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SHIA ISLAM AND POLITICS

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Introduction
Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon are among the Middle Eastern countries with the highest proportional Shia Muslim populations. They constitute centers of Shia political, religious, and intellectual life. In this context, since Iran’s Islamic revolution in 1979, which established a Shia Islamic government in Iran, that country’s religious and political leaders have used Shia Islam to expand Iran’s objectives in the Middle East and beyond. Since 1979, Iran’s leaders have been concerned about its security with respect to the expansionism of the United States and other Western countries, and threats from neighboring Sunni countries. Iran’s government has attempted to align itself with Shia Muslims in various countries, such as Iraq and Lebanon, against American and Sunni expansionism, mobilizing those Shias religiously and politically (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019).

Iran
During World War II, Britain and the Soviet Union divided Iran into zones of influence, with the Soviets controlling much of Iran’s north and the British occupying the south, which includes Iran’s oil assets (Blake, 2009). This was similar to the situation in Iran during the late nineteenth century and World War I. The two powers established a neutral zone (which included Iran’s capital, Tehran) in central Iran, which was ostensibly under the control of Iran. In 1942, the United States stationed soldiers in Iran as part of the allied effort during World War II (Blake, 2009). From the perspective of the allied powers, the occupation of Iran was crucial to their goals in that war since Iran produced oil that was essential to the allies, it was close to other oil-producing nations near the Persian Gulf, and it provided vital transportation corridors for the transport of war materiel from the Persian Gulf to the Soviet Union. Iran was a geopolitical linchpin for the allies as they attempted to block Nazi Germany’s military and political influence in Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. The British and Soviet actions in Iran during World War II constituted significant violations of Iran’s sovereignty and national dignity. The negative memories that these events carried for Iranians have persisted throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and have catalyzed anti-Western and, subsequently,
anti-American attitudes, which played a substantial role in generating Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979 (Buchta, 2006).

In 1942, the United States deployed thousands of soldiers to Iran to help maintain the Persian Corridor. In addition, Americans advised Iran's government and facilitated changes, in such areas as finances, domestic security, and the military. In these ways, the United States established the foundation for its subsequent involvement in Iranian government and society after World War II (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016). After that war, the United States continued its relationship with Muhammad Reza Shah, with the goals of assisting Iran in its oil industry, while using Iran as a military and political buffer against Soviet expansion in the Middle East (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016).

Political instability and foreign interference undermined Iran's government and economy in the late 1940s. As this turmoil continued, one significant question, with respect to who would govern Iran was the following: Would Iran's parliament, which was elected, together with that country's cabinet govern the country or would Iran's king, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, perpetuate his own rule over the country as his father Reza Shah Pahlavi had done? Regarding this question, in the early 1950s, a far-reaching protest movement in Iran contested Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule in view of Britain's and the United States' influence in Iran. This movement contributed to Mohammad Mosaddegh, an Iranian politician and lawyer, being elected Iran's Prime Minister in 1951 (Kinzer, 2006).

Mohammad Mosaddegh

Mosaddegh and the National Front political party, which he founded, gained political traction in Iran because during the early half of the twentieth century Iran's sovereignty was undermined through concessions that Iran granted to foreign countries and, in effect, foreign soldiers in Iran (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016; Holliday, 2016). A political issue that catalyzed Mosaddegh's popular support was the control of the oil industry in Iran by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), which was dominated by Britain, and controlled much of the oil industry in Iran, including its profits. As frustration with the AIOC's influence increased among Iranians, in 1950 Mosaddegh demanded that the Iranian government cancel that concession, and he expressed his support for the nationalization of Iran's entire oil industry (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016).

While Mosaddegh and his supporters organized public demonstrations and delivered speeches in order to gain backing for their cause, a high-level Shia cleric by the name of Ayatollah Sayyed Abol Qasem Kashani, who was a major anti-imperialist figure and a member of the National Front, sought to integrate Islam with Iranian nationalism as he mobilized Iranians for the nationalization of Iran's oil resources, urging Iranians to fight against the “enemies of Islam and Iran by joining the nationalization struggle” (Abrahamian, 1982, pp. 265–266). Although Ayatollah Kashani and Mosaddegh experienced tensions later in their relationship, Kashani, through his charisma, status as a Shia leader, and persuasive use of Shia religio-political language, played a significant role in galvanizing Iranians' support of oil nationalization (Mousavian, 2014). In 1951, amid the support for Mosaddegh and the National Front, Iran's parliament took two steps. First, it passed legislation nationalizing the oil industry in Iran. Second, it elected, by a majority vote, Mosaddegh as Iran's prime minister (Harrison, 2011).

