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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Are Shias rising in the western part of the Arab world? The case of Morocco

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This article raises the question of whether Shias in the western part of the Arab world have also established political movements. For this, Morocco provides an interesting case as the country has inherited Shiite customs in the religious and cultural domain from the Idrisid dynasty and the monarchy still derives its legitimacy from a succession principle introduced by the Idrisids. However, the international community and probably most Moroccans seem to be unaware of this legacy as well as the existence of a marginalised Shiite community in dissimulation (*Taqiyya*). A theoretical approach, which is based on the current mainstream of international relations literature, is used to analyse the history of Shias in Morocco, forms of political, economic, and cultural discrimination as well as current Shiite elite politics in order to explain why no genuine political movement has emerged, so far, and to determine the likelihood of the formation of a Shiite political movement and resulting internal conflict. The article should thus be considered a theory-guided first step to open the doors for further enquiries into the subject.

Keywords: Morocco; Shia; Shiite rising; political movements; sectarian tension; discrimination; Moroccan history; international relations

In the aftermath of the US war on Iraq in 2003 and the resulting fights for political power inside the country, the question of a 'broad Shiite revival' (Nasr 2006), which might stimulate sectarian movements in various Arab countries, has become a central topic in the international media (e.g. Burke 2006; Moubayed 2005) as well as scientific community. And it was the Jordanian king Abdullah II., who, in December 2004, gave the fears of many Sunni rulers a name, when he spoke of a 'Shiite Crescent' in an interview with *The Washington Post* (Wright and Baker 2004).

With regard to the ongoing debate on the rise of political Shia'ism in the Middle East, this paper raises the question of whether Shias¹ in the West have formed movements to demand

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greater political participation in governing institutions, the abolition of economic discrimination, the enhancement of civil rights, to gain extensive religious freedoms and to even seek to secede from the states in which they live. This paper will conduct a case study on the Shiite population in Morocco with the aim of providing a limited answer to the question raised, and thus tries to throw some light on developments in a region that have so far been neglected by most international scholars. It should be noted here that all official statistics provided by Western governments do not even show a Shiite minority in Morocco (see Appendix) and our analysis suffers from a severe lack of reliable data on the Moroccan Shia. On this issue, extensive field research in Morocco to collect primary data still needs to be conducted. Unfortunately, we did not have the capabilities for performing this task. Thus, we are well aware that our analysis is moving on thin ice regarding the available information. However, we hope to open a door for further scientific enquiries into Shia'ism in Morocco.

The subject of political Shia'ism was on debate recently in the Moroccan press. Articles published by *Maroc Hebdo*, *TelQuel* online and *Le reporter* reflect two conflicting points of view. On the one hand, authors like Chadwane Bensalmia (2004) claim that a Shiite movement is timidly rising to the surface, again. In her article Bensalmia quotes the Moroccan sociologist and historian Mohammed El Ayadi who asserts that since Khomeini a new form of Shia'ism has risen in Morocco – a form that allegedly follows the sermons broadcasted by Hezbollah's radio station, *Al Manar*, as well as the ideas taught in Iraqi, Iranian, Lebanese, and Syrian universities, which were then brought into Morocco in the 1980s. Contrary to this, Saâd Bouachrine, another Moroccan expert known for his experience in analysing Shiite movements, states in an interview: 'I think that it is difficult to speak of a movement of Shiite Moroccans in Morocco, today. Because one can also not say that they have a clear political vision. [...] They merely borrow their ideas from different sources' (Mokhliss and Hamraoui 2007, p. 5; own translation from French). We believe it is more reasonable to assume the latter without denying that 'a general trend in the Gulf of a rise in Shiite politics' (Zahid and Zweiri 2007, p. 14), resulting from Shia empowerment in a democratic Iraq (as well as Bahrain) and Iran's growing importance in international affairs, can be observed. Instead, we will argue that this is not and probably will not be the case in the western part of the Arab world and a general hysteria is therefore inept. Our analysis will substantiate this assumption by showing that the general preconditions for the development of a Shiite political movement in Morocco are only given to a very limited extent and the few approaches by Shiite elites have not been successful so far.

The following section will start with a theoretical approach, which is based on the current mainstream of international relations (IR) literature in political sciences, identifying preconditions and acute causes for the outbreak of intra-state conflicts. At the end of that section we will present our hypothesis drawn from the theoretical reflections. We will then test these hypotheses as far as possible considering the lack of preceding research. The analysis will start with an overview of the long Shiite history in Morocco. Thereby we will show that, on the one hand, Shiite culture has had an impact on the Moroccan society since the ninth century, which should allow an easy integration into the Sunni-dominated Moroccan society. But on the other hand, Shias have also suffered from severe oppression, which would rather create an opposing stance towards the governing authorities. We will then look for indicators of economic, political and social discrimination against Shias as well as their current geographic distribution to further determine, if Shias do have incentives to take action. The analysis ends with a short look at the activities of Shiite elites in Morocco as well as external elite influence on the Moroccan Shias.

Finally, the concluding section will sum up our findings suggesting that, no joint political movement has emerged so far in Morocco. This is mostly due to the fact that despite a long history of oppression, Shias today do not suffer from any form of discrimination that is particularly directed against them. Besides that, most Shias still practice *Taqiyya*, which means they hide their faith from their social environment for their own protection – a conduct that is legitimised by their faith when they have to be afraid of persecution or abuse by their social environment. We will further argue that the 2003 Casablanca suicide bombings provoked a strict backlash by the Moroccan authorities targeting in particular members of the fundamental Islamist political opposition. As a consequence, the general conditions for a new Islamic political movement to emerge – not to mention a Shiite movement with suspected ties to Iran or the Lebanese Hezbollah – are currently rather unfavourable. Moreover, the Moroccan Shia appears to be a statistically small minority spread over vast parts of the country, which hinders the creation of a single strongly cohesive group. However, the external influence of the Lebanese Hezbollah could inspire more Shias to abandon their life in dissimulation.

