

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Emerging 'Shia Crescent'

by Samuel Helfont

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Abstract: To form a more prudent foreign policy toward the Muslim Brotherhood, we must understand it not only as a domestic actor, but also as a major regional player. In fact, the Brotherhood has a complex relationship with Iran and the Shias, which blurs the lines of the so-called Shia Crescent. This article addresses the Muslim Brotherhood's foreign/regional policy by analyzing its attitude toward the Shias and Iran, thus placing it within the context of the emerging regional order. Addressing the complex relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Shias/Iran will help to clarify the regional fallout were the Brotherhood to gain control of a major Sunni Arab state. This is a vital issue for policy makers who are considering the U.S. position vis-à-vis the Brotherhood.

Introduction

A new order led by Iran, sometimes referred to as the "Shia Crescent," is emerging in the Middle East. This new order pits Sunni Wahhabists and Arab nationalists, against Iran and Arab Shias. Much has been written about the emergence of this new order. Scholars such as Vali Nasr and Juan Cole have gone into great depth describing it and conferences at the Council on Foreign Relations and the Middle East Policy Council, among others, have attempted to address the implications for U.S. foreign policy.¹ However, the emerging literature on this subject has largely failed to address

The author would like to thank Tally Aharony, Sarah Feuer, Brandon Friedman and Harvey Sicherman for commenting on earlier versions of this article.

¹ See: Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006). And Juan Cole, Kenneth Katzman, Karim Sadjadpour, Ray Takeyh "A Shia Crescent: What Fallout for the United States?" *Middle East Policy*, Winter 2005.

one of the largest and most influential Sunni political organizations in the Middle East: The Muslim Brotherhood.²

The Muslim Brotherhood itself has attracted a fair amount of scholarly attention recently, but not in connection to its role in regional politics. Since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, many in the West have looked for a moderate Islamic alternative to al Qaeda. Some scholars have argued that the Brotherhood can fill this role. However, even though the Muslim Brotherhood exists as a major political force throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds, most of the scholarship on the Brotherhood deals exclusively with its role as a domestic actor within the political systems of individual states,³ despite the fact that the organization has very clear foreign policy goals. For example, from 2000-2005, most of the Brotherhood's street rallies in Egypt addressed international issues such as the Iraq War and the Palestinian Intifada.⁴ To some extent this is due to the Egyptian regime's repression of free speech on domestic political issues. Yet such rallies demonstrate that the Brotherhood is very interested in events beyond Egypt's borders.

The Shia Crescent

In December 2004, King Abdullah of Jordan described the Iraq War's effect and the Bush administration's push for democratization on the regional political order. He used the term "Crescent" to depict a broad strip running directly through the Middle East from an increasingly ambitious Iran, through a newly Shia-controlled Iraq and a Syria ruled by Iran's Allawi⁵ ally Basher al-Assad, and finally into Hezbollah-controlled Southern Lebanon.⁶ Substantial Shii populations also form a ring around the strategically important Persian Gulf. In addition to Iran and Southern Iraq, which both have considerable Shii majorities, the Shias constitute 75 percent of the population in Bahrain, 30 percent in Kuwait, and 10 percent in Saudi Arabia (In Saudi Arabia it should be noted that the Shias are concentrated along the Persian Gulf, where they are a

²The Muslim Brotherhood is a global organization, but because this work primarily focuses on the Sunni-Shia divide in the Arab world and Iran, I will focus on its Arab branches. Therefore, unless otherwise stated, the Muslim Brotherhood will refer only to the branches that exist within the Arab World.

³For recent scholarship on the Muslim Brotherhood and its role as a domestic political actor, see: International Crisis Group, "Egypt's Muslim Brothers: Confrontation or Integration?" *Middle East/North Africa Report*, no. 76 (2008); Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke, "The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007; and Jillian M. Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴International Crisis Group, "Egypt's Muslim Brothers."

⁵The Allawis consider themselves to be a breakaway sect of Shiism.

⁶Robin Wright and Peter Baker, "Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election From Iran," *The Washington Post*, Dec. 8, 2004.

majority in several areas including some of the major oil producing regions).⁷ In this new regional order, the traditionally powerless Shias form a significant block that worries the Sunni political and religious establishment.

Western academics have devoted considerable attention to understanding the implications of the Shia ascendance. Of these, Vali Nasr, a scholar of contemporary Middle Eastern affairs at Tufts' Fletcher School, has produced the most in-depth work.⁸ He argues that the Sunni Arab leadership sees Iran as not only a competitor but as a threat, and that in the minds of many, the Shii Arabs are loyal not to the regimes they reside within, but to their Shii brethren.⁹ Other scholars highlight the mutual contempt the Sunnis and Shias traditionally have felt for one another.¹⁰ This contempt goes to the heart of both sects' understandings of their faiths. The Shias see the Sunnis as usurpers, who seized power from the Prophet Muhammad's family. According to the Shii belief, the Prophet's family and his descendents are the rightful rulers of the Islamic community.