A large-scale dispute between Iran and the AIOC, about the nationalization of Iran's oil, created a domestic and international crisis (Cleveland and Bunton, 276). Mosaddegh was committed to ending the domination of foreign involvement in Iran while re-establishing the parliamentary and other governmental institutions which had been stipulated in Iran's
1906 constitution (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016; Abrahamian, 1982). Even though there were Iranians who supported Mosaddegh’s and the National Front’s goals, as prime minister he did not have adequate financial resources, and he experienced difficulties in implementing his policies. As Iran’s governmental revenues decreased because of the foreign boycott of oil directed against Iran, prices and the unemployment rate rose (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016). While Mosaddegh had public support for his policies, there was discontentment with the difficulties that Iran was experiencing economically and in other ways. In this environment, with the support of the United States and Britain, and their spies, all of whom opposed Mosaddegh’s oil nationalization policies, a small group of disaffected Iranian military officers formed a secret committee to plan Mosaddegh’s overthrow and to reinstate the king’s authority. In addition, the United States sent agents from the Central Intelligence Agency to Tehran to work with Iranian military conspirators to organize a coup d’état (or military overthrow) against Mosaddegh. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi agreed to the coup against Mosaddegh and signed a decree appointing the leader of the secret committee, General Fazlollah Zahedi, as Iran’s prime minister (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016).

Soon after the first coup attempt failed, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi left Iran for Rome, Italy (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016; Ebrahimi, 2016). However, on 19 August 1953, which was three days after his departure, the Iranian military, which supported the king, in coordination with the Americans and British, attempted a coup again, succeeded, captured Mosaddegh, and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi returned to Iran, re-establishing himself as monarch (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016). From 1951 until 1953, Mosaddegh had galvanized huge numbers of Iranians in a series of sweeping attempts to recover Iran’s national sovereignty and establish a democracy. The 1953 coup and return of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as king resulted in the United States intensifying its involvement in Iran’s affairs (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016).

The coup against Mosaddegh remained deeply rooted in Iranians’ memories, as they remembered it as yet another example of Britain’s and the United States’ interference in their affairs and of American and British hypocrisy. From this perspective, the Americans and British manifested hypocrisy by claiming to support democracy, while actively supporting a coup against a democratically elected leader, namely Mosaddegh, which brought to power an autocratic and undemocratic leader, namely Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Indeed, a factor that led to Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979 was the resentment that Iranians felt primarily against the American government for its unyielding support of the coup against Mosaddegh, the return of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to power, and the strong backing of him by the United States during his rule as Iran’s repressive king (Abrahamian, 2013).

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the post-Mosaddegh period

After the 1953 coup, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi undertook a variety of measures to combat the recurrence of the circumstances, which led to the opposition to him in the early 1950s. At the same time, those measures were factors that led to Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979 and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s final downfall as Iran’s king. In any case, the disagreement over Iran’s oil, which was an important catalyst behind Mohammad Mosaddegh’s popularity and rise to power, was settled by an international oil agreement. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi agreed to the principle of the sharing of oil profits equally, and signed a contract with a consortium formed of British Petroleum, the former owners of AIOC, and eight other European and American oil companies (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016; Abrahamian, 1982). This agreement strengthened Iran’s position in the global oil market and increased the revenues that entered Iran’s governmental coffers. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi also worked to improve Iran’s relationships with
western countries (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016). Iran and Britain restored diplomatic relations in 1954, while the king declared his commitment to the Western alliance and against the Soviet Union and its allies. He also oriented Iran to various forms of development that emulated the models of western countries (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016). These diplomatic relationships and Iran’s adoption of Western-style economic and cultural models enabled Iran to receive substantial amounts of aid from the United States. For example, between 1953 and 1963, the United States gave Iran five hundred million dollars in military aid, with that government having at least three goals regarding the aid, which it provided Iran:

1. Americans and other westerners wanted to continue receiving reasonably priced oil from Iran, which benefited American and other western consumers as well as petroleum companies that did business with Iran (Ritter, 2015);
2. The US government wanted to provide Iran with military, economic, and political support that enabled American and western companies to benefit financially from Iran’s lucrative consumer market (Pirzadeh, 2016); and
3. American politicians and members of its military viewed Iran as a crucial military and geopolitical buffer against the possibility of Soviet expansion into the Middle East during the Cold War. (Hunter, 2010)

With strong support from the United States, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi consistently persecuted individuals and groups who opposed him (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016). In his attempts to eliminate all forms of opposition, he formed, with the support of the United States and Israel, SAVAK, which was the king’s secret police force that engaged in far-reaching surveillance of Iranians and cruel treatment of political prisoners in Iran’s prisons (Amirahmadi, 1990).

