

Sectarian Discourse in the Middle East's Post-Saddam Order

A Marker for Intra-OPEC Rivalry and Humanitarian Catastrophe

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ABSTRACT Sectarian *Otherness* has intentionally been made integral to Arab political discourse ever since the 2003 implosion of *Ba'thi* Iraq and the subsequent emergence of a delicate power vacuum in the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, pertaining rumours of a supposed Iranian-led 'Shiite Crescent' or 'Shiite Revival' need foremost to be interpreted as top-down instigated forms of propaganda (identity politics), ultimately serving the isolation of the Iranian nation-state -the main beneficiary of the 2003 Iraq War. Today, the sectarian narrative has clearly taken a strong hold on Middle Eastern media concerns and popular consciousness –even detectable during Arab media coverage of the 'Arab Spring' (Bahrain, Tunisia) in 2010/2011- by which the very idea of an Iranian-led '*Shi'a* Crescent' has quickly spread to global academia. There is, however, a clear but understated correlation between geopolitical friction within OPEC, the Iraqi refugee *debacle* and the distortive sectarian *decharge* of the region's key US-aligned powerhouses.

Introduction

Although some studies relating to Middle Eastern sectarian politics have mentioned that wide scale, Iranian-orchestrated conversion to Shiism is more of a politically inflated myth than a proven societal reality, many have seemingly failed to consider the impact of post-war, Iraqi Shiite migration together with Iraq's altered positioning within the OPEC cartel as more substantial incentives and societal pretexts for such politicized claim of *Shi'a* proselytism in

the region.¹ The Iraqi refugee crisis is a serious concern though; the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees alarmingly reported in 2007 that:

“An estimated 60,000 Iraqis are being forced to leave their homes every month by continuing violence. As of September 2007, there were believed to be well over 4 million displaced Iraqis around the world including some 2.2 million inside Iraq and a similar number in neighbouring countries (in particular Syria and Jordan) and some 200,000 further afield. Around one million were displaced prior to 2003. UNHCR’s April 2007 Conference on Iraqi displacement focused attention on the huge humanitarian crisis developing in the region.”²

The US invasion and occupation of Iraq has generated one of the largest refugee flows in decades. In a historical perspective, it is regionally comparable to the consecutive Palestinian refugee flows all over the Middle East (1948, 1967, 1991³). Although the Iraqi refugee

¹ Abrahamian, E., ‘The US Media, Huntington and September 11’, *Third World Quarterly* (Vol. 24, No. 3, 2003), DOI: 10.1080/0143659032000084456; Barzegar, K., ‘Iran and the Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities’, *Brown Journal of World Affairs* (Vol. 15, No. 1, Fall/Winter 2008); Bröning, M., ‘Don’t Fear the Shiites: The Idea of a Tehran-Controlled “Shiite Crescent” over the Greater Middle is at Odds with Reality’, *International Politics and Society (Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft, IPG* - No. 3, 2008); available at http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/ipg/ipg-2008-3/06_a_broening_gb.pdf (accessed on 30/04/2011); Chomsky, N., ‘Targeting Iran’, in *Targeting Iran*, ed. Barsamian, David (San Francisco: City Lights, 2007); Chubin, S., ‘Iran’s Power in Context’, *Survival* (Vol. 51, No. 1, February-March 2009), DOI: 10.1080/00396330902749772; Ehteshami, A., *Globalization and Geopolitics in the Middle East: Old Games, New Rules* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Gause, G. F. III, ‘Iran’s Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars by Henner Fürtig’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Vol. 36, No. 3, August 2004); idem, ‘Threats and Threat Perceptions in the Persian Gulf Region’, *Middle East Policy* (Vol. 14, No. 2, Summer 2007); idem, ‘Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East’, *Council on Foreign Relations* (Council Special Report No. 63, December 2011); Haji-Yousefi, A.M., ‘Whose Agenda is Served by the Idea of a Shia Crescent?’, *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* (Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring 2009); Hunt, M.H., ‘In the Wake of September 11: The Clash of What?’, *Journal of American History* (Vol. 89, No.2, September 2002), pp. 416-21; Inglehart, R., Moaddel, M. & Tessler, M., ‘Xenophobia and In-Group Solidarity in Iraq: A Natural Experiment on the Impact of Insecurity’, *Perspectives on Politics* (Vol. 4, No. 3, September 2006); Jabar, F.A., ‘The Worldly Roots of Religiosity in Post-Saddam Iraq’, *Middle East Report* (No. 227, Summer 2003); Jones, T., ‘The Iraq Effect in Saudi Arabia’, *Middle East Report* (No. 237, Winter 2005); idem, ‘Saudi Arabia’s Not so New Anti-Shi’ism’, *Middle East Report* (No. 242, Spring 2007); Karshenas, M. & Hakimian, H., ‘Managing Oil Reserves and Economic Diversification in Iran’, in *Iran in the 21st Century: Politics, Economics & Conflict*, eds. Katouzian H. & Shahidi H. (New York: Routledge, 2008); Nasr, V., ‘When the Shiites Rise’, *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 85, No. 4, July-August 2006); Norton, A.R., ‘The Shiite “Threat” Revisited’, *Current History* (Vol. 106, No. 704, December 2007); Parasiliti, A.T., ‘The Causes and Timing of Iraq’s Wars: A Power Cycle Assessment’, *International Political Science Review* (Vol. 24, No. 1, January 2003); Parsi, T., ‘Israeli-Iranian Relations Assessed: Strategic Competition from the Power Cycle Perspective’, in *Iran in the 21st Century: Politics, Economics & Conflict*, eds. Katouzian & H.; Shahidi, H. (New York: Routledge, 2008); Proctor, P., ‘The Mythical Shia Crescent’, *Parameters* (Vol. 38, No. 1, 2008); Puelings, J., ‘Fearing a “Shiite Octopus”: Sunni-Shi’a Relations and the Implications for Belgium and Europe’, *Egmont Paper* (No. 35, Gent: Academia Press, January 2010); Shanahan, R., ‘Bad Moon Not Rising: The Myth of The Gulf Shi’a Crescent’, *Lowy Institute Analysis* (September 2008), available at: http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/LOWY_ShiaCrescentMyth.pdf; Slavin, B. ‘Mullahs, Money and Militias: How Iran Exerts its influence in the Middle East’, *United States Institute of Peace* (Vol. 31, No. 206, 2008); Susser, A. ‘Jordan: Preserving Domestic Order in a Setting of Regional Turmoil’, *Middle East Brief* (No. 27, March 2008), available at http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb_index.html; Vaitheeswaran, V.V., ‘Pipe Dreams in Iraq’, *Foreign Policy* (No. 138, September-October 2003); Visser, R., ‘The Reluctant Seat of “Shiastan”’, *Middle East Report* (No. 242, Spring 2007); Walbridge, L.S., ‘The Counterreformation: Becoming a Marja’ in the Modern World’, in *The Most Learned of the Shi’a: The Institution of the Marja’ Taqlid*, ed. Walbridge, L.S. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Wehrey, F., [et al.], *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Pittsburgh: Rand Corporation, 2009); Wright, R. & Baker, P., ‘Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election From Iran’, *Washington Post*, December 8th 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43980-2004Dec7.html> (accessed on 09/09/2010).

