

The Notion Of The Shia Crescent As A Threat To The Regional Security Of The Persian Gulf: Between Political Sectarism And Geopolitics (2004-2014)

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Abstract:

The Iraq invasion in 2003, as well as the deposition of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and the subsequent instability generated by the regime change, the political crisis in Lebanon established in 2005, among other events of the beginning of the 21st century, have included Shia communities in the center of conflicts and major transformation processes in the Middle East, especially in Persian Gulf and Levant (Syria and Lebanon). Opinion makers in the region and the United States, influenced by rationalist (such as realistic) approaches and epistemic (constructivist) approaches over the last few years have argued about what would be the main threat to maintaining the status quo in the Middle East: the evolution of a Shiite Crescent movement that would in control and serve by Tehran's interests. In view of the specificities of the Shiite communities in the Levant and Persian Gulf, this article starts from the questioning of the possibility of determining if the rhetoric of the Shiite Crescent was verified by the increase of the Iranian influence in these countries or if this resource was used only to unite the political and domestic interests of Sunni rulers around a common enemy, in view of the region's reordering (regarding the split between Sunnis and Shiites) following the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Key Word: Shiite Crescent; regional instability, Iranian influence, Shiite and Sunni conflict, regional security architecture; Iran

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I. Introduction

The Iraqi political crisis resulting from the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the instability marked by conflicts between religious groups regarding the formulation of a new government resumed the threat of the expansion of Shiism "guided by the interests of Tehran" (BARZEGAR, 2008a), since, according to the point of view of the Sunni Arab elites who ruled states with important Shia communities (such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Egypt), Iran would use alliances with ideologically sympathetic Shiite governments to project its hegemonic interests in the region. In addition, the possibility of the Persian country becoming capable of dictating security and energy policies, as well as intervening in domestic policies of neighboring governments on behalf of local Shiite communities, has sparked pressure on ways to contain Iran.

In this context, the historical division between Shiites and Sunnis has returned to the center of discussions of regional security in the Middle East and ideology – understood throughout this article according to the concept of THOMPSON (2011) as the production of meaning (symbolic forms that compose discourses) in the service of power – has proven to be a determining factor for the stability of the region, under the rhetoric of the development and maturation (at the regional level) of what is conventionally called the *Shia Crescent*. The idea of Crescent – represented by the so-called Iranian strategy of creating areas of influence from Iraq to Lebanon – was initially problematized by Jordan's King Abdullah II in 2004, after observing the political developments in post-invasion Iraq (such as the violent sectarian conflict that opposed Sunnism and Shiism and the increased influence of the latter Muslim current in Iraqi politics) as a regional threat – in the ideological and political spheres – for "linking itself to Iran's designs", which found resonance in countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia and came to occupy the security agenda of the Middle East, especially of the countries of the Persian Gulf region ruled mostly by Sunni elites.

Approaches to understanding the resurgence of the Shia-Sunni divide in the Middle East are commonly related, in the field of International Relations, to rationalist (such as realist and its strands) or epistemic/ontological (such as constructivist) theories. Analyses based on principles of neorealism, for example, tend to observe the "sectarism of regional politics" in the period after the fall of Saddam Hussein as a product of the readjustment of the power relations that took shape in Iraq and the power-balancing relationship between

Saudi Arabia and Iran in the new geopolitical scenario. However, some questions should be asked regarding the post-Saddam period: is the so-called "Shia Crescent" a verifiable phenomenon in Middle East politics? And yet in this sense, would it represent a movement of the different groups that make up the state, or would sectarian identities be used by Sunni-ruled states to refer to the fear of Iran's supposed power ambitions in the region and its reflections on their domestic security? Does Iran have an interest in reaching out to the different Shiite groups in Iraq, the Levant (Syria and Lebanon) and the Persian Gulf to expand its power in the region?

A detailed analysis of the resurgence of sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shiites, as well as aspects related to the rhetoric of the Shia Crescent, such as Iran's interests or objectives in the region and the "nature" of its foreign policy (offensive or defensive), the interests of the Sunni elites and the United States, is of fundamental importance for an assertive understanding of developments related to the regional security architecture of the post-Saddam Hussein's period.

In the view of the specificities of the Shia communities in the Levant and Persian Gulf, this article will be developed in order to contribute to an understanding of the so-called "resurgence of the Shiites" in Middle East politics, and consequently to the debate about the new challenges to regional security in the Middle East in the period after the year 2003, through the analysis of the emergence and evolution of the rhetoric of the Shia Crescent as a threat to the region, questioning the possibility of determining whether the same occurred through the increase of Iranian influence in the countries of the said region and its implications for the reordering of power, as well as the use of such discourse by authorities of the Arab countries of the Sunni elite and the policies verified in reality.

In order to discuss such questions this article is divided into three sections and is based on the discussion of the bibliographic material elaborated about the studied phenomenon– the Shia crescent or the resurgence of the Shiites in the Middle East and the consequences of such a process for regional security. The first section, *The Persian Gulf Security Architecture and Perception of Threats to Regional Security*, discusses how the region's security architecture has been forged over the decades and seeks to analyze perceived changes in the threat's perception of nation-states. The second section, *The Rhetoric of the Shia Crescent: Emergence and Preliminary Academic Discussions*, presents the political context in which the notion of the formation of a Shia crescent was developed, still at the level of rhetoric, and discusses how this was appropriated by foreign policymakers from Persian Gulf countries and by academics who tried to discuss the new threats observed in the region and their possible repercussions on intra- and extra-regional powers. In addition, it analyzes the premises contained in the rhetoric of the Shia crescent, such as the empowerment of Shiites in the Persian Gulf and region after the invasion of Iraq (2003), Iran's interests or objectives in the region (as well as the nature of its foreign policy – offensive or defensive).