A significant aspect of the protest movements against Mohammad Reza Pahlavi involved Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s sermons and speeches against the Iranian government. Khomeini was a high-level religious and political leader, who, based on interpretations of Shia sacred texts, expressed his opposition to the king and his government. Khomeini excoriated Mohammad Reza Pahlavi for his greed and corruption, marginalizing the poor and underprivileged, and undercutting Iran’s sovereignty. Khomeini also stated his belief that the king’s government violated crucial tenets of Islam by selling oil to western countries and granting economic concessions to the United States. In 1963, SAVAK arrested Khomeini for his anti-government endeavors. As increasing numbers of Iranians learned of Khomeini’s arrest, they engaged in large protests against it and the Iranian government, in Tehran and other major Iranian cities. Those demonstrations continued for three days before Iran’s military suppressed them with hundreds, and possibly thousands, of Iranians being killed (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016). Khomeini was exiled to Turkey in 1964. A year later, he left that country for Iraq, where he continued to write and preach until 1978, when he was forced to leave that country for France. Khomeini returned to Iran, as the leader of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, on 1 February 1979, after Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s departure from that country on 16 January 1979 (Rahnema, 2014).

The protests of 1963 were yet another vivid manifestation of the power of Iran’s Shia clergy in mobilizing large numbers of Iranians by showing the relevance of Shia teachings to the religious, political, and economic circumstances that Iranians faced. The protests also exemplified the protestors’ deep-rooted opposition to foreign influence in their country, together with a heartfelt commitment to Shia Islam and its clerical leaders (Keshavarzian, 2007). In the case of these protests, the criticisms were directed against an autocratic king whose interests, in the view of the protestors, were harmful to those of Iran as a whole (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016).
Mohammad Reza Pahlavi believed that the protests indicated circumstances in Iran that could have been harmful to his position as king. After the demonstrations ended, he gave increased attention to the institutions that constituted the foundations of his power. These institutions included his expansive system of court patronage and appointments of his allies to high-level positions in Iran’s government and military (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016). He placed much emphasis on the military, because he believed that the viability of his political future depended, to a large measure, on strengthening the military, while he worked to reinforce the bonds that existed between him and that institution (Cordesman, 1999). Mohammad Reza Pahlavi aligned his government closely with the United States, from which Iran’s government received enormous financial, political, and military support, while he implemented policies that were intended to westernize, modernize, and secularize Iran, politically and societally (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016). Mohammad Reza Pahlavi also implemented policies that had the goal of weakening Iran’s Shia clergy and religious institutions, in part because the king viewed those institutions as threats to his secularist rule (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016).

**Revolutionary prospects**

In this vein, the following factors led to Iran’s Islamic revolution:

1. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his family appropriating large amounts of money for their personal use, at the expense of Iranians;
2. Enormous economic disparities in Iran;
3. SAVAK’s imprisonment, interrogation, torture, and execution of Iranians, who members of Iran’s government believed opposed it;
4. The Iranian government spending billions of dollars on arms (largely purchased from the United States) that exceeded Iran’s needs;
5. The westernization and secularization of Iranian law and culture, including attempts to limit the influence of Iran’s Shia clerics;
6. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s strengthening of secular courts in Iran that required judges to hold secular degrees in law, while establishing a rival center of Islamic Studies at Tehran University, which taught Islam and related topics in such a manner that did not oppose Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s government;
7. The Iranian government’s interference in the certification of the Shia clergy, with the intention of blocking potential clergy who would oppose Iran’s government;
8. The Iranian government’s harsh treatment of Shia clergy, who opposed Iran’s government, including restrictions on their religious dress and the celebration of religious rituals that could have been used to protest the government; and
9. The Iranian government’s requirement that Shia seminary students, who were studying Islam in order to become Shia clerics, serve in Iran’s military.

(Cleveland and Bunton, 2016)