² UNHCR, ‘Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World’, *UNHCR*, September 2007, <http://www.unhcr.org/470387fc2.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011).

³ Referring to the 1991 Palestinian Exodus from Kuwait, due to the PLO’s formal alignment with Saddam Hussein.

problem has historical precedents (Iran-Iraq war, 1990 Gulf war), the 2003 Iraq War and the subsequent insurgency have led to an unprecedented mass displacement in the Middle East. Indications given by UNHCR testify the vast increase in refugees to their concern in the region ever since the inception of the US-led invasion.⁴ By 2007, about 15 percent of the Iraqi population was displaced, either internally (IDP) or extra-territorially ('refugees'), mounting up to an enormous total of around four million displaced Iraqis on the move due to existential insecurity. An estimated two million of them had either sought refuge in neighbouring Jordan or Syria, increasing the populations of those countries by respectively 15 and 7 per cent. Notwithstanding the magnitude of this humanitarian crisis, the event has been typed by a discursive silence, i.e. it was vastly and actively ignored by consecutive US policymakers and generally under-covered by the global media. This has consequently had the disastrous effect of only generating a minimal and actually insufficient degree of humanitarian relief for these displaced Iraqi masses.⁵

A 2008 UNHCR report indicated Jordan in particular as the second largest host country to absorb Iraqi refugees, that is, in registered cumulative numbers.⁶ UNHCR reports estimated the total number of Iraqi refugees in Jordan exceeding half a million, up to 750,000 in 2007.⁷ In the immediate years after the US-led invasion of Iraq (2004-2005) Jordan had in fact been the country with the highest amount of Iraqi visa applications, at least implying the physical presence of an enormous amount of displaced Iraqis –some passing through on their way to Syria.⁸ These dramatic numbers only reflect official statistics, but in such a post-war chaos, it must have undoubtedly concerned even higher numbers (clandestine refuge). Additionally, a 2007 UNHCR report indicated that the amount of submitted Iraqi asylum applications in

⁴ UNHCR, 'Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World', *UNHCR*, September 2007, <http://www.unhcr.org/470387fc2.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011).

⁵ Peteet, 2007, pp. 2-4.

⁶ UNHCR, 'Iraqi Situation Update', *UNHCR*, August 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/491956a02.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011).

⁷ UNHCR, 'Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World', *UNHCR*, September 2007, <http://www.unhcr.org/470387fc2.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011).

