

The Limits of Iranian Influence Among Gulf Shi`a

By Laurence Louër

IRAQ'S REGIME CHANGE in 2003 provided Iran the unexpected opportunity to extend its influence in the Arab Middle East. It now has a direct presence in Iraq, where it exercises considerable pressure on the various Shi`a movements competing for power. In nearby Lebanon, the Shi`a Islamist group Hizb Allah also gives Iran an important space of intervention in Middle Eastern geopolitics. In addition to Iraq and Lebanon, Iran considers the Gulf region a natural area of influence. In the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Gulf monarchies, which Ayatollah Khomeini considered as corrupt regimes tied to the United States, were among the main targets of Iran's policy of exporting the revolution. In the Gulf countries of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait—which all host significant Shi`a populations—local Shi`a Islamic movements supported by Tehran did not hesitate to resort to violence to make their ideals prevail. Although harshly suppressed, they managed to survive and even develop, and today they are unavoidable actors in Gulf local politics. The Shi`a remain a sizable minority in Kuwait (around 25%), a strategically located small minority (around 8%) in Saudi Arabia where they represent a third of the population in the oil-rich Eastern Province, and a large majority in Bahrain where estimates place them at 70% of the national population.¹

Nevertheless, when compared with Iraq and Lebanon, Iranian influence in the Gulf is much more constrained, especially when considering its concrete impact on the general dynamics of Shi`a politics in these countries. This article

1 Since there is no census that takes into account which current of Islam one follows, these numbers are only estimates based on Shi`a self-evaluation as well as on that of other observers. Only the size of the Saudi Shi`a population is a matter of controversy. Saudi Shi`a often say they represent as high as 20% of the kingdom's population, which seems rather excessive. A recent study by the Saudi National Security Assessment Project (SNSAP), led by Nawaf Obaid, used the data provided by the 2004 census and reached the conclusion that the Shi`a represent 8% of the population.

explains why Iran will have difficulty increasing its influence in the Gulf. This is especially true in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, where most Shi`a political actors campaign against submitting to Iranian influence in the hopes that this will expand their political freedoms at home.

A Bipolarized Shi`a Political Arena

Gulf Shi`a Islamic movements were born before the Iranian revolution. They were a result of the diffusion of two Iraqi Shi`a movements, al-Da`wa and the Message Movement, which were emanations of competing centers of religious authority. While al-Da`wa was the political expression of the traditional religious institution based in the city of Najaf, the Message Movement was the political arm of the al-Shirazi clerical family based in Karbala, who contested the domination of the Najafi religious establishment. Under the spiritual leadership of Ayatollah Mohammed al-Shirazi, they soon came to be known under the nickname of "Shiraziyyin" (the "partisans of al-Shirazi").

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the two movements extended to the Gulf region. Using transnational networks long established by the Najafi clerical class, al-Da`wa took roots in Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. Compelled to leave Iraq in the early 1970s in the context of the Iraqi regime's quelling of Shi`a Islamic movements, the bulk of the Shiraziyyin first sheltered in Kuwait and then established bases in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Oman. Once there, they entered in systematic confrontation with al-Da`wa activists. As a result, by the early 1970s a pattern of bipolarization of the Shi`a Islamic political scene was established.² During this period, the differences between al-Da`wa and the Shiraziyyin were small in terms of political mission and ideology. Both wanted to mobilize the Shi`a on the basis of a Shi`a version of political Islam. In essence, their dispute was first and foremost about religious and political influence.

2 Unless otherwise mentioned, the information provided in this article on the Gulf Shi`a Islamic movements is the result of extensive fieldwork conducted by the author among Gulf Shi`a Islamic activists between 2002 and 2007. It is to be found in more detail in the book Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst, 2008).

With the advent of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, this pattern of bipolarization was further reinforced but its meaning was reinterpreted. In the direct aftermath of the revolution, al-Da`wa and the Shiraziyyin competed to present themselves as the most enthusiastic and efficient propagandists of Ayatollah Khomeini's ideas. While al-Da`wa was content with propaganda, the Shiraziyyin, who had established close contacts with Khomeini and his aides long before their accession to power, became the main subcontractors of exporting the revolution. Exiled in Iran, Bahraini and Saudi militants, aided by their Iraqi mentors, attempted to destabilize the regimes with Iranian logistical support. Nevertheless, as early as 1982, when the Iranian regime began to establish its own network of so-called "liberation movements" independent from the pre-established Iraqi networks, the al-Shirazi network was progressively marginalized in Iran. They were eventually suppressed when Mohammed al-Shirazi not only criticized the dictatorial tendencies of the Islamic Republic, but also challenged the religious authority of Khomeini and his successor, Ali Khamenei, whom he refused to recognize as the sole leaders of the Shi`a world.

Many al-Shirazi activists were imprisoned and sometimes tortured, while the bulk had to leave Iran for Syria and Western Europe. Together with his sons and one of his brothers, Mohammed al-Shirazi remained in Qom, where he lived under house arrest until his death in 2001.