Conversely, the Sunnis view the Shias' focus on Muhammad's descendants as bordering on blasphemy. The Shias attribute mystical powers to Muhammad's line through his daughter Fatima. They consider this line to have produced a series of infallible Imams. According to the vast majority of Shias, the last of these Imams disappeared in the ninth century and has been in hiding ever since. His return, they believe, will bring a messianic era and justice throughout the world. For some Sunnis, the mystical powers that the Shias attribute to Muhammad's decedents put them outside the bounds of Islam. They view Shii beliefs about the Hidden Imam as contrary to a principal teaching of Islam, which states that Muhammad is the seal of the Prophets. This principle implies that Muhammad's message was perfect and that no one, not even the Hidden Imam, could possibly improve it.¹¹ These rifts between Sunni and Shii beliefs are deep and not easily transcended. Some argue that they will

⁷ Figures taken from: Vali Nasr, "When the Shiites Rise," *Foreign Affairs*, July/Aug 2006, pp.58-74.

⁸ See Nasr's article in *Foreign Affairs* as well as his book *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future*, both of which are cited above.

⁹ For example, Nasr quotes Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as claiming, "Shiites are mostly always loyal to Iran and not the countries where they live." See: Nasr, "When the Shiites Rise."

¹⁰ For example, at the Council on Foreign Relations conference on the Shia Crescent, Columbia Professor of History, Richard Bulliet, argued that "Saudi views, Bahraini views, Sunni Pakistani views, Sunni Lebanese and Christian Lebanese views" of the Shia are often "poisonous." See Council on Foreign Relations on June 2006. For Transcripts see: "The Emerging Shia Crescent," *The Council on Foreign Relations*, June 5, 2006 (http://www.cfr.org/project/1264/emerging_shia_crescent.html); Hereinafter: CFR, "Conference Transcripts."

¹¹ For more on the Sunni view, and especially the radical Sunni view of Shiism, see Emanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) pp. 181-205.

result in increased conflict as the Shias take control of states and regions that have been dominated by Sunnis for centuries.

However, some challenge the assertions inherent in the idea of an emerging Shia Crescent. Maximilian Terhalle, a former head of Middle East affairs for Germany's Defense Department, argues that the Shia ascendance has been exaggerated, and Graham Fuller, a Middle East expert and former high-ranking intelligence officer at the CIA, contends that this exaggeration is the result of Sunni autocrats attempting to hold on to power. Fuller argues that the "real split. . . is between the Sunni autocrats and their own citizens." He continues, "Most Sunni Islamists, except the most fanatic Wahabi-type jihadis, do not condemn these Shiites. Those who they condemn are their illegitimate Sunni rulers, who in the eyes of the masses, are craven creatures abandoning their peoples and rushing to take refuge in Washington's embrace."¹²

While it may be true that the rise of a Shia Crescent has been exaggerated and that the Sunni leadership may have played a major role in this distortion, it is hard to dispute the assertion that the Shia will wield more political power throughout the Sunni Arab heartland than they have in several centuries. Further, while the authoritarian regimes may have pushed the idea of a Shia Crescent to bolster their own creditability, other more moderate Islamists as well as the general population, certainly hold reservations about the Shias and their motivations. The nuances of the Shia ascendance are beyond the scope of this work. This article acknowledges that the Shias will hold more political power than they have in the past, and attempts to analyze the Muslim Brotherhood's position vis-à-vis this rise in Shii power. For the purpose of this work, the extent of the Shia ascendance is not as important as the fact that they are ascending and that other political actors in the region are responding to this changing dynamic.

Political Sunnism vs. Political Shiism

Critics of the idea of a Shia Crescent have argued that it is wrong to view both the Sunnis and Shias as monolithic. Discussions of a Shia Crescent often put all Sunnis on one side and assign them certain political loyalties and then put all Shias on the other, with a different set of loyalties. However, the Sunnis and Shias are not monolithic in their approaches to one another. While traditionalists on both sides may hold on to defamatory views of the other, many of the more modern Sunni and Shii movements have actually moved

¹² Maximilian Terhalle, "Are the Shia Rising?" *Middle East Policy*, Summer 2007; and Graham Fuller, "The Shia vs. Sunni Split? Not on the Arab Street," *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Fall 2006, pp. 34-6. These sentiments have also been voiced within the region. For example see: Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, "What the moderate Arab world is," *Al-Abram Weekly*, April 26-May 2, 2007.

closer together in their theology and political philosophies. This is especially true of Ayatollah Khomeini's brand of radical Shiism in Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood's political philosophy in general.

One of Khomeini's most important assertions in his 1970 book, *Velayat-e Faqih* (Islamic Government),¹³ was that the world is political as was the Prophet Muhammad, and therefore "Islam was political or nothing else."¹⁴ The importance that Khomeini placed on politics would form the foundation of his revolution, but to make Shiism political, he first needed to change the way it was understood.

