

FEARING A 'SHIITE OCTOPUS'
SUNNI - SHI`A RELATIONS AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR BELGIUM
AND EUROPE

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FEARING A 'SHIITE OCTOPUS'

**Sunni - Shi`a relations and the implications
for Belgium and Europe**

JELLE PUELINGS



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Executive Summary

During the last five years, and more specifically since the US invasion of Irak, different Sunni policy makers and religious actors have ventilated their concern for what they see as the rise of Shiite Islam. Although the condemnation of Shiism by more rigorous currents such as Wahhabism is hardly new, recently different governments in the Middle East have taken concrete measures against Shiite actors. The same 'Cold War scenario' the region witnessed immediately after the Iranian Revolution seems to appear again, making Arab Sunni voices reverberate up to Western policy makers, who start to worry themselves about the role of Iran and its allies. In this paper we will try to give an evaluation of this alleged shift in the Sunni-Shi'a power balance, and point out the possible consequences for Belgium and the EU emanating from this controversy.

We have treated the subject from two different angles. First of all, we looked at the level of regional politics and tried to formulate a context in which we have to see the Sunni fear for the conception of a 'Shiite Crescent', a geopolitical construction in which Shiites take over power in the Middle East, thus making the region the backyard of Iran. We pointed out that it is a nationally focused socio-political movement, aiming at emancipating the Shiites in their own national context. The transnational system of religious guidance, the *marja`iyya*, is at the same time both a diversified, non-uniform source of religious and social ideology, and a drive for Shiite political participation and adaptation. The Iranian role in this construction is to be seen in the light of its hegemonic aspirations, through the way of a pragmatic foreign policy. Its relations towards regional allies is largely tactical, and not to be overestimated. The Islamic Republic uses Shiite Islam more or less as a political instrument, surfing the wave of the Shiite movement more than actually steering it. We conclude this section with a first set of recommendations towards Belgium and the EU for their policy in the Middle East.

The second part focuses on the actual Sunni-Shi'a relations, varying from a *Wahhabi* hostility towards the religious identity of Shiism to a search for rapprochement and coexistence. Within Sunni circles like the Muslim Brotherhood, a certain form of distrust and a hardened speech is apparently on the rise, especially regarding a perceived infiltration of Shiite Islam in what they call 'Sunni' countries. The same fear has recently been instrumentalized by Sunni regimes of Egypt and Morocco, who undertook drastic measures to counter Iranian intrusion in their national sphere. The motives behind this are mainly a matter of regime survival and safeguarding their strategic position in the region. An important element in this controversy is the *tashayyu`* and Shiite proselytism, an instrument used in the Iranian search for hegemony.

To conclude the second part, we took a look at the European theatre, where we can see a largely similar development as witnessed in the Middle East, with Iran trying to gain influence amongst local Shiites. For the case of Belgium, the controversy hanging over the Moroccan community is of specific interest, given the concerns raised by Rabat on mass conversions towards Shiism taking place, thus threatening to destabilize the Moroccan State.

Overall, the power balance Sunnism and Shiism is not so much a problem than it is an expression of the existential fear of Sunni regimes. The red line within this paper is thus the political use of Islamic confessional identities (Sunni and Shi`a), in the framework of a regional political agenda. This will be, more than a structural opposition between Sunnism and Shiism, a threat to confessional coexistence, and can be a future cause for intra-Islamic strife.

Introduction¹

Some years ago, the Saudi preacher Mamduh ibn `Ali al-Harbi held a sermon under the title of *al-Ikhtabut ash-Shi'i fi'l-'Alam* ('The Shiite Octopus in the world'), brandishing Shiites as unbelievers, agents of Iran and criticizing their hidden agenda to take over the Islamic World². Although the condemnation of Shiism by more rigorous Islamic currents such as Wahhabism, is hardly new, recently different governments in the Middle East have addressed their deep concerns and even took concrete measures against Shiite actors. The same 'Cold War scenario' the region witnessed immediately after the Iranian Revolution seems to appear again, making Arab Sunni voices reverberate up to Western policy makers, who start to worry themselves about the role of Iran and its allies.

In the first part of this work, we will treat the validity of the 'Shiite Crescent' idea and match this to the political development of Shiite³ actors in the Middle East. We will also consider the role played by Iran in this story. After this, we can already give some interim conclusions for Belgian and EU policy.

The second part will focus on the actual rhetoric used by different Sunni actors, the actual extent of Shiite activism in 'Sunni' countries, and a sketch of the issues that will be important for Europe and Belgium.

We will close our paper with conclusions and some operational recommendations for Belgian and European policy makers.

We want to stress that this paper does not have the pretence of being complete. Considering the numerous aspects of the Sunni-Shi'a controversy on all levels of Middle Eastern society, in combination with the striking lack of exact demographic numbers and figures⁴, studying Sunni-Shi'a relations becomes a somewhat difficult exercise. As a consequence, it is rather our aim to put this contro-

1. The author would like to thank the following people for their highly appreciated help: prof. dr. Sven Biscop, prof. dr. Brigitte Maréchal, prof. dr. Sami Zemni, amb. dr. Raoul Delcorde, the follow-up committee at the Belgian Ministry of Foreign affairs, lt. col. Van Gils, lt. Pieter-Jan Parrein, CUTA (Belgian Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis), prof. dr. Rik Coolsaet, and everyone who contributed, both in words and deeds.

2. KAZIMI Nabras, 'Zarqawi's Anti-Shi'a Legacy: Original or Borrowed?', *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, n°5, 2006, p. 58.

3. When using the word 'Shiism' or 'Shiite', we refer to the *Imami* branch of Shiite Islam. Other branches of Shiite origin, such as the *Isma'iliya* of *Zaydiya* are not considered in this paper due to their minority position within the Shiite world and their relatively small impact in the Middle East, unless explicitly mentioned.

4. Prof. Sabrina Mervin added an annex to her excellent book 'Iran et les Mondes Chiites' discussing the validity of the different demographic data of Shiism (MERVIN Sabrina (ed.), *Iran et les Mondes Chiites*, Karthala, Paris, 2007, p. 457-465).

versy in a more balanced perspective, stripped of its sometimes hysterical dimensions, and to provoke further thinking and debate on confessional or other dimensions (economic, family, tribal, etc.) involved in the development of intra-Muslim relations.

1. Shiites on a search for space

1.1. Coming to terms: Shiite crescent, Shiite Revival and their limitations

Since the US invasion in Iraq and the end of the Ba`th regime, much has been said and written on Shiite empowerment and the apparent change in the 'sectarian power balance' in the Middle East. In 2004 King `Abd Allah II of Jordan expressed his fear for a 'Shiite Crescent', stretching from the Persian Gulf towards the Mediterranean, the area thus becoming the backyard of Iran⁵. Two years later, Egyptian president Husni Mubarak added to the controversy by stating that 'Shiites are mostly always loyal to Iran and not to the countries they live in'⁶. As such, this was soon to become a point of interest for Western scholars studying the possibility of the Middle East being threatened by a rise in the Shiite profile and the possible conflict with the Sunni majority connected to it. It was for example Vali Nasr who stated in his famous article 'When Shiites rise':

*"By liberating and empowering Iraq's Shiite majority, the Bush administration helped launch a broad Shiite revival that will upset the sectarian balance in Iraq and the Middle East for years to come."*⁷

In his book 'The Shia Revival', Nasr outlines the same prospects and foresees violent conflicts between the two Islamic currents as a future threat within the Muslim world. The work has high merit as an overview of Sunni-Shi'a relations in the present age, but a much-heard critique is the overemphasis on the role of religious identity in this controversy⁸.

For Iraq, the expected scenario came partially true: local Shiites did obtain power through the means of democratic elections. The person who played a major role in these developments was grand ayatollah `Ali Sistani, who apparently left his political 'quietism' to organize, unite and guide the Iraqi Shiite community towards empowerment. Throughout the region, especially in the

5. 'Iraq: Jordan See Threat To Election From Iran', *Washington Post*, 8 December 2004.

6. President Mubarak made the statements during an interview on the *al-Arabiya* channel on 9 April 2006 ('Iraqis Denounce Mubarak's Remarks on Strife', *International Herald Tribune*, 10 April 2006).

7. NASR Vali, 'When the Shiites Rise', *Foreign Affairs*, July – August 2006, (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/61733/vali-nasr/when-the-shiites-rise>).

8. NASR Vali, *The Shia Revival: how conflicts within Islam will shape the future*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York & London, 2006, pp. 287.

Gulf region⁹, coreligionists were indeed more motivated to demand their national rights. At the same time, however, violent jihadist inspired groups, causing civil strife, countered the Shiite agenda in Iraq.

But when translating the prospect of the 'Shiite Crescent' into a policy approach with a regional framework, we come across some limitations, that do not only make the concept as such highly problematic, but also prove that it lacks a certain touch with reality.

Historically speaking, the 'Revival' of Shiism is a phenomenon older than the power shift in Iraq, and older than the Iranian Revolution. Of great influence too were the rise of Shiite centers of learning, the revival of *Usuli* Shiism¹⁰ at the end of the 18th century and the impact of Sunni modernist thinkers such as Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897) or Muhammad `Abduh (d. 1905)¹¹.

The first apparent signs of a Shiite activism came to the fore in Iran with the Tobacco Crisis (1891-1892), the subsequent Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) and the 1920 Iraqi revolt against the British presence. The latter caused the *hawza* (center of Shiite religious learning) of Najaf to decline in prominence. The migration of Iraqi insurgent clerics towards Iran added to the revolutionary climate in the religious center of Qom¹².

During the following decennia the region witnessed the coming into being of different Shiite politically active outfits, spearheaded by the political movement of *ad-Da'wa* in Iraq in the 1950s. Elements of this organization were to have a great influence on the spread of the Shiite socio-political ideology in the region, notably in Lebanon and the Gulf. The latter was also the sphere of influence of the *Shiraziya*, the network of Muhammad ash-Shirazi (d. 2001) and his off-

9. The Shiite empowerment in Iraq seemed to have had an influence on the organization of the 'National Dialogue' in Saudi Arabia. (SAGER Abdulaziz O, 'Political Opposition in Saudi Arabia', in: AARTS Paul & NONNEMAN Gerd, *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*, Hurst & Company, London, 2006, p. 247).

10. The *Usuli* current, now the dominant doctrine within *Imami* Shiism, puts the emphasis for coming to a legal conclusion with the active interpretation of *usul al-fiqh* ('basis of jurisprudence'), rather than literally following of the traditions. Through the revival of Usulism, Shiite clerics were to exercise greater influence, and Shiism became a more dynamic system, able to react to the realities of the time. (COLE Juan, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2002, p. 77; MOMEN Moojan, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1985, p. 223).

11. NAKASH Yitzhak, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1995, p. 49. Both al-Afghani and `Abduh were staunch advocates of pan-Islamism and the unity of the *umma* against the then rising influence of the West. To `Abduh, one of the reasons of the stagnation of the Islamic World was according to them a consequence of the (Sunni) emphasis on *taqlid* ('Tradition'). (*Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, 'Afghani, Jamal al-Din al-', (KEDDIE Nikki); *ibid.*, 'Abduh, Muhammad', (CRAGG Kenneth).

12. NAKASH Yitzhak, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, p. 49.

shoot. This current, originating from Karbala, was an important supporter of Imam Khomeini since his days in Najaf, and would actively export the Iranian Revolution during the 1980s. Shiite militancy therefore has its roots within a dynamic between the religious centers of what is today's Iraq and Iran, as a model for Shiite activism in the Middle East region. The Iranian Revolution and the echoes it caused in the years after, is therefore to be seen as a pinnacle of a Shiite emancipation movement, not as the beginning of it.

When looking at the present situation, different aspects seem to run across the approach of a coordinated or concerted rise of Shiite forces. First of all, in the debate on confessional opposition, there is too little attention for the nuanced situation on the ground, for the very diverse nature of the Muslim World. Tribal, familial, ethnic or national identity plays a considerable role, and often these identities prevail above religious and confessional ones, sometimes resulting in conflicts within one Islamic current or loyalty over the borders of Sunni or Shi'a identity¹³.

