-Ṣadr. The latter is rather insignificant as a religious scholar, but he disposes of a broad following and, in the form of the so-called Mahdī army, of a powerful militia (ICG 2008). At the other end of the spectrum, there is Āyatollāh ‘Alī al-Sīstānī, a generally respected representative of the traditional Shiite clergy; his principal quietist attitude, however, did not deter him from decisively influencing the discussion about a new constitution and the participation of Shiite parties in the general elections. Finally, there are secular Shiite currents to whom, among others, also Prime Minister Jawād al-Mālīkī belongs. It remains to be seen which Shiite tendency will prevail in the end and whether this results in a ‘balkanisation’ of Iraq – much-feared by the Sunnites – and a break-up of the country along ethnic and sectarian lines. It is clear, however, that the political mobilisation of the Shiites in Iraq has already gained a spectacular victory.

The situation looks totally different in the Arabian Peninsula, where the Shiite parts of the population in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait are under Sunnite sovereignty, even if under dissimilar circumstances (Nakash 2006, p. 42ff.). The Shiites of Saudi Arabia live mainly in the Eastern provinces that had been conquered by Ibn Sa‘ūd as early as 1913, that is, before the establishment of the state, and where today the oil industry is concentrated. Furthermore, there are smaller communities in Mecca and Medina as well as some Ismā‘īlīs in South-Western Najrān near the Yemenite border. The traditional Wahhabite enmity towards Shiism meant, for many decades, political and religious discrimination and economic hardship for the Shiites. In school textbooks, it was taught as a matter of course that Shiites were unbelievers, worse than Christians and Jews. Shiite activists like Ḥasan al-Ṣaffār were able to raise their voice only in exile, and the ‘Organisation of the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula’, founded in 1975, stayed as ineffective as some revolts in 1979/80 that had been inspired by the Iranian revolution and that were put down by the

Saudis. The situation changed only after the second Gulf war, when the Shiites condemned the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and supported the policy of the Saudi government. This resulted, in 1993, in an informal agreement whose basic principles are still valid today and which entailed better living conditions and more religious freedom for the Shiites. Under the impression of global changes – the threat of terror and the impending war against Iraq – Shiite representatives became also involved in the Saudi reform movement and published a petition in January 2003 that contained a pledge of loyalty to the Saudi state. In the following period, Shiites participated in the national dialogue, and it seems that even *‘āshūra’* manifestations are tacitly tolerated (ICG 2005c, p. 5f.). Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that the Wahhabite establishment still sets the tone of the debate and that King ‘Abdallāh’s initiatives towards reform meet with strong opposition even within the government (Doran 2004). Conditions for the Saudi Shiites are totally dependent on the rulers’ goodwill, and an actual equality with the Sunnites is not to be expected.

The situation in Bahrain is again different in the sense that here a Sunnite minority has been ruling over a Shiite majority (75%) since the late eighteenth century. A first experiment in constitutional monarchy ended in 1975 after merely two years, when the rulers dissolved the parliament and suspended the constitution. The growing discontent among Shiites finally erupted in the mid-1990s in a revolt that lasted four years. Thereupon, Shaykh Ḥamad al-Khalīfa announced political reforms that were approved of by a large majority in a 2001 referendum. But they again came to naught as there was no real political participation of the people. Since then, tensions have again been rising, which, given the distribution of power and the majority of the people, nearly inevitably assume sectarian traits (ICG 2005b, p. 5ff.).

In Kuwait, on the other hand, where Shiites are a relatively strong minority (30%), the ruling Āl Ṣabāḥ family managed so far to keep them away from the inner circles of power, without, however, setting them against the existing system. This was made possible by a longstanding practical tolerance that enabled Shiites to assume influential positions in economy, the army and even political bodies. Thus, they were integrated into the state, and not, like in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, regarded as potential enemies (Nakash 2006, p. 42f.). At present, Kuwait is the only state in the region without a noticeable sectarian problem.

The exactly opposite example is given by Lebanon, where sectarianism – in this case not limited to Sunnites and Shiites but comprising 18 groups altogether – is engraved into the state’s constitution and has become its highest principle. The National Pact, concluded in 1943 upon the country’s independence from France, stipulates that the President has to be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunnite Muslim, and the Parliament’s President a Shiite. The distribution of power is based on the 1932 census, the last that has been carried out until today (Norton 2007,

p. 11f.). Although it is clear to everyone that today's reality is totally different, no-one dares to shake the foundations of the state, as the consequences would be obvious. One may safely assume, however, that the Shiites are nowadays Lebanon's largest religious community.