Shahrough Akhavi, an expert on Shii political thought at the University of South Carolina, argues that the main principles of traditional pre-Khomeini Shiism rest on two foundations: "1) Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, should be succeeded by his decedents, the Imams; 2) salvation is vouchsafed to those who believe in the restoration of God's justice, to be accomplished by the last Imam when he reappears on earth."¹⁵ These two tenets of Shiism were problematic for Khomeini in that the politicization of Islam, which Khomeini claimed was necessary for the religion to be relevant, would only be possible under the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad's decedents, the Imams, who disappeared in the ninth century.¹⁶

To solve this problem, Khomeini shifted the focus of Shiism away from the above principles. He asked what Muslims should do while they are waiting for the Imam to reappear, and what sort of governance is acceptable during this waiting period. Khomeini was not the first to raise these questions or to provide answers. Some previous Shii scholars were reluctant to accept the legitimacy of the state, and others had even claimed that "since all rulers were essentially usurpers, true believers should essentially shun the authorities like a plague."¹⁷ This debate took place throughout Shii history, but as Ervand Abrahamian, the renowned historian of Iran at CUNY, makes clear, "no Shii writer ever explicitly contended that monarchies per se were illegitimate, or that senior clergy had the authority to run the state."¹⁸ Khomeini's ideology is theologically revolutionary because he insists that an Islamic government can come into being before the return of the Imam. Therefore, monarchies (and all other forms of government) are inherently un-Islamic.

¹³ A better translation of this work would be "Government of the Jurists," but most authors use the title "Islamic Government" when discussing it in English. To avoid confusion I will also refer to it as "Islamic Government."

¹⁴ David Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990) p. 4.

¹⁵ Shahrough Akhavi, "The Ideology and Praxis of Shi'ism in the Iranian Revolution," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, April, 1983, p. 203.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 18.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

One way Khomeini made his argument was to reinterpret the Koran (Sura four, verse fifty-nine) which states: “Obey God, His prophet, and those among you who have authority.”¹⁹ The words, “those among you who have authority,” historically have been interpreted to refer to several different groups of people. Indeed others, who like Khomeini, have vied for power, had turned to this verse. For example, while in traditional Shiism the verse was interpreted as referring to the Imams, the medieval Sunni philosopher, al-Ghazali, used this verse to condemn rebellions against a monarch, and in 1501 the Safavids, who established Shiism as the official religion of Iran, used the verse to justify their rule.²⁰ Khomeini offered a different interpretation. Claiming that the Imams had passed down their authority to the clergy, Khomeini applied the verse to the religious establishment.

Khomeini claimed that while neither he nor the other clerics were the equivalent of the Imams, he argued that the clerics could create an Islamic government by following the laws of Islam. The late philosopher and Middle Eastern sociologist, Ernest Gellner, has argued that this assertion had several significant effects on Shiism. First, while not replacing the Imams completely, it certainly makes them redundant. Shiism traditionally viewed government as a provisional caretaker, with the idea that a righteous government would be installed upon the Imams’ return. If righteous rule could be established without the Imam, what would be the point of his reappearing? This is a question that Khomeini does not address.

The second major change that Khomeini introduced was a brand of Shiism more dependent on a standardized law. Prior to Khomeini, Shii Islamic legal decisions were largely informal. There was no set of procedures to be followed, and most aspects of an individual’s life were governed by the laws of the state, not the laws of Islam.²¹ To some extent this was due to the Shii idea of waiting for the return of the Imam. The argument was that in a truly Islamic government, the infallible Imam would have all the answers. As opposed to Sunni Islam, which does not believe in a divinely inspired Imam and, therefore, has to rely on the jurist, traditional Shiism assigns far less importance to jurisprudence. It is probably for this reason, as Abrahamian points out, that in the Middle Ages the Shias unlike the Sunnis failed to establish a consistent theory of an Islamic state.²²

Gellner goes even further in his analysis to show that by emphasizing the law, Khomeini gave it an importance that existed in Sunni but not Shii Islam. The law essentially became sacred even in the absence of the Imam, and Shiism, like Sunnism, became a religion based on juristic interpretation of the

¹⁹ Koran: Surah IV-The Women (*An-Nisa*), Verse 59.

²⁰ Abrahamian, pp. 18-19.

²¹ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 184.

²² Abrahamian, p. 17.

sacred law. By changing the role of the Hidden Imam and by focusing more on Islamic jurisprudence, Khomeini brought Shiism much closer to Sunni Islam.²³

Because Khomeini's shift was such a dramatic change for Shiism it was opposed by many important Shii scholars. The Grand Ayatollahs Shariat-madari, Khoi, and Qomi fundamentally disagreed with Khomeini on whether or not jurist could claim not only religious, but political authority. The latter they reserved as the exclusive right of the hidden Imam.²⁴ This disagreement would cause a rift in Shii Islam that remains today. Important Ayatollahs, such as al-Sistani in Iraq (along with most of the Iraqi Shias), continue to oppose Khomeini's reforms.

Similarly, but more subtly, the Muslim Brotherhood has transformed its political theory, bringing it much closer to Khomeini's theory of an Islamic State. Traditionally, Sunni scholars were wary of political power. With few exceptions, religious clerics accepted the legitimacy of a Sunni ruler as long as he declared that there was no God but God and that Muhammad was the last of the Prophets.²⁵ Even when the Muslim Brotherhood turned against their secular rulers in the 1950s and 1960s, thinkers like Sayyid Qutb, who pioneered these revolutionary tendencies, never argued that the clerics should assume political power. Since the Iranian Revolution, however, the idea of clerical rule has become more attractive within Sunni circles. For example, in the Palestinian territories during the early 1980s some Muslim Brothers were unable to find Sunni justifications for active resistance to the Israelis and, therefore, turned to Khomeini's Shii teachings. This group, lead by Fathi al-Shiqaqi, eventually broke from the Brotherhood and formed the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.²⁶ However, the Brotherhood eventually incorporated several of Khomeini's ideas into their political theories. So much so that in the twenty-first century Muslim Brothers do not need to abandon their organization to justify Sunni clerical leadership of an Islamic state.

