"Introduction", in Sabrina Mervin (ed.), The Shi'a worlds and Iran, London, Saqi Books, 2010, pp. 9-26

Sabrina Mervin

Introduction

We may assume that the expression "Shi'a worlds" will gain ground in the future. The "Shia crescent", an easy and appealing construction, has made plenty of ink flow – probably too much – but it does not account for a complex and changing reality. There is neither a crescent nor an arch forming a homogeneous block under the direction of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but rather a non-contiguous collection of spaces distributed over a far wider area than just the Middle East. From Africa to China, there are zones hosting minorities and sometimes majorities of Twelver Shi'a, without even counting the diaspora in Europe, the United States and elsewhere. Hence we prefer to speak here of Shi'a worlds, like it is common to speak of Muslim worlds, carefully marked in plural[1], because these worlds belong to different sociolinguistic spheres and are embedded in different local cultures. The researchers that contribute to the present project specialise in the different regions that concern us, but they are also experts on contemporary Shi'a Islam or on Islamic movements in general. The "crescent" will easily be forgotten once we take a closer look at the subject and internalise the idea that "the Shi'a factor" – another fashionable expression these days – has become an issue that needs to be taken into consideration.

It is useful to remember that the expression "the Shi'a crescent" was born out of a fear for what is described as the resurgence or the rise of Shia Islam following the American invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein in April 2003. In Iraq, but also in the Gulf, Shi'a started demanding that their demographic weight play its proper role in the political balance, provoking reactions from Arab leaders as well as American neo-conservatives.[2] Mahmud Ahmadinejad's rise to power, bringing along his renewed revolutionary and millenarian enthusiasm, populist domestic policies, anti-American foreign outlook, and his firm position on nuclear power, has increased the fear of a return of Iranian influence. While the struggle to export the Islamic Revolution seemed to have ended - in a relative defeat for Iran – a new era of strife started among the major powers in the region – of which Iran claimed to be one. Later, the July 2006 war between the Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel reinforced the axis Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah, an alliance more political than Shi'i between the three

---

[1] With all necessary precaution, since the aim is not to essentialise but rather to contextualise and account for interrelations. On this subject, see the editorial by Sylvie Denoix, "Des culs-de-sac heuristiques", *REMMM*, 2004, pp. 7-26.

[2] The subject of Sunni-Shia conflicts, susceptible to contribute in reshaping the Middle East, is developed by Vali Nasr in *The Shia Revival*.

actors of a new front of refusal.[3] With the background of a cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Jordanian king Abdallah's complaints against the "Shia crescent", in 2004, were followed by the repeated accusations of the Egyptian president Husni Mubarak against what he considered the Iran-Hezbollah coalition and its plots. The peak of the crisis was in Spring 2009 when the Egyptians arrested a group of persons and suspected them of being linked with Hezbollah and preparing attacks in the country. At the same time, Morocco cut its diplomatic relations with Iran, accusing the Iranian mission of seeking to spread Shi'ism in the kingdom and to interfere in its internal affairs [4]. So that a certain press spoke about an enlargement of the Shiite crescent and we can guess that this phenomenon is not over [5].

The idea for this book predated all these events, coming as it did before 2003, when, already, here and there the visibility of Shia Islam increased through its rituals and institutions in various locations, and research on non-Iranian Shi'ism started to expand. Several publications had already carried contributions on various Shi'a communities in different countries.[6] Researchers specialising in the subject began opening up their fields and collaborating around different themes, comparing and relating these geographically remote Shia worlds in an endeavour to account for their similarities and differences via a heuristic approach.[7] With the present collection of essays, we aim to continue in the same direction as well as explore other paths by focusing on the tenuous relations, if any, between these Shia worlds and Iran, where Shi'ism is both the faith of the majority and the state religion. What is the place of Iran, a country which is routinely claimed to occupy a central position among these Shia worlds? Can we envisage its role without reducing it to the export of the revolution? To what extent can we speak of an Iranian model? The present book provides answers to these questions, broadening our knowledge of little-known communities such as the Ironi Shia of Uzbekistan, and refining our understanding of groups that have been studied more extensively, like those in Iraq. Yet we do not want to close the debate or propose a theory - firstly, because the ties between Iran and the Shia worlds have to be

---

[3] A political alliance underpinned, among others, by a religious factor as some of the Alawis have come closer to the Twelver Shi'ites in order to integrate more into the *umma*. This doctrinal overture started in the early twentieth century, developed in the 1950s and continued under the presidency of Hafez al-Assad. Lebanese as well as Iraqi Shia participated in this movement through the foundation of places of worship and *hawzas*. Cf Sabrina Mervin, "Quelques jalons pour une histoire', and 'L'"entité alaouite", une création française". About the political alliance between Syria and Iran, see Jubin Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran.*

[4] See http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2009/03/2009370303221419.html.

[5] Abir Taleb, "Le croissant chiite s'étend vers l'Ouest", cf. http//
    hebdo.ahram.org.eg/Arab/Ahram/2009/3/11/marab0.htmSemaine.

[6] Cf. Biancamaria Scarcia-Amoretti, *Sciiti nel mondo*, Jouvence, Rome, 1994; Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a. The Forgotten Muslims*, Palgrave, New York, 2001.