⁸ UNHCR, 'Statistical Yearbook 2005', *UNHCR*, 2005, <http://www.unhcr.org/4641be5c0.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011); UNHCR, 'Iraqi Situation Update', *UNHCR*, August 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/491956a02.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011); UNHCR, 'Iraqi Displacement as of April 2008', *UNHCR*, April 11th 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/487ef7144.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011); UNHCR, 'Iraqi Situation Update', *UNHCR*, August 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/491956a02.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011).

extra-regional, industrialized countries hit a crucial low point in 2003 and its immediate subsequent years (2007), implying, again, an enormous regional concentration of asylum refuge, for over a period of roughly three to four years.⁹ Hereby, one should realize that 2004 was the year of Jordanian king Abdullah's famous coining of the controversial term 'Shi'a Crescent' (*al-Hilāl ash-Shī'ī*)¹⁰ during one of his media interviews; an alleged 'Shiite Expansion/Tide' (*al-Madd ash-Shī'ī*) was propagated as a creeping danger that might split up the Arab and 'Muslim World', altering the 'traditional' Sunni-dominated make-up of the Middle East.¹¹

Interestingly, this vague conception of unifying 'radical Shiite' polities was soon popularized among other autocratic establishments in the region –which have increasingly been referred to as the 'moderate Sunni Arab' states by Western academics and political commentators.¹² The now imprisoned Husni Mubarak of Egypt reportedly stated in a 2006 interview with the *Al Arabiya* satellite news channel that "Shi'a in the region are mainly loyal to Iran and not to their own states".¹³ In that same year, a former security advisor to the Saudi King Abdullah was quoted as saying that Saudi Arabia had "the religious responsibility to intervene" in Iraq because the country was "the birthplace of Islam and the de facto leader of the world's *Sunni* community".¹⁴ Additionally, Saudi king Abdullah himself has reportedly accused Iran for masterminding the proselytizing of predominantly 'Sunni countries' in the Middle East (e.g. Syria). In March 2009, Moroccan authorities allegedly cut their diplomatic ties with Iran, claiming a Tehran-led wave of proselytism in the North African kingdom. Hence, an amalgamating trend of blending sectarianism with political motive for the sake of

⁹ UNHCR, 'Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World', *UNHCR*, September 2007, <http://www.unhcr.org/470387fc2.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011).

¹⁰ I abide by the transliteration guidelines of the *International Journal Middle East Studies* (IJMES); e.g. <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/ijmes/pages/transliteration.html>.

¹¹ Bröning, 2008, pp. 61-2; Haji-Yousefi, 2009, p. 116; Puelings, 2010, pp. 7, 27; Jones, 2005, pp. 24-5; Wright, R. & Baker, P., 'Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election From Iran', *Washington Post*, December 8th 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43980-2004Dec7.html> (accessed on 09/09/2010).

¹² Bröning, 2008, 60-1, 73-4 ; Brahimi, A. & Joffe, G., 'The dilemma for Syria's Neighbours', *Al Jazeera (Opinion)*, February 28th 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/02/201222613517197680.html> (accessed on 29/02/2012).

¹³ Mubarak, H., quoted in Bröning, 2008, p. 61.

¹⁴ Terhalle, M., 'Are the Shia Rising?', *Middle East Policy* (Vol. 14, No. 2, Summer 2007), pp. 1, 69; Obaid, N., 'Stepping into Iraq', *The Washington Post*, November 29th 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/28/AR2006112801277.html> (accessed on 03/03/2011).

regime-survival had set off –a deceptive strategy, still in use during the contemporary popular uprisings coded as the ‘Arab Spring’ (e.g. Bahrain, Tunisia).¹⁵

Opposition in the Gulf: Iraq’s OPEC Potential & Saudi Cartel Hegemony

Iraq has ever since 2003 been depicted as one of the main loci of a regional sectarian struggle by various Middle Eastern policy makers, media outlets, clerics and academics. This country has been portrayed as if it was encroached by a regional ideological ‘clash’, between Sunni and Shiite populations both backed by supposed kingpins of a greater intra-Islamic conflict unfolding in the region. However, an inquiry into more structural dynamics (material motives) sheds a different light on contemporary events that are manifest in Iraq and the Gulf region. The Iraqi factor for regional discontent, threat perception and subsequent hegemonic rivalry is directly economically related. Whereas ‘Palestine’ –alluding to Iranian interference in the Levant (Hizbullah, Hamas)- is to a certain extent a symbolic and diplomatic matter¹⁶, Iraq’s strategic geographic locus and the riches bulking beneath its surface are not.¹⁷ Today, oil is a vital source of income for all rentier-based economies in the Gulf region and crude petrol is still one of the most important energy sources and market commodities of the 21st century. In this sense Iraq is not merely the scenery of sectarian induced violence, the country is also holder to one¹⁸ of the largest conventional oil reserves in the world, a substantial member of the OPEC cartel and geographically situated at the very heart of the world’s largest oil