Why 'ethnic' groups rise – a theoretical approach

We are well aware that the term 'ethnicity', which is used in much of the international literature dealing with intra-state conflicts, is heavily disputed. However, we want to make use of the insights international scholars have gained in that field of research. With regard to our project, we will focus on religion as the only characteristic that is used to construct a common group identity for its members. Brown (1997) distinguishes between underlying factors or 'permissive causes' as the basic precondition for the outbreak of intra-state conflicts and short-term 'proximate causes' that eventually work as catalysts which trigger open conflicts. For the underlying causes, he identifies a set of four groups of factors:

- (1) Structural factors include state weakness, internal security problems, and the so-called 'ethnic geography'
- (2) Political factors are discriminatory political institutions, exclusionary national ideologies, mutually exclusive inter-group politics with confronting strategies as well as elites willing to exploit unstable political conditions for their personal aims
- (3) Economic or social factors such as economic problems, discriminatory economic systems or economic development and modernisation
- (4) Cultural or perceptual factors like patterns of cultural discrimination and problematic group histories

Another important point, which is stressed by Brown (1997, p. 20) for the possibility of using ethnicity to mobilise supporters, are antagonistic group histories. Therefore, our analysis also has to focus on historical events that were likely to fuel antagonism or at least influence mutual perceptions between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Of the past 50 years, two such events stand out: the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the Iraq war in 2003. For that reason the second part of our analysis will concentrate on the living conditions of Shias from the 1980s to today with a special focus on the past seven years.

There is a large debate among international scholars about the relevance of 'ethnic geographies' for conflicts to break out. It should be noted, that ethnic minorities can presently be found in the overall majority of states but only in a few cases violence between ethnically defined groups has occurred. Some of the more recent studies even tend to downplay the role of religious or ethnic diversity – as well as political and economic discrimination – at all by

referring to statistical evidence that stresses economic opportunity structures as the best determinant for civil wars to occur (Fearon and Laitin 2003). But other economists such as Collier *et al.* (2003, p. 57) state that 'substantial ethnic and religious diversity significantly reduces the risk of civil war'. By contrast, Nicholas Sambanis (2000, p. 280) finds that violent identity conflicts are caused by 'grievance', i.e. political discrimination, and that 'ethnic heterogeneity is significantly and positively correlated with the onset of ethnic war'.² However, probably the most evident statistical finding is, again, provided by Collier *et al.* (2003, p. 57) and Collier and Hoeffler (2001, pp. 7–13). In case of 'ethnic dominance', which means that the largest ethnic group forms an absolute majority in the society, the conflict risk is almost doubled.³ Lastly, Brown (1997, p. 7) assumes that 'countries with highly intermingled populations are less likely to face secessionist demands because ethnic groups are not distributed in ways that lend themselves to partition'.

As the factor ethnic heterogeneity has proven to be inconsistent, our depiction of Morocco's 'religious geography' will focus on the degree of religious commingling, which we can only estimate by looking at the current geographic dispersion of Shias in Morocco, as well as a possible 'religious dominance' to observe.

As noted above, Sambanis shows that political discrimination is important with regard to identity conflicts. Gurr (2001) emphasises that economic, political and cultural discrimination furthers the will of individuals to take part in collective actions of their identity group – in particular when disadvantages are perceived as collective *vis-à-vis* other groups (p. 169f.). In order to follow Gurr's arguments, we will look for indicators of economic, political and cultural discrimination against Shias. We will do so by referring to established indexes on economic and human development as well as political liberties to draw an overall picture of the situation in Morocco.

In the short run, internal conflicts, which in most cases implies the resort to violence, can either be driven by certain policies of internal or external elites playing the 'ethnic card' (i.e. stressing ethnic differences to gain support), or crisis in the home country as well as neighbouring countries that affect a broad mass of people (Brown 1997). We thus have to try and identify Shiite elites or leaders, who are endowed with the potential of finding popular support, as well as the policies they are following – in particular with regard to alliances with foreign groups (Hezbollah in Lebanon) or powerful states (Iran). In this way, we will examine possible proximate causes that might trigger stronger political action by Shias in the future.

From the theoretical arguments mentioned, the following hypotheses can be drawn:

- (1) A long record of oppressing Shias is likely to fuel antagonism among Shias against their (Sunni) oppressors. It then constitutes a common group identity and can thus be used to mobilise popular support from Moroccan Shias for political aims. However, more recent experiences of mutual respect and practical agreements in everyday life are likely to prevent the formation of or dismantle existing antagonistic group identities. Furthermore, the Iranian Revolution and the events following the 2003 Iraq war have probably had an impact on Sunni–Shiite relations causing tension – at least temporarily.
- (2) Collective political, economic and social discrimination against Shias strengthens Shiite unity and makes political action by Shiite organisations more likely.
- (3) If Shiite and Sunni communities are clearly separated from each other, secessionist efforts by the Shiite minority or rather sectarian tension because of Sunni fears are likely to be observed when the former suffers from severe discrimination. Besides that, religious dominance by the Sunni Muslims forces Shias to make stronger demands for their security.

- (4) Foreign support for Shiite organisations in Morocco promotes active political engagement of the latter. However, support by Iran or the *Hezbollah* as well as (loose) ties of Moroccan Shiite leaders with these cause severe tension as they spark fears among the Sunni majority – and the Moroccan government, of course.