[7] Two colloquia were organised, one in Freiburg, the other in Geneva, and their proceedings published, cf. Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende, *The Twelver Shia*, and Alessandro Monsutti, Sylvia Naef and Farian Sabahi, *The Other Shiites.*

considered in the long term[8], and secondly because many communities are not dealt with here, most importantly the Indian Shia - important for their vast numbers alone, as well as their history – as well as the community in Bangladesh, the diaspora, the small groups found in the Caribbean or the even less numerous and lesser known Shia of Thailand.[9]

The Shia dealt with here are Twelver or Imami Shi'a; it is to this group that most contributors refer when they use the term without further specification.[10] The Ismaili, Zaydi and other groups remotely or closely related to branches of Shi'ism are not treated here.[11] The dogma of Twelver Shi'ism acknowledges a succession of twelve Imams from the 'people of the house' (*ahl al-bayt*) of Muhammad, who are his successors as leaders of the community. First among these is Alî b. Abî Tâlib, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, followed by his two sons Hasan and then Husayn, the martyr of Karbala. The twelfth and last successor is the Mahdî, the hidden Imam who, according to doctrine, is in occultation since AD 941 and will reappear before the end of times to restore justice on earth; the faithful await him.

Specific Twelvers' rituals derive from the doctrine of the imamate which, contrary to its Sunni counterpart the caliphate, is an integral part of the principles of the religion (*usûl al-dîn*). They are also related to the specific place occupied by the *ahl al-bayt* - the prophet's descendants - and their history. These Shia practices consist mostly of pious visits (*ziyâra*) throughout the year to the tombs of the *ahl al-bayt,* pilgrimages which mark and punctuate the space of the Shia worlds. A special place is occupied by the shrines of the Imams 'Alî in Najaf, Husayn in Karbala and Ridâ/Rezâ in Mashhad.[12] Added to this cult of holy figures are the rituals of the month of Muharram in commemoration of the battle of Karbala in 680. These celebrations culminate on the tenth day of the month, the day of Ashura, when the devotees relive the martyrdom of Husayn through public rites, processions and theatrical representations that are sometimes accompanied by spectacular practices of mortification.[13] Satellite channels broadcast the images, as if to illustrate the slogan "Every day is Ashura and the whole world is Karbala". That day, after attending or participating in the rituals of their

---

[8] Which would be easier in a monograph. See for example the very useful publication edited by Houchang Chehabi, who transcends clichés and commonplaces about the relatively recent relations between Iran and Lebanon. Houchang E. Chehabi, *Distant relations*. See also Juan Cole, *Sacred Space*, for a collection of essays on both the modern and contemporary periods.

[9] Research on India and the Caribbean has concentrated on rituals. See among others David Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*, and Franck J. Korom, *Hosay Trinidad*.

[10] Among specialists, this distinction is clear, but in vulgarising publications and in the media there is often confusion and erroneous definitions circulate.

[11] Nevertheless, we have to stress that the Zaydis revivalists in North Yemen, specially the Huthist rebels of Saada, have been accused of developing religious links with Twelver Shia and receiving support from Iran. See the ICG report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada time bomb*.

[12] Other Imams, as well as Fâtima, had their shrines in Medina until the Wahhabis relegated them to simple tombs after occupying the city in December 1925.

[13] These practices of mortification have been the object of debates among ulemas since the beginning of the twentieth century; reformists try to forbid them and replace them with blood donations. Sabrina Mervin, *Un réformisme chiite*, chapter VI.

neighbourhood, the devotees watch their fellow believers in Shia worlds spread all over the globe perform the same movements and pronounce the same words. Despite local particularities, the mirroring effect is evident. The other is acknowledged as an individual belonging to a community much larger than that of everyday life, through a common expression of devotion to Husayn and the other imams and through the recitation of a shared history that began with the epos of the "people of the house".

This common history continues throughout successive layers (*tabaqât*) of religious scholars who elaborated the doctrine and progressively assumed more of the prerogatives of the Imams, thus positioning themselves as guides of the community - spiritual guides who would occasionally extend their authority to the political sphere.[14] This history began in Kufa, the city where 'Alî exercised his imamate, and later branched out to other cities as well as modest villages which for a while became places of Shia scholarship, to reach Safavid Iran in the sixteenth century. When Iran adopted Shia Islam, it had the ambition to become its centre, becoming a "fluid field of interaction, undergoing influence from abroad and in turn exporting its influence to the Arab regions as well as Central and South Asia.[15] The number of Persian ulemas grew at the expense of Arabic ulemas.

Najaf and Qom: competing for centrality
The ancient *hawza*[16] of Najaf soon became an important centre of Shiism, attracting students and clerics from Iran and elsewhere who came to gain and share knowledge of the religious sciences. This knowledge did not remain unchanged; little by little, it became more rational as the *usulî* current gained the upper hand over the more literal *akhbarî* approach. But although the former prevailed, partly through the use of violence in the eighteenth century, polemics and doctrinal divisions between clerics continued to guarantee a degree of plurality in doctrinal approaches. The incessant mingling of populations from remote regions where Shia identities developed, anchored in local cultures and formed through processes specific to each culture, added another level of diversity to this plurality. Thus Najaf and the other "sacred thresholds" (*'atabât*) of Shi'ism, such as Karbala, Samarra and Kazimiyya, developed a degree of cosmopolitanism which left considerable space for the expression of local particularities and linguistic identities, strengthening ties among those who shared a common origin. Nevertheless, solidarity networks between Shia worlds also developed, creating the embryo of a "Shi'a international",[17] even while animosities between Arabs, Turks and Persians[18], to mention just a few, began to appear. There was, moreover, also an increasing rivalry between cities (such as Najaf and Karbala), city quarters controlled by gangs linked to certain ulemas (such as the Zugurt and

---

[14]   For an overview of the development of this doctrine, see Mohammad-Ali Amir-Moezzi and Christian Jambet, *Qu'est-ce que le shî'isme?*, p. 181-220, or for a shorter account, Sabrina Mervin, *Histoire de l'islam*, chapter VII.