¹⁵ Jones, 2007, p. 30; Puelings, 2010, pp. 36-7; Aziz, S. & Musalem, A., ‘Citizens, Not Subjects: Debunking the Sectarian Narrative of Bahrain’s Pro-Democracy Movement’, *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding* (July 2011 Report), pp. 19-24; Fisk, R., ‘Why No Outcry over these Torturing Tyrants?’, *The Independent*, May 14th 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-why-no-outcry-over-these-torturing-tyrants-2283907.html> (accessed on 14/05/2011). During the Tunisian ‘Jasmine Revolution’ many media outlets seemed to have been speculating on similarities between the Tunisian Islamist leader of the Nahda party, al-Gannouchi, and Iran, prompting him to object: “We are a moderate Islamic movement, a democratic movement based on democratic ideals in ... Islamic culture. Some people pull Khomeini’s robe over me, while I am no Khomeini nor a Shia”. See: Al Jazeera, ‘Police Join Protest in Tunisia’, *Al Jazeera*, January 23th, 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2011/01/2011122133816146515.html> (accessed on 14/07/2011); Al Arabiya, ‘I Am No Khomeini: Tunisia’s Islamist Leader’, *Al Arabiya*, January 22nd 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/01/22/134607.html> (accessed on 14/07/2011).

¹⁶ ‘Leverage’ in the case of Egypt, for instance.

¹⁷ Alagha, J.E., *The Shifts in Hizbullah’s Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology and Political Program* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006); Wehrey [et al.], 2009, pp. 1-2, 4, 45, 60-1, 77, 93-8.

¹⁸ Estimates differ, but Iraq always positions itself within the top four, together with Saudi Arabia, Venezuela and Iran; based on 2010-2011 OPEC statistics, Iraq is indicated as the third largest crude oil unit in the world. Cf. OPEC, ‘Annual Statistical bulletin 2010-2011’, *OPEC*, 2011, http://www.opec.org/opec_web/static_files_project/media/downloads/publications/ASB2010_2011.pdf, p. 22 (accessed on 04/12/2011).

exporting region, namely the Persian Gulf. In contrast to other places around the globe (e.g. Russian Caspian Sea, Venezuelan Amazon) and similar to its larger Saudi neighbour –the current arbiter of the global oil market– its reserves are relatively easy and cheap to exploit. In this respect, Iraq was not merely a former dictatorship where the ‘tyrant’ Saddam –strangely, a former ‘*Sunni*’ protector¹⁹ in the contemporary Saudi (sectarian) logic- was altruistically ‘toppled’ by the world most capable military force to install a heaven of ‘democracy’; in the geo-economic realm Iraq signifies ‘black gold’.²⁰

The removal of Saddam and the installation of a (formally) pro-US government in Iraq – whether allegedly ‘*Shi‘a*’ or not– had initially rendered the US administration, which represents a domestic US market²¹ consuming one fourth of the world’s oil production²² while harbouring only a marginal percentage of global reserves²³, significantly more grip on the global energy market. Through its control of Iraq, Washington also gained more influence vis-à-vis the bargaining power of OPEC (Saudi Arabia, Iran) and it simultaneously provided the US with crucial leverage over its major industrial rivals (Europe, China, India).²⁴ It is within this context crucial to realize that certain Arab OPEC countries have since long played a key role in Western economic progress and viability in times of recession through the steady flow of favourably cheap oil; not least the Gulf monarchies. This relationship has known various shifting dynamics over time. In the 1970s, for example, imperial Iran was still a key US-aligned energy giant. Structuralism aside, today, Gulf states their own share of revenue has substantially grown in contrast to colonial and early post-colonial times (‘Seven

¹⁹ The sectarian narrative is, in this sense, a re-emergence of an older tradition that was in use during the Iran-Iraq war, whereby various Gulf countries had thrown their financial backing behind Saddam, in order to block any sort of regime-change in the region. Between the First and the Second Gulf War (2003) such a dichotomous discourse has been fairly absent in the light of Saddam’s incursion into Kuwait and the ongoing containment of Iran in the 1990s (Cf. Gause, G.F. III, ‘Threats and Threat Perceptions in the Persian Gulf Region’, *Middle East Policy* (Vol. 14, No. 2, Summer 2007), pp. 120, 123; Lustick, 1997, pp. 672, 675, 677-9; Parasiliti, 2003, pp. 160-162; Parsi, 2008, pp. 141, 145; Wehrey [et al.], 2009, pp. 1-4).

²⁰ Barzegar, 2008, p. 89; Callinicos, A., *Imperialism and Global Political Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p. 53-61; Golan, G., ‘Gorbachev’s Difficult Time in the Gulf’, *Political Science Quarterly* (Vol. 107, No. 2, Summer 1992), p. 53-61; Hunt, 2002, pp. 416-21; Lustick, I., ‘The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political “Backwardness” in Historical Perspective’, *International Organization* (Vol. 51, No. 4, Autumn 1997), pp. 671-2, 675-9; Pappé, I., *The Modern Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 53.

²¹ The US market together with others such as the Chinese and European markets are the main beneficiaries of low oil prices and intra-OPEC rivalry.

²² Vaitheeswaran, 2003, p. 70.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁴ Callinicos, 2009, pp. 53-61; Chomsky, 2007, ‘Targeting...’, p. 55.