The political mobilization of the Lebanese Shiites is inextricably linked to the person of Mūsā al-Ṣadr who immigrated from Iran in 1959. In the 1960s and 1970s, he gave the Shiites – who had before been the socially and economically most disadvantaged group – a strong voice (Nakash 2006, p. 99ff.). Many who previously – like elsewhere in the Middle East – had leaned towards leftist secular or communist parties often led by Christians now increasingly professed their sectarian identity. Al-Ṣadr established the 'Supreme Islamic Shiite Council' in 1969, and the 'Movement of the deprived' in 1974 from which the Amal militia was soon to emerge. This transformation of Lebanese Shiism from quietism to activism survived al-Ṣadr's mysterious disappearance on a trip to Libya in 1978. Under the impression of the civil war and the Israeli occupation after 1982, a radicalisation and a split within the Shiites took place. The result was the formation of the Ḥizballāh ('Party of God'), which was backed by Syria and especially Iran (Norton 2007, p. 27ff.). One of the many Lebanese battlefields during the 1980s was the struggle between Amal and Ḥizballāh for supremacy.

The Lebanese civil war was formally ended by the Ṭa'if accord in autumn 1989, which confirmed the sectarian proportional system of 1943 in a modified form. In the following years, Ḥizballāh managed to gain the upper hand among Shiites in Lebanon, not least because of its far-reaching social services that soon made the organisation appear to be a state within the state (Norton 2007, p. 107ff.). Since the 1990s, it gradually and at the instigation of Āyatollāh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍllāh turned from a revolutionary force into a political party, which has been participating in elections since 1992 and in 2005 joined the government. At the same time, however, it consistently refused to be disarmed. Even after the Israeli withdrawal in 2000, it continued its policy of pinpricks, backed by the Syrians, against Israel that finally escalated in summer 2006 and led to a 34-day war. This military confrontation as well as the increasing anti-Syrian opposition after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Ḥarīrī (February 2005) again put the sectarian system to the test. In autumn 2006, Ḥizballāh withdrew from government, and when efforts to elect a successor to outgoing pro-Syrian President Lahoud dragged on for several months between autumn 2007 and spring 2008, the enormous power of Ḥizballāh became as obvious as the impending break up of the state along sectarian boundaries. In May 2008, it led a largely successful military campaign against the Lebanese government that had tried to have Ḥizballāh's independent and uncontrollable communication system switched off. At present, Ḥizballāh is by far the strongest and best organised political actor in the country and is anxious to implement Shiite iconography,

for example, by recently opening an exhibition near its stronghold Nabaṭiyya in memory of its former military activist, ‘Imād Mughniyya, who was assassinated in Damascus in February 2008.

Like in nearly all cases mentioned so far, the mobilization of Shiites in Pakistan in the past 30 years was also accelerated by two factors: discrimination on the part of Sunnites and enthusiasm for the Iranian revolution. Although Shiism here is only a 20% minority, this makes Pakistan, at a general population of an estimated 160 millions, the second largest Shiite country after Iran (Nasr 2006, p. 159ff.). Until the mid-1970s, sectarian identity had not played a significant role in this state that had been established in 1947 as an Islamic republic. This changed when General Zia ul-Ḥaq seized power in 1977 and began a policy of ‘Islamization’ that amounted basically to the Sunnitization of the state and met with broad opposition among the Shiites. After 1979, the sectarian atmosphere became more heated (Zaman 1998, p. 693ff.), particularly as against the backdrop of the conflict in Afghanistan there were unmistakable signs of a proxy war. Numerous Shiites groups were supported by Iran, while on the other hand the Saudi Wahhabites financed various Sunnite parties. Assassinations of respective enemies were absolutely common, for example, in 1987, when Iḥsān Ilāhī Zāhīr, a fierce opponent of Shiism and author of many polemical books, was killed during a rally in Lahore (Brunner 2004, p. 380f.). Until this very day, many radical Sunnites aim at having the Shiites treated the same way as the Aḥmadiyya. The latter, a reform movement that originated at the end of the nineteenth century, was formally excluded from Islam by the Pakistani parliament in 1974 (Friedmann 1989).