We want to support our theoretical arguments by referring to the example of the Shiite movements in Saudi Arabia. In our opinion, the comparison of the Moroccan situation with the one in Saudi Arabia is justified by the fact that both states have a long history of Sunni dominance over a Shiite minority and both states supported Wahhabi Islamists in order to counter influences of the Iranian Revolution on their Shiite population – or rather Saudi Arabia backed up the Moroccan monarchy (after 1979) which in turn had to open the doors for Wahhabi Islamists. The *Minority At Risk Data Project* (MAR), which was initiated by Ted Gurr, captures the Saudi Arabian Shia as such a threatened minority:

Shi[as] in Saudi Arabia are currently subject to a plethora of political, cultural, and economic discriminatory policies. They are sharply restricted against political organizing, do not have a right to free expression, face employment discrimination in both the public and private sectors, and are restricted from equal access to the Saudi police/military or high office [...]. Members of the Shi[ite] minority are also the objects of officially sanctioned religious discrimination. [...] The Saudi government also has undertaken repressive actions by randomly taking Shi[ite] sheikhs into custody for violating so-called restrictions on Shi[ite] religious practices [...]. [...] In the economic realm, Shi[as] are much worse off than the rest of Saudi Arabia's Sunni population. They are socially excluded from better jobs and receive less government funding. (MAR 2003)

A 2005 report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) confirms the MAR results on discrimination and gives further evidence supporting our assumptions. The Shiite community constitutes between 10 and 15% of the Saudi Arabian population and mostly lives in the (oil-rich) Eastern Province, where they form a demographic majority. Besides that, around 100,000 Ismaili Shias live close to the Yemeni border. Thus, one can reasonably assume that a deeper analysis would confirm the religious geography and dominance hypothesis in terms of the link between population dispersion and secessionist or at least sectarian tension. Historically, Shias in the Arabian Peninsula were almost continually ruled by foreign Sunnis and, as the ICG (2005, p. i) states, the Saudi Arabian Shia has been 'subject to discrimination and sectarian incitement' since the establishment of the state in 1932. The report also indicates that sectarian tensions between Sunni (Wahhabi) and Shiite Muslims severely intensified as a result of the both, the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and even more so the 2003 Iraq War. On the one hand these events encouraged some Saudi Arabian, or rather exiled Shiite elites to press for political action while on the other hand it increased Sunni suspicion.

Considering all of these factors, it is not astonishing that the first Shiite underground movement was formed in the middle of the 1970s (the Organization for Islamic Revolution) and two strong Islamist movements (the Reform Movement and the Saudi Hezbollah also known as Followers of the Line of the Imam) with popular support as well as marginal traditionalist and liberal secular currents have emerged by today. As political organisations or societies are prohibited by the Saudi Arabian authorities, one rather has to regard the Islamist movements as informal networks of activists and followers, who share common beliefs, political aims and ideologies, and who are led by prominent clergy members. They oppose the Saudi government and either seek to address the grievances of their constituency through moderate political action and media pressure (i.e. the Reform Movement's more conciliatory approach) or isolate themselves because of disrespect for the monarchy and government as a whole and occasionally

challenge the regime with violent means (Hezbollah). The characteristics of these political movements (informal networks led by a clergy member or other elite, regime opposition, common programme or political aims, popular support or large constituency, non-violent or violent political action) should be kept in mind as we now turn to the case of Morocco.

History of Shias in Morocco

As Table 1 (Appendix) shows, most Western sources do not even capture that there is a Shiite minority in Morocco. The complete neglect of Shiite communities and culture in Morocco could be due to ignorance or rather lack of precise historical analysis of the developments that have lead to the spread of Shiite Islam in the Maghreb. This is expressed by Dr Husain Munis who states that 'The Idrisid State still needs a person who should write their history and defines its role in the development of Al-Maghrib' (cited al-Amin 2007). Of course, this section cannot produce such an account and rather struggles to spotlight important events in the history of the Moroccan Shia. All events presented in the following section are dated in terms of Common Era (CE or rather AD).

After the Umayyads had introduced (Sunni) Islam in Morocco in 683 and had been followed by the Abbasids in 750, Imami Shia'ism was spread from 788 on with the arrival of Idris ibn Abd Allah. Being a Zayyid Shia, Idris was persecuted by the Abbasids and fled to the Maghreb in 786 where he won the support of dissident Berber tribes who embraced him as their Imam and mostly converted to Shiite Islam. With their support, Idris managed to establish the first autonomous Islamic state in Morocco and became known as the founder of the Idrisid dynasty (790–974/985). The line of succession to the throne was hence regulated by the *sharifian* tradition which is based on the descent from the Prophet's family through Muhammad's daughter Lalla Fatima. From our point of view, this principle of the Maliki school of Islam obviously resembles a core characteristic of Shiite Islam, namely, the succession order of Shiite Imams.

Until his death in 791, Idris I. enlarged the Idrisid realm conquering neighbouring as well as remote areas of Al-Maghrib and Al-Awsat. It is also said that Idris I. introduced the Shiite faith in places which so far had not been reached by Islam. His son Idris bin Idris (Idris II), who ruled from 791 to 828, then built the city of Fez in northern Morocco at the river Fez as a new and more attractive capital and royal residence. The city then became a major centre for Islamification. Idris II further expanded the realm by subjugating the cities of Nafis and Aghmat and finally taking away most of Algiers and Morocco from the Abbasids. In this way, the Idrisid kingdom became the most important power in Morocco and in more idealistic terms the Idrisids can be regarded as the founders of the modern Moroccan state. Besides that, the Idrisid dynasty was the first that incorporated Berbers as well as Arabs in its reign.

In the second half of the ninth century the Idrisid realm increasingly came under strain due to internal power struggles on the one hand and the external challenges by the rising Fatimid dynasty and its allied Berber tribes – in particular the Miknasa – located in the Idrisid state. The Fatimid dynasty (909–1171) had been founded by the leader of the Isma'ili sect, Abdullah al-Mahdi or Ubaydallah, as he was called by Sunni leaders. The Isma'ilis started as a Shiite revolutionary underground movement, based in Syria, which had slowly won popular support throughout the Muslim world in the late eighth and ninth centuries. Al-Mahdi had also allied with local Berber tribes in order to conquer the Aghlabid Empire in North Africa in 909 and to establish a Fatimid Caliphate in the Maghrib.⁴ After the overthrow of the Ikhshidid dynasty in Egypt, the Fatimids, in 969, build Cairo as their new capital from which they challenged the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. Between 917 and 920 the Idrisids suffered defeats

by the Fatimids in the struggle for Fez and finally left their capital forever in 926. With the support of the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba the Idrisid dynasty survived until 985 and was replaced in Morocco by the Maghrawa, a Berber tribe put in control by the Umayyads.