Sisters’)²⁵ thus rendering them to a certain extent more independent political and economic power. This does, however, not mean a simultaneous increase of the redistribution of wealth on a national level, nor a liberalization of the domestic political process. Moreover, up until this day, the US had not been able to ensure the desired stability of crude oil prices.²⁶

The new Maliki-led government of Iraq has clearly been desperate for oil revenues to assure the questionable viability of the malfunctioning Iraqi nation state. Although its petroleum infrastructure needs extensive upgrading and is in fact highly dependent on foreign companies, its increasing export capacity will nevertheless further pressure the existing production quota and revenues of its OPEC neighbours.²⁷ It is hereby worthy to mention that in 2008 a unity coalition was formed in the Iraqi parliament that went across confessional lines to re-initiate the state’s management of its precious recourses. Thus, interestingly, when it comes to the oil-economy the supposedly engrained sectarian dichotomy was easily overcome.²⁸ Both OPEC giants Saudi Arabia and Iran have been increasing their rivalry over Iraq ever since the US started losing its firm grip on internal affairs from the mid-2000s onwards (insurgency). The implosion of Bathist Iraq and Taliban-led Afghanistan has made some scholars to suggest the ‘Rise of Iran’ as a regional power, in favour of Saudi Arabia’s regional aspirations.²⁹ Both Riyadh and Tehran have of course since long been strong competitors in the oil business –this even applies to pre-revolutionary Iran- because of their distinctive national make-up (consumption) and diverging external market strategy. Their disparity also results from a difference in oil reserves. Whereas contemporary Iranian reserves are estimated at 136 billion barrels, Saudi Arabia is reported to host a tantalizing 267 billion barrels in oil reserves. Moreover, the Saudi cost of extraction a barrel is estimated at \$2 to \$3

²⁵ Seven multinational companies who controlled more than 90 per cent of the oil production outside the Soviet Union during the 1950s: five American, one British and one Dutch (cf. Papé, 2005, p. 55).

²⁶ De Ley, H., ‘The Danish Cartoons: Contextualizing their Publication and the Muslim Response to it’, *Centrum voor Islam in Europa* (2006), <http://www.flw.ugent.be/cie/CIE2/deley36.htm#n12> (accessed on 02/03/2011); Wehrey [et al.], 2009, pp. 86-9; Chomsky, 2007, ‘Targetting...’, pp. 31-4; idem. *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* (Boston: South End Press, 1987), pp. 268-270; Luomi, 2008, pp. 37-8; Pappé, 2005, p. 55.

²⁷ Pappé, 2005, pp. 70-1.

²⁸ Bröning, 2008, p. 70.

²⁹ Bröning, 2008, p. 75; Nasr [et al.], ‘Who Wins in Iraq?’, *Foreign Policy* (No. 159, March-April 2007), p. 40-1; Proctor, 2008; Wehrey [et al.], 2009, pp. 1-4, 96-8, 100-2.

while Iran's production costs weigh up to \$15 a barrel, mainly due to sectoral inefficiency.³⁰ Through this favourable position, Riyadh has over the years become the new financial strongman of the Arab world (and the GCC), further enabling it to exert increasing control over pan-Arab media outlets, whilst simultaneously assuring the strategic backing of the region's key external power, the United States. Subsequent to the First Gulf War, the US had turned to Riyadh to counter Iran's hegemonic aspirations in the Gulf. Today, Riyadh hence enjoys considerable diplomatic capabilities and it has established a somehow different relation to the US than other US-aligned Arab states.³¹ To use the accurate words of the senior lecturer in Middle East Politics at the University of Exeter, Dr. Larbi Sadiki: "Saudi Arabia's renting role gives it more of an equal exchange with the US: oil in return for petro-dollars and arms. Egypt and Jordan do not possess of that equal exchange: they rent their 'mediatory' role in return for US aid and favor."³²

Today, Iranian strategists clearly take interest in maximizing oil profits in the near-term, as they do not believe their export reserves to last that long, mainly due to the accelerating pace of domestic consumption. While Tehran actively lobbies for higher global market prices within OPEC and is utterly pleased during favourable global market disruptions (e.g. Libyan 'Arab Spring' insurgency, 2011), the Saudis, on the other hand, are more concerned about the long-term prospect since they harbour such vast amounts of oil, have a lower demography and a less energy-intensive (industrial) economy. Significantly, they also seek to temper the industrialized world's push for alternative energy sources and tend to lower extreme global market prices in a bid to ensure their long-term rentier income. It is of course no coincidence that Saudi Arabia together with other Gulf states have repeatedly blocked UNFCCC³³

³⁰ Wehrey [et al.], 2009, pp. 72-5.

³¹ Pappé, 2005, pp. 52-3; Parasiliti, 2003, p. 162; Wehrey [et al.], 2009, pp. 1-2.

³² Larbi, S. 'The Arab 'Peace Troika'', *Al Jazeera (Opinion)*, September 14th, <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2010/09/201091311433794490.html> (accessed on 30/11/2010). I do not agree with the entire content.