The transnational system of Shiite religious and political thinking is not to be seen as a monolithic bloc either. There are different levels of Shiite political activism or national inclusion per country. One *marja` at-taqlid* ('source of emulation'; the highest religious scholar within *Imami* Shiism) differs from the other in matters of political activism or in how he sees the role of the clergy within the State. The most popular *marja`* of the moment is `Ali Sistani of Najaf, who is seen as being a 'quietist', keeping himself far from active political involvement. On the other hand, the Iranian Supreme Leader, `Ali Khamana`i is seen as the complete opposite, being the highest representative of the Iranian *wilayat-i faqih* ('Ruling of the Jurisprudent') doctrine. These *Maraji`* can be focused on giving guidance to their community inside a national context, and are widely followed abroad at the same time (eg. grand ayatollah Muhammad Hussayn Fadl Allah of Lebanon). In some case, international standing can support national interest. This is the case of grand ayatollah Muntaziri (d. 2009), who knew a large following, had always outspoken critique on the official Iranian interpretation of the *wilayat-i faqih* and played an important symbolic role in the Iranian reformist movement. These different opinions do not only draw lines of division within Shiite ideology, at the same time they can be considered as the motor for political

13. An illustrious example of this dimension is the confrontation between the *Jaysh al-Mahdi* of Muqtada as-Sadr and SCIRI, two Shiite Islamist groupings, contesting each other's sphere of influence in 2006-2007. Not only are both movements dominated by famous clerical families – respectively the as-Sadr and the al-Hakims – they both represent different strata of the Iraqi society: *sadriya* has its followers from the nation's Shiite lower class, whereas SCIRI is the party of the wealthier middle class (International Crisis Group, 'Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council', *Middle East Report*, n°70, 15 November 2007, p. 19).

dynamism within the community and a way to cope with an ever changing society.

1.2. Socio-political struggle and national participation

The socio-political *raison d'être* of most Shiite movements and their focus on their own national context is perhaps the biggest factor that reveals the limited extent of religious motivations or the current existence of a larger geopolitical strategy. This struggle for social promotion is largely the consequence of the poor economical and social standards of the Shiite population – minority or majority – in most of their home countries. This element was shown by the massive Shiite participation in socialist or communist parties throughout the region in the 1950s-1970s, to see their demands addressed, even if other confessional groups dominated them. But from the second half of the 20th century onwards, Shiite political activism began to organize itself in a framework of its own. In spite of a period of direct contestation immediately after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, these movements evolved towards political participation and national accommodation, rather than following or serving a transnational cause, or destabilizing the societies concerned. By considering the following cases, this political evolution can be illustrated in a more concrete way.

In Iraq, the Shiite community was a majority deprived of political power, first under the Hashimite monarchy, then under the *Ba`th* regime. Even the actual Arabian origin of the Iraqi Shi'a was being disputed under the Nationality Law of 1924. In 1957-1958 the *ad-Da`wa* movement was founded, offering a religious alternative for the Leftist parties in which Shiites traditionally participated. Its main ideologue, Baqir as-Sadr, vehemently denounced the political aloofness of Najaf. More than forty years later, in 2003, the movement of Muqtada as-Sadr rode the same wave of socio-political longing as his preceding family members did. Muqtada was able to partially draw on the network of his father Sadiq as-Sadr, which was mainly composed from the poorer circles within Iraqi society¹⁴.

The turning point for State participation – and de facto rule – of the Shiite majority in Iraq were the general legislative elections of 2005. Grand ayatollah `Ali Sistani was the driving force behind these general elections, issuing different fatwa's in 2003 and 2004, calling the Coalition Provisional Authority and its constitutional activities illegitimate, since they did not represent the entire of

14. International Crisis Group, 'Iraq's Muqtada as-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?', *Middle East Report*, n°55, 11 juli 2006, p. 5.

Iraqi society¹⁵. The different Shiite organizations that came into being during the past decennia were to take part in the national political scene. The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), founded in 1982 as an opposition group amongst Iraqi refugees in Iran with Iranian support and training, participated in a very pragmatic way, and became the most important Shiite party in Iraq, and still dominates the Ministry of Interior. In a symbolical move to underline its own accommodation to the new Iraqi context, the organization dropped the word 'Revolution' from its name (becoming the 'Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq'; ISCI) in 2007, and adopted grand ayatollah Sistani as its *marja*¹⁶.

By taking part in the 2005 elections and eventual participation in the national government, the movement of Muqtada as-Sadr seemed to follow a comparable nationalizing dynamic. In 2007, as-Sadr withdrew his 5 ministers, partly in opposition to the American 'surge', and disappeared underground¹⁷. In the 2009 provincial elections, different candidates ran with his support, but did not obtain good results¹⁸.

For Lebanon, it was the changing societal reality in the first part of the 20th century, when local Shiites increased in number, became more urbanized and shook off the traditional *zu`ama* system¹⁹ by getting directly involved in the national politics that was on the basis of the Shiite movement. Of great importance for the Lebanese Shiite movement was the arrival of *sayyid* Musa as-Sadr (d. 1978), an Iran-based cleric of Lebanese origin in 1957. His principal goal was the organization of the marginalized Shiite community, amongst others by founding the *al-Majlis ash-Shi'i al-Islami al-A'la* (Higher Shiite Islamic Council)

15. Often, the stance of Sistani and the *hawza* of Najaf is in general considered as being 'quietist'. One has to realize that this political silence does not mean that they are apolitical. Sistani does have a vision on an Islamic State, but situates the *'ulama'* within a consultative context than as actually ruling a nation or community, like the Iranian *wilayat-i faqih* prescribes. Through his intervention in the formation of a post-2003 Iraqi State, Sistani has proven that Shiite *maraji'* are non-negligible in putting forward a strategy for the region. (VISSER Reidar, 'Sistani, the United States and Politics in Iraq: from Quietism to Machiavellianism?', *NUPI Papers*, n°700, 2006, p. 14-15).

16. International Crisis Group, 'Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council', *Middle East Report*, n°70, 15 November 2007, p. 15-16.

17. The *Jaysh al-Mahdi* was suspended on 28 August 2007, in order to be transformed into a smaller 'Cultural and Religious Force', called *al-Mumahidun* ('the Straighteners [of the Path]'). Some analysts see this move as a result of Iranian influence, seeking to bolster the power of the Iraqi al-Maliki government (RAHIMI Babak, 'The Mumahidun: Muqtada al-Sadr's new militia', *Terrorism Monitor*, n°6, xvii, 2008 (http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=5136)).

18. International Crisis Group, 'Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge', *Middle East Report*, n°72, 2008, p. 3; KATZMAN Kenneth, 'Iran's Activities and Influence in Iraq', *CRS Report for Congress* RS22323, 7 April 2009, p. 3-4.

19. A *za'im* (pl. *zu'ama*) in the Ottoman context is a political leader whose power is based on a local community, and is able to keep this support by taking care of the demands of his clients. This client-patron relation is a personal one. The Lebanese Shiite movement of AMAL represents a more modern form of the *zu'ama*, one fitted within the political context, where clients vote for a strongman, thus creating a minimum of control over this relation [Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World, 'Za'im', (SHEHADI Nadim F)].

and the *Haraka al-Mahrumin* ('Movement of the Deprived'). The latter would turn out to be the forerunner of the current major Shiite players in Lebanon. While AMAL (*Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniya*; 'Lebanese Resistance Battalion') as the successor of the *Haraka al-Mahrumin*, grew out to be a political movement with a more or less secular profile, it was Hezbollah that continued as the Shiite Islamist organization in Lebanon. The conception of Hezbollah is believed to partially come forth from a disenfranchised part of AMAL, organized and supported by Iran and elements from *ad-Da`wa*²⁰.

The Lebanese reality after the Civil War (1975-1991) forced the former militant groupings to adapt to the national political theatre. AMAL demilitarized after the Ta'if Agreements in 1989. The party represents for a lot of Lebanese the new *zu`ama*: a local network of clients, outside the context of family relations. Hezbollah on the other side, choose in the framework of its famous 1992 *Infitah* ('opening up'), to insert itself into the national politics and to tone down its own militant and revolutionary character. Figurehead of this new course was the popular secretary-general Hassan Nasr Allah. Despite this apparent transformation in approach, the military element of the organization remained at its heart ever since, even after the retreat of Israel in 2000, and was the actual cause for the sectarian clashes in the Western Suburbs of Beirut in 2008²¹. Apart from that, Hezbollah controls extensive social initiatives in the south of Lebanon, addressing the various needs of Shiites in the region. This element is not exceptional, since AMAL and the network of grand ayatollah Fadl Allah undertake the same projects. Hezbollah, however, does not only have to rely on its own religious resources, it can also bend for a large part on Iranian money.

As the Sunni-Shi'a opposition within the Gulf was more influenced at the start by the evolutions in Iran in 1979, a development made clear by the emergence of different insurgent groups, eventually it would not contest its own national belonging or even the legitimacy of the ruling elite. Violent actions undertaken by the national Shiite minorities were first of all a demand for authentic political rights and social promotion. Later these conflicts escalated due to the economic climate and the oil prizes in the 1990s²².

20. NORTON August Richard, *Hezbollah: a short history*, Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 32

21. International Crisis Group, 'Hezbollah's Weapons turn Inward', *Middle East Report*, n°23, 2008, p. 12.

22. BAHRY Louay, 'The Socioeconomic Foundations of the Shiite Opposition in Bahrain', *Mediterranean Quarterly*, n°11, iii, 2000, p. 137; The exceptions amongst the Shiite movement within a national context were the *Hizb Allah al-Hijaz* in Saudi Arabia and *Hizb Allah al-Babrayn* in Bahrain, who were rounded up in respectively 1987 and 1996. These groupings were accused of having ties with and receiving material support from the Iranian regime, and of planning to overthrow their respective governments. The *Hizb Allah al-Hijaz* was even suspected of having undertaken the attacks on the Khobar Towers in 1996. Whatever the truth was behind these organizations, these accusations were fully used to divide the growing Shiite opposition.

In Bahrain, Shiites form a majority of 70% that long since demand a part in national politics, a sphere dominated by the Sunni family of Al Khalifa, the historical Sunni leaders of the island. Discriminatory policies of the ruling clan triggered violent confrontations in the 1990s and as recently as 2008²³. In Saudi Arabia, where Shiites make up about 10% of the population, Shiite militantism emerged as a call for basic citizen rights denied by the *Wahhabi* regime. For the Saudi government, their Shiites form an important strategic domestic element since the area where most of them live, the province of ash-Sharqiya, contains a large part of the kingdom's vast oil reserves. The social struggle that Shiites undertook as employees of ARAMCO in the 1950s was a major boost in their future activism²⁴. Decisive moment was the *Intifada of Muharram 1400*, when Shiites took the streets to publicly celebrate *'Ashura*²⁵.

The Shiite movement in both countries has obtained some result, however. In Bahrain, emir Hamdan Al Khalifa initiated the 'National Action Charter', which introduced a bi-cameral government system and abolished the repressive 'State Security Law'. It was only in 2006 that the Shiite organization *al-Wifaq* was to participate in the National elections, obtaining 18 of the 40 seats in the *Majlis an-Nawwab* ('Council of Deputies'). In Saudi Arabia, then Crown Prince 'Abd Allah organized the 'National Dialogue', of which meetings are held every year, giving more religious rights to the Saudi Shiites and even providing municipal elections. Hassan as-Saffar, up to the present considered as the most important Shiite cleric, originated from militant *Shiraziya* milieu (cf. supra), exporting the Iranian Revolution in the 1980s, but changed the profile of his engagement to a less revolutionary one during the 1990s, even switching to the *marja'iya* of Sistani after the death of Muhammad ash-Shirazi in 2001. For both countries,

23. 'Bahrain TV airs terror plot confessions', *International Herald Tribune*, 28 December 2008; 'Muwahjahat 'anifa fi'l-Bahrayn li'l-yawm ath-thalith 'ala khalafiya i'tiqal nushata' shi'a', *ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 30 January 2009; 'Bahrain King Pardons Shiite Political Prisoners', *The New York Times*, 13 April 2009.