It goes without saying that the Idrisid dynasty as well as Fatimid policies in Morocco had a great impact on the country's culture and must have left a Zayid or Isma'ili footprint in Morocco's religious society. Several accounts posted on homepages like www.imamreza.net and www.ismaili.net stress the conversion of non-Muslim Berber tribes to Islam as one of the most remarkable deeds the Idrisids and Fatimids have performed. Or as David Hart (2001, p. 84) puts it, local Berbers could easily hook into the Idrisid genealogy. But in order to do the more precise genealogical analysis of Hart justice, we have to add that the actual impact of the Idrisid cult on Moroccan culture and its idealisation only occurred five centuries after the downfall of the Idrisid dynasty under Marinid rule. Hart (2001, p. 83) dates the origin of Idrisid resurrection to the year 1437 when the remains of Idris II. were discovered during repair works at the Qarawiyn mosque in Fez and he was subsequently reburied. As a result, a significant number of Idrisid descendants gained '*de facto* religious control over all of Morocco north of Fez' (p. 84) and their religious influence was arguably bigger than during the earlier Idrisid dynasty itself. But this does not challenge the validity of our argument that the Shiite Idrisids have shaped the Moroccan culture from the very beginning to a high degree. There also was a short revival of Idrisid reign following the revolt of Fez in 1465 but it only lasted for six years and the Idrisids were unable to found another dynasty.

After the Idrisid dynasty, Morocco was divided into smaller kingdoms until it was reunited by the Almoravids (1062–1145), who were followed by the Almohads (1145–1248), the Marinids (1248–1465), the Sa'dians (1554–1660), and, finally, the 'Alawids (1660–present). According to the Yasin 'Abd al-Salam (date unknown), a prominent religious Sufi leader in Morocco and founder of the Sufi Islamist *Al-Adl wal-Ihsan* movement, the *sharifian* principle introduced by Idris I. was taken over by most of the succeeding Sunni Muslim dynasties: 'Every dynasty which has ruled Morocco – with the exception of the Almoravid[e]s and the Almohad[e]s – has claimed descent from the Prophet and followed a Shi[ite] political model'. With regard to the 'Alawids in power it should be added that they are indeed *shurfa*' (of *sharifian* descent) but this lineage emerged much later than the Idrisid one (24 generations after Prophet Muhammad's daughter compared to the six generations of the Idrisid point of fission). But the 'Alawids have emphasised their *sharifian* status since they gained control of Morocco in 1666 and have proven to be the most competent holders of political power – despite their lack of idealist-religious power in comparison to the Idrisid achievements (see Hart 2001). As we will later see, it is important to stress that the Moroccan 'Alawid monarchy has taken over and maintained the Maliki school of Islam which embraces the King as *Amir al-Mouminin* ('Commander of the Faithful') and claims direct descent from the *Ahl al-Bayt* (the family of the Prophet Muhammed).

'Abd al-Salam also reports that the Almoravids strived for a purified Islam and used coercive means to convert pagans, Christians and so-called 'heretical' Muslims. He further reports that by 1054, those Shias who refused to practice their religion clandestinely (*Taqiyya*) had been killed and that persistent persecution forced the Moroccan Shia to go underground until today. In fact, according to Mokhliss and Hamraoui (2007), *Taqiyya* (dissimulation) is one of the founding principles of Morocco's Shiite community and thus still in practice today (p. 2). We want to note that we cannot prove the accuracy of al-Salam's accounts but we rather consider him an important primary source reflecting a pro-Shiite point of view.

In summary, the historical survey we have just presented shows that the Moroccan state has in fact inherited a Shiite legacy whereas the history since the downfall of the Idrisids – from

a Shiite perspective – has been marked to a high degree by suppression of Shiite believers. When used to construct a common group identity for the Moroccan Shias, a common history of oppression is very much likely to promote the creation of antagonistic perceptions of self and other. A strong sense of solidarity among group members would be the result, which should make the emergence of a political movement more likely. However, a genuine political Shiite movement has to date not been observed. To explain this, we now turn to the analysis of more recent historical events and the current situation of the Moroccan Shias.

The impact of the Iranian Revolution

In 1984, pressure on Shias reached a peak in Morocco as a consequence of the Iranian Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini's announcement to export the revolution. The Islamic conference held in Casablanca in 1984 and public pro-Khomeini manifestations were followed by mass arrests and a *fatwa* issued by the Moroccan Sunni *ulema*, which denounced Khomeini of being an infidel. Before, the Moroccan government, seeking for help to counter the influence of the Iranian Revolution on its subjects (as well as financial assistance for its war on the *Polisario*), had turned to Saudi Arabia. In an article published in the Jamestown Foundation's *Terrorism monitor*, Pargeter (2005) reports that Saudi Arabia 'began to channel significant funds into Morocco and developed institutions to spread their own propaganda including setting up Qu'ranic schools and charitable organisations' (p. 6). Consequently, Saudi scholars had come to dominate the *ulema*. Yasin 'Abd al-Salam reports that 'a full-scale propaganda campaign against Shi[a]'ism was launched on the country's state-controlled media' with Saudi support and that 'Wahhabi theorists rejected the modern open Malikism of Morocco and denounced Sh[i]ites as apostates'. Finally, when Shias witnessed the harsh sentences against the Bahá'ís in 1986, they either practiced a stricter form of *Taqiyya* or moved to Iran. The situation for Shias in Morocco only seemed to gradually improve with the passing of the Moroccan Constitution in 1996, granting them the freedoms of religious practice, expression and association.

Before we turn to the analysis of current discriminatory practices against Shias, we want to mention that, contrary to our hypothesis, no direct impact of the Iraq war on the Moroccan society with regard to the Shiite issue can be observed. This may be due to the fact that the war coincides with the Casablanca suicide bombings, which had a more direct effect, as well as the bigger geographic distance from Iraq, which makes spillover effects very unlikely.