The Iranian Model as a Fracture Line

It is the transformation of the Shiraziyyin's relationship to Iran that entailed the reinterpretation of their initial dispute with al-Da`wa. As a result, the two factions compete today over Iran's role, both as a state and a political model. While the Shiraziyyin have developed their own alternative conception of clerical political rule,³ most Gulf al-Da`wa activists display full support for the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* (the rule by the specialist in religious

3 Mohammed al-Shirazi is a proponent of the so-called *shurat al-fuqaha* (council of the jurisprudents) theory. This means that the government of the state should be run by a council of the most learned clerics as opposed to a single one, as in Khomeini's doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*.

law) on which the Islamic Republic's legitimacy rests. Together with younger activists socialized politically after the Islamic revolution, al-Da`wa activists today form the so-called "Hizb Allah" or "Imam's Line"⁴ trend. This pattern of bipolarization between pro- and anti-Iranians is one of the reasons why Iranian influence has been limited in the Gulf: the Islamic Republic no longer has an ideological monopoly over the Gulf's Shi`a Islamic movements and now represents one of the major fracture lines dividing these activists. This is most evident in Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

Bahrain

In the Gulf, the Shiraziyyin are leading the movement of criticism toward Iran. They are sometimes isolated in this respect, as is the case in Bahrain. In Bahrain, for example, the Shiraziyyin have a political society of their own named the Islamic Action Society. Some of its members have joined al-Wifaq (the Concord), a Shi`a mass party gathering all the Shi`a Islamic currents present in the country. The Bahraini Hizb Allah trend, which is pro-Iranian, is not structured into a fully-fledged political party but is embodied by a constellation of individuals who sometimes have a wide political and religious audience. It is the case of Shaykh Isa Qasem, for example, the founder of al-Da`wa in Bahrain in the late 1960s who now supports the *wilayat al-faqih* doctrine and Ali Khamenei's pretension to lead the Shi`a world. As for the other influential political activists who do not follow the Iranian line, such as Shaykh Ali Salman who heads al-Wifaq, they prefer to focus on local political problems rather than transnational ones and have not entered in the debate about the Iranian model.

Kuwait

In Kuwait, the Shiraziyyin are particularly vocal in denouncing Iranian policy. Nevertheless, they are a small political faction with only one member of parliament, Saleh Ashur. The stronger Hizb Allah faction, which is known officially in Kuwait as the Islamic National Alliance, has three members of parliament. In an excessively fragmented Shi`a political

scene, however, the Shiraziyyin have succeeded in gathering all the other Shi`a societies—a total of five, not including the Hizb Allah faction—into a coalition (the National Coalition of the Assemblies), the political positioning of which almost systematically contradicts that of Hizb Allah on local political matters. The National Coalition of the Assemblies is close to the government, which supports its candidates during the elections. One of the favorite tools of the Kuwaiti Shiraziyyin when fighting their adversaries is to denounce their leanings to Iran, describing the Hizb Allah Islamic National Alliance as the Trojan horse of Iranian influence in Kuwait. The National Coalition of the Assemblies has yet to constitute into a coherent political organization, however, and has been unable to match the Islamic National Alliance's political strength. The latter, indeed, benefits from a long history of mobilization in favor of a better representation of the Shi`a at the parliamentary level, with some of its members of parliament having been elected in almost all the elections since 1981. As an opposition movement moreover, they recently benefited from the Kuwaiti population growing dissatisfied with the government.

Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, the Shiraziyyin, although increasingly divided due to different views of what strategy to adopt toward the Saudi regime, are the dominant political actors among the Shi`a population. This is largely due to the skillfulness of their historical leader, Shaykh Hasan al-Saffar. In Saudi Arabia, the Hizb Allah trend is institutionalized in the framework of the Hijazi Hizb Allah. It is only a small radical group that, to date, has not been able to challenge the Shiraziyyin effectively. While mainly concentrated on local matters, Saudi Shiraziyyin are also leading the debate about the Iranian model and, overall, Shi`a relations to Iran. In November 2008, while on a trip to Bahrain, a Saudi al-Shirazi delegation declared that it was time for the Shi`a to say loudly that they are not pledged to Iran and are loyal citizens of their respective nation-states.⁵

Gulf Regimes' Politics of Recognition

The pattern of bipolarization between pro- and anti-Iranians is the result of the Shi`a Islamic movement's own historical dynamic. As a factor of containing Iranian influence, Shi`a bipolarization has been reinforced by the evolution of the Gulf regimes' attitude toward their Shi`a populations overall, and their political representatives specifically. In the 1980s, the regimes tended to consider their Shi`a citizens as a fifth column of Iranian expansionism and reacted by restricting any form of Shi`a political—and incidentally religious—expression. From the 1990s onward, however, they adopted more subtle strategies in the context of a major reshaping of the geopolitical framework.