24. Although at the start ARAMCO was and is to be considered as a positive element in the emancipation of the local Shiite community, poor working conditions, limited chances for promotion and lack of access to the oil gains quickly added to the already living frustrations of the Shiite minority. Due to the formation of worker's unions and the emergence of a Shiite Leftist movement in the 1950s, the distrust of the Saudi Government and ARAMCO towards the Shiite employees was on the rise. The Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the *intifada* of that year marked the final schism between the two parties, and the definitive sidelining of Shiites as a work force (LOUËR Laurence, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, Hurst & Company, London, 2008, pp. 40-44).

25. The riots in ash-Sharqiya inspired by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, quickly gained an iconic status. *'Ashura*, the 10th day of the Islamic month of Muharram, in which the martyrdom of Imam Hussayn is remembered, is usually celebrated with processions, thus becoming one of the events during which the Shiite identity is very much accentuated. Only after the National Dialogue of 2003, Saudi Shiites were able to publicly perform this ritual in Shi'a majority parts of the kingdom (SAGER Abdulaziz O., 'Political Opposition in Saudi Arabia', p. 247; JONES Toby Craig, 'Rebellion in the Saudi Periphery', *International Journal for Middle East Studies*, n°38, 2006, p. 222-227).

however, reform does not seem to reach far enough, as reoccurring protests²⁶ seems to prove. For Saudi Arabia, a 2009 Human Rights Watch Report criticized this failure of implementing changes for its Shiite citizens²⁷. The lengthy search for emancipation, and the limited results the Shiite movement in the Gulf has obtained until now, has the risk of pushing them into the arms of more radical tendencies²⁸.

Kuwait, often portrayed as a societal model for the Gulf region, saw its portion of Shiite contestation in the wake of the First Gulf War, when Iraq put pressure on the Al Sabah to crack down on Iraqi dissidents and the following rise in oil prices during the 1990s. The otherwise good relationship between the Shiite commercial elite and the ruling Al Sabah deteriorated. It was only after the Second Gulf War, in 1991, that the trust between both parties was restored. Sunni-Shi'a differences now mostly play a role on a political level²⁹.

When considering all these elements, we have to conclude that the Shiite movement is too diversified to talk about one coordinated phenomenon. The common denominator, however, is its origins as a socio-political drive. The Shiite movement evolved and adapted itself to a national reality, notwithstanding a more revolutionary intermezzo during the 1980s. As such, the success of Shiite militancy can be seen as a consequence of the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the end of colonialism in the region. Due to the formation of States, Shiites were not only faced with a minority position within the Middle East as a whole,

26. In Bahrain, protests against the prevailing social conditions were held in 2005, and in 2008. As for Saudi Arabia, severe disturbances appeared in February 2009 in the neighborhood of the cemetery of *al-Baqi'* in Medina, where different Imams are buried. ('Muwajahat `anifa fi'l-Bahrayn li'l-yawm ath-thalith `ala khalafiya i'tiqal nushata' shi'a', *ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 30 January 2009; 'Ghadab Shi'i fi as-Sa`udiya ba'd ishtibakat bi'l-Madina al-Munawwara', *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 25 February 2009; 'Tazahirat bi'l-mint-aqat ash-Sharqiya fi as-Sa`udiya .. Wa 's-Saffar yantaqad mawqif al-hukuma wa yutalib al-malik bi't-tadakhkhul', *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 26 February 2009; cf infra).

27. Human Rights Watch, *Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility towards Saudi Shia Citizens*, September 2009, pp. 27 (<http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/saudi0909web.pdf>; consulted on 30 October 2009).

28. An example of this radicalism is the secessionist rhetoric of the radical Shiite *shaykh* Nimr an-Nimr, who threatened secession of the ash-Sharqiya province after the *Intifada al-Baqi'*. On the website of the *Shabaka ad-Difa' `an Shaykh an-Nimr*, a communiqué was published on 10 May 2009, in which the 'Birth of the Arab Republic of the East in the region van al-Ihsa and al-Qatif' was announced. The capital of the new nation, that was not only limited to the East of Saudi Arabia but ran across the borders of the Southern part of the country as well, would become al-`Ammawiya, home town of *shaykh* Nimr an-Nimr. The writer emphasized that the initiative came from the Saudi Shiites themselves, not by foreign actors. A message like this is quite insignificant and marginal within the Saudi Shiite movement, but proves the presence of separatist tendencies in some pockets of the country, like the city of `Ammawiya. (www.alnamer.co.cc/print.php?action=print&m=newsm&cid=188 [Arabic], consulted on 14 May 2009, the website is currently offline).

29. The most recent of these incidents was the entry of an Iranian cleric into the country, despite security concerns ('al-Kuwayt: al-milaff at-ta'ifi yutafajjir mujaddadan ba'da dukhul rajul din shi'i ila al-bilad', *ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 15 November 2008).

but in some instances within a national context as well. It is in this environment that Shiites were starting to claim their position within their country, thereby looking at the example of transnational Shiite structures.

Thus, one cannot speak about a change in Sunni-Shiite power balance, if not only because of the limited overall number of the Shiites in the Muslim World. It is the search of the Shiite minority for a larger involvement in its national politics that is taking form, not a structured, region spanning attempt to take over power from the Sunni majority.

Notwithstanding this, the transnational character of the Shiite movement remains an element that is not to be neglected, as we have stated previously. It plays a role in the ideological or political orientation of the different actors, within their respective national contexts, and can ultimately grant legitimacy to Shiite actors taking part in the national political game. It is on this national level that different religious approaches meet, and provoke a differentiation of the political approach, a dynamic in meeting up to the current day and age, and the challenges involved.

1.3. Iran as the perceived king pin in the regional Sunni-Shi`a struggle?

In Iran, the causes of the 1979 Islamic Revolution were the result of a religious-political movement, protesting against the autocratic tendencies of the Shah's regime on the one hand, and – not the least – a huge Western influence in the country on the other. The doctrine that gave form to the new Iranian State was the *wilayat-i faqih*, in which the central power was vested in the person of a cleric, in this case *Imam* Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989). At the start, this movement was not specifically Shiite, because it appealed to pan-Islamist ideals. The movement of Khomeini has always shared the same political objectives as Sunni Islamists; he even adopted a great deal of its ideas from Sunni Islamist thinkers such as Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad `Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1934). It was a struggle against oppression, which the Revolutionary Movement in Iran shared with these early radical Sunni tendencies, and the support Iran was to give to the oppressed, formed an important element in the Iranian constitution. These Khomeinist ideals were in a large degree indebted to the ideas of Iranian thinkers such as `Ali Shari`ati (d. 1977) or Murtaza Mutahhari (d. 1979), who claimed that the struggle against oppression – both on the level of oppositions within Iran as within the Muslim World or between the

Muslim World and Western imperialism – should be undertaken by a more activist and militant interpretation of the Shiite religious identity³⁰.

It was in a large part because of the perception raised by Sunni nations within the Middle East, who feared the success of the Iranian Republic that the Iranian establishment was to redefine its policy towards a more Shiite-oriented one³¹. Nevertheless, Iran would not give up on the Khomeinist pan-Islamic vision. During the first years after the Islamic Revolution, Iran tried to export its revolutionary ideology in the region by supporting armed groups, such as Hezbollah or SCIRI. An important actor in this project proved to be the aforementioned *Shiraziya*, who were able to build a revolutionary influence in the Gulf (cf. supra).

From the second half of the 1980s onwards, a major shift would emerge regarding the foreign policy of Iran. In an attempt to transform Iran into a post-revolutionary and manageable society, Khomeini did not only oust elements opposing his policies, but also radical forces that were supporting Iran's violent exports. In 1989, after the First Gulf War and the death of Imam Khomeini, the politics of Iran changed dramatically, both internally and externally. The new political and diplomatic strategy of Iran was *siyasat-i dast-i gol* ('policy of a handful of flowers')³², a more gentle and sophisticated approach, often described as 'pragmatic'. An aspect of this became the larger independence of Iran's allies to integrate into their respective national context, making them indispensable for their own country. In this way, Iran could still rely on the loyalty of those organizations, without using them as proxies³³. This element becomes very clear when we watch the evolution of Hezbollah in Lebanon and SCIRI/ISCI in Iraq, as both groupings succeed in becoming politically relevant actors. At the same time, Iranian militant Islamism was still to be exported throughout the region, but in a more subtle way.

30. DABASHI Hamid, 'Ali Shari'ati', in: NASR Seyyed Hossein & DABASHI Hamid & NASR Seyyed Vali Reza (eds.), *Expectations of the Millennium: Shi'ism in History*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1989, p. 385-386. The universal (Quranic) opposition of *mustad'afun* ('oppressed') against *mustakbirun* ('oppressors') is implied in Article 3 of the Iranian Constitution (<http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution.php>).

31. Article 12 of the Iranian Constitution states that the official religion of Iran was to be Islam of the *Ja'fari* School of Law. This article was copied from the time of the constitutional movement and inserted in the 1979 constitution, partly to counter the power claims of liberal-Islamist groupings (<http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution.php>; BUCHTA Wilfried, 'Tehran's Ecumenical society (Majma' al-Taqrīb): a veritable ecumenical revival or a Trojan horse of Iran?', in: BRUNNER Rainer & ENDE Werner (ed.), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture & Political History*, Brill, Leiden & Boston & Köln, 2001, p. 333-342).

32. PAHLAVI Pierre, 'La Place du Chiisme dans la Grande Stratégie Iranienne', *Défense Nationale et Sécurité Collective*, n° 8/9, 2008, p. 44.

33. ROY Olivier, 'l'Impact de la Révolution Iranienne au Moyen Orient', in: MERVIN Sabrina (ed.), *Les Mondes Chiites*, p. 40-41.

Under the presidencies of Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and especially Khatami (1997-2005) the pragmatic approach to foreign policy saw its heydays, with rapprochement not only towards the West, but also to Arabian countries. In this way, Iran was steadily trying to fit into the international community, seeing this as an indispensable step in its search for regional hegemony³⁴. After the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the consequent removal of the hostile Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the fall of Saddam Hussayn in 2003, the moment had come to further implement its strategy of expanding its influence. As a consequence of this fact, Iran adopted a more assertive profile, enhanced by the military victories of its Hezbollah allies in Lebanon. At the same time, however, Iran had become more vulnerable for a future attack due to the larger presence of the US in the region, and the distrust raised by the traditional 'Sunni countries' in the regions, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, towards the ambitions of Iran³⁵. In spite of the more radical and confrontational tone handled by the 'neoconservative' administration of Ahmadinajad, not much seems to change in the Iranian foreign policy³⁶.

Many observers therefore point at Iran as being the center of the recent apparent rise in the Shiite profile. To a larger extent, this proved to be incorrect. Not only did Shiite militancy originate – as we saw – in different national contexts, as a reaction against local social and political problems. The actual influence Iran has over militant groups such as Hezbollah or ISCI is also very limited, and the nominal and material support the country offers is of a tactical nature, fitted into its strategy of regional hegemony³⁷. The relation between Iran and the Shiites of the region is more one of Iran trying to reach out to the different Shiite movements in the region, in order to fulfill its geostrategic goals, rather than these movements blindly serving Iran.

At the same time, Iran is still profiling itself as a religious authority, and is reaching out to Shiites worldwide. Its religious dimension has become a channel through which Iran is promoting its own hegemonic status in the region (we will go into these mechanisms further on). These instruments of 'religious promotion' have known an evolution which runs parallel to the process of power centralization in Iran, where the the importance of clerical backing within State

34. RAMAZANI R.K., 'Iran's Foreign Policy: Independence, Freedom and the Islamic Republic', in: EHTESHAMI Anoushiravan & ZWEIRI Mahjoob (eds.), *Iran's Foreign Policy from Khatami to Ahmadinejad*, Ithaca Press, Reading, 2008, p. 9.