In 2007, for example, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood put forth a political platform that called for the formation of a Council of Clerics (*majlis ulama*) that would ensure the legislative and executive branches do not implement laws contrary to the *sharia*.²⁷ As Mohamed Elmenshawy argues, the Brotherhood's

. . .Majlis Ulama [. . .] could end up being elected by Islamic clerics, not through free and fair elections. Reminiscent of Iran's Guardian Council, this undemocratically

²³ Ernest Gellner, "Inside Khomeini's Mind," *The New Republic*, June 18, 1984, p. 30.

²⁴ Arjomand, pp. 155-156.

²⁵ Gilles Kepel, *The Roots of Radical Islam*, trans. Jon Rothschild (London: SAQI, 2005) pp. 57-60.

²⁶ Ziad Abu-Amr, *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza: The Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 93.

²⁷ "Barnamag Hizb al-Ihwan al-Muslimin" (Platform of the Party of Muslim Brothers) August 25, 2007.

selected body could have the power vested by the state to veto any and all legislation passed by the Egyptian parliament and approved by the president that is not compatible with Islamic sharia law.²⁸

As we can see, while the traditional theologies and political theories of Shii and Sunni Islam may contain some aspects that might seem to cause tension between the two sects, much has been undertaken by the followers of Khomeini and the Muslim Brotherhood to bridge these gaps. Issues such as the function of the Hidden Imam, the role of Islamic law, and the clergy's place in government have yet to be resolved, and religious issues still create tension between Brotherhood and Iran. Nevertheless, the efforts on both sides to transform their religious beliefs into modern political ideologies have brought them much closer together than is usually acknowledged in the literature on the rise of the Shia Crescent. Further, this is not simply an exercise in theory. The revolutionary Shia and the Muslim Brotherhood have supported each other's policies and actions.

Cooperation on Contemporary Issues

The structural shifts that brought Khomeini's Shii thought closer to Sunni teaching were not entirely coincidental. Khomeini intended to unite the Sunnis and the Shias under his leadership and he implemented specific policies to achieve this goal. For example, Khomeini eliminated the prohibition of Shias praying behind a Sunni prayer leader and vice versa. He also distributed flyers to Sunnis during the *hajj* hoping to promote conciliation.²⁹ These practices have continued until today. As Ray Takeyh of the Council on Foreign Relations argued, "Iran has always tried to overcome the sectarian divide in the Middle East and become a larger Middle Eastern power [. . .] because otherwise, if it is cast exclusively as a Shii power, then by implication, its regional influence is limited."³⁰ Iran overcomes the Sunni-Shia divide in contemporary regional politics by focusing on issues that unite Muslims of all sects and issues that undermine its regional competitors, namely the secular Arab regimes. As Nasr points out:

The Sunni rulers are in the palaces in the region. The United States has good relations with these leaders, but they don't own the street. And in fact, it's better for Iran to sort of champion, if you would, the secular Muslim cause of the cartoons against the prophet, the Israel issue, the Holocaust issue, because this creates a kind of Islamic unity that rises above the Shia-Sunni issue. And I think for now the Iranians have decided that that's the way to go.³¹

²⁸ Mohamed Elmenshawy, "The Muslim Brotherhood Shows its true Colors," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 12, 2007.

²⁹ Sivan, pp. 181-205. Quote taken from p. 186.

³⁰ CFR, "Conference Transcripts."

³¹ *Ibid.*

The Muslim Brotherhood has responded positively to these outreach programs. The best example of this occurred in the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War. Despite the fact that Hezbollah fought fiercely against Israel throughout the war, much of the Sunni Arab establishment condemned Hezbollah's actions. The regimes in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia criticized Hezbollah in ways that they would never have criticized a Sunni group fighting the Israelis. Moreover, the prominent Kuwaiti Sheik Hamid al-Ali denounced Hezbollah's actions and described them as resulting from Iran's imperial ambitions. In addition, the influential Wahhabi Sheik Abdullah bin Jabreen in Saudi Arabia declared it to be "illegal for Muslims to join, support, or pray for the militant group Hezbollah."³²

