Shia Communities in the Middle East: Can they be influenced by Iran?

by Cenap Çakmak

Introduction

It can be argued that Iran through its external policy is seeking to expand its sphere of influence in the Middle East in an attempt at becoming a regional power in a predominantly Arab and Sunni setting. This is despite the fact that Iran is an outsider to the region because of its Persian identity along with its sectarian religious outlook. On this basis, it is possible to assert that like Israel, Iran is unlikely to be accepted as a player in the region. Despite this obvious obstacle, Iran is striving to become a regional power, one that would attempt to play a major role in regional affairs.

Irrespective of the merits of this choice, Iran has skilfully used its assets in a manner which is advantageous to the achievement of its foreign policy goals. On the one hand, it has promoted Islamic revolution in the entire region without making any distinction between Sunni and Shiite sectarian beliefs; this strategy has attracted visible attention from the radical extremist groups including those with a Sunni orientation. Iran made alliance with such groups in order to win the hearts of the masses by paying a great deal of attention to the Palestinian issue despite it not being a crucial problem for Iranian security. As a result, the Palestinian issue has become a trump card in the hands of Iranian authorities to gain wider popularity in a region where it would otherwise be unwelcome.

In such a delicate setting, Iran also has another advantage and one that it could use to fulfill its foreign policy goals. The Shia communities in different parts of the Middle East can be seen as potential allies of Iran because of co-religionist sentiments. Despite national identity differences (all other Shia are Arab and Turkmen) and amongst the different interpretations of the Shia faith, Iran is able to present itself as a strong power that Shiite people in other countries can rely on. This has been the case in Bahrain where the majority Shia rioted against the government. It was observable that protestors held Khomeini’s portraits during the riots. This is symbolically important given that Bahrain is a predominantly Arab country but yet, people showed inclinations towards Iran. So this raises a question that deserves analytical attention: will Iran be able to influence the Shiites in predominantly Arabic countries?

Shiism as a faith of protest and its implications

The Shia Crescent theory is based on the idea that Iran is able to appeal to the Shia community in particular areas of the Middle East and act as their
main sponsor in the region. Is this a reasonable assumption? This is a particularly simple and yet relevant and crucial question considering that with the exception of Bahrain and Iraq, the Shia do not constitute the majority in any of the Middle Eastern countries. It is also important to note that it will be an exaggeration to believe that the Shia faith is solely represented by the Iranian version of Shiasm and that there are no irreconcilable differences between different Shia groups. These differences notwithstanding, there are however, two important features of Shiasm to consider for the sake of the discussion in this study: that Shiism is “a religion of protest,” and that it has become extremely politicized over the centuries. It is of course unnecessary to go into the details of how the Shia belief emerged as a separate Islamic interpretation in history. However, it is fair and sufficient to point out that subscribers to this faith have in general been sidelined and persecuted even in the Sunni world and that with a few exceptions; they have rarely ascended to power within a political entity. As background information, it could be said that Shia refers to supporters of Ali (the cousin of the Prophet Muhammed); in the controversy over the murder of Uthman (the third Caliph in Islam and a companion of the Prophet Muhammed) which turned into a blood feud. Muawiya (another companion of the Prophet Muhammed) insisted on taking revenge and claimed right to become Caliph instead of Ali (although this is disputed). In the Battle of Siffin, Muslims, for the first time, were divided into certain groups; one of them was the Shia who, in addition to supporting Ali, also believed in the transfer of the right of caliphate through the lineage of the Prophet Muhammed. Over time, all those who believed that the post of caliphate should be held by Ali and his descendants came to be regarded as Shia. The persecution and brutal treatment of the Shia particularly under the Ummayid caliphate rule ironically contributed to the spread and popularity of this branch of Islam. This has created a sense of minority and solidarity among the members of the Shia community and their Imams; and as a result, they adopted a strong approach of taqiyyah (dissimulation). The concept and practice of dissimulation has been central to the Shia belief since then, preserving the sectarian identity and contributing to the enhanced sense of isolation and discrimination.

Appointment of the Imam as Major Determinant in Shia Faith

The Shia believe that the appointment of an Imam who serves as the religious authority and head of the people is evidently included in the sphere of competence of Allah. Other groups in Islam, however, view this process as something that the Muslim community is entitled to do. Subsequently, the Shia faith entails that Imamate is a divine duty and position like Prophethood and that he holds the power to say the final word on the state affairs as well as religious and political matters. While the Sunni scholars argue that a caliph or Imam who commits mistakes cannot be challenged and that he still should be obeyed, the Shia assume that the Imam is flawless and purely innocent. This assumption is based on the view that the Imam is the representative of Allah and chosen by Him. They further argue that Ali, the prophet’s son-in-law, was designated as the Imam of the ummah (transnational Muslim community) after his death; this view has remained the same throughout the history.

The particular problem with the Shia was that they have remained under the rule of Sunni authority for most part of the history; in other words, they rarely seized the opportunity to practice their own approach vis-à-vis the Imamate issue. However, the “Shia leadership has survived and maintained itself, sustained by a lineal association largely believed to be derived from prophetic descent.” Most Shia recognized the 12 Imams in this line as “their infallible leaders.” The 12 Imam formulation has kept the Shia identity strong and alive over centuries. It should be, however, noted that even though persecution and brutal treatments vis-à-vis the Shia contributed to the emergence of a strong sense of belonging, Shiism has not been a political challenge because it is believed that the last twelfth Imam, al Mahdi, disappeared in occultation and that he would return as Imam to restore justice. This leads to the conclusion that for the Shia, there has been no legitimate government or ruling system for centuries

5 Musa K. Yılmaz, Şia’da din Devlet ilişkisi ve velayet-i fakih

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6 Ibid., 41-44.
8 Salamey and Othman, “Shia revival and Welayat al Faqih in the making of Iranian foreign policy,” 199.
in the absence of the last Imam. This is the primary factor that added a revolutionary character to the Shia sect.