35. SABET-SAEIDI Shahriar, 'Iranian-European Relations: a Strategic Partnership?', in: EHTESHAMI Anoushiravan & ZWEIRI Mahjoob (eds.), *Iran's Foreign Policy from Khatami to Ahmadinejad*, Ithaca Press, Reading, 2008, p. 55.

36. EHTESHAMI Anoushiravan & ZWEIRI Mahjoob, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives*, I.B. Tauris, London & New York, 2007, p. 103-107.

37. For instance, see: WEHREY Frederic (et al.), *Dangerous but not Omnipotent: exploring the reach and limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2009, p. 203.

politics has degraded. While this was made very clear during the 2009 election unrest, this tendency already stems from the years of Khomeini, who in 1988 introduced the concept of *wilayat-i mutlaqa-yi faqih*, which grants the Supreme Leader a greater religious authority, placing his State rulings above the *Shari`a*³⁸. Thus more religious power was to be centralized in the person of the Supreme Leader. After Khomeini's death and his controversial appointment of Khamana'i as his successor in 1989, during which he sidelined his first successor Montaziri, the religious establishment came under even bigger strain. The new Supreme Leader was practically obliged to take the same road, since he did not have the same backing from the religious circles, in Iran or abroad, as Khomeini did. As a consequence, he gradually sought other means of supporting his rule, which he found in the *Sipah-i Pasdaran* ('Revolutionary Guard') and the *Basij* ('Mobilization', paramilitary organization resorting under the Revolutionary Guard). At the same time, he tightened his grip over the Iranian clergy in Qom, through the foundation of different controlling organs and by means of financial support³⁹.

Iran uses Shiism today mainly as a vehicle for the spread of its regional hegemonic ambitions, as a political channel of self-promotion. In this way, the promotion and dissemination of its militant (Shiite) Islamic ideology can exist together with the different local realities, thus allowing Iran to ride the wave of Shiite activism, while running parallel with more apolitical interpretations of Shiism, and keeping in touch or reaching out to Shiite communities throughout the Islamic World. At the same time, it can try to gain at least some control over the very amorphous network of the *marja`iya*, that might run across the regional political objectives of Iran. So, towards the future Najaf might indeed grow further in prominence as a center of religion, for Iran it will only be the political influence that matters.

At the same time, Iran is trying to keep up a pan-Islamic profile, a premise for being able to extend its relations and standing within a mostly Sunni Middle East. Various statements by high-ranking clerics such as ayatollah Rafsanjani seem to point in this direction⁴⁰, the Islamic Republic also undertakes or supports different initiatives of *taqrib* ('rapprochement'; cf. infra) between the dif-

38. MARTIN Vanessa, *Creating an Islamic State; Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*, I.B. Tauris, London & New York, 2000, p. 170.

39. KHALAJI Mehdi, 'The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism', *Policy Focus*, n° 59, September 2006, p. 26-32.

40. 'Rafsanjani: al-khilafat al-madhabiya hiya al-waba' al-'azim alladhy yuhaddad al-'Alam al-Islami', *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, 23 May 2009. See also PAHLAVI Pierre, 'La Place du Chiisme', p. 50. It is very important to see statements as these by high ranking Iranian officials like Rafsanjani in the context of a current domestic power struggle, and the role that they want to give themselves in the Iranian establishment.

ferent currents of Islam. The pan-Islamic nature of the Islamic Revolution stays at the heart of Iranian foreign policy, not in the least for pragmatic reasons.

All things considered, is Iran really a regional 'king pin', steering the Shiite movement with the goal of dominating the region by proxy? Such a perception would be all too simplistic. The Shiite socio-political movement knew – as we have already discussed – a history and development of its own. During the beginning of the 1980s, Iran did try to export its Islamic Revolution and pan-Islamist ideals by force, but only with limited success. Since the end of the 1980s, Iranian foreign policy is a pragmatic search for regional influence, adopting a less confrontational approach. Iran rather rides the wave of the Shiite movement, than that this Shiite movement is directed by Iran. As we will see in the next paragraph, by promoting Shiism of the 'Iranian brand' and by associating itself with the universal ideas of social promotion and fighting oppression, Iran is trying to give form to its plan of enhanced regional influence.

1.4. Europe, Belgium and the Sunni-Shia opposition within the Middle East

By now, it might be useful to make some observations and formulate recommendations on how to approach the Sunni-Shi'a paradigm within the Middle East itself.

On a policy level, the Sunni-Shi'a controversy does not seem to be an issue for the EU, nor for Belgium. In specific cases, for example in European efforts in the Middle East peace process, the specter of a regional Shi'a take-over and the subsequent reluctance of policy makers or EU Member States to involve the supposed proxies of Iran (Hezbollah, Hamas) into the search for solutions often hinder the creation of a feasible policy for the region.

Renewed political and economical relations with Iran have always been an appealing possibility for the EU and Belgium, certainly given the fact that it is the most important trade partner to the Islamic Republic⁴¹. At different moments, Europe showed unwillingness to subscribe to the more confrontational approach of the US. From the Iranian side, there was a major move towards Europe after the 11 September attacks, since the country was more and

41. Even under the current nuclear file, trade between Iran and the EU continues. In 2008, 26.7% of Iran's import came from the EU. Iran has the second greatest gas reserves and the third largest oil reserves. ('Iran', *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>, consulted on 19 November 2009; http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113392.pdf, consulted on 16 October 2009).

more becoming a possible target for United States military interventions⁴². The deepening of the political and economic ties has been stalled since the revelation of the Iranian nuclear efforts in 2002.

Nevertheless, the EU seems to be aware of the possibilities lying in normalized relations with Iran, not in the least on a geopolitical and geostrategic level. Europe will have to be aware of the hegemonic aspirations of Iran, and the eventual problems involved with the threatened strategic position of its classical allies in the region, such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia. This might give an indication why the recent nervousness in the traditionally 'Sunni' regime countries is mounting, fearing the loss of their own strategic role within the region (cf. *infra*).

The power that Iran is able to exert in Iraqi politics is substantial, but must (?) not be overestimated. Here we can also indicate that the relations between the Islamic Republic and ISCI are confined to a more tactical, ad hoc nature. The specter of an Iranian-Iraqi alliance and the regional weight of both countries play a bigger role than the fear for a 'Shiite Crescent'. However the EU plays more or less second fiddle in Iraq since the US invasion of 2003, it should not question its support for State building to the current and future government, and initiatives such as EUJUST LEX training of officials will prove helpful. Europe has to remain supportive of the democratic process, involving the entire range of Iraqi ethnic and religious actors. One has to keep in mind that relations between the Iraqi establishment and Iran still are very close, as proven by the operations against militants of Iranian opposition group *Mujahidin-i Khalq* in the camp of al-Ashraf⁴³.

In Lebanon, Belgium and the EU adopt a position towards Hezbollah that appears to be ambiguous. Unlike the United States for example, who consider this organization as being a terrorist group, the EU does maintain contacts with what is described as the 'political wing' of Hezbollah. Most recently, in June 2009, high representative Javier Solana met with one of the MP's of the grouping, much to the dismay of the Israeli government. The meeting, that took place in the context of the 2009 national elections, in which the March 8 Alliance lost, was meant to promote a pluralist approach in Lebanese politics, and a stabilization of the Lebanese situation in a non-militarist way⁴⁴. But the Lebanese reality is that Hezbollah sees its own armed status as its core business, and as being inseparable from political activities. A proof of this emerged in 2008 when Hez-

42. SABET-SAEIDI Shahriar, 'Iranian-European Relations', p. 55.

43. The armed activists were allegedly resisting the creation of a police station in the camp ('Iraqi forces raid Iran exile camp', *BBC News*, 29 July 2009 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8173676.stm)).

44. Interview with EU Council official, 15 October 2009.

zbollah came to clash with Sunnis in the western part of the suburb of Beirut. The cause for this was the attempt by the 14 March alliance to sack the Hezbollahi head of security at Beirut International Airport and to dismantle the parallel communication network used for the military operations of this group.

The most important element in the Belgian and EU security policy that can be affected by the Sunni-Shi'a opposition appears to be the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon, in which the EU augmented its contribution under resolution 1701, after the Summer War of 2006. The most imminent danger for Belgian troops stationed in the South of Lebanon will not so much be posed by the presence of Hezbollah elements itself. The biggest actual threat comes from the possibility of renewed fighting between Israeli armed forces and the Lebanese Hezbollah, in which case the Belgian troops can get caught between both fighting parties. A second one is formed by terrorist attacks by jihadist movements residing in the Palestinian refugee camps in the north of the country⁴⁵.

The Gulf is of great strategic importance⁴⁶ for the European Union, since 70% of the oil import comes from the GCC countries. Of the GCC, two countries have an unstable political situation, with a sectarian edge, namely Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The EU approach for the region is – as before – one of emphasizing human rights. Basically, this should prove to be a fertile one, seeing the fact that the Sunni – Shi'a controversy in the region has a lot to do with demanding correct political representation and more equal rights. The EU, however, has only the means to encourage the Gulf countries and the GCC to respect these rights, not to impose it on them. While the EU correctly realizes the contra productivity of such an approach, it should be aware of the limitedness of such a stance. There have been initiatives from regional governments in the past to reach out to their Shiite citizens, and it often proved to be a mere nominal reform. The best example in this case is the Saudi 'National Dialogue', that was to promote the national situation of Saudi Shiites. The Human Rights Watch report mentioned above proved the prevailing discrimination of the Shiite minority.

45. In 2007, six Spanish UNIFIL peacekeepers died during an attack by al-Qa`ida-inspired militants. (ABDEL-LATIF Omayma, 'Lebanon's Sunni Islamists – a growing force', *Carnegie Papers*, n°6, 2008, pp. 22).

46. A more tangible example of the interests involved in the Gulf situation is the opening of a French naval base in the Arab Emirates. As a mere national initiative, the objective of this action was the support of French allies in the region, as well as guaranteeing security and stability in the region. In an official communiqué, the French authorities stated not to rule out the deployment of nuclear weapons in its new base ('France opens UAE military base', *al-Jazeera English*, 26 May 2009 (<http://english.aljazeera.net>)); 'Moyen-Orient: la France se donne les moyens de riposter', *Le Figaro*, 15 June 2009; two months later, US secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the US is ready to extend military support for its allies in the Gulf, to counter an Iranian nuclear threat ('US mulls Gulf defences against Iran', *al-Jazeera English*, 22 July 2009 (<http://english.aljazeera.net>)).

End of 2009, the most acute threat to regional security seems to come from the situation in Yemen, where a five-year-old conflict between the northern al-Huthi rebels (a *Zaydi* Shiite grouping) and the Yemeni central government seems to escalate. At the basis of the conflict lies the economically neglected status of the Sa`da province, but the Saleh administration claims material support of Iran for the insurgents, and thus places the conflict in a wider confessional context⁴⁷. The EU already expressed her concern for the situation, urging the end of hostilities and stressed on the need for a stable and unified Yemen⁴⁸. The biggest danger of the conflict lies mostly in the possibility of a spillover to Saudi Arabia, which already undertook military interventions at the Yemeni border, and the entire peninsula⁴⁹. Although the conflict is more and more placed within the struggle of Sunnism against Shiism, and an Iranian quest for geostrategical power, the al-Huthi movement rejects government accusations of wanting to revive the in 1962 abolished *Zaydi* imamate in North Yemen, and gives socio-economical reasons for their struggle.

47. Until November 2009, no actual evidence was given for the allegations of Iranian support. The Islamic Republic officially supports the unity of Yemen and denies involvement ('Larijani yu'akid da'm Iran al-qawi li wahda al-Yaman', *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, 15 May 2009).

48. Council of the European Union, 'Council conclusions on Yemen: 2971st External Relations Council meeting', 27 October 2009, http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/yemen/docs/2009_joint_communique_en.pdf.

49. 'Saudi jets bomb Yemeni Houthis', *al-Jazeera English*, 5 November 2009 (<http://english.aljazeera.net>).