Throughout the third section, *Iran's Perspective on the Shia Crescent and the Constituents of its Foreign Policy for Iraq and the Region*, the most controversial element of the Shia crescent debate is critically discussed: Iran's so-called expansionist policy, which according to proponents of such a threat to regional security would be linked to the Persian country's intention to make the best use of Iraq's political developments post-2003 invasion to ensure its empowerment as a regional power. Thus, the section presents the reaction of most Iranian nationalists to observing the dialectical movement introduced by Jordan (and propagated by countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia) – as well as the attitude of Iranian foreign policy makers, who observed such rhetoric as a threat to regional security and subsequently invested in a rhetoric aimed at refuting such a threat – and seeks to develop an analysis of the elements that constituted Iranian foreign policy for Iraq and the region in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

II. The Persian Gulf Security Architecture and Perception of Threats to Regional Security

Discussions about the contours and development of security arrangements in the Persian Gulf sub-region have been constant since the fall of Saddam's Baathist regime and changes in the traditional balance of power strategy developed in the region. However, before drawing what appear to be the contours of the new security arrangements, in view of the perception of recent threats such as sectarian conflict (especially those pitting Sunnis and Shiites against them) and the so-called relative increase in Iran's influence in the Gulf region, it is important to identify how schools of thought in security can address the new challenges of the Gulf region (KRAIG, 2004), as well as analyzing the previous security arrangement – the balance of power – determining its origins, perceptions of threat to regional security, and policies developed over the decades. In this sense, it is worth mentioning the contributions of KRAIG (2004; 2006), BARZEGAR (2007; 2008), GAUSE (2009), about the characterization and modus operandi of the security arrangement developed throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

Since the 1970s, when the Persian Gulf states experienced the withdrawal of British troops, the regional security architecture has been developed according to the realization of the so-called "traditional threats", such as the increase in the relative power of states, the influence of transnational identities and rivalries around regional ambitions, faced by countries. The strategy developed – the balance of power – had an offensive

character, marked by the increase of the relative power of the states in a zero-sum game, was based on three main aspects, namely: a) the triangle formed by Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq – oil-holding countries that had a rivalry relationship based on the search for regional dominance; b) the actions of the States of the peninsula to achieve their domestic and regional political objectives; and c) the interference of external actors, especially the United States.

As for the first two aspects, in view of the perception of States regarding the nature of threats, the game of regional balancing approached, at various times, the precepts of realism (based on the idea that threats to the survival of States would be linked to the increase in the relative power of States around them, and States would seek ways to ensure their survival, including through the formation of alliances) and, between the 1970s and 1990s, was directly linked to the efforts of the aforementioned triangle to achieve a dual agenda, composed of the pursuit of domestic security (maintenance of political regimes and containment of threats related to ideologies and contestation of power) and the aspirations of regional leadership. When the Baathist party seized power in Iraq for the second time, Iran and Saudi Arabia grew closer due to fears about the military intentions of the new Iraqi regime. Similarly, when the Islamic Revolution occurred in 1979, alliances changed and Saudi Arabia and Iraq reconnected to jointly confront the ideological threat that Persian revolutionary Shiism posed to the maintenance of the Baathist regimes and the house of Al-saud, due to the fact that in both countries the Shia populations were repressed and subjugated to regimes that represented little to them.

As for the third aspect, the interference of external actors, BARZEGAR (2010b) develops a critical reasoning about the premises that made up the political and security arrangements in the Persian Gulf by questioning the limits (or non-observance thereof) of the performance of external powers – such as, for example, the United States – to regional arrangements, as well as the negative legacy that such structures brought, Such as, for example, the inability to ensure the security and stability of the region, mainly because the powers of the region were based on a zero-sum game, that is, on the rise of the relative power of potential rivals. For these reasons, these structures generated only mistrust, tensions and wars between the states involved.

Throughout the 1970s, the main threats envisioned according to U.S. interests were related to the existing rivalries between the states of the region and the possibility of Soviet allies reaching power or influencing in some way changes in the existing tenuous balance of power. In this way, the main policy of US action was based on the construction of strong local allies, as was the case of the policy of the so-called "pillars or local hegemonies" or "twin pillars", based on the support aimed at the Saudi monarchy (house of Al-Saud) and the government of Shah Reza Pahlevi in Iran, – in order to dominate the region without considering in the calculations the domestic aspect of the security of the Gulf (KRAIG, 2004). The aforementioned U.S. strategy of acting together with the "local pillars or hegemonies" and the non-observance of domestic developments of both countries collapsed after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which led the Persian country to a forced regime change and expanded Iran's influence over the Islamic movements of the Gulf and the Levant (Syria and Lebanon), and later with the emergence of transnational terror groups integrated by Saudi citizens, such as Al Qaeda.