Within this context, Ayatollah Khomeini, who had been planning, for many years, an Islamic revolution in Iran, continued, while in exile, to mobilize Iran’s clerics and preach sermons advocating the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and the establishment of a Shia Islamic government in Iran. Khomeini’s book entitled *Vilayat-i Faqih* (which means “Governance of the Islamic Jurist”) was published in 1970 and contains Khomeini’s lectures and other writings, as well as his vision for a Shia Islamic republic (Khomeini, n.d.; Khumayni, 1981). He argues that in the absence of a divinely inspired imam (which in Shia Islam is a saintly and infallible leader
who leads Shias religiously and politically), the Shia clerics (or jurists) should govern a Shia Islamic nation-state, which would be under Islamic law. According to Khomeini, these Shia clerics are entitled by God to govern because they possess the knowledge and spiritual insights to interpret Islam's sacred texts, the teachings of the 12 Shia imams (who ruled visibly from the seventh through ninth centuries), and Islamic law in such a way that adheres to Shia Islam and is relevant to contemporary Islamic societies, such as Iran (Arjomand, 1988). Khomeini stated that the Shia clerics’ mandate means that they must govern a country and administer it according to Islamic law. Khomeini argued that a monarchy, secular or otherwise, contradicted Islam, while he called for the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s government and the establishment of a Shia Islamic government in accordance with Khomeini’s vision. Khomeini’s politically activist position stands in sharp contrast to those of Shia quietists, who believe that Shias should separate themselves from politics, while remaining religiously observant, until the reappearance of the 12th Imam, who will establish peace and justice throughout the world before the Day of Judgment (Knysh, 2017; Marcinkowski, 2004).

Khomeini prepared the way for Iran’s Islamic revolution by training hundreds of students and speaking to thousands of people, many of whom participated in Iran’s Islamic revolution and some of whom became leaders in Iran’s Shia government after that revolution succeeded. Khomeini also facilitated Iran’s Islamic revolution by having his message disseminated in Iran through tape recordings and leaflets that contained Islamic, anti-monarchical, and anti-colonialist ideas. The principles contained in these communications informed Iranians of Khomeini’s grievances and his vision for Iran. These communications also inspired them to support Iran’s Islamic revolution, Khomeini’s eventual return to Iran (which took place in 1979), and his leadership of the country until his death in 1989. During 1978 and 1979, millions of Iranian demonstrators of various political and religious perspectives engaged in dozens of peaceful protests against the government of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and often experienced violent pushback at the hands of Iran’s military (Arjomand, 1988; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, 1994).

By the time that Khomeini had returned, from exile in France, to Iran on 1 February 1979, that country’s government, military, internal security services, and economy had lost much of their strength. In this context, some of the work that led to the establishment of Iran as an Islamic republic continued with a national referendum on 31 March 1979, which approved the replacement of the previous monarchy with an Islamic republic. After the referendum, Iran’s Islamic constitution was written and implemented. Khomeini’s Vilayat-i Faqih and other writings about an Islamic republic formed the template for Iran’s Islamic constitution and government (Cleveland and Bunton, 2016; Spellman, 2006).

**Iran’s Shia Islamic constitution**

According to Iran’s Shia Islamic constitution, the country has a Supreme Leader, an ayatollah, who is elected by the Assembly of Experts, whose candidates are vetted, and then run in popular elections. The supreme leader serves for life, unless he is removed from office, and has broad powers in domestic, foreign, military, and economic policies as well as influence on other areas of Iranian society. Candidates for Iran’s presidency are also vetted before they can run for that office (Islamic Republic of Iran’s Constitution of, 1979 with Amendments through 1989, Article 107, 1989). Iran’s president serves a four-year term and may run for a second, and final, four-year term. While Iran’s president has some influence in domestic, economic, foreign, and military policies, his authority is circumscribed by Iran’s supreme leader, parliament, and certain government agencies (Islamic Republic of Iran’s Constitution of, 1979 with Amendments through 1989, 113–132, 1989) Iran’s parliament, each of whose members serve four-year terms,
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is composed of 290 parliamentarians (Ansari-Pour, 1999–2000). Some parliamentarians represent legislative districts, while others represent minority religious communities such as Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians (Islamic Republic of Iran’s Constitution of, 1979 with Amendments through 1989, Article 64, 1989).

The Guardian Council is composed of 12 persons, who serve for six-year terms on a phased basis, so that half the membership changes every three years. This council approves or rejects all bills passed by parliament. Thus, it has the power to veto them if it considers them inconsistent with the constitution and Islamic law. This council can also bar candidates from running in elections to parliament, the presidency, and the Assembly of Experts (Islamic Republic of Iran’s Constitution of, 1979 with Amendments through 1989, Articles 4, 68, 72, 85, 91–99, 108, 110, 1989). The Expediency Council is an advisory body for the leader with ultimate adjudicating power in disputes over legislation between the parliament and the Guardian Council (Islamic Republic of Iran’s Constitution of, 1979 with Amendments through 1989, 110, 111, 112, 177, 1989).