After Zia’s military dictatorship ended in 1988, several civil governments (among them Benazīr Bhutto who, herself being of Shiite origin, was assassinated in December 2007) were not able to get the increasing radicalisation under control that by then had seized all provinces and especially the bigger cities. Also General Musharraf’s (president from 1999 until 2008) resolution to take action against extremism and sectarianism hardly went beyond lip service (ICG 2005a, p. 23ff.). On the contrary: the religious forces were constantly used in order to curb the secular opposition that is regarded as a greater danger. Sectarianism in Pakistan has in the meantime assumed truly frightening dimensions: the number of religious schools from which all groups recruit their followers has exploded from 137 (in 1947) to 10,430 in 2003, and the religious landscape is even more fragmented than in Iraq or in Lebanon. In 2005 there existed 58 religious parties and no fewer than 245 religious groups, the majority of which have a sectarian agenda (ICG 2005a, p. 6). This certainly augurs badly, as far as the future relationship between Sunnites and Shiites in the country is concerned.

At present, there is only one country, namely, Syria, where a Shiite minority (in fact hardly more than 1% of the population) is ruling over a Sunnite majority. Even within Shiism, the Syrian example is an untypical

case. The Syrian ruling elite since 1970 has been belonging to the 'Alaw-iyya or Nuṣayriyya, a formerly secret esoteric and syncretistic sect which had been rejected by Twelver Shiism for a long time as extremists and accused of exaggeration (i.e. of their veneration of 'Alī in religion). It was only in the twentieth century that a kind of inner-Shiite rapprochement took place between the two groups (Kramer 1996b). Officially, however, the regime adheres to the socialist Ba'ṯh ideology and tries to appear largely secular while, at the same time, propagating a rather streamlined 'state Islam' without sectarian undertones. The persecution of Sunnite oppositional groups like the Muslim Brothers, who were massacred in Ḥamā in 1982, has to be seen in this political – and not in any religious – light. The same holds true for the longstanding strategic alliance with Iran that is motivated less by a common Shiite agenda, but by power politics with regard to Lebanon and the Palestinian conflict.

Conclusion: Shiism in the Modern Context

Contrary to most believers' and theologians' view, for an historian religions are never completed and fixed entities. Although most doctrines may have originated in the distant past, the degree of their applicability varies according to the circumstances and exigencies of the respective present. What is more, the standing and power of those who are in charge of watching over the doctrines – in the case of Islam the 'ulamā' – changes sometimes enormously over time. Shiism is a dramatic case in point. The twentieth century witnessed the apex and – at least temporary – conclusion of an evolution that transformed this branch of Islam from a quietist religion to a powerful political ideology. The repercussions this development had and continues to have on several Shiite key doctrines cannot be overlooked and shall be demonstrated in conclusion on the basis of four characteristic examples.

- (a) *taqiyya* (religious dissimulation). The command to conceal one's faith for self-protection in case of threat to life and limb is neither restricted to Islam nor, within Islam, to Shiism. But the evolution of this group in a hostile Sunnite environment has caused Shiites to make good use of this maxim, especially throughout its pre-modern history. In the twentieth century, however, propagation of prudent *taqiyya* was pushed more and more to the background, and Āyatollāh Khomeini went so far as to demand to discard it entirely in favour of *jihād* (Alagha, 2006, p. 88f.). Although the practice of dissimulation still exists in some areas of mixed population, and although for Sunnite polemicists against Shiism it is totally out of the question that Shiism by means of *taqiyya* strives to undermine Sunnite Islam (Momen 1985, p. 277; Brunner 2004, p. 332f.), it is safe to state that today it has completely lost its former importance and distinctly symbolises the transition from prudent quietism to self-confident activism.