In the following decade, having identified the Islamic Republic of Iran as one of the catalysts of regional instability, the U.S. strategy was related to the search to develop a "pure" balance of power, based on concepts such as deterrence (policy of intimidation), containment (preventing the advance of a possible security threat) and balance (preventing a given state from altering an established power dynamic), which included intelligence and financial support for Iraq in its war against Iran (1980-1988), and in this way it was possible to contain the growth of both countries and prevent them from becoming immediate threats to conservative Arab regimes allied with the United States. This strategy forged the development of Iraqi military offensive power and ended up amplifying instability in the region, mainly because having developed militarily, Iraq became a greater threat to neighboring states, and Saddam Hussein's calculations of power eventually considered the expansion of his power through the subjugation of weaker states, as was observed with the invasion of Kuwait in 1991.

Despite the Cold War scenario and the competition existing between the superpowers at the time to determine their areas of influence on a global scale, GAUSE (2009) describes that although important, the involvement of the United States in the Gulf region was mostly reactive, related to the maintenance of its interests in the region and the limitations observed in its domestic policy, mainly because of U.S. public opinion about the legacy of the Vietnam War, which prevented more active military action in the region.

According to the perspective of this author, throughout the 1970s and 1980s the driving forces behind international events in the Gulf were the countries of the region: the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and Iraq's decisions to start wars in 1980 and 1991. The countries' security agenda, and consequently state behavior, was based on the importance of existing transnational identities – such as Arab, Muslim and ethnic (Kurdish question) – and on the efforts of states to maintain internal cohesion, especially through the idea of regime security in which the group that held power in a given state sought the means to secure its position and prevent the rise of its opponents through the pursuit of national interests.

The complexity of security issues in the Gulf, as assertively stated by GAUSE (2009), goes beyond an explanation and analysis based exclusively on the balance of power strategy of classical realism, given that the ambitions for regional dominance on the part of Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as the efforts to counterbalance a possible hegemon, were important for these countries as well as for others in different regions and periods, that is, such ambitions and containment strategy based on the creation and maintenance of a status quo do not figure as a specificity of said sub-region.

The aforementioned authors introduce the argument that the Gulf security agenda is complex and multifaceted because of intervening variables, of a diverse nature such as cultural and political, that operate in the decision-making of States. Among these variables, we highlight the concern to maintain national stability, both from the point of view of maintaining the state regime (according to the idea of regime security developed by GAUSE (2009) regarding the actions taken to keep a certain group in power) and the verification and performance of transnational identities operating in the Gulf, such as Iraqi Arab nationalism and Iranian revolutionary Shiism, and changes in American foreign policy in the region.

The Iraqi political crisis, resulting from the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the instability marked by conflicts between religious groups regarding the formulation of a new government, figured as a kind of turning point with respect to the perception of traditional threats to the security of the states that make up the said sub-region, mainly because of the displacement of a threat based on the military power projected by a state to threats of a different nature, as the transnational identity that Shiism represents, and brought the notion of threat related to the expansion of Shiism *guided by the interests of Tehran* (BARZEGAR, 2008a), since according to the point of view of the Sunni Arab elites Iran would use alliances with sympathetic Shia governments to project its hegemonic interests in the region. In addition, the possibility of the Persian country becoming capable of dictating security and energy policies, as well as intervening in domestic policies of neighboring governments on behalf of local Shiite communities, has sparked pressure on ways to contain Iran.

III. The Rhetoric of the Shia Crescent: Emergence and Preliminary Academic Discussions

After years of practicing quietism – a doctrine according to which Shiites sought to avoid participation in matters related to politics – and living in conditions of social, economic and political representation marginalization, Shia communities entered the twenty-first century as catalysts for a potential transformation in Middle East politics, based, above all, on the instability of the distribution of power between Shia and Sunni Muslims.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, as well as the deposition of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and the subsequent instability generated by the articulation for regime change, the political crisis in Lebanon established in 2005, began to be observed, debated and used by analysts such as NASR (2004; 2006), TERHALLE (2007), BARZEGAR (2008a; 2008b; 2010a; 2010b) and HAJI-YOUSSEF (2009) to exemplify diverse points of view in the debate about the existence of the so-called Shia Crescent and its influence on processes of transformation in the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf and Levant (considering only Syria and Lebanon).

The idea of this Crescent – represented by the so-called Iranian strategy of creating areas of influence from Iraq to Lebanon – was first problematized by the King of Jordan Abdullah II in 2004, after observing the political developments in post-invasion Iraq (such as the violent sectarian conflict that opposed Sunnism and Shiism and the increased influence of the latter Muslim current in Iraqi politics) as a regional threat – in the ideological and ideological spheres. By linking itself to Iran's designs, it found resonance in countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia and came to occupy the security agenda of the Middle East, especially of the countries of the Persian Gulf region ruled mostly by Sunni elites.

The perception of the threat related to the Shia Crescent was, according to the perspective of BARZEGAR (2008), based on the idea that, as a consequence of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Shiites have re-emerged in the political environment of the Middle East, and on three main assumptions about Iran's role and ambitions as the leader of such a process in the region, namely: engaging the masses in the region, building an ideological belt composed of nearby Shia governments, and expanding their regional role and power. This perception has been debated by Sunni Arab elites and by Western countries opposed to the growth of Iran's regional power, such as the United States, for example.