Because Iran is under Islamic law, Shia Islam dominates almost every aspect of life including the religious, legal, political, economic, social, and educational spheres (Islamic Republic of Iran’s Constitution of, 1979 with Amendments through 1989, “Preamble”; “The Dawn of the Movement”; “Islamic Government”; “The Form of Government in Islam”; and “The Wilayah of the Just Faqih”. 1989). In this vein, since Iran’s Islamic revolution, Iran’s religious and political leaders have wanted to support Shias throughout the world, including Shias in Iraq and Lebanon, in order to protect them and expand Iran’s influence so as to protect its own security with respect to Iran’s adversaries which include the United States, Israel, and some Sunni Muslim countries (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019).

Iraq

Iraq is a majority-Muslim and majority-Arab country, whose population is approximately 60% Shia, and contains important Shia seminaries and sacred sites, while sharing a long border with Iran. For these and related reasons, Iran has attempted to expand its influence in Iraq, which until the US invasion of Iraq, beginning in 2003, was under a secularist government, many of whose political leaders were Sunni Muslims. In the wake of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, who was an influential Iraqi Shia cleric, announced from Tehran on 17 November 1982 the formation of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) that described itself as representing all of Iraq’s Muslims, including Shias and Sunnis, although it was actually a Shia religious and political organization. At the same time, SCIRI recognized the Islamic Republic of Iran as the foundation and primary mover of the world Islamic revolution (The Publicity Unit of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, 1983). In May 2007, SCIRI changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, which is also translated as the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (Cordesman, 2008; Isakhan, 2015). SCIRI’s formation was preparation for a Shia Iraqi government that would be formed in Iraq if Iran were to conquer Iraq or parts of it in the context of the Iran–Iraq War, which took place from 1980 until 1988 (Wiley, 1992). In 1983, SCIRI established a military force with Iran’s support; this force, named the Badr Corps, conducted guerilla operations inside Iraq, while also participating in Iranian military operations during the Iran–Iraq War. As that war continued and the Badr force, as well as Iran’s other Shia allies in Iraq, continued the war effort against the Iraqi military and government, in June 1987, the commander of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards announced plans to increase the strength of pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia military forces in Iraq. Consistent with that policy, Kamal Kharazi, a spokesperson for the Iranian government’s
office of war information, told Iran’s media that the war should be continued by the Iraqis themselves (Wiley, 1992).

During that time, Iraqis who had been fighting as part of Iranian military units were formed into all-Iraqi units. Ayatollah Khomeini also directed that Hezbollah brigades be established inside Iraq. Iran’s attempts to provide autonomy to Iraqi Shia military units, such as the Iraqi Hezbollah, would carry advantages and disadvantages for Iran during the decades that followed. One advantage of this policy was that the members of the autonomous Iraqi Shia units were composed of Iraqis who knew Arabic as well as the specific aspects of neighborhoods, geographic landscapes, and tribal allegiances in Iraq that could enable them to engage in combat and hold the land that they had conquered. One disadvantage of these units’ autonomy, for Iran, was that there were times when such units could act in ways that could advance their own interests in Iraq, while potentially damaging Iran’s objectives in that country (Wiley, 1992).

**Iran in Iraq**

Although the Iran–Iraq War had a devastating impact on both countries and perpetuated a situation where the boundaries between the two countries at the end of that war were virtually the same as the boundaries at the beginning, that war enabled Iran to increase its influence within Iraq over the long term. Iran used that war to strengthen its position within Iraq through its deployment of its own Shia-based military forces in that country. This Iranian and Shia military mobilization in Iraq was linked with fiery religio-political speeches by Khomeini and other Shia leaders in Iran justifying Iran’s battles against Saddam Hussein (who was religiously Sunni and led a secular government) as battles where the Shias were ardently fighting against a Sunni enemy. At the same time, Khomeini and other Shia leaders in Iran justified that country’s military operations in that war as a war of self-defense for Iran and for the Shias of Iraq, although there were other Iraqi Shias who viewed the situation differently (Marr, 2017).

While Iran’s leaders may not have been aware of it at the time, as Iran attempted to strengthen its position among Iraq’s Shias through the Iran–Iraq War, Iran’s Shia government and its military were setting the stage to further strengthen Iran’s position in Iraq’s future in the advent of US (1) future attacks against Iraq during the Gulf War in 1990–1991, (2) subsequent bombings of the no-fly zone in southern Iraq from 1991 until 2003, and (3) invasion of Iraq beginning in 2003. Thus, as the United States and its allies attacked Iraq during and after these periods, they were creating situations where Iran increased its influence among Iraqi Shias in such a way that mobilized them religiously and politically, in spite of the fact that some Iraqi Shias resent Iran’s involvement in their country (Marr, 2017).