2. Sunni-Shiite relations and the politics of religion

The first part of this paper focused on the developments within the Middle Eastern Shiite community, what the limitations are of a 'Shiite Crescent'-approach and what the role of Iran in this construction. In part two, we will take a closer look at how religious identities are becoming the object of political instrumentalization, how regional power play lies behind a more outspoken distrust towards Shiism, and how the claims and fears over Shiite proselytism fit into this controversy. At the end, we will consider the eventual points of concern for EU and Belgian internal security policies.

2.1. The instrumentalization of Sunni-Shi'a relations in the Middle East

From bitter enmity to 'business as usual'

Within the more radical Islamic tendencies, Wahhabism⁵⁰ can be considered as one of the ideological currents most hostile towards Shiite, basing its arguments on the writings of Muhammad Ibn al-Wahhab (d. 1792) and the *Hanbali* school of law⁵¹. Laying an overall emphasis on *tawhid* ('Unity [of God]') it considers the Shiite practices of grave visiting as alien to Islam, and the special status of the Imams is a thorn in the eye. Shiites are systematically called *rafida* ('they who refuse [the first Righteous Caliphs]'), are considered *mushrikun* ('polytheists') and therefore unbelievers. One of the most recent major declarations made in this context was the *takfir* ('charge of heresy') by *shaykh* `Adil al-Kalabani dur-

50. Wahhabism, the movement following the religious doctrine of Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), is until the present day the official interpretation of Islam in Saudi Arabia. The *Wahhabi* clerical circles, referred to as the *Al Shaykh*, provide the Saudi royal family with the necessary religious legitimacy. In Saudi recent history, different attempts have been made to suppress the Shiite identity or even to make it fade away (*EP*, Wahhabiyya, (PESKES Esther & ENDE W.); NAKASH Yitzhak, *Reaching for Power: the Shi'a in the Modern Arab World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford, 2006, p. 46); The *Wahhabi* trend that draws an anti-Shiite picture in the psychological warfare against the Islamic Republic of Iran, under the influence of the Saudi government, is often called 'Neo-Wahhabism'. Their activities, however, never seem to surpass mere rhetoric (HASSON Isaac, 'Les Shiites vues par les Néo-Wahhabites', *Arabica*, n°53, iii, 2006, p. 30).

51. DELONG-BAS Natana J., *Wahhabi Islam: from revival and reform to global jihad*, AUC Press, Cairo, 2004, p. 84-85.

ing a BBC television broadcast on 2 May 2009, following the *Intifada al-Baqi*⁵² in February of the same year. In this statement, he declared the Shiite *'ulama'* infidel because of their view on the Companions of the Prophet, and said that the Shiites already enjoyed enough rights⁵³.

Although this ideology already originated beginning of the 19th century, it gained great momentum after the Iranian Revolution, when different Arabic States came under the influence of Saudi Arabia, and in this way receiving *Wahhabi* influence on their own territory⁵⁴. It is against this background that we have to see the emergence of a *Wahhabi* anti-*Shi'a* literature, which overall tries to place Shiites and Shiite activism outside the Arab and Islamic identity. Often it bluntly identifies Shiism with Iran and Persian heritage: all Shiites are only loyal to Iran and Shiism itself stems from non-Islamic roots. Moreover, they are accused of working to revive the glory of Safavid Iran, by undermining the *umma*, and by working together with Israel and the US⁵⁵. This literature has been used and quoted in different *Wahhabi* inspired discourses, and knows a great dissemination over the Internet, on anti-Shiite websites or discussion forums⁵⁶.

52. In February 2009, riots broke out in the city of Medina. The direct cause was the filming of female pilgrims while praying by security forces. The result was a violent conflict between Saudi religious police, civilians and Saudi Shiites from ash-Sharqiya. ('Muwajahat 'anifa fi'l-Bahrayn li'l-yawm ath-thalith 'ala khalafiya i'tiqal nushata' shi'a', *ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 30 January 2009; 'Ghadab Shi'i fi as-Sa'udiya ba'd ishtibakat bi'l-Madina al-Munawwara', *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 25 February 2009; 'Tazahirat bi'l-mintaqat ash-Sharqiya fi as-Sa'udiya .. Wa 's-Saffar yantaqad mawqif al-hukuma wa yutalib al-malik bi't-tadakhkhu', *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 26 February 2009).

53. In this way, he clearly criticized the National Dialogue initiative, organized by the Al Sa'ud. The disputed broadcast is available on: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_TytRBiZaxl&feature=Playlist&p=33FE9A72C00EF1A4&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=2 [Arabic], consulted on 30 October 2009). In the days after, not only Saudi Shiite clerics uttered their protest, and asked the King to sack the *Imam al-Haram*, the Iraqi government and the Iranian Supreme Leader demanded apologies from al-Kalabani and condemned these statements as creating splits in the Muslim World. On 10 July, al-Kalabani renewed his *takfir*. ('Ulama' Shi'a yad'un li iqala imam al-haram aw i'tidhar 'an takfirihi lahum', *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 11 May 2009; 'Khamana'i yuhajim al-Wahhabiya wa yutahhimuha bi tanfidh mukhattat al-tafriqa bayn al-muslimin', *Rasid*, 14 May 2009 (www.rasid.com/print.php?id=29005, consulted on 14 May 2009); 'Imam al-Haram yujaddid takfirahu li'sh-Shi'a wa yanfi ta'arrudahu li 'ayy tadyiq aw istid'a' min as-salata', *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 11 June 2009).

54. DELONG-BAS Natana J., *Wahhabi Islam*, p. 84-91.

55. One of the most important examples of such literature is '*Wa Ja' Dawr al-Majus*' ('Then it was the Magi's turn') written by a certain dr. 'Abd Allah Muhammad al-Gharib in 1980. The work describes in a pseudo-scientific way the *Shi'a* as a fifth column within Islam, locates the origins of the Shiite movement within an Iranian Jewish-Christian-Zoroastrian conundrum, wanting to restore the Safavi Empire, while conspiring with Israel and America to achieve this goal. The text does not proclaim the *takfir* on the Shiites, however. (The text is available on the anti-Shiite website *ad-Difa' 'an as-Sunna*: <http://www.dd-sunnah.net/records/view/action/view/id/113/> [Arabic]). Although the work uses a complete different method, approach and vocabulary, the ideas articulated in this work are still widely used by *Salafi* apologetics. (See also KAZIMI Nabras, 'Zarqawi's Anti-Shi'a Legacy', p. 56-58).

56. Material such as this is easily downloaded from anti-Shiite websites such as *ad-Difa' 'an as-Sunna* (<http://www.dd-sunnah.net/>), *Faysal Nur*, (<http://www.fnoor.com/>) or *al-Bayna* (<http://albayna.net/>).

Wahhabi and *Salafi*⁵⁷ inspired groupings who adopt a radical or militant view on the idea of *jihad* can form a direct threat to Shiite communities; the most known examples in this regard are without doubt the activities of Abu Mus`ab az-Zarqawi (d. 2006) in Iraq. The outspoken view on Shiism as a form of *kufr* ('heresy') is, albeit more spread during the last decades, still a minority position.

With the debate on Sunni-Shi`a relations raging amongst observers, one would easily forget that until recently, confessional affiliation or being Shiite was not an issue at all. In the Muslim streets, people were often unaware of the meaning of Shiism, and in so-called 'Sunni' countries as Egypt, both branches of Islam lived next to each other without any problem at all. The presence of a confessional Islam, with *Sufi* influences, in some way promoted this coexistence, in which Sunni and Shiite elements overlap (eg. visiting shrines, celebrating *mulids* ('Birthday') of Sufi saints, or of the Prophet himself). Some observers point out that this confessional Islam is losing more and more appeal, with Sunnis turning towards a more 'mainstream' form of Sunnism. We can wonder in this regard if the public opinion of the average Sunni Muslim is in possible danger of getting more polarized.

In recent history, the Muslim world also witnessed different initiatives to bring both branches closer together. In 1946, well before there was an Islamic Republic, Iranian clerics founded the *Jama`a at-Taqrīb bayna 'l-Madhahib* ('Organization for the Rapprochement between the Schools of Law') in Cairo⁵⁸. In 1959, the *Jama`a at-Taqrīb* reached its greatest result when *shaykh al-Azhar* Mahmud Shaltut (d. 1963) issued a fatwa recognizing Shiism as a fifth Islamic school of law. At the end of the 1970s, the activities of this institution ended: the Islamic Revolution took away the last Sunni enthusiasm for *taqrīb*. In 1990, the Iranian regime under Khamana'i founded a successor to the *Jama`a at-Taqrīb*, in the framework of its new, pragmatic Foreign Policy and the pan-Islamist ideal of the Revolution: *al-Majma` al-`Alami li 't-Taqrīb bayn al-Madhahib al-Islamiya*⁵⁹ ('World Association for Rapprochement between the Islamic Schools of Law'), stationed in Tehran. Its activities are more or less the same as those of its predecessor: publication of the *Risala at-Taqrīb* periodical, transectarian education, and the organization of seminaries and conferences on Islamic unity. Outside Iran however, the Muslim World is considerably less enthusiastic, and consid-

57. As the usage of the term 'Salafist' or *Salafiya* is somewhat problematic; in this paper we will use the concept *salafiya* as a reference to the body of Islamic currents, 'aiming to regenerate Islam by a return to the tradition represented by the pious forefathers' (*as-salaf as-salih*; EI², 'Salafiyya', (ENDE Werner)).

58. The driving force behind it was the Iranian *shaykh* Muhammad Taqi Qummi. The goal of the initiative was bringing Shiism and Sunnism closer to one another, and having the former recognized as a *Jafari madhhab*. One of its core activities was the publication of *Risala al-Islam* ('Message of Islam'), an inter-faith periodical.

59. On the website of the *Majma` at-Taqrīb* (www.taghrib.org) one can still consult the issues of the former *Risala al-Islam*, next to the current *Risala at-Taqrīb*.

ered the initiative as a tool of the Iranian search for hegemony⁶⁰. In 2005, King `Abd Allah II of Jordan organized the *Risala `Amman* ('Amman Message'). In this initiative, the most influential Muslim clerics recognized the different interpretations of Islam, and forbade *takfir* amongst Muslims⁶¹.

But even within Sunni Islamist circles, distrust appears to become greater. When we take the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as an example, it does not seem to take an outspoken stance in the Sunni-Shi'a controversy⁶², not even in the Egyptian 'Hezbollah controversy' of April 2009. But if we look at the discourse of one of its more known exponents, *shaykh* Yusuf al-Qaradawi, we can see cracks appearing in the non-sectarian stance of the Brotherhood. On the one hand, the *shaykh* took part in many initiatives of *taqrib*, such as the recent *Risala `Amman*. On the other, he has on many occasions expressed his concern about the growing Shiite presence and visibility in mostly Sunni countries, and his absolute rejection of this Shiite 'infiltration' or proselytism. *Shaykh* Yusuf al-Qaradawi⁶³ ventilated this position at the Opening Speech of the 13th Conference for Islamic Research at al-Azhar:

"Iran is twofold: the nation and the madhhab [‘doctrine’]. We keep on supporting and defending the nation [...]. The madhhab Iran and the attempts of conversion that take place behind it, we reject. We are part of Sunnism, and we believe that we are in our right”. [...] “We do not want to be converted to Shiism, at the same degree that we do not want to convert Shiites to Sunnites. From this point of view, we reject any Shiite infiltration in the lands of Sunnism”⁶⁴.

60. BAR Shmuel, 'Sunnis and Shiites – Between Rapprochement and Conflict', *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, n°2, 2005, p.89; BUCHTA Wilfried, 'Tehran's Ecumenical Society', p. 333-342.

61. Amongst the participants of the *Risala al-Islam* were Yusuf al-Qaradawi, `Ali Sistani and `Ali Khamana'i (see also <http://ammanmessage.com/>).

