"The Shia Arabs: Questions of Citizenship and Identity"

A background paper for an ACRPS Conference to be held February 27-28, 2016

Motivated by a desire to understand the prevailing Arab context in which it was born and in which it operates, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies has, since its establishment in 2011, concerned itself with questions of social integration and identity. In doing this, it has taken a particular interest in the affairs or Arab religious and ethnic minorities. This was evidenced, in particular, in two specific previous academic meetings which the ACRPS convened: the first of these was the Second Annual Conference on the Social Sciences and Humanities (Doha, March, 2013) which investigated the theme of social integration and nation building in the Arab region; and the second was the Third Annual Conference on Democratic Transition (Dead Sea, Jordan, September, 2014), which focused on "Sectarianism and the Construction of Minorities" in the same region that is being examined here.

The careful academic attention given to these two topics reflects the centrality of a new and very urgent phenomenon, and one that merits dedicated attention by Arab social scientists and other scholars, namely, the increasing importance of sub-national (alternately, "crypto national" or "pre national") forms of identity consciousness. This manifests itself today in the Arab countries through sharp and oftentimes violent schisms which exist between different groups. Notably, the recent ascendancy of these schisms comes a full century since the first attempts to forge modern Arab nation states, which presupposed the existence of all-encompassing national identities.

A closer view of these societal schisms reveals two historical events as pivotal milestones in the exacerbation of these problems across the Arab *Mashreq* [*]. The first of these was the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq, which served to turn the country into a battleground between various sub-national identity groups. The second was the eruption of the Arab Revolutions in 2011, which placed the conflict between competing identity groups in center stage, seemingly replacing all other factors in the battle for power, wealth and social and political participation. The end result was that Arab societies were polarized along sectarian-confessional fault lines, specifically as it relates to the split between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and not according to considerations of citizenship or diverging political, social or economic worldviews. By focusing on the questions of citizenship and identity of the Shia Muslim Arabs in this upcoming conference, the ACRPS has an opportunity to address two pressing and fundamental issues at once. The Center is also able to examine themes that touch on the failure of social integration policies in the Arab world, which is itself the most obvious symptom of the sectarian schism in evidence today.

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[*] This conference will focus on a variety of regions, including Iraq, Greater Syria and the Gulf states; in the Arabic version of this document, Arab Mashreq is used in contrast to the Arab Maghreb

Programmatically, the proceedings will seek to illuminate how those Arabs who embrace the Twelver Shia confession of Islam relate to the political spheres in their home countries and their wider Arab identity more generally. The conference will also rely on a vast body of literature, most of it written by Shia Arab authors, that focuses on the political disenfranchisement of Shia communities in the Arab countries, and which claims that the Shia Arabs suffer discrimination and marginalization. In contrast to this stand the many efforts to depict Shia Arabs as a homogenous group with extensive trans-national bonds to other Shia communities across the globe. This has specific interest for allegations of connections to Iran, a strong and menacing regional power which sponsors the export of Shia political Islamism.

One major conclusion of the Third Annual Conference on Democratic Transition (2014), was that the Sunni-Shia divide was political, and not theological, in nature. This truth has also meant that the intensity of the Shia-Sunni divide has worsened with the tremors that have shaken tyrannical Arab regimes and the increased tension in Iranian-Arab relations which is itself often framed as a battle between Sunni and Shia combatants. In a similar fashion, all of the conflicts to impact the Arab countries have become framed as sectarian battles, reducing individuals to religious entities and transforming an overarching socio-political struggle into a conflict between competing identity groups.