This opposition that those Iraqi Shias have against Iranians is rooted, in part, in those Shias being Arabs and having a feeling of ethnic superiority with respect to the Iranians, who are ethnically Persians. The deep misgivings of some Iraqi Shias against Iranians is also rooted in those Iraqi Shias’ belief that the presence of Iranian soldiers and governmental officials in Iraq is damaging to Iraqi sovereignty, while many of those Iraqis believe that Iran is using its presence in Iraq to serve its own purposes at the expense of Iraqis. In contrast, there are other Iraqi Shias who believe that Iran’s presence in Iraq is benefiting Iraqi Shias in several ways, including economically, religiously, and educationally (Mumtaz, 2005).

After the attacks of al-Qaida, a Sunni Islamist group, against the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, on 11 September 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan, beginning in October 2001, and Iraq two years after that. With respect to both wars, the US government’s justification involved combatting al-Qaida and similar groups, in order to decrease the probability that any such groups would attack the United States in the
future. The US war in Iraq had the effect of substantially increasing the influence of Iran and Shia Muslims in Iraq, in that the United States (1) captured and executed Iraq’s then President, Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Muslim who strongly opposed Iran and Shia influence in Iraq; and (2) implemented a democratic form of government, which resulted in the election of many Shias to Iraq’s parliament and other political offices, because Shias comprise a substantial majority in that country (Mumtaz, 2005).

As Shia religious and political power decreased dramatically in Iraq, because of the US invasion and Iran’s support of Iraq’s Shias, Sunni Islamist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fought against the Shias and ISIS’s other adversaries, with the intention of establishing, in Iraq, Syria, and eventually worldwide, a Sunni Islamic nation-state under strict Sunni Islamic law (Marr, 2017).

ISIS and its Iraqi Shia adversaries

By June 2014, ISIS had captured large amounts of territory in Iraq, and the Iraqi military was experiencing difficulties in blocking ISIS’s far-reaching military advances. With ISIS a few miles outside Baghdad and Iraq’s military weakened, Iraq’s government became dependent on several non-governmental militias in Iraq, primarily Shia and Kurdish, in order to defend Baghdad and other parts of Iraq. On 13 June 2014, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, an influential Shia leader in Iraq, issued a fatwa (a religious and political decree) calling on Shias to defend Baghdad and Shia holy sites in Iraq. While his decree was not exclusively directed at Shias in Iraq, large numbers of Shias in Iraq responded to this decree by joining several Shia militias for the purpose of defending Shias in Iraq against ISIS’s advances and hostile actions against Shias. Some of these Shia volunteers joined a Shia force named “al-Hashd al-Shaabi”, or the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) (Watling, 2016). The PMF functions as an umbrella organization that coordinates the work of existing Shia militias (Marr, 2017). It is estimated that after Sistani issued his fatwa, the various Shia militias in Iraq, including the ones that operated under the PMF, came to be composed of between 60,000 and 120,000 soldiers, whereas, around the same time, the Iraqi military was composed of only fifty thousand reliable soldiers. The Badr Brigade and Mahdi Army, both of which were Shia and had been renamed the Peace Brigades, constituted significant components of the PMF (Marr, 2017).

ISIS versus Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IGRC) Quds Force played a crucial role in Iraq, and particularly in the battles against ISIS. The Quds Force is a branch of the IGRC, which formed soon after Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979. The IGRC is intended to protect Iran’s Shia Islamic political system, including its government. The IGRC views itself as having a crucial role in protecting Iran’s Islamic system by preventing foreign interference in Iran and coups in that country by Iran’s regular military. The IGRC’s Quds Force is a special-forces unit, which is responsible for military operations outside Iran. The Quds Force reports directly to its own commander and the Supreme Leader of Iran (Ostovar, 2016).

One of the Quds Force’s early victories took place in August 2014 in Amerli, Iraq, which is approximately 110 miles north of Baghdad where Shia and Kurdish forces caused ISIS to retreat (Collard, 2014; Ostovar, 2016). This military campaign benefited from US air support, which was largely coordinated through the Kurds, with Shia and Kurdish militias fighting on the ground (Ostovar, 2016). Shia and Kurdish forces under the Quds Force’s command had similar success in defeating and causing the withdrawal of ISIS from the Iraqi towns of Jalawla and
Saadia, which are 20 miles from Iraq’s border with Iran (Ostovar, 2016). These battles included the first reported use of Iranian F-4 military aircraft, which provided air support for the ground forces. The use of the F-4s was an escalation prompted by the proximity of the fighting to Iran’s borders. It was a bold assertion of Iran’s place in the war, in that Iranian air assets were operating in Iraq in a manner parallel to that of the United States and allied air forces. This was one case, possibly among others, where Iran and the United States cooperated in the fight against ISIS and similar Sunni Islamist organizations (Arango and Erdbrink, 2014). Although both countries denied that such cooperation existed, in December 2014, US Secretary of State John Kerry described Iran’s military contributions as having a positive effect in the war against ISIS (al-Ali, 2017; Ostovar, 2016).