62. The Muslim Brotherhood largely stresses on the unity of the *umma*, and the understanding amongst Muslim believers. For example, the General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, Muhammad Sharif, clearly emphasized the need for mutual understanding between Sunnism and Shiism during the al-Jazeera TV programme '*al-Hiwar al-Maftub*' on 6 March 2004 (www.ikhwanonline.com/print.asp?ArtID=5267&SecID=210 [Arabic]; consulted on 19 November 2009).

63. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a follower of Hassan al-Banna and member of the Muslim Brotherhood, stands for a moderate, conservative Islam. By making use of modern means of communication, al-Qaradawi has obtained a huge visibility in the entire world (*Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, 'Qaradawi, Yusuf al-', (MANDAVILLE Peter).

64. 'al-Qaradawi: Qadiya al-Bashir bi Haja li Waqfa `Arabiya, La Ziyarat', *IUMS Online* (<http://www.iumsonline.net/>), 12 March 2009 [Arabic]. Similar statements have occurred on 25 January 2009 when a member of the General Guide's bureau, dr. Mahmud Ghazlan, used largely the same arguments as al-Qaradawi. The man lauded the ideological aspect of the Iranian political project, and repeated the aloofness of the Muslim Brotherhood in the sectarian issue as well as the respect for their Shiite co-religionists. He criticized the confrontational language used by Iran, and warned that the Brotherhood would no stay on the sidelines, and intervene by informing the Sunni community on the true details of this threat to the unity of the *umma* (<http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=45768&SecID=0> [Arabic], consulted on 30 November 2009). The General Guide himself stressed in a message following on dr. Mahmud Ghazlan's statement that this is his opinion, not the one of the Brotherhood as a whole, (<http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=48149&SecID=0> [Arabic], consulted on 30 November 2009).

The distrust of clerics such as al-Qaradawi towards the 'madhhab Iran' can be seen as a product of the Iranian search for hegemony⁶⁵. These elements support the regional efforts made by Iran and its loyalists against Israel and the West, because this is a goal that runs parallel with their own ambitions. They do not, however, tolerate the spread of political Islamic thought of Iranian signature in the traditional Sunni Islamist sphere of influence.

It would be very interesting to conduct further study on the question why exactly Sunni actors as al-Qaradawi actually would fear losing territory to an Islamic political current associated with Iran. Perhaps the universal revolutionary idea of the struggle of *mustad'afun* ('oppressed') against *mustakbirun* ('oppressors'), the more inclusive character of Iranian style Islamism and the disenfranchisement of Sunni Arabs with how their government fails to tackle regional issues, add up these Sunni concerns. While all this remains speculation, the element of the displeased Sunni Arab masses is a very concrete issue for local governments, as we shall see in the next point.

Sunni regimes distrusting Shiism

As we have seen at the beginning of this paper, different events in the region recently marked the growing distrust of Sunni State regimes towards the perceived *al-madd ash-shi'i* ('the 'Shiite Expansion'), thus securitizing it, and making it an issue of national importance. In spite of the transnational dimension of the Sunni-Shi'a dispute as described above, it's basically national concerns, translated in a discourse directed towards it's own community. The statements or interventions made by these governments are not to be seen as mere fears for the Sunni identity of their country, but are signs of concern for the possible influence of a revolutionary and political Shiism in their own backyard.

For example, in April 2009 the Egyptian government surprisingly declared to have rounded up a Hezbollah cell on its territory. The leader was a certain Muhammad Yusuf Mansur, of Lebanese nationality. The organization was not only accused of planning to perpetrate attacks on targets of national strategic importance; it was also involved in arms trafficking towards Gaza, and – more notably – Shiite missionary activities. The Mubarak administration even

65. Al-Qaradawi is very critical about what he calls *al-Madd ash-Shi'i* ('Shiite expansionism') noemt. In an interview with the journal *ash-Sharq al-Awsat* in 2008 he complained about the rising number of Shiites in different 'Sunni countries' such as Tunisia, Morocco and his native Egypt. He is irritated by the fact that in these countries, the Shiite voice is heard more and more and accuses Iran of conducting a policy of *tabshir* through the *Ahl al-Bayt* organization. *Shaykh* al-Qaradawi can't give exact numbers, but points out that one is not able to obtain these data due to the Shiite practice of *taqiya* ('ash-Shaykh al-Qaradawi li ash-Sharq al-Awsat: Duwal Kanat Sunniya Khalisa Asbaha Fiha Shi'a', *ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 25 September 2008).

accused the Muslim Brotherhood of having ties with the cell. In a response, Hezbollah's secretary-general Nasr Allah acknowledged that Mansur was indeed a member of Hezbollah, but by stating that he was only there to support Hamas in its resistance in Gaza, he made an appeal to the large popularity Hezbollah enjoys in the streets of Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood denied having bonds with the organization, but stated that it supports Hezbollah's political efforts against Israel⁶⁶.

For the Egyptian case, we can see additional reasons for stressing on the Hezbollah case. In the wake of the Gaza war, the Egyptian government lost a great deal of the support of its own people, by keeping itself far from interfering in the conflict. In this context, it would be highly convenient to play in the cards of the Sunni Islamist concern of Shiite infiltration, thus profiling their rule as protecting of the Arab, Sunni world, and at the same time accusing its main adversaries of Shiite proselytism.

In March of that same year, Moroccan authorities cut their diplomatic ties with Iran after allegations that the country supported terrorist groupings in Morocco. Important element in the entire controversy was the charge of Shiite missionary activities on Moroccan soil and, interestingly, in the European diaspora (cf. infra). As a consequence, a large-scale operation was held to ban Shiite literature from bookshops and markets in the big cities⁶⁷. During the Idrissid period (8th-10th century), Morocco was actually ruled by a Shiite dynasty, putting its stamp on the country for centuries to come. It was only after the introduction of the 1996 Constitution, and the religious liberties attached to it, that the Moroccan government was faced with a more assertive position of the small Shiite community⁶⁸, trying to organize itself in political groupings such as *al-Ghadir*. Here as well, the successes of Hezbollah in the Middle East allegedly play a great role in the current rise of the Shiite profile⁶⁹.

66. 'Jama`a al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin; la `alaqa lana bitanzim Hizb Allah fi Misr', *al-Quds al-`Arabi*, 15 April 2009. The response of Hassan Nasr Allah is to be viewed on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Oe_K2TJdp4.

67. 'Hujja at-tashayyu` fi tabrir al-azma ad-diblumasiya ma`a Iran tanqalibu `ala as-salatat al-Maghribiya', *al-Quds al-`Arabi*, 20 March 2009; 'Ba`da qat` al-`alaqat ma`a Iran .. ar-Rabat taqarara ghalaq madrasa` Iraqiya "Shi`iya"', *al-Quds al-`Arabi*, 23 March 2009. An article in the Moroccan periodical *Maroc Hebdo* spoke about 'tens of thousands of youngsters who have converted to Shiism, mainly in the North of the Country.' The Iranian embassy was accused of arranging the entire process, including training in Qom ('Le casse-tête chiite au Maroc', *Maroc Hebdo International*, 20-26 March 2009).

68. Exact numbers are unknown, which makes threat assessment a very arbitrary exercise in this context.

69. Shiite intellectuals, such as Dris Hani, see Shiite Islamism as a desirable social initiative, but compatible with the longings of their Sunni or Sufi compatriots. There are nevertheless indicators for groups of Shiite radicals in the outskirts of Casablanca. (ZWEIRI Mahjoub & KÖNIG Christoph, 'Are Shias Rising in the Western Part of the Arab World? The Case of Morocco.', *Journal of North African Studies*, n°13, iv, p. 514-524).

Both cases show a renewed concern for the export of Iranian revolutionary ideas towards their own countries and, the spillover of this ideology on the Islamist opposition in their own political context. The Shiite government of Iraq and the supreme *élan* of Hezbollah in the region do only add to the fears and concerns of Sunni regimes for their own survival. The pan-Islamic ideals of the Iranian Revolution and a more assertive Shiite profile raise worries in Sunni countries of a higher appeal towards their own citizens. The pragmatic Iranian foreign policy and its refined influence building are seen as a challenge. Sunni States like Egypt or Saudi Arabia fear losing their strategic position in the region and the Arab world towards the west to the 'Iranian camp'.

2.2. Large scale *tashayyu`* between myth and reality

Let us now take a deeper look at the phenomenon of *tashayyu`* ('the act of becoming Shiite'). Conversions from Sunnism to Shiism traditionally took place for very pragmatic reasons such as heritage rights or *mut`a* ('temporal marriage', allowed in Shiism). Nowadays it is also perceived as the Iranian weapon to gain support in the Sunni streets. The propagation and spread of the Iranian Islamic thought is an existing practice that is fitted in the '*siyasat-i dast-i gol`*-approach (cf. supra). The *tabshir* ('proselytism') is therefore a means used by Iran to propagate its ideology in the larger context of Middle Eastern politics.

The first source of the Sunni fear for *tashayyu`*, probably the most known and most overlooked channel, is the media. This visibility is without any doubt a big factor in the distrust radical Sunnites cherish towards their Shiite coreligionists. Numerous satellite TV channels of 'Shiite signature' can be viewed throughout the Middle East and the rest of the world. Famous examples are Hezbollah's *al-Manar* ('the Light House') and the Iranian *al-`Alam* ('the World') station⁷⁰. Next to that, the Internet is becoming a very useful tool. It is remarkable to which extent Shiite clerics and their institutions are able to fully exploit the possibilities of the Internet, offering an entire range of Shiite literature on their website⁷¹.

The second type of proselytism happens through a more organized channel, by founding mosques or institutes, organizing courses, travels to Iran, and so on. It is mainly the *al-Majma` al-`Alami li Abl al-Bayt* ('World Association for the

70. The Iranian channel *al-`Alam* was taken off air in November 2009 by the Arabian providers Arabsat and Nilesat, according to some due to the fear for the influence exercised by the Satellite channel. ('Iran Arabic channel taken off air', *BBC News*, 4 November 2009 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>; consulted on 06 November 2009).

71. A good example of this is the portal site 'al-Shia' of grand ayatollah Sistani (<http://www.al-shia.org/>), available in not less than 30 languages.

People of the House [of the Prophet]') that co-ordinates activities of proselytism and the promotion of Shiism. It was founded in 1990 by traditionalist elements within the Iranian religious elite, as a counterpart of *al-Majma` al-'Alami li 't-Taqrīb*. The difference between these two Iranian institutions is the fact that *al-Majma` Abl al-Bayt* aims at safeguarding the influence amongst Shiite communities abroad under the Iranian Supreme Leader, as well as the dissemination of publications on Iranian revolutionary Shiite ideology and the construction of Shiite religious edifices, rather than promoting rapprochement between the two sides⁷².

But in the controversy of Shiite missionary activities, one question is asked too little: what exactly do we speak of when discussing *tashayyu`*? First of all, one must realize that 'converting' from Sunnism to Shiism is not a well-defined matter. There is no defined *rite de passage*, like one can discern in converting, for example, from Christianity to Islam or vice versa⁷³. One stays within the same religion and is only going to follow a different interpretation of that faith, expressed in the participation of the rituals involved. One of the consequences, is that it is very difficult to obtain objective figures on Sunni-Shi'a conversions. Even political interests or a fear for personal safety of the individual believer hinder correct statistics. In short, when treating Sunni-Shi'a conversion, one is discussing a highly arbitrary and ungraspable matter.

One of the few studies completed on this matter is the report 'The Shiitization Process in Syria 1985-2005: a socio-statistic paper', issued in 2006 by the National Council for Truth, Justice and Reconciliation in Syria, a human rights organization based in France, and funded by the European Union. This project investigated the true extent of *tabshir* and *tashayyu`* in Syria, the country where these practices are allegedly conducted on a very large scale. In this country, the conversion controversy has the potential of becoming a national security threat in combination with deteriorating economic and demographic situation and an autocratic minority rule. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood accuses the Assad administration of accommodating Shiite proselytism in order to deepen its bonds with the Iranian government. Although there apparently is some truth in it (Shiite preachers and cultural centers have enjoyed a greater liberty since the

72. Within the Iranian foreign policy, *al-Majma` al-'Alami li Abl al-Bayt* has always had a priority status over *al-Majma` al-'Alami li 't-Taqrīb*. (BUCHTA Wilfried, 'Tehran's Ecumenical Society', p. 351). See also <http://www.aht-ul-bait.org/> and the portal site <http://www.ahtulbaytportal.com>. The organization holds conferences on their activities every four years, the last one being 2007. Recently, the *Majma`* has also opened a news site (<http://www.abna.ir/>) and a television station (*ath-Thaqalayn*).