In the absence of the Imam, the source of authority problem was resolved by the introduction of marji’ taqlid (source of immolation) system under which Ayatollahs (religious scholars) were revered as the heirs of the Imam particularly in religious matters. This was the culmination of a struggle between the Akhbari and Usuli (foundational) schools within the Shia sect; the Usulis who promoted the involvement of the scholars in politics defeated the Akhbaris in the late 18th century. This cleared the way for the involvement of the clerics in political affairs. However, “notwithstanding their participation in the sphere of politics, the clergy itself did not formulate (theory) a clear political leadership role for itself” and instead adhered to the previous “quietist tradition.” As a result, the normative ground of the marji’ taqlids stayed “rather informal and non-institutionalized.” The recognition of the role of the marji’ taqlid has been a turning point in the Shia world; despite initial objections and reactions, this role has over the time been internalized and the scholars recognized as marji’ have assumed strong roles in the social affairs.

It should also be noted that even though the scholars recognized as marji’ did not have formal political power, Khomeini’s success in the revolution is at least attributable to his role as marji’ in the Shia community.

Reformulation of the Imamate Theory by Khomeini

Khomeini took the practice of marji’ taqlid further by offering the theory of velayat-e faqih. This is basically a “call to consolidate the Islamic leadership within the one supreme leader with vested power to guide the Muslim world through its plight...Under such a religious leadership structure, the Supreme Leader is to reconcile communities’ political and spiritual divisions and achieve its emancipation.” In essence, this doctrine offers a religious mode of government. The velayat-e faqih theory actually contradicts with the traditional Shia stance which argues that the real order is the one to be established by the Imam and that His return will be the outcome of a natural process. Therefore, this process cannot be interfered with. Any political uprising in his absence may even delay his comeback. Khomeini, however, argued that the Muslim community does not have to submit to the persecution and cruelties in the absence of the Imam and that instead, they should do their part to straighten things up and not to allow the reign of chaos and disorder. In the relatively recent interpretation of Shiite precepts, although absolute authority “remains with the absent Imam, even during his greater occultation...in order to exercise authority, every just and capable faqih (jurist) requires the sanction of the Imam, who is in turn designated by God as the possessor of absolute authority and guardianship.”

Under this theory, Khomeini was designated as the absolute Imam who is deemed innocent as the Twelve Imams. He expanded the sphere of obligations that the Shiites have to observe to include not only the religious matters but all personal or collective activities. In other words, the theory stipulates that a Shiite has to emulate the vali in his or her social life and that the Imam has the power to rule the people and the polity they live in. To this end, he also challenged the view of the traditional Shia vis-à-vis the source of political authority stressing that the role of the Sultan could be assumed by the vali, the theory of which he successfully put into practice.

It should be, however, noted that Khomeini’s theory and practice of velayet-e faqih has not been problem free. Above all, the theory raised serious disagreements and discussions among the Shia scholars. For instance, it is argued that “the occultation of the last Imam does not entail a right of guardianship for any jurisprudent, regardless of the jurist’s qualifications” and “the absence of a divinely mandated authority reverts the guardianship of the

13 İşcan, “İmamiye Şiasında Politik Bir Teori Olarak İmametin İmkanı,” 77.
16 İşcan, “İmamiye Şiasında Politik Bir Teori Olarak İmametin İmkanı,” 81-89.
17 Vaeezi, Shia Political Thought, 68.

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ummato the umma itself.”

Another major difference and contradiction between the marji’ taqlid theory and Khomeini’s valayet-e faqih is that the vali can be elected and removed whereas this is not the case with the marja’.

Despite these objections, Khomeini’s theory found acceptance in some parts of the Shia world. For instance, the Hizbullah movement in Lebanon “followed the religious authority of Iran and paid homage and allegiance” to him as the political and religious leader of the entire Muslim world.22

This suggests that Khomeini’s theory defines a strong political and religious figure who is vested with extensive power and influence over the Shia followers. The theory makes the vali faqih a very influential and undisputable religious and political authority. The scholar who holds this position is considered so powerful and unquestionable that Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montezari was charged with treason because of a speech he delivered in 1997 where he criticized the religious and political authority of Ayatollah Ali Khamanei.23 And in fact, despite serious differences,24 the marji’ taqlid also enables the marja’s to exert political influence even though they are not directly involved in formal political processes. Both a marja’ and a vali’ faqih holds extensive authority over the Shia followers as the clergy is recognized a central place in the Shia faith whereas the “religious authority in the majority Sunni sect is much more diffuse.”

What does this tell us? It is of course premature to argue that Iran is able to influence all the people of a Shia persuasion in different parts of the Arab world. On the one hand, there are still serious differences between Iranian type of Shiism and how Arab Shiites formulate their belief. The major difference in terms of national identity sho-uld also be noted as well. However, it is also noted that Iran has been able to bridge the gap regarding the different interpretations of Shiism over the years, showing the ability to become a center of attraction for the entire Shia community in the Arab world. This of course does not mean that Iran has become a religious center for the Shia and a leader country whose authority is recognized by all Shiites in the world. But it is safe to say that the evidence so far tells us that Iran is able to entice the Shiites in the region if it remains decisive to use the Shiism card.

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