³³ UNFCCC conferences throughout the world (e.g. Copenhagen, Cancun); for more information, see also: UNFCCC, 'Johannesburg Summit 2002: Saudi Arabia Country Profile', UNFCCC, 2002, <http://www.un.org/esa/agenda21/natlinfo/wssd/saudiarabia.pdf> (accessed on 02/03/2011).

summits that deal with implementing global measures to reduce carbon emissions in an effort to tackle global warming.³⁴

High oil revenues for Iran imply high government subventions to handle the enormous post-revolutionary youth bulge; in Iran, domestic (socio-economic) frustrations are met with fuel subsidies. Therefore, the viability of Iran's establishment is quite strongly dependent on the country's positioning within international oil and gas markets. Any prospect that could broker more lucrative revenues is thus actively pursued. Today, the US does not only pressure the regime in Tehran through economic sanctions but also maintains a consistent military grip on Iran –the country is virtually surrounded by US military bases.³⁵ Therefore, any global action that is taken to target these central Iranian sectors is interpreted by Tehran as a direct assault on the country's viability. Iran's recent threats (January 2012) to close down the Strait of Hormuz as a reply to US and EU-enforced bans on Iranian-produced oil imports are embedded in this context.³⁶ This clearly signals Iran's underlying problem of economic sternness, related to its inability to attract major Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) over the years, which is of course inasmuch due to internationally imposed sanctions, mainly from the part of G8 member states.³⁷ In this sense, pushing for a civil nuclear capacity –a de facto legal right under the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT)- would imply a diversification of national energy consumption, a more sustainable export capacity and even a margin to develop a competitive petro-chemical industry in the medium-term -a strategy, which Iraqi officials already envisaged in the 1970s. It is worth mentioning that the latter rationale is almost never discussed in contemporary media coverage surrounding Iran's nuclear program. The country seems rather to be portrayed as an irrational ('fundamentalist') and warmongering state

³⁴ See for example: AFP, 'Saudis Block Call for Global Warming Report', *AFP*, June 10th 2010, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hqI3wKPaGKW8M_EvY25KvXgIvGIQ (accessed on 10/03/2011); <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8440181.stm> (accessed on 10/03/2011).

³⁵ Abrahamian, 1993, pp. 88-9; Chomsky, 2007, 'Targetting Iran...', p. 35.

³⁶ Al Jazeera, 'Iran begins Naval Drills in Strait of Hormuz', *Al Jazeera*, December 25th 2011 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/12/201112256111744890.html> (accessed on 26/12/2011); Al Jazeera, 'Saudis to Offset Libya Oil Decline', *Al Jazeera*, February 26th 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/02/2011226134942661640.html> (accessed on 11/05/2011).

³⁷ Karshenas [et al.], 2008, pp. 195-6, 197-9.

seeking to acquire and apply weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Rational policy, based on economic motive, seems to fall blank here.³⁸ Current Israeli president Shimon Peres is a passionate supporter of such logic and uses reference to Iran's 'future bomb' quite systematically in his discussions of the Palestinian affairs.³⁹

It is worthy to point out that although agreements were made within OPEC to ensure considerable profit for all cartel members, US-backed Saudi Arabia has shown hegemonic tendencies to dominate the organization –it harbours of course by far the largest reserves. Riyadh occasionally alters the cartel's official market strategy by unilaterally endorsing overproduction. It has done so as early as 1985.⁴⁰ The Saudis have become renowned for their diplomatic management of global oil supply. By instantaneously bringing their idle capacity on stream, they have numerously filled in global disruptions (Iranian Revolution, Iran-Iraq War, 2003 Venezuelan political crisis, fractious Nigerian elections and recent Iraq War). Riyadh has ever since gotten more efficient and assertive in conducting its management role. In the past, oil crises did often have a nefarious impact on the global economy. The latest example of such market management was interestingly made just recently when Saudi officials agreed to produce more oil than their OPEC-entitled quota during the 2010-2011 popular uprisings in the Arab world. This assuring move immediately mitigated speculation and stabilized oil prices. By doing so, they made up for the Libyan deficit, (from their part) safeguarded US and EU economic recovery efforts and, interestingly, moderated (excessive) Iranian profits. Such market management demonstrates Riyadh's very relationship with the

³⁸ Chomsky, 2007, 'Targeting...', pp. 35-6, 46-7; Karshenas [et al.], 2008, pp. 194-201, 212-15; Vaitheeswaran, 2003, p. 71; Lustick, 1997, p. 671; Lotfian, S., 'Nuclear Policy and International Relations', in *Iran in the 21st Century: Politics, Economics & Conflict*, eds. Katouzian H. & Shahidi H. (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 158-9, 161, 174-5.

³⁹ E.g.: Peres, S., 'Israeli president: Need for peace deal with Palestinians is 'urgent'', *CNN*, June 19th 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/06/19/israel.mideast.peace/index.html> (accessed on 19/06/2011), 02.40-03.00; Fisk, R., 'We've been here before - and it suits Israel that we never forget 'Nuclear Iran'', *The Independent*, January 25th 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-weve-been-here-before--and-it-suits-israel-that-we-never-forget-nuclear-iran-6294111.html> (accessed on 26/01/2011).