The Shia and the Crisis of the Nation-State in the Arab Mashreq

Within the countries under examination, the sectarian divide, as it applies to the tensions which exist between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the Arab region, can be localized to Lebanon, Iraq and the Gulf States, these being the only regions in which Shia communities form a demographically significant part of the population. Throughout this paper, the use of "Shia Arabs" shall refer specifically to those Shia communities who live in multi-confessional countries, being the group with the most instructive experience to study. In broad terms, however, the "Shia Question" is relevant to the entire Arab *Mashreq* and its mosaic population, with the presence of the Shia community in this region representing one more facet of the ethnic, religious and confessional diversity which typify the Arab experience. Yet the existence of the "Shia Question" is also part of the legacy of the failed approach taken by modern Arab nation states towards their own countries' population diversity, which they dealt with using authoritarianism and without finding institutional, citizenship-based solutions to the problems which diversity posed. In this way, the sectarian schism between Shia and Sunni Muslims has found itself at the center of the crisis that lies at the heart of the nation state in the Arab *Mashreq* and that has been brought to the fore by the Arab revolutions. It is also evidence of the crisis that lies at the heart of Arab nationalism, and specifically where Arab nationalism takes the form of political parties.

These similarities notwithstanding, the status of Shia citizens in the countries and regions under discussion varies according to each individual case. Scholars concur that not only do Shia communities differ from one country to the next, but that the Shia communities within individual countries do not form homogenous blocs, differing in terms of social composition, patterns of religiosity and political position. Despite this reality, the myth of a common Shia bond which ties together disparate groups across borders remains resilient in the political sphere and continues to impact scholarship on the topic. The contemporary socio-political fabric of Shia communities is a completely novel construct, unrelated

to an over-arching and common religious hagiography and theological heritage which Shia Muslims across the globe share. Today's Shia Muslims are members of a society and citizens of modern-day nation states and cannot be limited to a purely religious-confessional identity—they are more multi-faceted than that.

The political aspirations of the various Shia communities across the Arab region also vary according to their home countries. While Iraqi Shia seek to dominate the government of their country, Lebanese Shia want merely to rearrange the consocitational political order in a manner that brings Lebanon's unwritten "National Accord" in line with demographic transformations subsequent to the drafting of the Accord. Shia communities in the Gulf, meanwhile, want only to safeguard their citizenship and the protection of their minority status.

What these various Shia communities have in common, however, is the problematic nature of the relationship between their home countries and their confessional identities. It is this tension that gives rise to a feeling among the Shia Arab communities that they are being deprived of full political participation in their countries. Such sentiments were only heightened with the 1979 Revolution in Iran, which led to the birth of the Islamic Republic as a major exporter of a specifically Shia political Islamism in a neighboring, non-Arab country which made demands on the Arab Shia communities. The sum of these factors is that the relationship of Shia Arabs to their Arab national identity is problematized and the possibility of constructing an all-encompassing Arab identity to act as a backdrop of far-reaching national political agendas becomes more difficult.

Even following the rise to power of Shia groups and political parties, such as for example in Iraq following the 2003 invasion—although that situation remains more similar to a civil conflict than a functioning government—the basic premises of this problem remain unresolved. In other words, there has been no fundamental shift in opinion amongst Shia politicians in Iraq or any innovation in their approach either to their own Arab identity or their relationship with Iran, even following their rise to power. Instead, they have merely reinvented the same old, decrepit post-independence Arab nation statenation state, the only difference being that they changed the confessional identity of the ruling clique.

The above arguments lead us squarely to the modern nation state as it is conceived within the Arab *Mashreq* and the crisis which it faces as a result of its failure to create a comprehensive and satisfactory mode of citizenship for its people. Such a mode of citizenship must go beyond merely a collection of obligations and rights, but rather must include the right to political participation on an equal footing with other citizens. The modern Arab nation state has failed to entrench the concept of a national identity as one that supersedes ethnic and sectarian affiliations. Instead, these nation states have merely provided an arena for the rivalries between competing sub-national identities. The authority structures that took shape in the Arab *Mashreq* in tandem with this only crystallized these rivalries. In some cases, such as Iraq, the idea of an over-arching Arab national identity which embraced both Sunni and Shia Muslims was completely jettisoned, while no other nation state identity to take its place emerged. In such situations, the sect and the tribe are no longer merely pre-national identity groups acting as buffers against state power, but rather competing political entities in their own right. A

consequence of this failure of social integration and of nation-building is the divergence of collective memories and fundamental disagreements over national history. In essence, the Shia-Sunni dispute hides a broader disagreement over the nature of the nation state and political regime which should take its place.