73. Some observers have claimed that adding the phrase '*Aliyan Wali Allabi*' ('Ali is the close friend of God') to the *shabada* ('confession of faith') is a transition rite by which Sunnites convert to Shiism. Different *maraji`* have issued fatwas against this practice, possibly because doing so might add to the misconceptions that radical Sunnites have on Shiism, and their veneration for 'Ali (For such a fatwa by Sistani, see <http://www.sistani.org/local.php?modules=extra&eid=4>; accessed on 22 October 2009).

accession of president Bashar al-Assad in 2000), the 2006 report came to remarkable findings. It contradicts some of the ruling conceptions in the region. It largely puts the extent of *tashayyu`* into perspective, and notes that conversions mostly occur within the `Alawi population, accounting for 85% of all converts. The rest is distributed over other currents: about 2% is actually Sunni. In most cases, these Sunni families were Shiite in the past, so it is mostly a re-affirmation of their Shiite identity. There were no defined socio-economical circles that were more probable of converting, and *tashayyu`* in exchange for money proved to be marginal. Some Sunni converts stated to have taken up Shiism out of admiration for Hassan Nasr Allah and the Hezbollah victory over Israel in 2006⁷⁴.

In Syria, *tabshir* has the biggest effect on indigenous Shiite currents; very few Sunnites are affected by it. The primary target audience of the Iranian *tabshir* can thus be considered as the endogenous Shiite community. The actual reason for this might be as pragmatic as the tactical Iranian support to groupings such as Hezbollah or Hamas: gaining a political foothold in the countries involved by gaining the support or at least the sympathy of Shiite communities. If Sunnites are receptive towards the promotion of the Iranian Revolutionary brand of Islamism, it can only be an advantage. It must be noted that by an aggressive and proactive campaign of promoting Shiism to Sunnites, Iran is risking large opposition from Sunnites in the region, thus undermining its own political agenda.

Also, the popularity of groupings like Hezbollah, the sympathy for the Iranian defiance of Israel and the West and the disillusionment of Sunnis with their governments and the role they play in regional politics, cause the perception of these Sunni sympathizers of 'adopting a Shiite profile'. In other words, the true meaning of the *tashayyu`* feared by Sunni actors is to be seen in the light of political leanings or support: becoming pro-Iran, pro-Hezbollah and their politics. The most important element in the practice of *tashayyu`* in this case is not the religious aspect, the taking part in the rites of the Shiites. Conversion becomes a change in the political allegiance of the Sunni believer, and in combination with the more universal characteristics, associated with Shiite Islamic thought, and thus, in the eyes of many Sunni actors, associated with Iran.

74. ELAD-ALTMAN Isra'el, 'The Sunni-Shi'a Conversion Controversy', *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, n°5, 2007, p. 3; 'Bahth hawla at-tashayyu` fi Suriya', *al-Ilaf*, 7 January 2007 (www.elaph.com [Arabic]); SINDAWI Khalid, 'The Shiite Turn in Syria', *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, n°8, 2009, p. 82-107.

The very ungraspable nature and arbitrary numbers of the *tashayyu`* controversy, in combination with the *Wahhabi* inspired views of Shiites being secretive and underhanded (eg. the practice of *taqiya* ('dissimulation of religion'), the *batini* ('hidden') nature of Shiism itself), makes this paradigm a very useful political tool. It fits into a political game for influence that has been played in the Middle East for the last decades. But there is also a possible side effect to the situation: there are indications that the anti-Shiite stance of Sunni governments finds its way to the Muslim in the street, tilting the popular perception towards an anti-Shiite, *Wahhabi* flavored stance. In this way, instrumentalized religious identities can become a cause of conflict. While the infiltration of Shiism becomes an apparent threat in 'Sunni' countries, it is remarkable that they often have a history of Shiite presence, and as such their populations have traditionally lived next to each other without much of a problem. Moreover, due to the presence of a confessional form of Islam, they even had common religious grounds. With the apparent diminution of this confessional Islam, the twilight zone between the two sides threatens to fall away, giving more chance of friction. There is not much reason, however, to assume that this in itself can become a large-scale, region-wide conflict.

2.3. European Muslims and Sunni-Shi`a tensions

Europe and the Shiite community

In the European Islamic diaspora, the religious dimension of Shiism seems to be able to maintain even within a context where believers cannot directly rely on a local *marja`* or the presence of famous religious scholars. The attachment of the Shiite generations born in Europe to the *marja`iyya* is getting under considerable pressure; new ways of staying in touch are taking over. While in earlier years, the clerical networks depended on a large scale on the *wukala`* ('deputies') of the *marja` at-taqlid*, modern channels of communication, such as the Internet, enable believers abroad to address the *marja`* himself, or one of his collaborators through his website, to seek religious advise. Shiite clerics make extensive use of the Internet in their effort to stay in touch with their followers, by distributing literature on Shiism, posting audio files of their *khutba*, and giving fatwas on demand. In this way, Shiite communities in Europe seem to be able to develop a more direct link with the *marja`iyya* of their choice. However, the question remains whether through this way all the needs of the Shiite community are met:

a lot of them still long for a personal representation of a *marja*⁷⁵.

When we study the same issue on a European level, London seems to be sticking out above the rest as a haven of Islamic diversity. The city has benefited from the limited success of Iran in portrait itself as the center of Shiism, as well as the problematic sectarian situations in Iraq and Lebanon. During the past decennia, many refugees, mostly from Iraq, found their way to the British capital. They often belonged to opposition organizations like *ad-Da`wa* and SCIRI, a lot of them are still represented there until today⁷⁶. Of course, its role as the center of a former colonial power is also a major factor. The number of Shiites in this city is still within proportion to the Sunni Muslims. While Shiite leaders claim their number is approximately 15-20% of the local Muslims, British authorities state their number is not higher than 5%⁷⁷. The city houses the representational organs of different *maraji*.

The most famous one is without doubt the Imam al-Khu'i Foundation, with branches in London and New York. This institution is a sort of a family enterprise for assisting Shiites in Great Britain in leading an Islamic life in the diaspora, in the tradition of Grand Ayatollah al-Khu'i (d. 1992). This happens through education, translation of religious texts into English, organizing cultural events and building mosques. The al-Khu'i foundation keeps connections between the believer and the *hawza* of Najaf, or even the office of Muhammad Hussayn Fadl Allah in Lebanon. The most important role played by the Foundation is maybe its attempts to build a better image on Islam through better communication with non-Muslims and by counseling Western authorities on Shiite Islam. In 1997, they even obtained 'General Advisory Status' to the United Nations, through which it organizes its work in the field of Human Rights.

At the same time, however, the same recruiting mechanisms as deployed within the Middle East have found their way into Europe, in order to recruit the Muslim elements for its political ambitions. Propaganda spread by publications, Satellite TV stations⁷⁸ or Internet sites and forums is one of the most effective recruiting factors for both Sunnism and Shiism. Also, we can find the same

75. LEICHTMAN Mara A., 'Transnational Scholarly Family Networks: the Role of the Shi'i Marja'iyya in London and New York', *unpublished article*, 2009, p. 20 (research to be edited by Peter Mandaville, for the 'Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life', Washington DC).

76. RAHE Jens-Uwe, 'Iraqi Shi'is in Exile in London', in: `ABDUL-JABAR Faleh (ed.), *Ayatollah's Sufi's and Ideologies: State, religion and Social Reform in Iraq*, Saqi Books, London, 2002, p. 212-213.

77. LEICHTMAN Mara A., 'Transnational Scholarly Family Networks', p. 20.

78. In Germany, Hezbollah television station *al-Manar*, has been banned from broadcasting, due to its subversive nature towards the State of Israel (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, *Verfassungsbericht 2008*, 19 May 2009, p. 233-234 (<http://www.verfassungsschutz.de/download/SHOW/vsbericht2008.pdf>)).

methods of building an influence within the European Muslim community through a more active and direct kind of proselytism⁷⁹.

An example of this Shiite proselytism can be seen in Germany. The *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* referred in 2008 to the *Islamisches Zentrum Hamburg* (IZH) as the centre for German Shi'a and their propagation. The organization is located near the Imam `Ali mosque in Hamburg, in 1962 erected. IZH not only arrange religious festivities, it also reaches out to other Shi'a associations in Germany, both on an organizational level, as on a financial one. Although the IZH portrays itself as a religious foundation, the *Verfassungsschutz* points out that:

“Towards the outside world, the IZH acts as a mere religious organization that does not include political activities in its direct field of work. [...] In reality however, IZH spreads the Shiite teachings of Iranian brand, as one of the most active centers of Iranian propaganda in Europe. Its actual task is the ‘subtle propagation’ of an Islamic theocratic State after Iranian example”⁸⁰.

In other words, centers like these serve to gain influence amongst the Shiite communities in Europe by promoting the Iranian political brand of Shiism to the local Shiites. Here, like we saw in Syria, converting Sunni Muslims to Shiism does not seem to be a goal in itself⁸¹.

This political propagation, and the distant threat a perceived proselytism might pose, is certainly a thorn in the eye of the *Wahhabi* and *Salafi* inspired trends within the European Islamic diaspora. These trends are widely present in Europe, and often base their criticism, on mere religious elements. However these radical tendencies remain a concern for the European domestic security policy; for examining the evolution of Sunni-Shia relations, they are not representative for the Sunni position. In the sector of Sunni Islamism, *shaykh* Yusuf al-Qaradawi is also an influential figure for European Muslims. He heads the ‘European Council for Fatawa and Research’ (ECFR) and the ‘International

79. Mechanisms of Iranian proselytism in Europe also fall under the umbrella of the *Majma` Abl al-Bayt*. In the period 2003-2007, the *Majma`* would have organized ‘religious and cultural education’ for about 1000 persons, amongst which were British, German, Belgian and Dutch nationals (CUTA, *De Nieuwe soenni-sji`a Polemieek: Impact op Moslimgemeenschappen in België?*, 02 September 2009, p. 3 (Report requested by EGMONT). In London, the in 1998 founded Islamic Centre of England can be pointed out as a representative of the Iranian Islamic State doctrine (WALBRIDGE Linda S, ‘The Counterreformation: Becoming a *Marja`* in the Modern World’, in: WALBRIDGE Linda S, *The Most Learned of the Shi`a: the Institution of the Marja` Taqlid*, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 2001, p. 239; <http://www.ic-el.org/>, consulted on 24 November 2009).

80. Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, *Verfassungsbericht 2008*, 19 May 2009, p. 255 (<http://www.verfassungsschutz.de/download/SHOW/vsbericht2008.pdf>).

81. *Ibid.*

Union of Muslim Scholars' (IUMS)⁸², both with headquarters in Dublin. It is thus important to see that al-Qaradawi's anti-Shiite position will eventually find its way to European Sunnites.

The level on which a split between Sunnism-Shiism on European soil can become as a security issue is largely political, as two instrumentalized identities that are being deployed within a political conflict. In other words, there can be a moment when the instruments of recruitment and mobilization become reasons for strife themselves, when both identities are taken from their political context, into a more transcendent level. If this situation is further fomented by political actors in Europe and abroad, or by references to events and situations in Muslim World, such a situation might possibly escalate into incidents. The pretence in this case could be any minor event. It seems unlikely that large-scale violence between the different currents of Islam will occur in Europe itself, not in the least due to the small number of Shiites.

