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The Myth of the Shia Crescent

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AMMAN – Recently, Israel's Vice Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz offered an unequivocal veto on a key issue in the Middle East peace process. Any return of the Golan Heights to Syria would result in an "Iranian foothold" on Israel's border and would thus not only be politically naïve but irrational.

Mofaz's statement is symptomatic of a perception that is now deeply entrenched, not only in the Middle East, but in the United States as well. That notion is of a hegemonic Iran that is attempting to dominate the region through an array of Shiite proxies. This Iranian fifth column is believed to stretch from Beirut via Damascus, Gaza to Baghdad and finally from Iran to Saudi-Arabia to Yemen. Recent armed clashes between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government are, it is said, just another sign of Iran's hegemonic reach.

Ironically, this perception brings Israel some rather unlikely partners. President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt claims that Shiites are "always loyal to Iran," while King Abdullah of Jordan has coined the axiom about a rising "Shiite crescent." This "rise of the Shiites" and the resulting "Sunni/Shia divide" is alleged to be creating an ever widening chasm in the region.

Although this perception may convince at first glance, it is ultimately based on generalizations that reveal more about its advocates than the actual reality on the ground.

Take Iraq, where the looming "Shia crescent" is often blamed for much of the chaos. Recent developments in Iraq allegedly point to a fundamental clash between Sunnis and Shiites in the region and bear witness to malevolent Iranian interferences. But is Iraq really symptomatic of a greater Shia scheme?

True, sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq have escalated since the fall of Saddam. But contrary to common perception, Iraqi Shiites do not form a homogenous block that opposes the supposedly unified Sunnis. Indeed, the contrary is true. In the light of Iraqi nationalism that crosses sectarian boundaries, it is farfetched to consider the Iraqi Shia merely proxies of Iran.

Instead, what we are witnessing in Iraq today is not ever increasing friction between religious communities but escalating internal power struggles within the Sunni and Shiite communities. Ongoing violence in Basra and the fighting between Sunni "Awakening Councils" and Al Qaida in Iraq demonstrate this. In fact, the current escalation points to an increasing political struggle between the federalist position of Shia Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki and the centralist position of Shiite cleric Moqtada al Sadr. This struggle will ultimately define the political structure of Iraq.

Here is where Sunni-Shiite cooperation comes in. Widely unnoticed, Iraqi Sunni and Shia centralists have managed in the last couple of months to form a united parliamentary platform that leaves sectarian tensions behind. More than a hundred followers of Ayad Allawi, Al Sadr, and others have joined their ranks. This supra-sectarian platform calls for a central government administration of Iraq's natural resources and the postponement of the looming referendum to settle the status of the city of Kirkuk.

Change within the government is also noteworthy. Sunni ministers who had been boycotting the government since last year have returned to their posts. Thus, Iraq is seeing both escalating intra-sectarian violence and cautious steps towards inter-sectarian alliances.

And what about Iran? Contrary to the blame games being played out in the US, Iran cannot be accused of an unrestrained aggressive stance toward Iraq. Of course, no Iranian decision-maker is interested in a US-

success in Iraq that might well put regime-change in Iran back on the agenda. But the rationale behind Iran's policy of economic, social and military engagement seems to be first and foremost, defensive.

Memories of Iraq's eight year war of aggression against Iran in the 1980's have not faded. From Iran's perspective, any future threat originating from Iraq needs to be averted by ensuring the participation in Iraq's government of Shiites and Kurds.

These complexities are lost on many observers when matched up against the convenient and catchy rhetoric of the "Shia Crescent." But they have not gone unnoticed among ordinary Arabs. A recent poll by the University of Maryland indicates that a large majority of Arabs in the region consider Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad one of the three most popular political leaders worldwide. Only 11% identified Iran as the biggest threat to their security. So if a Shia threat organized by Iran really does exist, why is it being ignored by those that it purportedly targets – the Sunni Arab majorities?

Rather than objectively describing the actual political situation in the Middle East, the notion of a fundamental Iranian threat is being used to continue unconditional Western support for increasingly unstable regimes. Moreover, the overstatement of the threat posed by Iran is also being used as a convenient excuse for political inflexibility and stagnating reform processes throughout the region.

But exaggerating the supposed Shia threat has a price. Continuous talk of a "Sunni-Shia divide" might ultimately develop into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Alarmist rhetoric may, in the end, jeopardize rather than protect the status quo in the region.

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