Contrary to the Sunni establishment, the Muslim Brotherhood supported Hezbollah throughout the conflict. The Brotherhood organized rallies backing Hezbollah fighters and the influential Muslim Brotherhood linked scholar, Yusuf al-Qaradawi rejected the Saudi *fatwa* against praying for Hezbollah. In the Egyptian daily *al-Wafd* he declared "The Shias are a part of the Islamic Ummah." He explained that the Shias say "there is no God but God," and that "They agree with us in many of the fundamentals and disagree [only] on some doctrines." Qaradawi therefore insisted that "It is obligatory to aid this [Hezbollah's] resistance against the enemy Israel."³³ Qaradawi later posted a *fatwa* on his website, *Islam Online*, reinforcing the idea that Shias are "Muslims who believe in the Oneness of Allah and the Prophet Muhammad," and emphasizing that "We should try to make use of what we have in common for the benefit of all Muslims."³⁴ Qaradawi has also defended Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology, declaring that a "nuclear Iran is not a threat to regional countries,"³⁵ and that "It is obligatory on all Muslims to resist any possible attack the U.S. might launch against Iran."³⁶

The statements of other leading figures in the Muslim Brotherhood depict a similar conciliatory attitude toward Iran and the Shias. The General Guide of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and of the International Organization of the Brotherhood, Muhammad Mahdi Akif, offered unequivocal support

³² Quote is a paraphrase taken from: "Saudi Sheik Issues Fatwa Against Hezbollah," *UPI*, July 21, 2006. (http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2006/07/21/Saudi_sheik_issues_fatwa_against_Hezbollah/UPI-18161153481820/).

³³ "al-Qaradawi: Da'ama Hisb allah Wajib Shar'i Walsbu'ub alArabiyah Tastabaqqa alTabiya" (Al-Qaradawi: Support of Hesbollah is a legal obligation and the Arab People deserve our solute) *Qaradawi.net*, July 27, 2006 (http://www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=4345&version=1&template_id=116&parent_id=114).

³⁴ Yusuf al-Qaradawi, "Shi'ites and Sunnis: Time for Unity," *IslamOnline.net*, Jan. 22, 2007 (http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503544230).

³⁵ "Qardawi: Nuclear Iran Not a Threat to Regional Nations," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, Dec. 22, 2007 (<http://www2.irma.ir/en/news/view/menu-236/0712224020172538.htm>).

³⁶ "Qaradawi Call to Defend Iran if US Attacks it," *Gulf Times* (Qatar), Oct.13, 2007 (http://www.gulf-times.com/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=178201&version=1&template_id=36&parent_id=16).

for Hezbollah during the war in Lebanon. When he was pressed over other more controversial issues between Sunnis and Shias, he responded that the traditional arguments between Sunnis and Shias should be suspended until after the “Zionist enemy” is defeated. He also has highlighted the relationship between the Sunni group Hamas, which is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Shii Iran to demonstrate the Sunni-Shia alliance.³⁷

Throughout other Sunni Arab states, the Muslim Brotherhood has largely followed the lead of their Egyptian counterparts in stressing unity with Iran and the Shias against the secular Sunni regimes.³⁸ Even in Lebanon, where sectarian tensions can run very high, the Muslim Brotherhood has largely supported Hezbollah. Faysal Mawlawi, the Secretary General of the Islamic Group, which is the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, has consistently promoted unity between Sunnis and Shias.³⁹ Additionally, in 2006, Ibrahim Masri, the deputy secretary of the Lebanese Islamic Group, stated that his organization was fighting alongside Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon. He further clarified that the Lebanese Brotherhood supports Hezbollah and that “his organization’s support of Hezbollah in military operations goes back to the 80s.”⁴⁰

Since the war in the summer of 2006, the Lebanese Brotherhood’s relationship with Hezbollah has been strained. The official Brotherhood position was to remain neutral in the conflict between Hezbollah and the government, but some prominent members of the Islamic Group spoke out against Hezbollah’s actions. Nevertheless, other Lebanese Brothers, such as Fathi Yakan, have continued to support Hezbollah fervently.⁴¹

The recent conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip (Winter 2008/2009) reinforces the idea that what exists in the Middle East not necessarily a Sunni-Shia divide. In that conflict, much of the Sunni Arab establishment was either critical towards or remained noticeably silent about the plight of their Sunni counterparts in Hamas. Conversely, in addition to Hamas’ Muslim Brotherhood associates throughout the Middle East, the most vocal defenders of Hamas were the Shii regime in Iran, the Allawi regime in Syria, and the Shias in Southern Lebanon.

The one major exception to the Brotherhood’s generally conciliatory stance toward the Shias and Iran is the Syrian branch of the organization.

³⁷ Israel Elad-Altman, “The Sunni-Shia Conversion Controversy,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, April 6, 2007, p. 5.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., pp 6-7.

⁴⁰ Hayan Nayuf. “*Biltizamina ma’a i’lan majmu’at suniyah ‘jabbat aljibad’ ‘ibwan lubnan’ yakasbufun ‘an qitalibim ila janib bizb allah fi janub.*” (“In conjunction with the announcement of the Sunni groups ‘The Jihad Front’ and ‘The Brotherhood of Lebanon’ revealed their fighting on the side of Hezbollah in the south.” *al-Arabia.net*. August 1, 2006 (<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2006/08/01/26248.html>).

⁴¹ Elad-Altman, p. 7.