From the Sunni Arab elite's point of view, as BARZEGAR (2008, 2010b) points out, the resurgence of Shia communities in Iraq, especially after the 2005 Elections, has raised concerns about the demands of these Shia populations (whether majority or minority) present in the Middle East to acquire or expand their social, political and economic rights, as well as the mobilization of the masses around the removal of Sunni governments and their subsequent replacement by new governments led by Shiites, an action that would cause an imbalance from the domestic and regional point of view between Sunnis and Shiites. Moreover, the concern about Iran's expansion and influence on "Arab" issues underscores the importance accorded to the ideological dimension – with regard to the opposition between Shiism and Sunnism – by the countries that appropriated the narrative of the Crescent: Iran, considered a key player in the movement of resurgence of the Shiites, already

figured for some Arab regimes, as is the case with the Saudi, as a dual threat because of its Persian and Shia character, and throughout the history of the Gulf the shared perception of such a threat towards the Persian country has been reinforced by national, ethnic, political-social and economic divisions, manipulated by some rulers and politicians to serve their immediate interests.

In this sense, it should be explained that traditionally the security policy for the Persian Gulf region has been based on the search for the maintenance of the balance of power between the main regional actors – Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran – in order to avoid the existence of a hegemonic country; achieve a dual security agenda, consisting of domestic security (maintaining political regimes and containing ideological-related threats and contesting power) and regional leadership aspirations. From the 1970s, when the Persian Gulf states experienced the withdrawal of British troops, until the mid-1990s, the regional security architecture was developed according to the realization of "traditional threats" such as the increase in the relative power of states, the influence of transnational identities and rivalries around regional ambitions, faced by countries (KRAIG, 2004; GAUSE, 2009).

Over the decades, Iraq and Iran have balanced their power, mainly by seeking alliances with countries in the region and outside it, such as the alliances established between the United States and the Saudi and Jordanian monarchies. Thus, when the Islamic Revolution took place in 1979, Saudi Arabia and Iraq came together to confront together the ideological threat that Persian revolutionary Shiism posed to the maintenance of the Al-saud and Baathist regimes, respectively, because in both countries the Shia populations were repressed and subjugated to regimes that represented little to them.

The Iraqi political crisis resulting from the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the instability marked by conflicts between religious groups over the formulation of a new government resumed the aforementioned threat of expansion of Shiism guided by Tehran's interests, since, according to the point of view of the Sunni Arab elites, Iran would use alliances with sympathetic Shiite governments to project its hegemonic interests in the region. In addition, the possibility of the Persian country becoming capable of dictating security and energy policies, as well as intervening in domestic policies of neighboring governments on behalf of local Shiite communities, has sparked pressure on ways to contain Iran.

Taking as a premise the notion that the greatest consequence of the 2003 invasion of Iraq was the so-called *empowerment* of Shiites in the Persian Gulf country and the region, experts have focused on understanding the various elements that constitute this movement, such as Iran's interests or objectives in the region and the "nature" of its foreign policy (offensive or defensive), the interests of the Sunni elites and the United States, as well as the consequences of the interests of the aforementioned actors for regional stability.

TERHALLE (2007), in his article *Are the Shia Rising?*, when analyzing *Shia empowerment under the narrative of the Shia Crescent*, drew attention to what he called the inconsistency of the latter term, determining the weak points of such a narrative, and highlighted the fact that the rhetoric of a Shia rise, which consists in taking advantage of the sectarian divisions of their countries presenting the Shiites as a threat to national instability, It is a common political practice in the domestic realm of some Sunni Arab regimes to maintain the legitimacy of their authoritarian rule. The dynamics of organization of the internal security of some countries of the Persian Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, is highlighted by the author to demonstrate the use of the sectarian divisions of the countries as a way to guarantee the legitimacy to the policies of authoritarian governments.

For the author, the idea of the Shia rise, understood against the background of the conflict against Iran, does not have both political and religious cohesion, and errs in conceiving the Shia communities as belonging to a monolithic group, with Iran as the driving force. In this sense, he adds that the role of the Shiites in the Gulf region has become more prominent in the last ten years because of three interconnected developments, namely: the strengthening of Iran's geopolitical position due to the fall of the Taliban *and Baathist* regimes and its attempt to diversify its bilateral relations with the countries of the region; the increase in Shiite consciousness precipitated by the US plans for democratization of the region, and the decline of U.S. power in Iraq.

In view of the resurgence of Shiites in the Iraqi political scene, NASR (2004; 2006) discussed the implications of this process for the political future of Iraq and for the balance of power among sectarian communities, considering that the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime altered the balance of power between Shiites and Sunnis in favor of the former and challenged the premise of Sunni governments as dominant in the region. As far as Iraq's domestic political sphere is concerned, the most important result attributed to the invasion of the country in 2003 was that a democratic government with a Shiite majority was sworn in – after the 2005 elections – in an Arab country considered to be of great importance for maintaining the stability of the region.

At the regional level, the author argues that while the resurgence of Shiites in politics does not mean the development of a pan-Shiism led by a specific government or country – unlike the rhetoric of the formation of a homogeneous Shia group led by and in the service of Iranian interests, propagated by some Sunni-ruled Arab countries and by Western countries such as the United States and Britain – such a resurgence would be

verified in the search for greater presence and influence in the political channels of countries in the region, such as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates.

In addition, the analyst adds that in the early years of the occupation of Iraq Sunni militancy and *Wahhabi activism* (current derived from the Sunni tradition, is considered ultraconservative for preaching a literal interpretation of the sacred scriptures), and not "revolutionary" Shiism, constituted a destabilizing potential for its violent and ideological character based on elements such as anti-Shiism and anti-Americanism.