**ISIS weakened**

The battles against ISIS continued and by June 2018, ISIS forces within Iraq and Syria were weakened but not fully destroyed. Indeed, large numbers of ISIS soldiers fled from Iraq, under massive military pressure from the militaries of the United States, Iran, and Iraq, to countries such as Syria, Libya, Yemen, the Philippines, and Turkey (Schmitt, 2018). Although ISIS had been weakened in Iraq and Syria, thousands of ISIS soldiers remained in those countries and internationally, all of whom were committed to ISIS's cause and were ready to fight for it well into the future (Iraq Bombs meeting of Daesh Leaders in Syria – Military, 4 February 2018).

The proportionately large number of Shias in Iraq, combined with Iraq’s electoral system, will perpetuate the Shias’ significant influence in Iraqi politics. Yet, within this context, Iraq’s leaders face the challenges of (1) creating long-lasting national cohesion; (2) developing Iraq’s economic resources; (3) establishing proper governance in the face of corruption, kinship allegiances, sectarianism, ethnic divisions, and weak infrastructure; and (4) resisting the involvement of foreign countries in Iraq’s affairs (Armajani, 2020).

**Lebanon**

Musa al-Sadr, a highly influential Shia cleric who was born in Iran in 1928, was a significant figure in Shia political mobilization in Lebanon in the twentieth century. In 1974, he established the Shia Amal movement in Lebanon, which became a major militia and political party. Through his speeches, mobilization, efforts, and founding of several Shia charitable organizations, he began the process of strengthening the religious and political bonds of some of Lebanon's Shias, as they exerted influence in Lebanon's political sphere (Norton, 1988).

Within this context, Iran’s Islamic Revolution had a profound impact on Lebanon’s Shias. The overthrow of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1979 served as an important model, demonstrating that committed and well-organized Shia clerics could depose a government in the face of oppression and injustice. Some of Lebanon’s Shias also hoped that Iran’s Shia government would be a source of religious, political, and financial support, which came to be the case. During the course of decades, there had been significant exchanges of ideas between Lebanese and Iranian Shias, who had studied at Shia seminaries in such cities as Najaf, Iraq, and Qom, Iran. These relationships, and the cooperative atmosphere in which they were pursued, enabled certain members of Amal to play roles in Iran’s Islamic Revolution while some members of Amal were influenced by their Iranian counterparts’ ideas and actions. A number of Iranians including Ayatollah Khomeini’s son, Ahmad, and his brother-in-law, Sadiq Tabatabai, received training in Lebanon, under Amal’s auspices. Musa al-Sadr’s and Amal’s religious and political ideology, its
political mobilization of Lebanon’s Shias, and Amal’s ties with Iran were factors that created the groundwork for the emergence of Hezbollah, which is one of Lebanon’s largest Shia political parties and military organizations. Hezbollah arose in the early 1980s during Lebanon’s civil war, which took place from 1975 until 1990 (Norton, 1988).

Hezbollah’s origins and ideology

The Lebanese, who comprised the first cadre, of what was to become Hezbollah, such as Ragheb Harb, who had a significant leadership role in that organization’s early years; Subhi al-Tufayli, who would become the organization’s first secretary general; Sayyid Abbas al-Musawi, who would become its second secretary general; and Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, who would become the third person in that position, were all in their twenties or thirties in the mid-1980s, and were originally from Shia areas in southern Lebanon or the Beqaa Valley (Norton, 2018). Iran and Syria supported these Shia revolutionaries, while Iran had the leading role. For Iran, the establishment of Hezbollah constituted the initial attainment of an important objective, in that high-level Iranian officials in the Islamic Republic wanted to spread Iran’s Islamic Revolution. Syrian government officials hoped that Hezbollah would be a means by which Syria could maintain its alliance with Iran and gain leverage to strike at both Israel and the United States, both of which viewed Syria as hostile to Israel’s interests. At the same time, the Syrian government wanted to maintain some influence with respect to Amal (Norton, 2018).