In the latter part of the twentieth century in Iraq, this disagreement took the form of the rise of identity based political movements that represented Shia Muslims, the first of which was the Dawa Party, formed in the 1950s. A reading of the early literature produced by the Dawa Party, which was in fact modeled on the Muslim Brotherhood, suggests that its first mission as the combatting of a then-expanding leftist movement, the movement it started quickly became a means for the expression of "Shia Anguish" (*Mahrumiya*, or "sense of deprivation" in Arabic). The founders of what would become Iraq's Dawa Party included individuals from a number of countries however, including Lebanon and the Gulf States, something which would have implications for those countries. One of the first reverberations was the establishment of "The Movement of the Deprived" (*Harakat al Mahrumeen*) in Lebanon during the 1970s, which in turn gave rise to Hezbollah in the following decade.

Domestic Crises and Foreign Rivalries

Throughout the modern era, the "Shia Question" and the fate of Shia Arabs has been tied not only to domestic considerations and the failure of the Arab state, but also to regional rivalries, particularly since the adoption of the Twelver Shia confession by the Iranian Safavid dynasty during the sixteenth century. The new religious convictions of Iran's rulers made way for nearly two and a half centuries of conflict with the Ottoman Empire which ruled over wide Arab lands.

Beginning with the Shia revival in Iran and continuing throughout the modern era, Iran has always tied its ambitions of becoming a regional imperial power to the Shia communities in the Arab countries. Over the past four decades since what would come to be known as the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, and culminating in the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Iranian imperial aspirations have been cloaked in a sectarian garb.

The trickling of the Shia Question into the extra-national sphere has helped to shape a number of dynamics and forms of intellectual, cultural and political rhetoric. These include a now well established discourse on the loyalty of Shia Arabs and their national identity. Another result is the way in which the Shia Arabs themselves vacillate in their approach to their multi-faceted identity, both Shia Muslim and Arab. Shia Arabs today approach these questions with some trepidation, and ultimately become embroiled in power games between various regional players.

For an example of the disappointments which have flowed from the entrapment of Shia Arabs in these regional machinations, one has to look to the hopes which many Shia Arabs held out for the creation by Iraq's Shia political movements of an independent Shia polity that defined itself as Arab and therefore was independent of Iran. In the end, however, these political movements failed even to act as a bridge that would bring the Arab and Iranian worlds closer, and thereby reduce the tensions on the two sides of the Gulf.

The Shia Question is thus typified by a combination of a domestic intransigence preventing the Shia Arab community's full integration as citizens, and a foreign component in which an element of the Arab nation is turned into an arena for regional rivalries. Indeed, all components of the Arab populations share this fate with Shia Arabs, in that they are trapped between domestic and foreign factors. What makes the Shia Arab predicament unique is that their concerns have transcended the boundaries of the nation state coincidentally with the intensification of sectarian battle lines across the *Mashreq*, particularly since the US invasion of Iraq. This turn of events reached a crescendo with the Arab Revolutions, whence the Shia Arabs found themselves at a flashpoint of two competing and ascending axes.

Political Shi'ism

In addition to the other two points elaborated on above, there is also the phenomenon that this paper shall describe as "Shia Political Proselytization". This is the phenomenon in which sects and communities that are not traditionally considered a part of the Twelver Shia confession come to define themselves with the Shia side of regional rivalries. Specifically, this applies to the Alawites of Syria and the Houthis (Zaidi Shia) in Yemen, groups which are being re-defined in terms of sectarianism for the purposes of political expediency. Attempts to proselytize the Shia doctrine in Egypt and the Arab Maghreb also fit this politically motivated mold.

In these last two cases, religious and political rivalries overlap neatly. While the Islamic Republic of Iran has not shirked away from supporting Sunni Islamist groups that support its ideological positions (the two Palestinian parties Hamas and Islamic Jihad are two specific examples), it has also been persistent in its support for the spread of Shia doctrine across Egypt and North Africa. Its support for such missionary activities has served to undermine efforts at ecumenical reconciliation between the various Muslim confessions, the earliest of which predate Iran's Islamic Revolution.