The same goes for Israeli officials in the UN; see for instance, the latest statements made by the Israeli delegation in the UNSCR during their July debate regarding the Palestinian National Authority's unilateral statehood bid: +972, 'Palestinian UN Envoy Breaks Down at Security Council', +972, July 28th 2011, <http://972mag.com/watch-palestinian-un-envoy-breaks-down-at-security-council/> (accessed on 28/07/2011), 00.50.00-00.51.30, 00.52.10-00.53.00.

⁴⁰ Pappé, 2005, p. 56.

industrialized world, i.e. its geopolitical ‘alignment’.⁴¹ An article published on the website of *The Economist* on March 3, 2011 accurately reported this global dynamic and underlying structure:

“There are good reasons to worry. The Middle East and North Africa produce more than one-third of the world’s oil. Libya’s turmoil shows that a revolution can quickly disrupt oil supply. Even while Muammar Qaddafi hangs on with delusional determination and Western countries debate whether to enforce a no-fly zone, Libya’s oil output has halved, as foreign workers flee and the country fragments. The spread of unrest across the region threatens wider disruption. [...] The markets’ reaction has been surprisingly modest. The price of Brent crude jumped 15% as Libya’s violence flared up, reaching \$120 a barrel on February 24th. But the promise of more production from Saudi Arabia pushed the price down again. It was \$116 on March 2nd—20% higher than the beginning of the year, but well below the peaks of 2008. Most economists are sanguine: global growth might slow by a few tenths of a percentage point, they reckon, but not enough to jeopardise the rich world’s recovery.”⁴²

Moreover, other contemporary reports show that Riyadh preferred not to announce its wilfulness publicly due to “the political sensitivities in the region and the internal dynamics of OPEC”.⁴³ Interestingly, it was furthermore reported on June 2011 that OPEC was unable to reach a new quota-agreement on global oil supply. The Libyan oil crisis seems to have hit the very core of OPEC’s intra-cartel oppositions. At the time being, Riyadh (backed by Kuwait and the UAE) agreed –on a platform with key industrialized nations in Vienna- to increase their supply while other key OPEC countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Iran and none less than Iraq obstructed such a commitment. While Riyadh wanted to set the crude oil price at a

⁴¹ Pappé, 2005, pp. 51-6; Vaitheeswaran, 2003, p. 71.

⁴² The Economist, ‘Oil and the Economy: The 2011 Oil Shock’, The Economist, March 3th 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/18281774> (accessed on 11/05/2011).

⁴³ Al Jazeera, ‘Saudis to Offset Libya Oil Decline’, *Al Jazeera*, February 26th 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/02/2011226134942661640.html> (accessed on 11/05/2011).

fixed \$80 per barrel, the other members lobbied to keep it well above \$100 a barrel. These remarkable contemporary dynamics highlight the very issue that is at stake regarding Iraq's future positioning within the OPEC cartel. Interestingly, it appears that Iraq is currently favouring the more extreme (short-term) Iranian strategy. In this context, it is no wonder that Ali al-Naimi, the Saudi oil minister, was quoted saying that they "were unable to reach an agreement; it is one of the worst meetings we have ever had".⁴⁴ It is in fact no secret that Saudi Arabia uses its unique position within the oil market to engage Iran geopolitically, seeking its own US-sponsored hegemony in the Gulf. Riyadh damages Iran's national budget as a weapon in their geopolitical quarrel. Nawaf Obaid, a former security advisor of the current Saudi monarch, even literally stated so in an article that he wrote for the *Washington Post* in 2006:

"Finally, Abdullah may decide to strangle Iranian funding of the [Iraqi and Lebanese] militias through oil policy. If Saudi Arabia boosted production and cut the price of oil in half, the kingdom could still finance its current spending. But it would be devastating to Iran, which is facing economic difficulties even with today's high prices. The result would be to limit Tehran's ability to continue funnelling hundreds of millions each year to Shiite militias in Iraq and elsewhere."⁴⁵

The latest of such moves came in January 2012, when the US was seen tightening the global embargo on Iran's central bank –thus blocking its domestic means to sell oil abroad– and when Saudi Arabia reportedly announced that it would make up for any Iranian shortfall in oil supply, hence diligently complementing Washington's efforts to isolate Tehran globally and domestically. In response, Iran warned Arab Gulf States not to endorse overproduction or

⁴⁴ Al Jazeera, 'OPEC Rejects Increase in Oil Supply', *Al Jazeera*, June 8th 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/europe/2011/06/201168123819705145.html> (accessed on 11/05/2011); Gause III, F. G., 'Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East', *Council on Foreign Relations* (Council Special Report No. 63, December 2011), pp. 26-7.

⁴⁵ Obaid, N., 'Stepping into Iraq', *The Washington Post*, November 29th 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/28/AR2006112801277.html> (accessed on 03/03/2011).