In London, authorities have actively supported initiatives to bridge differences within the Muslim community. In 2006, the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Body (MINAB) was formed⁸³, which started its activities in May 2009. This was the outcome of the work of the Muslim Taskforce, a group called into life by the British Government in 2005, to give operational recommendations after the attacks of 7 July of that year. MINAB organizes formation for imams and tries to promote good governance of mosques. By positioning Muslims behind the common goal of social promotion, MINAB tries to prevent extremism, overcome sectarianism and promote social cohesion within the Islamic community. In MINAB, different branches of Islam meet; the Shiite movement is represented by the al-Khu'i Foundation. Middle of 2009, the initiative counted about 600 members from different confessional background. The organization also reaches out towards the more radical streams amongst UK Muslims, but on this level, a lot of work remains to be done⁸⁴. The organization keeps itself far from political involvement, so it will not be able to diminish the process of instrumentalization or the political battle for the Muslim hearts. It is however a perfect factor in preventing or combating sectarianism on the basis

82. The websites of these organizations are respectively <http://www.e-cfr.org/> and <http://www.iumsonline.net/> (accessed on 25 October 2009). Yusuf al-Qaradawi also runs the famous portal site <http://www.islamonline.net>.

83. The founding member organizations of MINAB are the al-Khu'i Foundation, The Muslim Council of Britain, The Muslim Association of Britain and The British Muslim Forum. The organization represents about 600 mosques and institutions (<http://www.minab.org.uk/about-us/about-us>, accessed on 31 October 2009).

84. 'Watchdog for UK mosques launches', BBC News, 27 juni 2006; <http://www.minab.org.uk/about-us/about-us> (accessed on 30 October 2009); 'Developments of Shi'a-Sunni Relations in the UK with Special Reference to the Middle East', presentation as delivered by prof. *sayyid* Yusuf al-Khu'i on the 'International Conference on Sunni-Shia contemporary Relations', Brussels, 2 October 2009.

of religious pretexts, lining up their members behind the common goal of ameliorating their status within the country.

Belgium and the Moroccan community

The Sunni-Shi'a situation within the Belgian Muslim community⁸⁵ is generally dominated by a controversy hanging over the Moroccan diaspora in the country. As we already discussed, Moroccan authorities are nervous about the alleged augmentation of the Shiite Muslims in their own country, to such an extent that they recently cut their diplomatic ties with Iran⁸⁶.

The last couple of years, Moroccan security services consider Shiite activities of proselytism amongst nationals living in Europe – especially in Belgium – as one of the most imminent threats to their country. These Shiite converts in their turn would spread Shiism and deploy anti-governmental activities in their country of origin. On 29 September 2009, the ambassador of Morocco Sami Addahre stated in an interview to the periodical 'Le Vif':

*"We in Morocco do everything within our power to support this co-operation [i.e. between Moroccan and Belgian security services]. One of the means, and I want to emphasize this, is to allow, in the context of a concerted action, that Morocco guides the Moroccan community in Belgium, in conformity with its values of tolerance and openness, that are shared by both our countries, and are a trade mark of the Moroccan Islam, Sunni, of Maliki rite. This Islam has nothing to do with Shiism or Wahhabism. Morocco has indeed frozen its diplomatic relations with Iran for reasons of its proselytism on the national territories, and in the Moroccan diaspora."*⁸⁷

The discourse as given by the ambassador fits within the concerns raised by governments of Sunni countries. Shiism is identified with Iranian meddling, while few exact numbers regarding these conversions are available. The preser-

85. One of the best-known Shiite mosques in Belgium is the 'Rida – Association islamique' (a mosque and non-profit organization) in Anderlecht. In February 2007, the mosque filed a complaint at the local police of being menaced by Sunni elements. Authorities soon declared that this evolution was to be seen within the context of the war in Iraq ('Tensions irakiennes jusqu'à Anderlecht', *La Libre Belgique*, 16 February 2007). Other institutions are 'Centre Islamique Culturel Chiite – Ahlou al Bayt' in Brussels and the 'Alzahrhaa Center' in Berchem, Antwerp (<http://aqaed.org/theshia/moasesat/europ/belgium.html> [Arabic]; consulted on 24 November 2009).

86. 'Hujja at-tashayyu` fi tabrir al-azma ad-diblumasiya ma`a Iran tanqalibu `ala as-salatat al-Maghribiya', *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 20 March 2009; 'Ba`da qat`al-Alaqaq ma`a Iran .. ar-Rabat taqarara ghalaaq madrasa `Iraqiya "Shi`iya"', *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 23 March 2009.

87. 'Marocains en Belgique: l'interview-vérité de l'ambassadeur du Maroc', *Le Vif*, 29 September 2009.

vation of the Moroccan national identity is in this context closely connected to survival of the national rule and its geopolitical interests.

The actual link between Shiism and Islamists opposing the Moroccan authorities seemed to come to the fore when in January 2008 a Belgian national with Moroccan roots, Abd al-Qadir Belliraj was arrested in his land of origin on the claims of leading a terrorist cell, allegedly planning the overthrow of the Moroccan State. The rumour also spread that the man was in fact Shiite. In fact, Belliraj was trained during the 1980s in Hezbollah facilities in the Middle East, and even met Imam Khomeini. He stated during interrogations that he was a Sunni, making use of different subversive networks, amongst which Iranian ones. These networks, that at the time still served the Iranian foreign policy of a violent exportation of the Islamic Revolution, are now considered to be gone. So, we can see that indeed the link was there at the time, but that it can be considered as mere opportunism from the side of Belliraj. The Shiite infiltration in Morocco seems to be much more a sign of the deeper lying political tension of opposition to the legitimacy of the Moroccan government, than it is a religious or doctrinal issue threatening the identity of the country or foreign meddling⁸⁸.

Apart from the Moroccan controversy, we can ask ourselves if a possibility of Sunni-Shi'a strife or violence actually exists in Belgium. In this case, the largest threat comes from *Salafi* and *Wahhabi* inspired radical movements. A report from the Belgian Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) states:

*“For most of the Muslims [in Belgium], the demonization of Shi'a Islam is not an issue. Only already radicalized circles, Salafi and Salafiya Jihad-diya, consider the new political anti-Shi'a discours as a mobilizing factor. As a matter of fact, recently, ‘conferences’ treating this theme have been organized in Belgian radical mosques. The tone is denigrating and xenophobic towards the Shi'a community. A trend most concerning, that merits further follow-up.”*⁸⁹

Polarization in general day-to-day Sunni-Shi'a relations seems not to be a security issue: the problem lies with already radicalized movements. But while they foment against Shiism, they also foment against everyone who is not on the same hard line as them, thus making them target of the Belgian security policy anyway. In this way, the Belgian situation does not differ that much from what we have seen in the overall European theatre, and should be treated in the very

88. Interview with officials of the Belgian Federal Police; ‘Morocco’s efforts to tackle Islamists’, *The Economist*, 21 February 2008. Among the people arrested was a certain Abdul Hafiz Sriti of the *al-Manar* TV channel. This might be a reason for the Moroccan authorities to suspect Iranian meddling.

89. CUTA, *De Nieuwe soenni-sji'a Polemieck*, p. 3. One of these conferences was ‘l’Islam et le Chiisme’, a lecture given by the *Salafi* preacher Abu Khayma, on 18 April 2009 in Charleroi (*Ibid.*, p. 7, n. 4).

same way: as a political struggle for the hearts of the local Muslims. If conflicts will occur, they are to be expected from this very dimension.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

To conclude, we should revisit some of the core issues, that add to the demarcation of the Sunni-Shi'a controversy and how to approach it. The movement of Shiite Islamism has originated in the Middle East as a reaction to historical events (the end of the Ottoman empire and the beginning of colonialism, the foundation of national States), and as a drive to obtain social promotion of the Shiites. The Iranian Revolution is to be seen as one of the pinnacles of this movement, not as the beginning of it. In other countries, Shiite movements were working to fulfill their own agendas, finding their inspiration in different currents within Shiite Islamism. It is therefore practically impossible to speak about a major shift in power; it is more the ongoing search of Shiites to claim their place in society.

The role Iran plays in using Shiite actors in the region is not to be overestimated, since it is more of a tactical nature than a strategic one. Iran's own hegemonic ambitions have always to be considered in this regard: by having deepened relations with allies such as ISCI and Hezbollah and supporting them in all their independence, the Islamic Republic guarantees itself of their loyalty, and has political clout in the country involved. Shiite Islam is used in the same way, as a means for promoting its revolutionary ideals in the Middle East.

When we consider the current opposition between Sunnis and Shiites, we have to keep in mind that this dichotomy is not an absolute one, and that the extreme *Wahhabi* position is a rather limited one. Distrust is becoming more overt, nevertheless, with moderate clerics such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi taking a firm stand in opposition to the perceived Shiite influence. Concrete measures taken by Sunni regimes in the framework of concern for the 'Shiite Threat', show in this way their fear for internal implications of militant Islamism of Iranian brand, for spill-over or sympathy of national Islamist opposition towards this current. The success of Hezbollah in the Sunni streets and the Iranian defiance towards the West only adds to this fear. On a more international level, the unease of possibly losing a strategic position to the 'Iranian camp' plays a non-negligible role.

The specter of large-scale *tashayyu`* that is raised by Sunnites, is more a political weapon to counter Iranian influence than it is actually a strategic tool that threatens the identity of Sunni countries. Iranian Shiite organizations recruit mainly towards Shiites, even in the European diaspora. There are no objective numbers on the alleged conversions, nor are there indications that the Sunni-Shiite opposition as a religious model is becoming a security issue. The same applies to conversions within the Belgian Moroccan community. Anti-Shiite dis-

course and ideology can be found in Belgium, but are still situated within radicalized milieus that are already considered as a concern of security. In the long run, the biggest threat to Sunni-Shi'a relations comes from a progressed instrumentalization of these religious identities by Middle Eastern governments, finding their way to the Muslim in the street, and eventually becoming a motive for violence.

Recommendations for the EU and Belgium

- The process of policy making should not be influenced by the fear for a 'Shiite Crescent': the Shiite Islamist movement is in its conception a socio-political movement that is focused on a national reality, now more than ever. However it looks towards the transnational structure of Shiite Islam for ideological reasons, it does not serve a transnational cause for Shiite empowerment.
- When dealing with intra-Islamic relations, the diversity within Shiism or Islam as a whole and the views connected to them should be taken into account. Equally, if not more important than confessional affiliation are elements like family, tribal bonds, societal standing, economical factors, that often transgress the apparent limits of ideological divisions within Islam.
- The Iranian role in the Middle East is to be seen in the framework of its own pragmatic foreign policy and its hegemonic ambitions. The support it gives to Shiite groupings is of a tactical nature. It would be wrong to simply identify the political and material goals of Iran with those of the Shiites as a whole. There is no consensus over the Iranian political model, or any other for that part. Iran's perceived allies (eg. Hezbollah) should be seen as national movements and relations between the EU and these actors should be assessed on this very basis.
- Policy makers will have to involve Shiite clerical actors into their approach towards the Middle East. Recent history proved that *'ulama'* can and will play a role in the socio-political developments of their community, even if they are known as being 'quietist'.
- The Shiite movement is best approached by demanding their respective governments to grant their Shiite communities basic human rights and full-fledged civil rights. This seems to be the most effective way in preventing unrest and future radicalization.
- The fear of Sunni States like Saudi Arabia or Egypt for losing their strategic position in the region will get bigger, and if this would be accompanied with

further anti-Shiite rhetoric, the EU and Belgium have to face growing mistrust and enmity with the knowledge that this controversy is located within a political context, not an intrinsic conflict between two opposing ideological currents.

- Belgium and the EU as a whole will have to keep in mind that the political instrumentalization of both religious identities is a bigger problem than an intrinsic antagonism between Sunnism and Shiism.
- Instrumentalization of Sunni-Shiite can – in the long run – be the cause of future conflicts in the Middle East or Europe. The rhetoric or actual actions of governments in the Middle East or the Muslim World as a whole could inflict damage on what is best described as a 'sectarian ecology' within Islam, a natural co-existence of Sunni and Shi'a communities, with different forms of confessional Islam acting as a buffer. It is not likely that a mere religious opposition will lead to an open war or a great conflict; small-scale unrest is more plausible.