Conference Proceedings

The organizers of this conference believe it to be impossible to study any of the above factors in isolation from the others, particularly since these have all resulted in political ramifications. Moving forward, the ACRPS is committed both to the academic rigor of the meeting it intends to host as well as to its principled opposition to the increasing intensity of sectarian tensions that presently grips the region, which is concomitant with the creation and expansion of political sectarianism throughout the *Mashreq*. This commitment to anti-sectarianism is reflected in the deliberately worded title for the conference, in which the appellation "Shia" modifies the Arab identity of these communities. This adamant political conviction does not change the ACRPS' expectation that all of the submitted papers meet the highest academic standards, and that they critique sectarianism through an academic methodology, by casting light on its founding myths and the interests which manipulate sectarianism for their own ulterior motives.

Scholars who are interested in the themes discussed above are invited to submit their proposals to the organizing committee, in line with the guidelines set out elsewhere. Proposals are invited in line with the following topics:

- The Ottoman-Safavid conflict: fallout and impact on Sunni-Shia polarization
- The religious roots and growth of Shia political ideologies in parallel with the transformation of the state from an autocratic, *Sultanic* state into a constitutional (*Mashrutiat*) state
- Shia Muslims and the Modern Nation-state
- Political sectarianisms and the formation of a modern nation state in the Arab *Mashreq*
- The Iraqi state: its transformations and the role which Shia Iraqis played in it
- The clerical authorities of Shia Arabs
- The role played by clerics from Najaf and Jabal Amel in the Arab revival of the nineteenth century and in the formation of a common Arab cultural identity
- Identity affiliations and their role in the theological disputes between Arab and Iranian Shia Muslims: the Najaf-Qom discord
- The identity- and politics-based contexts in which Shia political Islamisms emerged: "Rule of the Jurisprudent" (*Vilayet-e-Faqih*), the "Sovereignty of Humankind" (*Khilafat al Insan*), "Rule of the Community" (*Wilayet il Ummah*) and "the Infallibility of Prophecy" (*Shihadat al Anbia*)
- The rise of Shia political movements
- Shia Islamism in the Arab *Mashreq* in a broader context of expanding fundamentalist movements
- Shia political activism in Lebanon within an established sectarian system: the cases of Amal and Hezbollah
- The formation of modern Shia Arab elites
- Shia elites and the secularization of the state
- Shia Arabs and social integration
- The political enfranchisement of Shia Arabs
- The rule of the Shia: the case of Iraq since 2003
- The Shia Question in the Gulf
- The political proselytization of Shi'ism: Alawites, Houthis and the spread of the Shia doctrine in Egypt, Sudan and the Arab Maghreb
- The Shia Arabs and Iran: outstanding issues
- Arab identity as manifested in Shia rhetoric and actions in culture and in politics
- The Shia and Arab national identity as a cultural vehicle, an idea and a political movement
- What hope for an Arabist Shia political movement that envisages equal citizenship for all Arabs?
- The prospects for an Arab Shi'ism independent of the Iranian religious model
- Shia Arabs and regional power politics: a Shia camp hiding under an Iranian umbrella?
- The diversity of Shia attitudes to regional policies and to Iran in particular
- Political sectarianisms in the calculations of regional powers
- Identity politics within Shia Arab émigré communities
- The Shia Arabs of Iran

Deadlines and milestones

- A research proposal, accompanied by the CV of the author, is to be received no later than Tuesday, October 20, 2015. The proposal, to be no longer than 800 words, must include: the research problem being examined; the main themes which it addresses; the extent to which the proposed research paper will relate to the extant body of literature; the novel features of any submitted work.

- Provided that all relevant submission guidelines are met (please see here), and that the proposal was accepted by the organizing committee, and that no part of the completed draft has previously been published through another channel, the organizing committee shall notify authors of its final decision on the inclusion of a text within the conference proceedings no later than December 31, 2015. All such final decisions will be based on the deliberations of a specialist committee, which will explain the decision not to accept a complete draft as necessary. Authors are advised that approval of a proposal does not guarantee acceptance of the completed draft.

All correspondence related to this conference is to be directed to the conference coordinator, Dr. Haidar Saeed, at the following email address: arabshia@dohainstitute.org