[15]   Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War*, p. 2.

[16]   Technical terms in Arabic and Persian are explained in the glossary.

[17]   Cf. Meir Litvak (*Shi'i Scholars*, p. 31), who took the expression from Chibli Mallat.

[18]   The Turks concerned here are in fact Azeris. *Ibid.*, p. 201, note 38.

Shumurt in Najaf) and clerical families eager to increase their control over the management of sacred affairs. Indeed, there was no uniformity in this society of turbaned men in perpetual negotiation, divided by internal discord but nevertheless presenting a united front towards the outside world. The centre - made up of Najaf and her sisters, the other *'atabât* - expanded its influence to the very limits of the Shia worlds in order to attract new candidates to perpetuate the group.

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Najaf positioned itself as the seat of the *marja'iyya* which provided Shi'ism with religious authority in the person of the *marja'*, a grand cleric and an institution, with informal appearances certainly, but nevertheless organising clerical hierarchies and relations between believers and the top of this hierarchy. In the early twentieth century, when communications between the centre and the periphery intensified due to the telegraph, Najaf flourished not only on a doctrinal but also on a political level. The Iranian constitutionalist movement (1906-1911) was endorsed by leading Persian clerics living in the holy city, such as Mohammad Kâzem Khorasâni (d. 1911). The ulemas moreover played a decisive role in the fight against the British mandate and the formation of modern Iraq.[19] However, the political defeat which they suffered weakened them, and some were exiled to Iran where they participated in the "re-foundation" of the school of Qom in the 1920s.[20] This marked the beginning of the rivalry between the two centres of Qom and Najaf, who continue to compete until this day for primacy as the sacred source, home of knowledge, centre for the formation of clerics and seat of religious authority "ruling" over all the Shia worlds.

Already before the Iranian revolution, the efforts of Ayatollah Borujerdi (d. 1961), a *marja'* recognised by all at the time, to modernise the *hozeh* of Qom had notably undermined the prestige of Najaf and attracted many students. The establishment of the Islamic Republic led to new reforms in Qom, as the objective now became to train clerics who would also be government officials, and to attract foreigners liable to support the Islamic project upon their return to their home countries. Qom had the necessary means to develop a religious education system that was modern and efficient while simultaneously claiming a tradition that attested to the depth of the studies. The city's influence grew to the detriment of Najaf and the holy cities in Iraq which were additionally under attack by Saddam Hussein's baathist regime. Today Qom has around 30,000 students, while Najaf barely has a few thousand. The renewal of the Iraqi *hawza* expected after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 seems to be postponed *sine die* due to the chaos submerging the country, which does not allow even for a normal functioning of the schools, even if ambitious new projects are being prepared.

Nevertheless, Najaf remains Qom's rival, particularly as the city hosts four *marja'*, including 'Ali Sistani, to whom the majority of believers not only in Iraq but in all the Shi'a worlds refer.[21] Sayyida Zaynab, a suburb of Damascus named after the sister of

---

[19]   On this subject, see Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La formation de l'Irak contemporain*.

[20]   Qom derives its legitimacy as a holy city from the presence of the shrine of Fâtima, sister of the eighth Imam.

[21]   The other three are Muhammad Sa'îd al-Hakîm, Ishâq Fayyâd and Bashîr Najafî Pakistanî.

Imam Husayn, whose shrine is located there, is a minor centre, but it has been compensating for the failure of Najaf, especially since the 1980s. Although it is a popular site of pilgrimage (notably for Iranians who visit there on organised tours) and a place where Shia populations mix, no famous *marja'* resides there.[22] Only the Lebanese Muhammad Husayn Fadlallâh maintains a regular presence, often visiting for lectures.

Najaf and Qom both have their own networks of interaction – which may overlap – with places that function as relay stations as well as local centres with their own characteristics, such as Mashhad in Iran, the southern suburbs of Beirut in Lebanon or Lucknow in India.[23]

Marja'iyya and *Hawza*, the pillars of religious authority

The centrality of the holy cities relies first and foremost on the sacred nature of the locations and their appeal as pilgrimage destinations which entails the movement of populations and the circulation of goods. Mashhad, for example - a phenomenon which unfortunately has not yet received the in-depth study it merits – welcomes over ten million visitors per year. Their centrality is further based on the two interdependent institutions around which the clergy is structured, the *hawza* and the *marja'iyya*. These constitute the pillars of religious authority in contemporary Shiism, and an understanding of their functioning is indispensable for the study of the religion.[24]

The term *hawza* refers to a system of teaching, to a religious school where clerics are educated, to a group of schools situated in one city, and to the clerics who make up its students and teachers. Two systems coexist today and tend to complement each other: the classic system and the system of the "reformed" schools, usually called institutes (*ma'had*). The former is also called the 'free' system, as students can choose the courses they wish to follow and the masters with whom they desire to study. The studies take many years and are divided into three cycles: the first (*muqaddimât*) aims at acquiring the basics, the second (*sutûth*) at assimilating the classic works of each

---

[22] Cf. Sabrina Mervin, 'Sayyida Zaynab'; Paulo Pinto, "Pilgrimage, commodities and Religious Objectivation : The Making of Transnational Shiism between Iran and Syria" Fariba Adelkhah, "Économie morale du pèlerinage et société civile en Iran : les voyages religieux, commerciaux et touristiques à Damas".