In examining Iranian foreign policy towards Iraq after the 2003 invasion, BARZEGAR (2008; 2010a) argues that in view of the history of the political, cultural and social dynamics of distinction between Persians and Arabs, the implementation of an ideologically Iranian-led Shia Crescent was unlikely, that is, for the analyst the Persian country's attempt to engage to create coalitions and/or alliances with "friendly Shia governments" was based on a rational and pragmatic strategy – in view of the perceived threats to their security caused by the arrival and maintenance of US troops in the region – and not just ideological, as in the first decade of the Iranian Revolution.

In this sense, Iranian foreign policy toward Iraq would be the result of considerations designed to produce both national security – in view of the new dilemmas to the security of the Persian country, such as the direct presence of U.S. troops on Iran's immediate borders and the differing views between the United States and Iran regarding the new threats to regional security – and opportunities with the new government of the neighboring country. mainly through the idea of moving it to a friendly, stable, secure and prosperous state, discarding the traditional designation of Iraq as a counterweight to the Persian country, which had been stimulated throughout the administration of George W. Bush and revising the regional security architecture based on the "balance of power" to one based on the balance of interests. However, according to the author, it is precisely the lack of understanding of Iranian strategic objectives and foreign policy that allows the perpetuation, in academia and foreign policy formulation, as a threat to U.S. interests and the elites of the Arab states supported by the United States.

Based on the interests of the Sunni elites, HAJI-YOUSEFI (2009) argues that, in a scenario in which the United States initiated the "Great Initiative for the Middle East" and the policy of promoting democracy in the Middle East, states ruled by autocratic regimes began to face a dilemma: on the one hand, they sought American security and protection, and on the other they began to suffer pressures to make changes in their policy domestic and electoral, the latter of which would lead countries to internal instability, related to the demands of communities repressed by the regimes. In this way, some regimes – such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt – have latched on to developments in Iraq after the 2003 invasion and to draw international attention away from their democratic deficits have come to constantly mention their fears about the creation and expansion of the so-called Shiite Crescent. Part of these fears about such a move were dictated by geopolitical aspects, such as the competition for power in the region (power traditionally "balanced" between the main countries of the Persian Gulf) and Iranian rule, and aspects related to the legitimation of the existing regimes in the countries, taking as an example the idea of regime security that aimed to maintain the status quo the division of power, preventing the access of certain religious groups to power, and the question of a possible civil war between Sunnis and Shiites in the region.

Thus, it is possible to question that for the Arab regimes the main source of threat of the aforementioned Shiite Crescent would not be related to the rise of members of the said community to power in Iraq, but rather to the fear that the US pressure for the democratization of the region would reach their authoritarian regimes – some of them, such as the Saudi, For decades they figured as the main allies of the American country in the region and established a pragmatic relationship based on mutual interests – since the Shiite resurgence in the region clearly demonstrated the questioning of the legitimacy of the dominant Arab (mostly Sunni) governments.

IV. Iranian perspective on the Shia Crescent and the constituents of its foreign policy towards Iraq and the region

The most contentious aspect of the debate over the idea of a Shiite crescent centers on Iran's so-called expansionist policy — propagated exhaustively by officials such as Jordan's King Abdullah and Egypt's then-President Hosni Mubarak — which supposedly sought to make the best use of Iraq's political developments in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion to ensure its *empowerment* as a regional power. At first, the reaction of most Iranian nationalists was to observe the dialectical movement introduced by Jordan and propagated by countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia as a threat to their interests, such as national security, and later invest in rhetoric aimed at refuting such a threat.

Iranian foreign policy in the immediate period following the invasion of Iraq was based on rational and pragmatic aspects, related to the troubled history of competition and mistrust that guided relations between Iran and the government of Iraq (especially after the Iran-Iraq War) – and which apparently the removal of Saddam Hussein from his post as president failed to contain – and more immediate factors such as containing the threat

related to the presence of U.S. troops on the borders of the Persian country and the development of new security arrangements (convergence of Iranian and U.S. interests with the new Iraqi government).

HAIJI-YOUSEFI (2009), in his article *Whose Agenda is served by the Idea of a Shia Crescent?*, took up the idea that the troubled history of competition and mistrust that guided relations between Iran and the government of Iraq, as well as the relationship of the Persian country with the other countries of the region, were decisive for the formulation of a more cautious foreign policy from the point of view of formulating alliances and guaranteeing its national objectives, such as survival in a hostile regional environment. In this sense, the Iran-Iraq War, the apex of the problematic relations between neighboring countries, was interpreted by the analyst as a catalytic and definitive element for the defensive positioning of the Iranian leaders, because during the eight years in which the said war lasted Iran was isolated several times while the United Nations (UN), through the Security Council, it took more than two years to express some form of disapproval of the actions of Iraqi troops and call for the withdrawal of Saddam Hussein's troops from Iranian territory.

In view of the developments of the period after the invasion and occupation of Iraq by foreign troops and putting the aforementioned historical aspects into perspective, the author questioned the notion of an *Iranian-led Shia crescent* by arguing that at the time the said notion was introduced by the Jordanian government the Iranian leadership found themselves in a situation similar to that which occurred after the Islamic Revolution – in which international public opinion and foreign policymakers began to "feed" the idea of an ethno-religious divide with the Muslim community in order to isolate Iran – and sought alternatives to deal with possible threats to its security. Thus, among the preliminary reactions of the Tehran government were to contain and resist the hegemony of the United States in the region; improve or even intensify its ties with the countries around it; maintain its strategic partnership and support with Syria and maintain its nuclear program.