- (b) The heritage of Karbelā'. As explained above, the martyrdom of the third Imam, Ḥusayn, was the starting point of an intense culture of repentance and mourning that included flagellation processions and stage performances. This form of self-mutilation continues to exist (especially in southern Lebanon and among South Asian Shiites), but it has been supplemented in the modern era by an important and highly effective different aspect: that of actively seeking martyrdom on the battlefield. The abovementioned slogan 'every day is 'āshūrā' every place is Karbalā'' not only became the hallmark of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, but was radicalised even more in the decades afterwards. When the notorious Bassij units (composed of 12- or 13-year-old adolescents) were sent by the Iranian regime onto the battlefields during the first Gulf War in the 1980s, to function as human minesweepers, they were not only indoctrinated with images of Ḥusayn, but were also furnished with a symbolic key to enter paradise. This meant nothing short of sanctioning martyrdom operations that were then adopted by other groups, notably the Lebanese Ḥizballāh in its struggle against the Israeli army (Alagha 2006, pp. 82, 105ff., 139ff.). Activist martyrdom was added to quietist self-mutilation (it has to be emphasised, however, that this quest for martyrdom, *istishhād*, which is nowadays often rendered as 'suicide attacks', has not been restricted to Shiite Islam; all 9/11 attackers were Sunnites).
- (c) The power of the 'ulamā'. This is certainly the most far-reaching change that has affected Shiism over the past centuries. After the occultation of the twelfth Imam, at the latest, Shiite scholars began to assume more and more prerogatives that had originally stayed with the Mahdī, be it the right to lead Friday prayer, to declare *jihād*, to control the financial donations made by the believers, or, in general, to reach binding legal judgements (*ijtihād*). This evolution, briefly described above, not only led to an enormous increase in power of the 'ulamā' that was finally channelled by Khomeini into his theory of *welāyat-e faqīh*, and to a concomitant silencing of the ordinary believers who henceforward had to follow the 'sources of emulation'. It moreover also affected its very foundation, namely –
- (d) The idea of the Mahdī. Although one needs not go so far – as has been recently done – as to define Shiism as an actually anti-messianic movement (Maghen 2008, p. 242), it is certainly safe to state that the gradual and accumulative takeover of the Shiite 'ulamā' more or less took place at the Mahdī's expense whose return now had to be deferred to eternity in order not to endanger the 'ulamā's position. Also in this regard, Khomeini's re-interpretation of Shiite doctrine brought this process of 'de-messianization' to a logical conclusion (Maghen 2008, p. 250). Superfluous as the Mahdī might seem nowadays, the figure of the Awaited Saviour paradoxically retains his importance on a symbolic level: article 5 of the Iranian constitution pays lip

service to him by stipulating that the leadership devolves upon the supreme jurist ‘during the occultation of the Walī al-Aṣr’ (i.e. the Mahdī). As far as folk religion is concerned, however, the idea of the coming Messiah is indispensable as ever and continues to be politically exploited, be it by the Iraqi cleric-cum-warrior Muqtaḍā al-Ṣadr who named his militia ‘The Mahdī army’ (*Jaysh al-Mahdī*), be it by the current Iranian president, Aḥmadīnejād, who keeps updating the public about his spiritual encounters with the twelfth Imam and their significance notably in the struggle against Israel that is presented in eschatological terms.

All this is not to say that quietist Shiism has completely disappeared. But even a traditional leader such as Āyatollāh Sīstānī in Iraq – who by some is already declared to be the last exemplar of the ‘old guard’ (Khalaji 2006) – could not (and would not) afford to stay aloof from politics if the need to take a stand arises. Shiite Islam by now has amassed a huge cultural memory (cf. Brunner, 2005), and like in real life, this memory over time has unfolded a potential both for preserving the past and for changing the future. In the modern era, the focus of Shiism certainly has been on change and revolution.

Short Biography

Rainer Brunner graduated in Islamic Studies, Modern History and Political Science from the University of Freiburg from which he holds a MA and a PhD. He was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a member of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, NJ, and taught at the Universities of Freiburg, Basel and the Sorbonne. Since 2005, he has been ‘Directeur de recherche’ at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. His research interests focus on modern Islamic intellectual history, especially Shiism and the relations between Sunnites and Shiites in modern times. His book *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century* (Leiden 2004) is an analysis of the relationship between Azhar University in Cairo and Shiite theologians and intellectuals and of its political implications. He furthermore authored a book on the Shiite attitude towards the Qur’an and a number of articles for *Saeculum*, *Arabica*, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, and the *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Current research deals with contemporary developments in Shiism, the question of religious authority in Islam, and Islam in Europe.

Note

* Correspondence address: Rainer Brunner, Laboratoire d’Etudes sur les Monothéismes (CNRS), 7 rue Guy Môquet, Villejuif, France, 94801. E-mail: rainer_brunner@yahoo.com.

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