Economic, political and cultural discrimination against Shias

Article 13 of Morocco's 1996 constitution guarantees 'equal rights in seeking education and employment' (KoM 1996) to all citizens. Apart from that, we were not able to determine any form of open economic discrimination against Shias. On the contrary, the accounts posted by a blogger named Sarah Zaaimi (2007) and 'Abd al-Salam do not support the discrimination supposition. Moroccan Shias rather seem to be well-off intellectuals: 'The majority of Shi[as] of Morocco are highly educated and young, rarely reaching 40 years of age. They are engineers, medical doctors, lawyers, business men, teachers, and students' (al-Salam).

With regard to our theoretical assumptions, low economic development and modernisation problems can generally be underlying causes for intra-state conflicts to emerge. Morocco is categorised as a lower-middle income economy by the World Bank (2007) and ranked 126 out of 177 in the 2005 Human Development Index (UNDP 2007a) thus showing medium human development. According to World Bank data provided by the UNDP (2007b), Morocco reached the

highest GDP at PPP per capita value since 1975 in 2005. However, with US\$4555 the PPP calculations for Morocco are higher than those for Egypt (US\$4337) but lower than those of its neighbour Algeria (US\$7062) and troubled Middle Eastern countries like Lebanon (US\$5584) or Jordan (US\$5530). Indeed, recent economic problems pose a severe threat to social cohesion in Morocco. The economy largely consists of agricultural, industrial manufacturing, tourism and mining activities. Although it is fairly stable, it has suffered from lower growth rates than those needed to significantly reduce the high levels of unemployment and poverty. As the African Development Bank's Country Strategy Paper 2003–2005 for Morocco highlights in its executive summary, 'youth unemployment, especially young graduates, is a major challenge and an immediate cause for social concern for Morocco. The unemployment rate for youths aged 15 to 24 years reached 33.7% in 2002' (AfDB 2003, p. i). And the 2006 draft for the subsequent strategy paper 2007–2011 indicates that young people aged 15 to 34 made up 78.7% of unemployed city dwellers in 2004 (AfDB 2006, p. i). Thus, one can reasonably assume that ideologies, which challenge the Moroccan state and the economic policies it has pursued since 1993, should generally have a high potential to mobilise popular support among young Moroccans. In fact, there are indicators that the influential Moroccan Sufi Islamist association *Al-Adl wal-Ihsan* ('Justice and Spirituality' or 'Justice and Charity') is trying to make use of the economic crisis. In an interview (Hackensberger 2006), the spokeswoman of *Al-Adl wal-Ihsan*, Nadia Yassine, openly criticised the current capitalist world economic system and opposed that at a simple form of trade capitalism with a sense for justice had dominated at the beginning of Islam. The organisation is not legal but tolerated by the authorities. Yassine, who is the daughter of the organisation's founder and spiritual and political leader, Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine (or Yasin 'Abd al-Salam), also votes for the abolishment of the constitutional monarchy. However, the movement has so far only opted for moderate social and political reforms and refuses violent means. Chris Zambelis (2006b) argues that the association 'is banned from formally participating in Moroccan politics because of its longstanding opposition to the monarchy' (p. 3).

In a similar way, the Shiite organisation *Al Ghadir* requested official recognition from the Moroccan authorities in 2002 (US Department of State 2004). The organisation, which was founded by Mouhssine Hani, the younger brother of the disputed spiritual Shiite leader Dris Hani, was the first Shiite association that asked for political recognition. However, it has so far not received any response. But according to the latest *Religious freedom report* released by the US State Department (2007), the Moroccan government now 'recognizes the presence of a Shi[ite] Muslim community'. Furthermore, the report underlines that neither restrictions on religious activities of Shiite Muslims nor any discrimination based on religious practice in general were observed. One can thus hardly argue that *Al Ghadir* has not been recognised because it is a Shiite organisation. As the treatment of *Al-Adl wal-Ihsan* shows, the monarchy rather seems to maintain a cautious stance towards more fundamental Islamist political movements and political opposition in general. On the one hand the authorities deny those groups official and legal recognition, but on the other hand they appear to tolerate political activities as long as these do not openly put the government's legitimacy into question. There is a lot of evidence that supports this assumption. An article in the *Morocco Times* concluded that in spite of the political reform process and increasing public participation in politics, 'opposition groups in Morocco continue to face serious obstacles, especially when they directly criticise the institution of the monarchy or other government policies' (*Morocco Times*, 25 May 2006, cited Zambelis 2006a, p. 5).

From a more general scientific perspective the level of political freedom has gradually improved since the 1960s but according to the *Polity IV Index* Morocco remains on the

authoritarian side of the political spectrum. The index measures the degree of democratic accessibility of a political system on a scale from -10 (strongly autocratic) to $+10$ (strongly democratic). Morocco has moved from a value of -9 in 1965 to -7 in 1999 and remained on -6 from 1998 to 2003 (WRI 2005). Unfortunately, no data is available for the following years. But the 2005 country report released by Freedom House indicates that human rights protection was still limited due to the anti-terrorism law that has been in place since the 2003 Casablanca suicide bombings and opposition parties were weakened by the government's crackdown on suspected Islamic extremists (Freedom House 2005). The latest Amnesty International report estimates the authorities' anti-terror efforts with 200 arrests and charges of suspected Islamist activists resulting in many doubtful convictions and two death sentences and charges against more than 500 *Al-Adl wal-Ihsan* members for belonging to an unauthorised organisation (AI 2007). Yasin 'Abd al-Salam stresses that the government initially after the attacks suspected Shias to be the assassins and ordered to investigate against six Shiite PJD members. However, we do not have any evidence that suggests that Shias served as scapegoats apart from Salam's report. But his account indicates a feeling or perception of not being treated equally by the authorities, which would explain again, why most Shias still practice *Taqiyya*.