BARZEGAR (2008a; 2010a) corroborated the arguments of HAIJI-YOUSEFI (2009) about the defensive nature of Iranian politics and developed what he considered to be the main objectives and interests of the Persian country in view of its perceptions of the threats and opportunities in the regional scenario. From the point of view of formulating a foreign policy strategy, Iran has, over the decades, been influenced and "balanced" by two main elements: geopolitical reality and ideology. According to BARZEGAR (2008a) the Iranian geopolitical reality – an element that considers aspects such as the historical competition between Iran-Iraq-Saudi Arabia for regional power, ethnic rivalries and the performance of powers outside the region through local actors – associated with the political instability of the borders, considering in a larger spectrum the transformations in Iraq and Afghanistan, brought a component of pragmatism to Iranian regional policy, which was incorporated by the elite of the Persian country as a tendency to develop a positive and reasonable regional presence.

In this way, in view of the central objective of defending itself from possible threats of the new regional scenario, Iranian foreign policy has been refined on two main fronts, namely: the relationship with the so-called *Iraqi factions* and the *security dilemma with the United States*.

As for the first front, the relationship with the so-called *Iraqi factions*, it should be noted that in the years following the 2003 invasion the Shia communities in Iraq in the years following the 2003 invasion were – perhaps more than at other times in Iraqi history – divided from the perspective of themes related to recent reality, such as federalism (especially the reconfiguration of the notion of nationalism and the new contours of the central power of the state), the presence of U.S. troops on its national territory and the relationship with Iran in a more general aspect. In this way, Iran's relations with the different *Shia-oriented Iraqi factions* – such as the Supreme Islamic Council for Iraq, the Sadrists and Al Dawa – functioned as a kind of intersection point between the demands (short or long term) of the Iraqi factions and Iran.

Relations between Iran and the Sadrists, for example, took the form of short-term alliances, in view of the mutual perceptions of threats arising from the possible *empowerment of the* United States in Iraq and the total exclusion of Iran from the Iraqi political scene – an aspect that was opposed in view of the fact that such Iranian action was considered to be "beneficial" to the Sadrists interests of balance of political forces along with the new configuration of Iraqi power and for Iranian interests to forge a "friendly" and stable neighboring government despite all the developments that have occurred since 2003 – but there are experts, such as GAUSE (2009) who have questioned the so-called pragmatism of such relations and have been concerned to demonstrate their lack of solidity in the long term, since the principles and interests of both sides, especially because of the Arab nationalist component that the Sadrists have in their political spectrum, they would be incompatible (BARZEGAR, 2008a).

As for the second front, *the security dilemma with the United States*, Iranian perceptions of threats from the United States were mainly related to the policies developed by the George W. Bush administration, which generally tried to establish a new political and security order in the region through material elements (such as the question of the imposition of force as a way to effect regime change and the idea of establishing military bases in the Iraq) and non-material (such as the "creation" and support, for example, of Iraqi elites who accepted Western ideas of security for the region). Over the years following the 2003 invasion, Iran and the

United States observed themselves as *strategic enemies*, that is, the interests of both nations and their divergent projects for Iraq contributed to the instability of that country and consequently of the region.

In this sense, the formation of alliances of both parties with Iraqi political factions has been widely questioned: from a U.S. perspective, the regime change policies developed in Afghanistan and Iraq have benefited, from a geopolitical point of view, Iranian interests, and the new Iranian alliances with Iraqi Shiite factions (from moderate to radical) would seek only to expand Iranian power in the Gulf region by filling the power vacuum left by the government *Saddam's Baathist*. On the other way, from an Iranian perspective by supporting the *Iraqi Baathist and secularist* currents, the United States sought to balance Iran's role in the new Iraq and in the region as a whole (BARZEGAR, 2010a).

Throughout the first administration, Ahmadinejad's foreign policy (2005-2009) consisted of two complementary elements, namely: the formation of alliances and accommodation, both with roots in the geostrategic and ideological position of the Persian country, but now focused on a foreign policy approach aimed at political security by using alliances with Shiite groups in neighboring countries to deal with the perceived threat posed by the U.S. military presence on the borders Iranian nationals.

The perception of the U.S. and Persian Gulf countries of an increased Iranian presence in Iraq, especially after the empowerment of Shiite and Kurdish groups in the Iraqi government, and the existence of the Iranian nuclear program in addition to positioning the Persian country as a possible source of regional instability, have made the U.S. government seek, especially during the George W. Bush administration (2001-2009), to contain Iran's regional role and forge the foundations of the region's new power structure, mainly by reinforcing with Sunni governments the notion of the destructive role of the Persian country.

However, as BARZEGAR (2008b) argues, the desire of the Iranian leadership with regard to obtaining a more active presence in the region is the result of a perception of threats to Iranian security and interests, with defensive action oriented to the search and containment of possible threats, especially if we observe the Iranian Strategic Plan (2005-2025), which claims that the greatest duties of the Iranian political elite are the search for and containment of security threats, as well as the promotion of the country's economic and political development, that is, the rational foundations for Iranian action and presence in the region would be laid in this opportunity.