Hezbollah’s ideology was similar to that of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Hezbollah’s “Open Letter Addressed to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and in the World”, which was published on 16 February 1985, expresses some crucial aspects of this Shia revolutionary ideology. The document emphasizes that Iran’s Islamic Revolution was an inspiration to action and evidence that Shias can transform societies when the faithful gather under the banner of Shia Islam and work to break the oppression of tyrannical governments. While affirming the superiority of Shia Islam over all other worldviews, the open letter criticizes Western ideologies, declaring that they cannot respond to humans’ aspirations or rescue them from ignorance. According to the open letter, Shia Islam is the answer, in that it can bring renewal, progress, and creativity to human beings. The open letter excoriates the United States, Israel, and the Soviet Union for their expansionism and their attacks against Muslims (Hezbollah, 1985).

In addition, the secularism of Western-style democracies and capitalism, on the one hand, and communism, on the other, pose a grave danger to all Muslims. According to the open letter, Hezbollah was positioning itself as a force that fought against the United States, Israel, and the Soviet Union, all of which have oppressed large numbers of people in their colonialist spheres of influence. One unanswered question in the open letter involves Hezbollah’s political goals for Lebanon. The letter states, somewhat vaguely, that when Lebanon is freed from external and internal domination, the Lebanese will be able to determine their destiny, and if they choose freely, they will choose Islam. The letter does not make clear whether Hezbollah’s religious and political goals involve an Islamic republic similar to that of Iran (Hezbollah, 1985).

Hezbollah, social services, and education

While Hezbollah is an influential political party and militia in Lebanon, it operates social service and health organizations as well as educational institutions. For example, Hezbollah operates a vocational school for boys and a vocational institute for women in southern Lebanon (Norton,
Hezbollah also offers a wide array of services to its constituents, which include medical clinics, hospitals, pharmacies, and Islamic financing and loans, in compliance with Islamic law, for establishing businesses (Norton, 2018).

Hezbollah also devotes significant amounts of money and other valuable resources to its educational institutions (Le Thomas, 2009; Le Thomas, 2013). Hezbollah’s Mobilization for Education Committee coordinates all of the educational institutions that Hezbollah has founded and operates (Avon and Khatchadourian, 2012). These educational institutions include (1) Shia seminaries, which educate and train future Shia clerics; (2) Shia mosques, which often include schools on their properties; and (3) elementary and high schools, which sit on their own properties. All of those schools have Shia Islam as the foundations for their curricula and have enabled Hezbollah to consolidate and maintain its political influence among many Lebanese Shias (Le Thomas, 2003; Le Thomas, 2012).

Hezbollah entered the Lebanese political system in the 1992 elections and has participated in Lebanese elections since that time. The end of Lebanon’s civil war in 1990 and a belief among Hezbollah’s political leaders that Hezbollah and its Shia supporters would benefit from its participation in Lebanon’s democratic political process were crucial factors that led Hezbollah to becoming a full-fledged political party in Lebanon (Worrall et al., 2016).

Amal and Hezbollah

In addition, Hezbollah’s leaders did not want Amal to become the primary or exclusive political party for Lebanon’s Shias, partly because Hezbollah’s leaders believed that their understandings of Shia Islam were far closer to what Shia Islam actually taught than the beliefs represented by Amal. Some of Hezbollah’s leaders and rank-and-file members believed that many of Amal’s leaders and members were too secular in their beliefs and were not adhering to Shia Islam’s true teachings. Some members of Hezbollah also view Amal as corrupt. Related to these beliefs, members of Hezbollah felt a sense of rivalry with respect to Amal for the religious and political loyalty of Lebanon’s Shias. During the early 1990s, Hezbollah’s religious and political leaders consulted with Iran’s religious and political leaders about the possibility of Hezbollah participating in Lebanon’s political process, and they received approval from Iran’s government to do so. After those consultations, 12 of Hezbollah’s leaders discussed the possibility of that organization entering Lebanon’s political process, and they voted in favor of Hezbollah doing so by a vote of ten to two. Since that time, large numbers of Hezbollah’s members have been elected to Lebanon’s parliament and local political offices and have served in appointed positions (Worrall et al., 2016).

Amal and Hezbollah constitute significant religious and political institutions that have embedded themselves deeply into Lebanon’s religious and political life in general and into the lives of Lebanon’s Shia Muslims in particular. While Hezbollah has some of its roots in Amal, both of those parties originated as revolutionary movements, which consolidated Lebanon’s Shias religiously and politically, and provided those Shias with a thoroughgoing sense of communal religious and political identity, while offering them robust opportunities to participate in Lebanon’s political life. Both groups grew from several historical, religious, political, and ideological roots, with most of those roots in Shia intellectual life in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. Amal and Hezbollah have been part of a general pattern of religious and political life in the Middle East and other parts of the modern world, which has included the fusion of religion and politics, as well as mobilization under the leadership of one or more charismatic intellectual religious and political leaders (Armajani, 2020).
References