[23] The southern suburbs of Beirut are a recent centre, created by Shia migrating from South Lebanon and the Bekaa valley to the capital; it benefits from taking over the role formerly played by Jabal 'Amil in Shia history. See Mona Harb, "La Dâhiyya de Beyrouth : parcours d'une stigmatisation urbaine, consolidation d'un territoire politique". Lucknow has been a Shia centre since the beginning of the Eighteenth Century.

[24] There are many books and articles about these institutions in Arabic and Persian that cannot be referred to here. For the sources available in English and French, the reader can consult Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet*; Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran from Religious Dispute to Revolution*; Meir Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars*; Linda Walbridge, *The most Learned*; Faleh Abdul-Jabar, *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues* and *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*; Mehdi Khalaji, "The last Marja'"; and references in the articles of Sabrina Mervin, "La quête du savoir'; 'La *hawza* à l'épreuve"; and "Les autorités religieuses".

discipline, and the third (*khârij*) trains the clerics-students to the practice of *ijtihâd*. The subjects studied are the classical Islamic religious sciences[25]. In the institutes of the reformed system, students enroll after their secondary education and take four years to complete the first two cycles. In addition to the classical courses, they take new religious sciences (Islamic economy as laid out by Muhammad Bâqir al-Sadr, compared *fiqh*, history and philosophy of *fiqh*, etc.), history (of religions and of Islam) and introductory courses in social sciences (sociology, psychology, etc.). If the students wish to continue their studies, they are required to attend *khârij* courses, which are always "free", and taught by a renowned *mujtahid* or even a *marja'*. Very few *hawzas* are capable of providing *khârij* courses, so most students go to Qom or Najaf to complete this cycle, which makes these two cities the breeding-ground of Shia clergy. They are also the places where religious intellectuals and militants are educated who wish to acquire a religious formation in parallel to their university studies. Moreover, most of the books and journals documenting the doctrinal debates engaging the *hawza* circles are published here.

Qom, with its leading masters in classical *fiqh* and its modern Islamic universities, offers a wide choice to Iranian students. Foreigners are directed to the International Centre of Islamic Sciences (Markaz jahâni-ye 'olum-e eslâmi) which, after intensive courses of Persian, takes them through the various stages of their education which may last up to fourteen years. Modern methods and techniques as well as reformed sciences are taught there. Around one hundred nationalities are represented in the centre[26]: Arabs, Pakistanis, Afghans, Azeris and Indians, but also Chinese - the latter even including Sunnis[27] - come to merge in the melting pot of Qom and partake of the spirit that pervades its atmosphere. In addition, an organisation based in Tehran takes care of the founding and the functioning of schools abroad.

What does this "spirit" of Qom, that spreads through the Shia worlds, consist of? It is not just a revolutionary spirit, but also a certain concept of Islamic modernity which all can adapt and apply after returning to their own societies. It means being informed on the debates that scholars engage in, profiting from the cosmopolitan ambience to open up to the world and develop networks, as well as acquainting oneself with the Persian language and culture.

Qom is moreover home to a dozen *marja'*[28] with different opinions concerning the Khomenist theory of *velâyat-e faqih* and the way it has been implemented since the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is an element of the particular "spirit" of Qom too, since no other place offers such a concentration of grand clerics, although most of them exert only a limited local and national influence.

---

[25]   Arabic language, rhetoric, logic, *fiqh* and *usûl al-fiqh*, Qur'anic exegesis, *hadîth* and theology, to which can be added Islamic philosophy and gnosis (*'irfân*).

[26]   Interview with the director, sheikh A'rafi, Qom, 18/08/2003.

[27]   Oral communication by Elisabeth Allès, specialist of Chinese Islam, Paris, Summer 2006.

[28]   It is difficult to find an exhaustive, accurate and up-to-date list in the sources available. We could refer for example to the list of Mehdi Khalaji, "The last Marja'", p. 7, which mentions *marja'*s who are now deceased (such as Javâd Tabrizi or Mohammad Taqi Bahjat) and does not take into account important figures such as Ali Montazeri or Kâzem Ha'eri.

The *marja'* is formed in the *hawza* and generally goes on to teach there. Some basic rules determine the qualities he is required to possess - the first of which is to be the most knowledgeable among his peers - and govern his relationship with his adepts, i.e. the modalities of "imitation" (*taqlîd*) - the right way to follow his religious precepts. In addition to these few rules, the *marja'iyya* is organised according to unwritten manners and customs rather than explicit rules which can be freely consulted, and therefore does not permit external control, while guaranteeing the flexibility of an institution which has, in fact, been subject to continuous redefinition since its creation.