V. Conclusion

The Gulf's security agenda is complex and multifaceted because of intervening variables, of a diverse nature such as cultural and political, that operate in the decision-making of States. Among these variables, we highlight the concern, on the part of countries with mostly Sunni governments, to maintain national stability, both from the point of view of maintaining the state regime – according to the idea of regime security developed by GAUSE (2009) regarding the actions taken to keep a certain group in power – and the verification and performance of transnational identities operating in the Gulf, such as Iraqi Arab nationalism and Iranian revolutionary Shiism, and changes in American foreign policy in the region.

The Iraqi political crisis – resulting from the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the instability marked by conflicts between religious groups regarding the formulation of a new government – figured as a kind of turning point with respect to the perception of traditional threats to the security of the states that make up the said sub-region, mainly because of the displacement of a threat based on the military power projected by a state to threats of a different nature, as the transnational identity that Shiism represents, and brought the notion of threat related to the expansion of Shiism "guided by the interests of Tehran", since according to the point of view of the Sunni Arab elites Iran would use alliances with sympathetic Shia governments to project its hegemonic interests in the region. In addition, the possibility of the Persian country becoming capable of dictating security and energy policies, as well as intervening in domestic policies of neighboring governments on behalf of local Shiite communities, has sparked pressure on ways to contain Iran.

Taking as its initial premise the notion that the greatest consequence of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the so-called *empowerment of the* Shiites in the Persian Gulf countries and in the region, this article started from the discussions of experts who focused on understanding the various elements that constitute this movement, such as Iran's interests or objectives in the region and the "nature" of its foreign policy (offensive or defensive), the interests of the Sunni elites and the United States, as well as the consequences of the interests of the aforementioned actors for regional stability, to discuss the validity of such rhetoric.

As explained throughout the discussion proposed by this article about the various elements that constitute the emergence of Shiites in Middle East politics in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the main questions about the validity of the rhetoric of the Shia Crescent are: a) the conception of the Shiites as a single bloc; b) the nature of Iranian foreign policy, whether defensive or offensive, and its potential to destabilize the security architecture of the Gulf; and c) the goals of Arab countries ruled by Sunni elites in presenting Shiites as a transnational threat to regional stability and security.

As for the first question, *the conception of the Shiites as a single bloc*, based on the discussions of TERHALLE (2007), NASR (2006) and HAJI-YOUSEFI (2009) – developed throughout part two of this article – it was found that unlike this notion of oneness permeated by countries ruled mostly by Sunni elites and Western countries (such as the United States and the United Kingdom), the Shia communities in the Middle East, specifically in the Persian Gulf and Levant (considering Syria and Lebanon), are far from politically homogeneous and that they have, from the moderate to the extremist, their own views on how the government of their countries should be, in a broad sense.

Thus, two aspects are important for the understanding of such a reality. The first concerns nationalism, more specifically the notion of belonging to a nation-state and its political effects on the different confessional communities that compose it. In this sense, as argued by HAJI-YOUSEFI (2009), an interesting and important example for the formulation of Iranian foreign policy was precisely the Iran-Iraq War, in which some Shiite groups – which according to a perspective of religious uniqueness and a reductionist reasoning would unconditionally support their counterparts in the neighboring country – hierarchized according to importance the groups to which they belonged and placed the national feeling, being an Iraqi citizen, the front of religious sentiment and joined their *Baathist government* against Iran.

The second aspect relates to religion itself – with regard to the notions of source of power and doctrine – because within Islamic Shiism the political disputes around the role of *marja* (an influential role that due to its knowledge and qualities begins to grant advice and explanations on various topics to its Muslim followers) prevented the formation of a homogeneous bloc from the religious point of view and "confined" religious loyalties to the nation-state and political interests of each community. An example often used by analysts to exemplify the lack of political-religious cohesion of Shiites around the Middle East is the case of the dispute between Shia Islamic study circles in the cities of Nafaj (in Iraq) and Qom (in Iran) for the supreme power of such an Islamic current and the different ways in which these circles understand the role of clerics in the government.

In the post-2003 Iraqi context, for example, the Iraqi-based Iranian Ayatollah Ali Hussein al-Sistani came to be seen by Muslims and analysts in the region as a strong candidate for the role of *marja*, and also as a figure who could lead the formulation of a new Iraqi Shiite government that would maintain good (and contained) relations with Iran – especially if we observe that in his speeches in the period after the invasion the cleric demonstrated not sharing a notion of a theocratic government like Tehran's – and easing the religious tensions occasioned in the Muslim world. However, Al-Sistani's practical action in Iraq encountered obstacles and managed only for a time to contain sectarian violence (KHALAJI, 2006).

In addition, the resurgence of the Shiites at the beginning of the twenty-first century was directly related to the internal dynamics of the countries in which they were inserted, a fact that is hardly observed when a reductionist analysis to deal with the issue is developed. The Shia groups that operate in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, for example, as discussed by TERHALLE (2007) have their own agendas related to greater political representation in the country in which they are inserted, a demand that does not imply the dismantling of the structure of the State itself in favor of a specific sectarian group, but rather in the search for changes that allow local groups greater action.

It should also be noted, as BRÖNING (2008) announces, that although the sectarian or religious dimension is widely repeated and figures at the center of the rhetoric of the Shia crescent, the religious and political mosaic in the region (Persian Gulf and Levant) is complex; the groups have their own agendas – linked to the needs observed in their states – that separate them from those who would be their peers in the nation-state itself and in the other states, which directly questions the idea or perception of the existence of a uniform or monolithic Shiite bloc, which could go beyond national demands and interests and somehow unite the various Shia groups around a nation-state (in this case Iran) and their supposed interests.