As opposed to its counterparts throughout the Arab World, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria has sharply denounced both Iran and Hezbollah. On its official website, the organization posted a critique arguing that the Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad were “seeking, out of wickedness and malice, to destroy the region [the Sunni Arab controlled Levant] that they have no affiliation to or association with.”⁴² Further, Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leaders have also spoken out against their counterparts in other Arab countries who have instituted a policy of cooperation with Iran. For example in an interview with the Arab weekly, *al-Watan al-Arabi*, the deputy head of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Farouq Tayfour, argued:

Unfortunately, some Muslim scholars are not aware of the danger posed by the Iranian and the Syrian regimes and by Hizbullah in Lebanon. We must explain to Al-Qaradhawi about the suffering [caused to] the Sunnis in Iraq as a result of Iran’s influence, and about the suffering [caused to] the Syrian people by the spread of Shi’ism and by the Iranian chokehold over Syria.⁴³

It must be emphasized that, while the Syrian Brotherhood’s position may seem at odds with their counterparts throughout the region, when one looks at the broader political factors at play, the Syrian Brotherhood’s stance is actually typical of the Brotherhood in general. The Muslim Brotherhood is primarily an Islamist opposition movement. Throughout the Arab world, the various Brotherhood branches stand against the mostly secular regimes that they exist within. For the majority of Muslim Brothers this means opposing the secular Sunni regimes, but for the Syrian Brotherhood, it means opposing an Allawi regime that unlike its Sunni counterparts, is aligned with Iran and the Shias. Simply put, the majority of the Muslim Brothers exist within regimes that see Iran as a competitor and a threat. Iran is therefore a useful ally. In Syria, however, the Brotherhood opposes a regime that is allied with Iran, so Iran is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Contentious Issues

Thus far, this article has highlighted areas of cooperation between the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood and the regimes associated with the Shia Crescent.

⁴² Faisal Shaikh Mohammed, “*Najad Wa Bashar Yutawa’dan alMuntaqa Biltajfir*” (Ahmadinejad and Bashar Threaten to Ignite the Region) *Ikhwanysyria.com*, June 21, 2008 (http://www.ikhwanysyria.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3147&Itemid=29) Translated excerpts of this article are also available at: MEMRI “Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Website: Syria, Iran Working to Ignite Region for Own Interests,” *MEMRI Special Dispatch*, no. 1707 (Sept. 7, 2007) (<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP170707>).

⁴³ Translated excerpts of this interview are available at: “Senior Leader of Muslim Brotherhood in Syria,” *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series*, no. 1796 (Dec. 30, 2007) (http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP179607#_ednref1).

It has done so to show that the Sunni-Shia divide is not as clearly defined as it is sometimes depicted. In fact, many Sunni Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, align with Shii Iran against the Sunni Arab regimes. While, the focus thus far has been on political issues, it must be emphasized that the Brotherhood and Iran are not as conciliatory on other more contentious issues. The Brotherhood has been much more critical of Iran on three broadly defined topics: 1) The Iraq War; 2) Iranian nationalism; and 3) Shii proselytization.

The Iraq War, more than any other event in recent history, has exposed the divide between Sunnis and Shias. It has greatly affected the relationship between the Sunnis and the Shias throughout the Islamic world and indeed the Muslim Brotherhood could not avoid being drawn into the debate. However, the Brotherhood's position on Sunni-Shia relations in Iraq is typical of their stance toward Shias in general in that it is much more conciliatory than other Sunni groups. In this case, as in the other examples discussed above, Qaradawi's statements are a good representation of the Brotherhood's general position. While denouncing violence between sects and calling for reconciliation between Sunnis and Shias in Iraq,⁴⁴ Qaradawi clearly identifies with Sunni elements in that country. He has denounced "the fanaticism of the Iraqi Shias," and he pleads with them to "discard the violence against their Sunni brethren."⁴⁵ Conversely, he does not use such critical language when discussing the Sunni treatment of the Shias in Iraq.

In addition to sectarian conflicts in Iraq between Sunni and Shii Arabs, broader nationalist tensions can be detected between the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran. Despite their rhetoric denouncing secularism and calling for an identity based on Islam, both the Muslim Brotherhood and Khomeini's followers in Iran have embraced the secular idea of nationalism. These nationalist tendencies have existed in both movements from their very beginnings and they continue today.

Shortly after taking power in 1979, Khomeini called for a completely Islamic constitution, but what was finally produced included several un-Islamic features. For example, although the constitution claimed that there are no nations in Islam, the only legitimate division between men being that of Muslim and infidel, it also claimed that the president must be a native Iranian holding Iranian citizenship.⁴⁶ This appeal to nationalist identity over the stated goal of Islamic unity would emerge in other areas as well. For instance, Khomeini objected to the Arabs' use of the title Arabian Gulf for what the Iranians considered to be the Persian Gulf. Khomeini even turned

⁴⁴ See: "Qaradawi urges Muslims to support Hezbollah," *Gulf Times* (Qatar), July 30, 2006 (http://www.gulf-times.com/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=99984&version=1&template_id=36&parent_id=16). And: "Don't seek revenge, Iran cleric tells Iraq Shi'ites," *Reuters*, Feb. 14, 2007 (<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L14615313.htm>).