Apart from the harsh prosecution of suspected radical opponents, the Moroccan authorities have been pursuing a successful policy of integrating the moderate Islamist opposition, namely, the Party for Justice and Development (PJD). According to Werenfels (2005), who is working for the German Institute of International Politics and Security, the authorities have pursued a strategy of 'domesticating' Islamists since the middle of the 1990s. However, the authorities launched a zero tolerance strategy against the radical spectrum in the aftermath of the Casablanca bombings (p. 14). Especially after 2003, the PJD has strongly restrained itself. Although it should be noted that it developed from the broader and more radical social Movement for Unification and Reform (MUR) into a political opposition party, the PJD can today be viewed as the collecting tank of moderate Islamists of all Muslim branches. According to Yasin 'Abd al-Salam, an article in the daily *Assabah* asserted in 2003 that more than 50 Shias had taken part in the movement's first assembly, which was immediately denied by the aforementioned Saâd Bouachrine. However, al-Salam as well as Bensalmia (2004) claim that the PJD publication *Al Asr* had included a column by Dris Hani. We do not have the means to prove these assertions. However, it does not seem very unlikely that Shias participate in a moderate movement that is recognised and held accountable by the palace. At least, al-Salam's account indicates that Shias do have the (limited) opportunity to engage in Moroccan politics.

It has already been mentioned that no forms of social abuse resulting from a particular religious practice was observed. Monitoring all activities of mosques and Islamic organisations, the Moroccan authorities, and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments in particular, only sanction those activities they 'deemed to have exceeded the bounds of religious practice and become political in nature' (US State Department 2007). Again, it does not seem plausible that Shias are the target of well-directed discrimination. There is a variety of commercial products like sound, film and data carriers and above all literature available to Shiite believers in Morocco. Literature is available in bookstores throughout Casablanca, Rabat, and Marrakesh and Iranian and Lebanese publishers were reportedly allowed to offer books on the International Book Fair in Casablanca. One convert, who holds a diploma in management, even opened a specialised bookstore in Casablanca in 1999. However, Shias still practice their religion clandestinely because they fear repression in the Sunni-dominated country (Bernichi 2007, p. 28; Mokhliss and El Hamraoui 2007, p. 2). On the other hand, Sunni Islam has taken over a couple of aspects from Shiite Islam during the centuries. Above all, both communities as well

as the monarchy itself are traditionally adherents of the Maliki school of Islam. It is therefore no surprise that Sunni as well as Shiite Muslims commemorate 'Ashura in Morocco whereas Shias in Saudi Arabia had to struggle for their right to mourn. The fact that Shias still practice *Taqiyya* might thus be rather due to a tradition centuries old and suspicion, or fears of attacks from Salafist extremists. But it has to be added that, according to Bouachrine, that there are no Shiite *hussainiyats* (sacred places to commemorate the tragedies of descendants from the Prophet) in Morocco (Mokhliss and Hamraoui 2007, p. 4). We cannot provide an answer to the question of whether the Moroccan authorities have denied Shias *hussainiyats*, but we will show in the following section that it is more reasonable to consider the fact that the community is too small and that the Shia'ism in Morocco differs from the Shia'ism in the Middle East as a valid explanation.

The religious geography

The analysis of Morocco's current Shiite geography is subject to severe constraints. First and most important of all, no official numbers or estimates exist about the Moroccan Shias.⁵ To get a vague idea, we can only refer to the information which was posted on 20 January 2007 by the Moroccan blogger Sarah Zaaimi (2007):

[...] Moroccan Shia[s] today are a bunch of intellectuals, not more that 50 persons. Most of them received their education in Lebanon or Iraq or were influenced by the writings of the French thinker Henry Corbin or of Khomeini's Political Islam's ideology. Moroccan Shia[s] are mostly located in Rabat, Marrakech, Fez and Northern Regions, but they have no spiritual leader (Marji Ataklid). They follow Iraqi or Iranian Spiritual guides most of the time, as I deduced from my discussion with many of them.

Second, it seems impossible to even determine which Shiite branches do exist. On the contrary, Bouachrine states that there are no different sorts of Shiite schools in present-day Morocco and that all known forms of Shiite rites can be practiced in Morocco, but there is little reason to do so, for Shias are few in numbers (Mokhliss and El Hamraoui 2007, pp. 4–6). Bouachrine further claims that depending on the individual connection with the beliefs, different forms of Shia'ism can be observed. They can thus be Shias in a cultural, political, or ethnical sense or just because of an entire religious conviction. Bouachrine's argument is that it depends on their perception of Shia'ism, which is in turn constructed by the different channels the individual receives his information from. There are cultural channels like Shiite magazines, religious influences by Iraqi, Iranian and Syrian religious schools (*hauzat*), which incidentally suggests that Moroccan Shias today are probably Twelvers rather than Zaidis or Ismailis, satellite channels like *Al Manar* and *Al Alam* broadcasting political propaganda, and with regard to literature that furthers an ethnic understanding of Shia'ism, a small number of specialised home-made editions can be found at the Casablanca Book Fair. Besides that, two other factors make it difficult to determine the nature of Shia'ism in Morocco. A lot has already been said about the practice of *Taqiyya*. But Shia'ism has also been able to enter Morocco through Sufi gates and by directly promoting Sufism (in the development of which the Idrisids played an important part; see Hart 2001), the Moroccan state, though having treated Shia'ism as a heresy, has also indirectly supported Shias. This might also be the reason for the positive depiction of Moroccan Shias by Yasin 'Abd al-Salam. In either way, Shia'ism in Morocco seems to differ substantially from Middle Eastern Shia'ism and the fact that Sunnis and Shias celebrate holidays like 'Ashura and 'Id al-Mawlid together further indicates that religious divisions seem to have blurred.