The process of the emergence of a *marja'* is very subtle as he is not designated or elected by any organ or institution. He is required to rise above the pool of *mujtahids* and succeed in being recognised as the best among them by the clergy, the *hawza* masters and advanced students, as well as the financial circles on whose support he will depend. When he has in addition written a practical treaty (*risâla 'amaliyya*) of *fiqh*, offering religious advice for his adepts to follow, all believers are free to adopt him as their *marja'* and pay religious taxes (*khums* and *zakât*) to him. This system ensures the plurality of the *marja'iyya*. In 1989, the succession to Khomeini as *marja'* and guide *(rahbar)* of the Islamic Republic of Iran has disrupted this system which elsewhere continues to function. Khomeini was in effect the rival of the grand master of the *hawza* of Najaf, Abu al-Qâsem Kho'i (d. 1992), who had more followers in Iraq and in the Shia worlds than Khomeini. But Khomeini was also the Guide of the Republic and, before his death, designated as his successor in this double role 'Ali Khamenei, a cleric who at the time was not even recognised as *mujtahid*. This manoeuvre provoked resistance in Iran, where clerics refused to acknowledge the *marja'iyya* of Khamenei. The latter suffered a second setback when, in the mid-1990s, he tried to impose himself as *marja'* of all the Shia worlds. Believers preferred other *marja's* to him, notably those who defined themselves as successors of Kho'i, that is to say non-political clerics from the school of Najaf, such as 'Ali Sistani.[29] In Lebanon, during the 1990's, Muhammad Husayn Fadlallâh distanced himself from Iran – and from Hezbollah - to emerge as a *marja'* and resist the hegemonic Iranian claims.[30] Then, his relations with them gradually warmed up and he came back as a political ally during the 2006 Israeli war against Lebanon, but still claims his intellectual, religious and financial independence [31].

'Ali Khamenei's attempt to monopolise the *marja'iyya*, which would have resulted in the creation of an Iranian *marja'iyya* related to the Islamic Republic, thus failed. Over the years, he succeeded to obtain followers out of Iran, positioning himself as a sage and a charismatic arbitrator, especially after the rise to power of Ahmadinejad,

---

[29]   Cf. Pierre Martin, "La direction religieuse chiite"; Wilfried Buchta, "Die Islamische Republik Iran" and *Who rules Iran?*, chapter V; Saskia Gieling, "The *marja'iyya* in Iran"; Olivier Roy, "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy".

[30]   Jamal Sankari, *Fadlallah*, pp. 256-260; Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, *Shi'ite Lebanon: Transnational Religion and the Making of National Identities*, which argues that Fadlallâh wanted to construct an Arabic *marja'iyya* by distinguishing himself through a modernist reformist project.

[31] Cf. Mervin, Sabrina "Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, du "guide spirituel" au *marja'* réformiste", pp. 283.

who played the role of "revolutionary" and "extremist". But his support of Ahmedinejad during the political crisis that occurred after the presidential elections of June 2009 weakened him. The *marja'iyya* remains plural, divided between Qom, Najaf and other possible poles like Mashhad or Beirut. 'Ali Sistani remains the most widely followed *marja'*.

Nationalisms and transnationalism

The *marja'iyya* is essentially supra-statal and transnational, largely because of its economic independence: it is financed by the believers themselves through "the *khums* money", rather than by any state. Its function is to redistribute these funds through charitable institutions and religious schools that heighten its prestige and ensure the continuity of the group of clerics. Each *marja'*, therefore, stands at the head of a religious enterprise that sometimes handles enormous sums of money, as did Kho'i in the past and Sistani today.[32] The *marja'iyya* thus implies managing not just matters of spiritual salvation but also very mundane and worldly affairs, which goes some way towards explaining the stakes of the competition hidden beneath the velvet appearance of the clerical circles.

Each *marja'* has agents (*wakîl*) to represent him in places where he has following. The agents are charged with the task of, on the one hand, divulging his precepts and on the other, collecting religious taxes, to be used locally or to be transferred to the seat of the *marja'iyya*. We are in effect talking about a widespread organisation with tentacles stretching across the Shia worlds. In any place with a strong Shia presence, and especially in the holy cities, the *marja's* offices abound, one next to the other, sometimes several in the same street, as if to mark their territories. Furthermore, nowadays every *marja'* runs his own website, or even several of them, which eliminates distances and implies a new type of communication between the *marja'* and his followers.[33] Some even offer the possibility of paying religious taxes online.[34]

Shia transnationalism thus relies on the networks formed by clerical circles and resulting from a long history of population movements, especially migrations of ulemas, and marital bonds between different clerical families. While these are not recent phenomena, they are perpetuated, re-negotiated or recreated now. Certain families thus have anchor-points in different countries, which they maintain and renew through alliances and intellectual affinities. The Sadr family is an example in case. Descendants of a lineage from Jabal 'Âmil (now South Lebanon) and present in Lebanon under the name Sharaf al-Dîn, the family has branches in Iraq and Iran that continue to intermarry, thus ensuring group cohesion. Moreover, this family, like many others, has allied itself with political figures and leading clerics.[35] This practice unites

---

[32] According to Mehdi Khalaji, "The Last Marja", p. 10, he manages a fortune of 500 to 700 billion dollars.

[33] On this subject, see Stephan Rosiny, "Internet et la marja'iyya".