As for the second question, *Iranian foreign policy and its potential to destabilize the Gulf security architecture*, although analysts differ as to the defensive or offensive "nature" of such a policy, the defensive aspects have tended to prevail among Iran's foreign policymakers. BARZEGAR (2008a; 2010a), HAJI-YOUSEFI (2009) and NASR (2006) tend to reinforce aspects such as Iran's troubled history with neighboring countries, marked by mutual distrust, and more immediate factors of the period after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, such as containing the threat related to the presence of U.S. troops on the borders of the Persian country and the development of new security arrangements (convergence of Iranian and U.S. interests with the new Iraqi government) to argue for the idea of a more pragmatic and defensive Iranian action.

It is also worth mentioning the assertion of NASR (2004) that the important challenges to the stability and security of the Persian Gulf and the region would be related to Sunni extremism, for example. In this sense, the author that Sunni militancy would have emerged in the region at a specific moment, marked by the ideological division of the Cold War (clash between the superpowers United States and Soviet Union), as a way to maintain balance of power in favor of the Sunnis, but the fall of Saddam Hussein altered the said balance. In the context of the post-2003 invasion Sunni militancy and *Wahhabi* activism (a current of Islam that declares

Shiites as heretics), not what he termed Shia *revolutionary fervor*, which would be the source of threat to U.S. interests in the region and regional stability (Gulf and Levant), since Sunni action was seen by the author as ascendant, violent and ideological, which in addition to being anti-Shia is anti-American.

As for the third question, *the objectives of the Arab countries ruled by Sunni elites in presenting the Shiites as a transnational threat to regional stability and security, an element that can assist in understanding the objectives and or interests of the Arab countries ruled by Sunni elites* in developing the Shia narrative in the symbolic field of regional threat is the notion of regime security, as argued by GAUSE (2009), in which the group that owns power in a given state seeks the means to secure its position and prevent the rise of its opponents, through the pursuit of national interests.

The resurgence of Shia communities in Iraq, especially after the 2005 elections, has raised concerns about the demands of these Shia populations (whether majority or minority) present in the Middle East to acquire or expand their social, political and economic rights, as well as the mobilization of the masses around the removal of Sunni governments and their subsequent replacement by new Shia-led governments. This action would cause an imbalance from the domestic and regional point of view between Sunnis and Shiites.

Moreover, the concern about Iran's expansion and influence on "Arab" issues underscores the importance accorded to the ideological dimension – with regard to the opposition between Shiism and Sunnism – by the countries that appropriated the narrative of the Crescent: Iran, considered a key player in the movement of resurgence of the Shiites, already figured for some Arab regimes, as is the case with the Saudi, as a dual threat because of its Persian and Shia character, and throughout the history of the Gulf the shared perception of such a threat towards the Persian country has been reinforced by national, ethnic, political-social and economic divisions, manipulated by some rulers and politicians to serve their immediate interests.

HAJI-YOUSEFI (2009) argues that, in a scenario in which the United States initiated the "Great Initiative for the Middle East" and the policy of promoting democracy in the Middle East, the Arab states ruled by autocratic regimes began to face a dilemma: on the one hand, they sought American security and protection, and on the other, they began to suffer internal pressures to make changes in their domestic and electoral politics. The latter would lead countries to internal instability, related to the demands of communities repressed by the regimes. In this way, some regimes – such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt – have latched on to recent developments in Iraq after the 2003 invasion and to draw international attention away from their democratic deficits have come to constantly mention their fears about the creation and expansion of the so-called Shiite Crescent. Part of these fears about such a move were dictated by geopolitical aspects, such as the competition for power in the region (power traditionally "balanced" between the main countries of the Persian Gulf) and Iranian rule, and aspects related to the legitimation of the existing regimes in the countries, taking as an example the idea of regime security that aimed to maintain the *status quo* the division of power, preventing the access of certain religious groups to power, and the question of a possible civil war between Sunnis and Shiites in the region.

Thus, it is possible to question that for the Arab regimes the main source of threat of the aforementioned Shiite Crescent would not be related to the rise of members of the said community to power in Iraq, but rather to the fear that the US pressure for the democratization of the region would reach their authoritarian regimes – some of them, such as the Saudi, For decades they figured as the main allies of the American country in the region and established a pragmatic relationship based on mutual interests – since the Shiite resurgence in the region clearly demonstrated the questioning of the legitimacy of the dominant Arab (mostly Sunni) governments.

The *empowerment* of Shia communities around the Middle East, far beyond what could be the intentions of a single nation-state (in this case Iran), was related to the regional developments that occurred after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the subsequent regime change, and to the national context in which Shia groups were inserted at the time. There seems to be a consensus that U.S. action in Iraq has indeed brought political and security changes to the region: the fall of Saddam Hussein's government has brought Iran the neutralization of a threat to its security, yet developments on Iraqi soil – especially the political strengthening of Shiite groups there – have brought countries like Jordan to the brink. Egypt and Saudi Arabia feared about the expansionist potential of Iranian policy towards Iraq and the region (Persian Gulf and Levant), which led to the formation and development of a dialectical movement, later endorsed by Western authorities (US and England), which positioned Iran as the center of regional instability in the Middle East. However, the validity of this rhetoric of the Shia crescent proves questionable after a deeper analysis of the aspects that are related to it, such as the nature of Iranian foreign policy (defensive or offensive) and the interests of the various Shia groups in the region.

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