All of these reasons make it difficult to identify the exact number, forms and location of the Moroccan Shias. We will therefore use the information quoted and the location of several Shiite organisations that can be identified as a proxy for the geographical distribution of Shias in Morocco. Three religious organisations were named by all sources: *Attawassoul* in al-Hoceima, *Al Inbiaat* in Tangiers, and *Al Ghadir* in Meknes ('Abd al-Salam 2007; Bensalmia 2004; Mokhliss and El Hamraoui 2007; Bernichi 2007). Additionally, al-Salam claims that 'other associations are being organised discreetly in Agadir, Marrakesh, and Tetouan, without revealing their religious affiliation'. Finally, a report by Loubna Bernichi (2007, p. 29) on Shiite terrorists in Morocco names *Hijra wa Takfir* and *Assirat al-Moustakim* as two fundamentalist, violent groups with Shiite tendency which have evolved in Sidi Moumen, a commune in the suburbs of Casablanca.

A quick look on the map corresponds with the information posted by Zaaïmi. Interestingly, it also corresponds with Hart's (2001, pp. 84–87) assumption on the present localities of Idrisid lineages. By 1437, the assumed year of Idrisid resurrection, Idrisid lineages were mainly located in northern Morocco but had also spread over vast and more southern parts of the country and Hart claims that the Idrisid kins have probably persisted in the locations mentioned until today.

The map shows that three of the organisations named are located on the northern coasts of Morocco (*Attawassoul*, *Al Inbiaat* and the one in Tetouan). With *Al Ghadir* in Meknes (south-west of Fez) and the far more southern organisations in Marrakech (where the body of the important Idrisid Sufi movement leader Sidi Muhammad bin Sulayman al-Jazuli was placed after his death in 1465) and Agadir, one cannot reasonably assume that Shiite and Sunni communities are regionally separated from each other. Secessionist tensions should thus be not very likely. Furthermore, the religious dominance assumption can hardly be applied, either, as Shias practice *Taqiyya* and their number seems to be insignificantly small. The fact that a small number of Shias seems to be spread over large parts of the country could be one more part of the explanation for why no cohesive movement has been observed, so far.

Current elite politics

The preceding sections have shown that despite a long history of oppressing Shias in Morocco, the general economic, political, and social situation of the dispersed Shiite community is not very likely to cause the emergence of a joint political movement. Sarah Zaaïmi (2007) provides another interesting and quite reasonable explanation. She reports that Moroccan Shias actually aimed at forming a regular theopolitical movement during a meeting in Tangier. This attempt failed however, due to 'different interests and perspectives'. Furthermore, it is very difficult to determine, who the Shiite intellectuals and elites are as most of them prefer to stay anonymous. The only noteworthy exception is Dris Hani, who in December 2002 gave an interview that was published in the *Maroc Hebdo*. According to Yasin 'Abd al-Salam, Hani stated that he considered Morocco to be a Shiite country and that Shia'ism was the rule leaving Sunnism as the exception. Hani is said to have argued that there was no need to make Morocco a Shiite country, because it already was one. Reportedly, he also hoped that the community could create a political party like the Lebanese Hezbollah, but adapted to the Moroccan reality. As a reaction to pressure from the authorities, Hani withdrew many of his statements and has since then issued moderate statements promoting Islamic ecumenism and the unity of all Muslims (ibid. and Al Arabia 2007b). He considers Sunnism and Shia'ism as two complementary currents of Islam based

on the same fundamental beliefs. This shows that Hani has taken a conciliatory stance at least in his public statements as a Shiite intellectual. In an interview in August 2007 (Al Arabia 2007b), he further explained his understanding of Shia'ism. According to his statements, the Shia is not a minority group, but from a historical point of view must be regarded as a protest movement within Islam. For this reason Hani argues that both Sunni and Shiite Islam need to be understood in order to understand Islam itself. And with regard to Morocco, he declared that it was indeed an Idrisid state with a Shiite culture and identity but there was no need to build a Shiite state in Morocco, today. He also stated that Morocco presently had a mixed and open Sunni–Shiite identity, which can be regarded as a clear indicator of mutual respect and coming to terms with each other. Interestingly, he also stressed that he was not the man of Iran.

On the other hand, Hani does neither hide his sympathy for the Lebanese Hezbollah nor his friendship with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. In his rather populist article Bernichi (2007, p. 30) warns that Hezbollah has gained sympathisers in Morocco after its successful struggle with the Israeli armed forces. Hezbollah is considered invincible by those Moroccans and Nasrallah perceived the saviour of the *umma*. The cult around the 'father of the people' is reinforced by Hezbollah's television network *Al Manar*, which galvanises popular fervour, launches inflammatory speeches and videos of mouhjahiddins in training camps. Even al-Salam does not deny that *Al Manar* is finding a continuously increasing audience. As a result, Hezbollah could work as an external force that unites the Moroccan Shia. However, considering the lack of open discrimination as well as the small estimates of Shias in Morocco, it still appears to be unlikely that the Moroccan Shias will rise.

One incident indicates that the state's elites remain suspicious of Shias. An article published in *Asharq al-Awsat* in February 2007 reported that the Moroccan authorities monitored six Moroccans whom they believed to be part of a political movement and had traveled to Iran in order to visit religious schools there (Al Arabia 2007a). In the interview in August 2007, Dris Hani commented that he considered the state's activities to be exaggerated and once again stressed that no movement spreading political Shia'ism existed in Morocco (Al Arabia 2007b). And the incident suggests that the Moroccan authorities for their part will continue to take measures to prevent the formation of such a theopolitical movement.

Conclusion

We have argued that a genuine Shiite movement, which we defined as a (formal or informal) political network led by a prominent member of the community and pursuing specific goals like the alleviation of grievances or to end discrimination and gaining access to power either by public non-violent protest or militant acts, has so far not emerged because the structural preconditions are not very favourable. Shiite communities are found all over the country which indicates that the believers are dispersed and Sunni and Shiite Muslims are well commingled. Also, Shias are obviously small in numbers and therefore do not pose a serious threat to their social environment or the Moroccan authorities. Furthermore, as we indicated in the discussion on the religious geography, there appears to be a variety of different denominators of Shia'ism in Morocco, which suggests the existence of different belief systems causing additional fragmentation within the community. The formation of common political aims or an overarching ideology thus becomes more difficult, which is one more factor hampering the formation of a genuine political movement. However, with regard to Shiite branches, it seems reasonable to assume that a significant number of Twelver Shias can be found in the community. One reason is the influence of Iraqi, Iranian and Syrian *hauzats*, in which present members of the

Moroccan Shia like Dris Hani were and are being trained. Another indicator for this assumption is the fact that Shias reportedly practice *'Ashura* clandestinely. Apart from that, Mokhliss and El Hamraoui (2007) claim to report about converts to Shiite Islam (p. 2) and in an investigation on the homepage www.albainah.net, the author of which unfortunately is unknown, the names of two allegedly Moroccan Sunni Muslims who converted to Twelver Imami Shia'ism appeared.⁶ If this assumption proves to be true, one can reasonably assume that the events in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon, all being countries with established Twelver Shia movements, will have an influence, at least in ideological terms, on the Twelvers in Morocco.