[34] The sites of 'Ali Sistani as well as those of the Kho'i foundation: www.al-khoei.org

[35] The Iranian Musa Sadr and the Iraqi Muhammad Bâqir al-Sadr, two figureheads of Islamic movements, were cousins and brothers-in-law, while Muqtadâ al-Sadr married a daughter of Muhammad Bâqir. Cf. Sabrina Mervin, *Un réformisme chiite*, p. 437, and Houchang E. Chehabi,

the ranks, exceeding the political options of each person. It is interesting to notice, for example, the Iranian origins of certain families in Bahrain or Iraq, such as the Shirâzi, who are known as a family from Karbala but, as their name indicates, originated in Iran. The identity representations resulting from this can be astonishing when viewed from the outside: Kho'i and Sistani are in the first place perceived as *marja's* embodying the school of Najaf, even if they are Iranian. Indeed, Sistani, who even speaks with a Persian accent, is seen as "more Arabic than Iranian" and appeals to Arab nationalists.[36]

This transnationalism neither prevents Shia communities from constructing national identities, nor does it stop them from integrating into the states they resort under. While this phenomenon may leave observers perplexed, the actors themselves see no contradiction in it. Returning to the example cited above, Musa Sadr, born in Iran, whose mother tongue is Persian and his culture Iranian, worked for the integration of the Shia in Lebanon where he established himself in 1959 to ensure the continuity of the magisterium of a remote cousin, 'Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Dîn (whose son married his sister). In 1963, president Fuad Shihab accorded him Lebanese nationality and ten years later he conflicted with the Shah of Iran, and then lost his Iranian nationality. As if he lived two lives, two very different images of Musa Sadr now exist in Iran and in Lebanon.[37]

Without calling it actual contradiction, we nevertheless observe a certain tension between, on the one hand, local or national Shia identities involved in a process of definition and redefinition, and on the other Shia transnationalism on which Iran's claim of hegemony over the Shia worlds has grafted itself. This claim dates back to the foundation of Iranian Shi'ism under the Safavids and could also be observed under the reign of Reza Shah, even though the latter implemented a policy of secularisation. With the arrival of the Islamic Republic, the claim began to be used in a different way.[38] The question of the export of the revolution has been dealt with exhaustively in research published during the 1990s.[39] The historiography of the construction of local identities is currently being undertaken and reveals the particularities of each Shi'a

---

Distant Relations, p. 140, fig. 6.1. This table shows the relationships established with Mohammad Khatami and Ahmad Khomeini.

[36]   According to Mehdi Khalaji, "The last Marja", p. 28.

[37]   Two research centres are dedicated to him, one in Lebanon and one in Iran. On Musa Sadr in Iran, an aspect which is until now rather neglected in the available publications, we want to mention the excellent article of Houchang E. Chehabi and Majid Tafreshi, "Musa Sadr and Iran".

[38]   It must be noted that it is difficult to speak of an action taken by 'Iran' as if it is emerging from one entity. The politics of the Islamic Republic are developed through different institutions and organisations, many of which are connected to its Guide, but others to ministers and foundations that are more or less independent - such as the very powerful Astan-e Qods of Mashhad - or even to individuals. On this point the work of Wilfried Bukhta, *Who rules Iran?*, is very useful.

[39]   Referring, for example, to John L. Esposito, *The Iranian Revolution*; David Menashri, *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*; and *Revolution at a Crossroads*; Hooshang Amirahmadi and Nader Entessar, *Iran and the Arab World*. To see how the research questions change later, see Nikki Keddie and Rudi Matthee, *Iran and the Surrounding World*.

community.[40] However, little attention has been paid to this tension[41], which is precisely what the five articles opening this volume propose to do, under the title "Export of the revolution and national integrations". After a general overview by Olivier Roy, Alessandro Monsutti presents the case of Afghanistan while Laurence Loüer treats the Gulf states.[42] Two articles deal with the Lebanese Hezbollah: Joseph Alagha studies the evolution of the notion of the Islamic state as developed by the party, while Kinda Chaib approaches the link with Iran through the iconography of martyrs in the Shia regions and quarters of Lebanon.

The second part, "Shiisms under construction", presents analyses of identity inscription processes through particular case studies, showing how the Shi'a emerge and invent themselves as a group. This part also focuses on the role Iran plays in this process through broadcasting religious rituals, scattering a "Shi'a culture" from its institutions (cultural centres, religious schools) or through political activism. Thierry Zarcone writes the contemporary history of the Shia communities of Turkey and discusses the place Iranians occupy in this history and, more recently, the role played in it by Iran. Next we move to Central Asia: Bayram Balci relates the renaissance of Azerbaijani Shi'ism and demonstrates how Iran contributed to this process, while Boris Petric deals with the Shia of Uzbekistan, known as the Ironis. Still further afield, in Africa, the Shi'a of Senegal consist of two groups, Lebanese and local converts, presented here by Mara Leichtman.

Which "Iranian model" is transmitted and how? Is it possible to understand this model while transcending established ideas of direct Iranian influence on this or that contesting party? The third part attempts to shed light on this matter. Two articles on Muqtadâ Sadr, the insurgent cleric, one Pierre-Jean Luizard and the other Peter Harling, explain a phenomenon which, despite its omnipresence in the media, is still poorly understood. The authors illustrate the complex relationship between the revolutionary Iraqi and his Iranian neighbour. What is this Iranian model that no longer - or not exclusively anymore – consist of the political model of revolutionary Islam? Mariam Abou Zahab reveals certain aspects (Islamic feminism, rationalism and the modernity of an education that permits social mobility) by following the voyage of Pakistani women who go and study at the *hozeh* of Qom. Other elements are treated by Sabrina Mervin, who endeavours to define the influence exerted on intellectual and Islamic Arab circles by the laboratory of religious ideas that is Iran.