⁴⁵ Al-Qaradawi.net, "*al-Qaradawi: Da'ama Hisb allah Wajib Sbar'i Walsbu'ub alArabiyah Tastabaqqa alTabiya.*"

⁴⁶ Menashri, p. 117.

down Ayatollah Khalkhali's idea of foregoing nationalism altogether by calling it the Islamic Gulf.⁴⁷

The nationalism that seeped into Khomeini's ideology soon after he acquired power continued to play a greater role as the years progressed. Khomeini's move away from exporting the revolution in the 1980s was closely tied to the ideas of nationalism and national sovereignty. In its purest form, Islam does not recognize states, so the idea of sovereignty did not at first affect Khomeini's attempts to export the revolution. Indeed in the late 1970s, Khomeini preached for militantly expanding into what he considered to be illegitimate states. However, non-acceptance and calls to overthrow other Muslim regimes gave way to tolerance of their sovereignty and eventually to calls for brotherhood and cooperation. As the 1980s continued, Iran became more concerned with consolidating and securing its own borders than exporting the revolution. The influence of nationalism has had such a major effect on Iran that it can now be seen even in the most basic features of revolutionary Iran. For example, Iran's official name, Jumhuriyye Islamiyye Iran (The Islamic Republic of Iran), contradicts itself. The first part implies a government of the entire Islamic community, while the second limits it to Iran, only a small part of the former.⁴⁸

Iran's current policies and rhetoric continue to display elements of Iranian nationalism. The current regime often speaks of Iran's inherent right to be a major regional power. Iran after all possesses a civilization that extends back to Cyrus the Great and the current regime vies for regional leadership not just as a defender Islam, but as the heir of a great Persian civilization.

In the Sunni Arab world, Islam and nationalism have a history of being intertwined. This has been especially true of the Muslim Brotherhood. As a youth, the movement's founder, Hasan al-Banna, developed a personal ideology based on a combination of Islam and nationalism. Banna's final year of primary school, 1919, was also the year of an anti-British rebellion throughout Egypt. Banna took part in strikes and demonstrations and he expressed strong nationalist sentiments, claiming, "Despite my preoccupation with Sufism and worship, I believed that duty to country is an inescapable obligation—a holy war (*jihad*)."⁴⁹ This quote shows the mixture of Islam (the use of the term *jihad*), with the rising nationalist sentiments of the Egyptians masses. However, for many Egyptians these anti-British sentiments were not necessarily related to their religious belief. Turning to Islamic principles as a way to solve Egypt's problems later became a staple of Banna's and the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology.

As the twentieth century progressed, Egyptian nationalism was largely eclipsed by a broader Arab nationalism and the Brotherhood's position

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 101.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 388.

⁴⁹ Christina Phelps Harris, *Nationalism and Revolution in Egypt: The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood* (The Hague/London/Paris: Mouton and Co., 1964), p. 144.

evolved along with it. In the 1940s and 1950s, the Brotherhood aligned with Gamal abd al-Nasser's Free Officer Movement,⁵⁰ and in 1952 the Brotherhood played an essential role in the July Revolution, which would eventually bring Nasser to power.⁵¹ These nationalist tendencies have continued to the present. In December 2006, for example, Qatar hosted an "Arab Unity" conference that was attended by Arab nationalists as well as prominent Muslim Brothers such as the leader of Hamas, Khalid Mashal, and Qaradawi. Other important Muslim Brothers, such as the Egyptian Essam al-Arian, were invited but could not obtain travel visas.⁵²

The Brotherhood's links to Arab nationalism go beyond simple political pragmatism. Many within the organization view Muhammad as the ideal Muslim as well as the ideal Arab. They are proud of the fact that it was the Arabs who brought Islam to the world and they view the Arab people as having a special role in their religion. In many ways this has led to the emergence of a religious nationalism that conflates Arab and Islamic identities. As Uriah Furman points out, ideally "Islamists determine the status of different groups by their religion" however, "one may occasionally sense discomfort with the fact that Arabs can be non-Muslims, and there are signs of an impending debate about the attitude of such Arabs."⁵³

The nationalist views of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world and of the Iranian regime are often a cause for disagreement between the two groups. As Vali Nasr argues, it is common throughout the Sunni Arab world, to view the "Shias as the client of Iran."⁵⁴ This is often the source of friction between the Brotherhood and Iran. For example Qaradawi holds Iran responsible for the actions of Arab Shias in southern Iraq.⁵⁵ This perceived relationship between the Iranian regime and all Shias is also closely tied to another area of dispute between the Brotherhood and Iran, Shii proselytization. Despite the Brotherhood's overall conciliatory stance toward Iran and the Shias, some prominent figures have expressed their disapproval of Iranian funded Shii missionaries.

Despite the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood's professed allegiance to the leadership of Egyptian Brotherhood, which has gone to great lengths not to criticize Iran or the Shias, a veteran leader of the Sudanese Brotherhood, Sadiq

⁵⁰ See Richard Mitchell, *The Society of Muslim Brothers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 96-99.

⁵¹ Kirik J. Beattie, *Egypt during the Nasser Years: Ideology, Politics, and Civil Society* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), pp.57-58.