With regard to the discrimination assumption, we can clearly state that there is no discrimination which is directed against the Moroccan Shia as a group. Shias suffer from the same kind of political limitations as any other members of society do and their rights are not limited by government regulations. Additionally, they practice *Taqiyya* to protect themselves against harassment and social abuse. As indicated in our analysis of the religious geography, there are media accounts that mention an existence of militant Islamist groups with Shiite members, namely, *Hijra wa Takfir* and *Assirat al-Moustakim*, which were formed in the slums of Casablanca. But these accounts are severely challenged by the analysis of Alan Pargeter (2005, p. 8) who states that 'there is no solid evidence that any such group formally exists' and concludes:

It seems that all of these groups have no overarching formal structure as such. Instead these militant cells are made up from small numbers of individuals who have grouped around the teachings of a particular Sheikh and who may or may not have links and contacts with those in other cells both inside the country and abroad.

However, two factors could promote the establishment of a political Shiite movement. First of all, Morocco has a long history of Shiite oppression, which probably explains why Shias are still suspicious and have not gone public with their beliefs. This history constitutes a distinguishing feature for Shias in Morocco, which could be exploited by future Shiite leaders. Apart from that, considering the fact that Morocco has inherited Shiite ideals, which most Moroccans do not seem to be aware of, Shias could sooner or later be encouraged to demand for official recognition of their beliefs and make political claims. And second, the Lebanese Hezbollah as well as Shiite clerics trained abroad like Dris Hani could become the leading figures to encourage stronger and maybe even more radical political action. However, political opposition and Islamist movements are facing hard times at the moment as the Moroccan government is likely to keep prioritising security and political stability towards broader political liberties in the face of a terrorist threat and lingering socio-economic problems. Thus, if a Shiite movement emerges, it seems more likely that it will be a moderate reform movement that does not challenge the government's legitimacy.

Notes

1. We will use 'Shia' as a noun describing either the Shia community in Morocco or individual Shias, whereas 'Shiite' will be used as an adjective, for example, when we talk about Shiite branches, because we consider this to be the usage in English which is closest to Arabic.
2. Sambanis finds this statistical correlation because he disaggregates between identity wars and revolutions for economic resources. It must also be added that Sambanis defines 'ethnic war as war among communities (ethnicities) that are in conflict over the power relationship that exists between those communities and the state' (Sambanis 2001, p. 261).
3. The religious dominance assumption only holds, if the largest majority constitutes a maximum of 90% of the population as the minority's size is positively related to the expected material gains from oppression.

4. The Katama Berbers had taken over Ismailism and hence supported the establishment of a Fatimid Caliphate in the Maghrib.
5. See Bensalmia (2004); Abd al-Salam argues that the Shias 'have lived in such deep dissimulation that no number exists for them'.
6. The two names were Essam Ehmaidan Al Hasani (<http://www.albainah.net/index.aspx?function=Item&id=3456&lang=>) and Edrees Al Housaini (<http://www.albainah.net/index.aspx?function=Item&id=3415&lang=>). Those who converted from Sunni to Shia Islam were called Mstbsroon, which means people who found the right path (see <http://www.aqaed.com/mostabser>).

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Appendix 1. Religions in Morocco according to Western sources

Table 1. Religions (R) in Morocco in ratio to population (pop ratio).

| Source ^a | R 1: Pop share | R 2: Pop share | R 3: Pop. share | R 4: Pop ratio |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Encyclopedia of the Orient</i> | Sunni Islam: 99.7% | Christianity: 0.3% | Baha'i: 0.07% | Judaism: 0.02% |
| <i>CIA World Factbook</i> | Muslim: 98.7% | Christian: 1.1% | Jewish: 0.2% | — |
| US State Department | Muslim ^b : 99.99% | Jewish pop.: 4000 people | Christian pop.: >1000 people | — |
| UK Foreign Office | Muslim: 98.7% | Christian: 1.1% | Jewish: 0.2% | — |
| Ministère des Affaires étrangères | Sunni Islam | — | — | — |
| Auswaertiges Amt | Sunni Islam | — | — | — |

^aThe information given in the table is taken from the following internet sources: *Encyclopedia of the Orient*, article on Morocco, religions & peoples, http://lexicorient.com/e.o/morocco_4.htm; *CIA World Factbook*, country page Morocco (last updated 6 December 2007), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mo.html> [Accessed December 2007]; US Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (October 2007), *Background note: Morocco*, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5431.htm> [Accessed December 2007]; UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Country Profile Morocco* (26 November 2007), <http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029394365&a=KCountryProfile&aid=1020281580149> [Accessed December 2007]; Ministère des Affaires étrangères (French Foreign Ministry), *Présentation du Maroc* (16 November 2007), http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/pays-zones-geo_833/maroc_410/presentation-du-maroc_997/donnees-generales_1928.html [Accessed December 2007]; Auswaertiges Amt (German Ministry of Foreign Affairs), *Country Page Morocco* (July 2007), <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/de/Laenderinformationen/01-Laender/Marokko.html> [Accessed December 2007].

^bThe State Department specifies that 'Moroccans are predominantly Sunni Muslims of Arab, Berber, or mixed Arab-Berber ancestry'.