As it is a moving process, it is difficult to measure the impact of the internal political crisis in which Iran sank after the presidential elections of June 2009 on the Shi'a worlds, just while the Obama administration loosened pressure on Iran[43]. It was a deep crisis between a more and more autocratic power and an educated, citizen

---

[40]   Cf. notably Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power*.

[41]   See, nevertheless, Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, *Shi'ite Lebanon: Transnational Religion and the Making of National Identities*, Columbia University Press, 2008.

[42] For more developments on the subject, see Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics.*

[43]   The reformists candidates contested the official results of the elections, arguing that there was cheating, and asked for a new poll. Demonstrations were violently repressed and eventually, Ahmedinejad's reelection was confirmed, with the support of the Guide Ali Khamenei.

society, that demands a return to republican political practices. Debates about the khomeinist theory of *velâyat-e faqih* restarted, but more inside Iran than outside, up to now. The plan of the second mandate of Ahmedinejjad to impose a new Cultural Revolution (*enqelâb-e farhangi*), with a systematic islamization of social sciences in the universities, would certainly provoke its procession of reactions and inform other debates.

At a strictly political level, Iran's neighbors, especially concerned by the maintenance of safety and order in the region, considered this turmoil as an internal question. The same for its ally Hezbollah, whose deputy secretary-general Sheikh Naim Qassem said during the dramatic events that occurred after the poll: "The disagreements between the parties in Iran are affairs that concern essentially the Iranians" [44]. On the other hand, the party claims a wide independence in the conducting of its own affairs inside Lebanon. Towards its allies and the Shia worlds, Iran has implemented a politics of cultural diplomacy and soft power [45], a long term, patient work of developing deep cultural ties.

Bibliography

Abdul-Jabar, Faleh, ed., *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues. State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq*, London: Saqi Books, 2002.

Abdul-Jabar, Faleh, ed., *The Shi'ite Movement* in Iraq, London: Saqi Books, 2003.

Adelkhah, Fariba, "Économie morale du pèlerinage et société civile en Iran : les voyages religieux, commerciaux et touristiques à Damas", *Politix*, n°77, 2007/1, p. 39-54.

Amirahmadi, Hooshang, and Entessar, Nader, eds, *Iran and the Arab World*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad-Ali, and Jambet, Christian, *Qu'est-ce que le shî'isme ?*, Paris: Fayard, 2004.

Brunner, Rainer, and Ende, Werner, eds, *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times. Religious Culture and Political History,* Leiden: Brill, 2001.

Buchta, Wilfried, "Die Islamische Republik Iran und die religiös-politische Kontroverse um die marja'îyat", *Orient*, 36, 1995, pp. 449-74.

Buchta, Wilfried, *Who rules Iran ? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic,* Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy-Konrad Adenauer Stifting, 2000.

Chehabi, Houchang E., ed*., Distant relations. Iran and Lebanon in the last 500 years*, Centre for Lebanese Studies, London: I. B. Tauris, 2006.

---

[44] Quoted in http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0720/p06s07-wome.html

[45] See the activities of the Iranian cultural centers in Syria and Lebanon in Nadia Von Maltzahn, 'The Case of Iranian Cultural Diplomacy in Syria' and Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, *Shi'ite Lebanon: Transnational Religion and the Making of National Identities*, chap. 5.

Chehabi, Houchang E. and Tafreshi, Majid, 'Musa Sadr and Iran', in Houchang E. Chehabi, ed*., Distant relations. Iran and Lebanon in the last 500 years*, Centre for Lebanese Studies, London: I. B. Tauris, 2006*, pp. 137-161.

Cole, Juan, *Sacred Space and Holy War. The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002.

Denoix, Sylvie, "Des culs-de-sac heuristiques aux garde-fous épistémologiques ou comment aborder l'aire culturelle du 'monde musulman'", *REMMM*, 103-104, 2004, pp. 7-26.

Esposito, John L. and Voll, John, *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, Oxford University Press, 2001.

Esposito, John L., ed., *The Iranian Revolution: its Global Impact,* Miami: Florida international University Press, 1990.

Fischer, Michael M.J., *Iran from Religious Dispute to Revolution,* Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Fuller, Graham E. et Francke, Rend Rahim, *The Arab Shi'a. The Forgotten Muslims,* New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Gieling, Saskia, "The *marja'iya* in Iran and the Nomination of Khamenei in December 1994", *Middle Eastern Studies,* 33, 1997, pp. 777-87.

Goodarzi, Jubin M., *Syria and Iran. Diplomatic alliance and power politics in the Middle East*, London-New York:I. B. Tauris, 2nd ed., 2009.

Harb, Mona, "La Dâhiyya de Beyrouth : parcours d'une stigmatisation urbaine, consolidation d'un territoire politique", *Genèses*, 51, 2003, pp. 70-91.

International Crisis Group, "Yemen: Defusing the Saada time bomb", *Middle East Report* n°86, 27 May 2009.