⁵² This conference has been held every two years since 1994. See: Duraid al-Baik and Barbara Bibbo, "Arab World should unite against US," *Gulf Times* (Qatar), December 22, 2006 (<http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/06/12/22/10091439.html>).

⁵³ Uriah Furman, "Minorities in Contemporary Islamist Discourse," *Middle Eastern Studies*, October 2000, p. 3.

⁵⁴ CFR, "Conference Transcripts."

⁵⁵ "Don't seek revenge, Iran cleric tells Iraq Shi'ites," Reuters, February 14, 2007.

Abdullah Abd al-Majid, criticized his government for allowing Shii books to enter the country. In Jordan, a Muslim Brother⁵⁶ serving in parliament reportedly complained to the government about Shii missionary activity, but this was in contrast to the Jordanian Brotherhood's official, conciliatory position.⁵⁷ The most prominent example of a Brotherhood figure critiquing Iran-backed Shii proselyzation was Qaradawi's tirade against it in Egypt. In 2006, after the war in Lebanon, Qaradawi, who had been a strong proponent of Sunni-Shia coalescence, railed against Shii missionary activity in Egypt, arguing that it "will ignite a blaze that will destroy everything [in its path], and what has happened in Iraq between Shi'ite and Sunnis will [repeat itself] in all other countries."⁵⁸ Qaradawi's comments unleashed a fierce debate in Egypt over the status of its small Shii minority.⁵⁹

These statements by prominent Muslim Brothers against Shii missionary activity reflect a larger trend within the Sunni-Arab world, but it must be emphasized that they are atypical. Except in Syria, the Brotherhood has abstained from criticizing Iran or the Shias. What these comments show then, is that as Israel Elad-Altman argues, "the MB's [Muslim Brotherhood's] loyalty will be severely tested if Iran and its proxies manage to translate their newly acquired prestige into tangible gains for the Shi'a."⁶⁰

Looking Forward

An analysis of regional politics in the Middle East that puts all the Sunnis on one side and all the Shias on the other is simplistic and inaccurate. Moreover, it is very dangerous for policymakers to take such simplistic divisions for granted. Large and influential Sunni organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood are actually more closely aligned with Iran and Hezbollah than they are to the Sunni Arab regimes.

This does not mean, however, that there are no tensions between the Muslim Brothers and the Iranian regime. The main factors that affect their relationship revolve around four general ideological axes: 1) Iran as a champion of political Islam; 2) Iran as steadfastly anti-Israel and anti-American; 3) Iran as a champion of Shiism; 4) Iran as nationalist. The first two axes bring the Brotherhood closer to Iran. Indeed a practical alliance has developed around these two factors that, while sometimes strained, has largely remained intact. Further, these two factors have been important enough to the Brother-

⁵⁶ In Jordan the Muslim Brotherhood refers to itself as the Islamic Action Front.

⁵⁷ Elad-Altman, pp. 5-6.

⁵⁸ L. Azuri, "Debate over the Status of Shi'ites in Egypt," *MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series*, no. 311 (December 27, 2006) (http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=ia&ID=IA31106#_edn8).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Elad-Altman, pp. 5-6.

hood to dramatically overshadow the latter two axes, which would normally be seen as reasons for the Muslim Brothers to oppose Iran.

With a clearer understanding of the Brotherhood's relationship to Iran, the question still remains: what does this relationship mean for U.S. foreign policy? As discussed above, there has been considerable scholarly debate about the implications of U.S. support for the Muslim Brotherhood in places like Egypt. It has been argued that domestically, the Brotherhood in Egypt is non-violent and to some extent pro-democratic (at the very least it is more pro-democratic than the regime).⁶¹ There are certainly still some serious doubts as to the extent of the Egyptian Brotherhood's pro-democratic positions, and no one knows for sure if the Brotherhood's democratic rhetoric is authentic or simply a means to take power, after which any semblance of democracy would quickly fade.⁶² Nevertheless, when considering the U.S. position vis-à-vis the Muslim Brotherhood, it is inadequate for policymakers to focus only on the Brotherhood's domestic politics. The United States has considerable interests tied up in the Middle East and a regional balance of power that limits Iran's influence is important for achieving both its short and long term goals. The Brotherhood's rise to power in places like Egypt would significantly shift that regional balance of power away from Sunni regimes friendly to the United States, such as Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. It would also further empower Iran in its bid for regional hegemony. The resulting regional order would limit U.S. influence, make peace and stability between Israel and its neighbors increasingly difficult, and threaten the U.S. mission in Iraq.



⁶¹ For example of arguments in favor of U.S. support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt see: Leiken and Brooke; Tamara Cofman Wittes, "Three Kinds of Movements," *Journal of Democracy*, July 2008, pp 7-12; and, Bjorn Olav Utvik, "Hizb al-Wasat and the Potential for Change in Egyptian Islamism," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, Fall 2005, pp. 293-306.

⁶² For examples of scholarship highlighting these doubts see: Husain Haqqani and Hillel Fradkin, "Going Back to the Origins," *Journal of Democracy*, July 2008, pp. 13-18; And Amr Hamzawy, Marina Ottaway, and Nathan Brown, "What Islamists Need to be Clear About: The Case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Policy Outlook*, February 2007.