In 1990, the legitimacy of Gulf ruling dynasties was shaken by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and also by the weakening of their redistribution capacity in the context of the drop in oil prices and a demographic boom. To renew the basis of their legitimacy, they launched policies of political liberalization implying various forms of participation. The Shi`a movements benefited from this general context, but also from the appeasement of the Gulf monarchies' relationship with Iran, the foreign policy of which entered a more pragmatic phase. Also in the 1990s, the emergence of a strong Sunni Islamic opposition helped alleviate the pressure on Shi`a Islamic activists, who no longer appeared as the major threat to the monarchical regimes. As a result, they were able to settle official reconciliation with them and return from exile.

On the eve of the deposition of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Bahraini and Kuwaiti Shi`a Islamic movements had become legitimate political actors in the framework of more open political systems. In Saudi Arabia, they were still clandestine, but most of the al-Shirazi historical leaders had been granted some space to continue to exist on Saudi soil. Iraq's 2003 regime change accentuated this trend of normalization as opposed to reversing it. Shi`a activists used Gulf regimes' fear of Iran's new influence to renegotiate the Shi`a's social position, explaining to the rulers that the best way to deflect the Shi`a from serving Iranian interests was to grant them more rights. In Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, for example, this meant more visibility

4 The "Imam" refers to Ruhollah Khomeini, to which many Shi`a activists refer to as "Imam Khomeini" to point at his leading religious and political role.

5 This trip was reported in the Saudi-funded newspaper *al-Hayat* in its November 21, 2008 edition.

in the public sphere and the end of the impediments to the free practice of their rituals. The Shi`a Ashura rituals, which include processions in the streets, have been tolerated in both countries since 2004. In 2005, Kuwaiti Shi`a also obtained the creation of an administration of their religious endowments distinct from the Sunni ones, while the same year their Saudi co-religionists obtained a complete reform of their religious court system. These were not new demands. This time, however, the regimes responded positively. Of course, Sunni/Shi`a equality is far from being achieved, especially in Saudi Arabia, but there has been unprecedented progress.

Bahrain, however, stands as an exception for a few key reasons. Bahrain has a Shi`a majority, yet is ruled by a family dynasty from the Sunni minority. Moreover, the Shi`a in Bahrain always enjoyed almost total religious freedom since the creation of the state in the 18th century; their demands do not essentially pertain to religious matters but rather concentrate on political participation. In brief, what they want is a genuine democratization of the political system, which would mean the end of rule by the Sunni al-Khalifa family. This, of course, is totally unacceptable for the ruling class and it is the main reason why the Bahraini democratization process is and will remain at a standstill. This does not necessarily mean that Bahraini Shi`a will turn to Iran to support their struggle. Indeed, mainstream Shi`a political actors are aware that such a move would be counterproductive. To date, they have rather sought to convince the international community that they are not an Iranian fifth column, but a genuine democratic movement. They are also probably aware that although Iran is eager to have influence in Bahrain, the tiny archipelago does not stand on the top of its priorities and that it would never deploy important efforts to establish a pro-Iranian regime there.

Conclusion

The Gulf regimes' new positive attitude toward their Shi`a citizens is no doubt part of a strategy to contain Iranian influence. Yet it must also be seen in a wider perspective, as one manifestation of the general reshaping of state/society relations in the Gulf monarchies in the context of a sometimes deep crisis of

legitimacy. To assess the real possibility of Iran significantly influencing the Gulf monarchies' internal balance of power, one has to look not so much at what Iran is doing, but at the Gulf states' lengthy process of transformation. This is precisely what is at stake in the events that shook the Saudi Shi`a community in February and March 2009, after a handful of Shi`a were manhandled by religious police during a pilgrimage to the tombs of their imams at the Baqi cemetery of Medina.⁶ These events occurred a few days after King Abdallah excluded some conservative figures from key institutions.⁷ These conservative figures see the Shi`a as being among King Abdallah's best allies in his reformist endeavor, and targeting them in this particular moment was clearly a way to send him a message. In brief, the main issue behind these events was not so much Shi`a religious malpractice, but rather the pursuit of the reforms.

Overall, despite Iran increasing its level of influence in Iraq and Lebanon, there is no impending Iranian-led Shi`a crescent descending upon the Middle East. In particular, the Shi`a populations in the Gulf countries—especially Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain—are making an effort to distance themselves from Iran. If the Gulf regimes want to help their Shi`a citizens avoid looking to Iran as a possible political protector, they have to achieve a genuine transformation of their relations with their Shi`a populations.

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⁶ See the article by the Paris-based journalist Habib Trabelsi (who heads the team of www.saudiwave.com), of which an English version can be found at Habib Trabelsi, "Heightened Shiite-Sunni Tension in Medina," Middle East Online, February 24, 2009.

⁷ King Abdallah dismissed the head of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vices, the religious police well-known for its regular harassment of the Shi`a. Abdallah also reshuffled the cabinet, excluding some of its more conservative elements and appointing more liberal-minded figures, most notably at the Supreme Council of Justice.

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