Keddie, Nikki R., and Matthee, Rudi, ed*s, Iran and the surrounding world. Interactions in culture and cultural politics*, Seatle and London: University of Washington Press, 2002.

Khalaji, Mehdi, "The last Marja : Sistani and the end of the traditional religious authority in Shiism", *Policy Focus* 59, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September, 2006.

Korom, Frank J., *Hosay Trinidad: Muharram performances in an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora*, Philadelphia: University of Pensylvania Press, 2003.

Litvak, Meir, *Shi'i Scholars of nineteenth-century Iraq. The 'Ulama' of Najaf and Karbala',* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Louër, Laurence, *Transnational Shia Politics. Political and Religious Networks in the Gulf*, London, New York: Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2008.

Luizard, Pierre-Jean, *La formation de l'Irak contemporain. Le rôle politique des ulémas chiites à la fin de la domination ottomane et au moment de la création de l'État irakien*, Paris: CNRS éditions, 1991.

Martin, Pierre (alias Luizard, Pierre-Jean), "La direction religieuse chiite dans une zone de turbulences", *Peuples Méditerranéens, Statégies II,* nr 64-65, July-December, 1993, pp. 241-264.

Menashri, David, ed., *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, Boulder Colorado: Westview Press, 1990.

Menashri, David, ed., *Revolution at a Crossroad: Iran's Domestic Policy and Regional Ambitions,* Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1997.

Mervin, Sabrina, "La quête du savoir à Najaf. Les études religieuses chez les chiʿites imâmites de la fin du XIXᵉ siècle à 1960", *Studia Islamica,* 81, 1995, pp. 165-185.

Mervin, Sabrina, "Sayyida Zaynab: banlieue de Damas ou nouvelle ville sainte chiite?", *CEMOTI*, 22, Arabes et Iraniens, 1996, pp. 149-162.

Mervin, Sabrina, *Un réformisme chiite. Ulémas et lettrés du Jabal ʿÂmil (actuel Liban-Sud) de la fin de l'Empire ottoman à l'indépendance du Liban,* Paris: Karthala-CERMOC-IFEAD, 2000.

Mervin, Sabrina, "Quelques jalons pour une histoire du rapprochement (*taqrîb*) des alaouites vers le chiisme", *Islamstudien ohne Ende, Festschrift für Werner Ende,* Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2002, pp. 281-288.

Mervin, Sabrina, "La *hawza* à l'épreuve du siècle: la réforme de l'enseignement religieux supérieur chiite de 1909 à nos jours", in Maher al-Charif and Salam al-Kawakibi, eds, *Le courant réformiste musulman et sa réception dans les sociétés arabes,* Damascus: IFPO, 2003, pp. 69-84.

Mervin, Sabrina, "Les autorités religieuses dans le chiisme duodécimain contemporain", *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, nr.125, January-March, 2004, pp. 63-77.

Mervin, Sabrina, "L'ʿentité alaouite', une création française", in Pierre-Jean Luizard, ed., *Le choc colonial et l'islam. Les politiques religieuses des puissances coloniales en terre d'islam,* Paris: La Découverte, 2006, pp. 343-358.

Mervin, Sabrina, "Muhammad Husayn Fadlallâh, du "guide spirituel" au marjaʿ réformiste", in Mervin, S. ed., *Le Hezbollah, état des lieux,* Paris: Actes Sud, 2008, pp. 277-285.

Monsutti, Alessandro, Naef, Silvia, and Sabahi, Farian, eds, *The Other Shiites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia,* Bern: Peter Lang, 2007.

Mottahedeh, Roy, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Learning and Power in Modern Iran,* London: Chatto & Windus, 1985.

Nakash, Yitzhak, *Reaching for Power. The Shiʿa in the Modern Arab World,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Nasr, Vali, *The Shia Revival. How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2006.

Pinault, David, *Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India*, London: Palgrave, 2001.

Pinto, Paulo G., "Pilgrimage, commodities and Religious Objectivation : The Making of Transnational Shiism between Iran and Syria", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East,* 27/1, 2007, pp. 109-125.

Rosiny, Stephan, "Internet et la *marjaʿiyya*. L'autorité religieuse au défi des nouveaux medias", *Maghreb-Machrek,* 178, winter, 2003-2004, pp. 59-74.

Roy, Olivier, "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran", *The Middle East Journal*, n°. 53, 1999, pp . 201-216.

Sankari, Jamal, *Fadlallah. The Making of a Radical Shi'ite Leader,* London: Saqi Books, 2005.

Scarcia-Amoretti, Biancamaria, *Sciiti nel mondo*, Rome: Jouvence, 1994.

Shaery-Eisenlohr, Roschanack, "Iran, The Vatican of Shi'ism?", *Merip Report online,* n° 233, Winter, 2004.

www.merip.org/mer/mer233/shaery-eisenlohr.html (last consulted March 2008)

Shaery-Eisenlohr, Roschanack, *Shi'ite Lebanon: Transnational Religion and the Making of National Identities*, Columbia University Press, 2008.

Von Maltzahn, Nadia, "The Case of Iranian Cultural Diplomacy in Syria", *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 2, 2009, pp. 33-50.

Walbridge, Linda, ed., *The most Learned of the Shi'a. The Institution of the Marja' Taqlid,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

http://www.slate.fr/story/7485/iran-liban-hezbollah-syrie-israel-nasrallah-ahmadinejad