“face unspecified ‘consequences’”, referring to its navy-exercises in the Strait of Hormuz.⁴⁶ Clearly, intra-cartel rivalry between the two most potent powers within OPEC has grown out to be quite explicit and this ever more highlights the importance of Iraq’s recovering, intermediary position. The geopolitical rivalry between GCC member states and Iran has also been ventilated during Arab Spring demonstrations in Gulf monarchies. Hereby, domestic political opposition was actively linked to an Iranian inflicted ‘Shiite Threat’. The *Al Arabiya* news channel reported on April 7, 2011 that “Ahmed al-Jarallah, editor-in-chief of the Kuwaiti daily newspaper *al-Sayessah* [sic.] accused Iran Wednesday [April 6, 2011] of inciting a Shiite revolution in the Gulf region” –ignoring any relation to other Arab countries and their relatively secular-based demands for inclusive democracy and socio-economic justice. The report further mentioned that “Jarrallah cited the example of Bahrain and accused Iranian agents inside the Gulf nation of organizing strikes and protests to destabilize national security and cripple the economy”. The chief-editor was literally quoted saying: “We saw ministers disappearing and managers of big service companies running away or joining the protests. This was Iran’s doing.”⁴⁷ Such allegations went together with more politicized accusations (Iranian ‘spy rings’) –Iranian meddling is surely possible since it has such a capacity, similar to any substantial nation state, but that is not the argument here. Significantly, such formal allegations went along with a regulated restriction of foreign media coverage in Gulf countries such as Kuwait and Bahrain.⁴⁸ One can legitimately argue that such national, class-based emancipation processes relate foremost to legal, social and economic integration efforts of marginalized segments of Gulf societies into their respective

⁴⁶ Al Jazeera, ‘Iran tells Gulf states not to lift oil output’, *Al Jazeera*, January 15th 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/201211595031725845.html> (accessed on 15/01/2012).

⁴⁷ Al Arabiya, ‘Iran Inciting Shiite Revolt in Gulf: Kuwaiti editor-in-chief’, *Al Arabiya*, April 7th 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/04/07/144551.html> (accessed on 05/05/2011).

⁴⁸ Al Jazeera, ‘Bahrain expels Iran Diplomat over ‘Spy Ring’’, *Al Jazeera*, April 26st 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/04/2011426921169779.html> (accessed on 06/05/2011); Al Jazeera, ‘Iran Rejects Kuwaiti Spy Cell Allegation’, *Al Jazeera*, April 1st 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/03/2011331233525225240.html> (accessed on 06/05/2011).; The Economist, ‘Shut up the Shias’, *The Economist*, April 9th 2010, http://www.economist.com/node/16994636?story_id=16994636 (accessed on 06/05/2011); CNN, ‘Kuwait Shuts Down Al Jazeera News Bureau’, *CNN News*, December 14th 2010, http://articles.cnn.com/2010-12-14/world/kuwait.al.jazeera.bureau_1_kuwait-news-agency-kuwait-city-kuwaiti-authorities?s=PM:WORLD (accessed on 10/04/2011).

nation states (key reference), rather than a pressing for any cultural rapprochement of Arab Shiites ('Shi'a Crescent') with their Persian counterparts. Even Iranian political patronage is often overstated. Ever since the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the former's abandonment of trying to export its revolution (internal focus, *realpolitik*) and Gulf nations their inclusive nation-building efforts in the 1990s (*wataniyya/citizenship*), both transnational paramilitary and political ties have gradually been dissolved.⁴⁹ However, when Riyadh intervened in Bahrain on March 2011 by sending in Saudi troops, officials of both countries consistently refused to consider that the Bahraini uprising was rather secular and primarily class-based.⁵⁰

It can be argued that Iran's current push for economic integration vis-à-vis Iraq (oil industry, petro-chemical industry, political and security schemes etc.) –in a fairly patronizing way, to be clear- stems from the prospect of outmanoeuvring the imbalance in economic regionalism (GCC) in the medium term.⁵¹ The importance of such 'regional' economic interdependence/capitalist integration⁵² (common market, free trade zones, unified export strategies) is a logic that another regional power, namely Turkey, has also come to assert⁵³, certainly now that full EU membership seems not to be so imminent as once imagined (2000s). To use the keen insight of Turkey's current Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu:

"Turkey is not the endpoint of 'East' and Greece for example is not the endpoint of 'West'; in this global world this type of terminology should be changed. It is time to end

⁴⁹ Ajami, F., Nasr, V. & Haass, R.N., 'The Emerging Shia Crescent Symposium: Implications for the Middle East and US Policy', *Council on Foreign Relations* (Panel Meeting, New York, 5 June 2006), <http://www.cfr.org/religion-and-politics/emerging-shia-crescent-symposium-implications-us-policy-middle-east-rush-transcript-federal-news-service-inc/p10866>.

http://www.cfr.org/content/meetings/emerging_shia_crescent_summary.pdf (Panel Summary, see this format for page reference), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4btGg9yZAE> (digitalized), p. 3-4.; Aziz, S. & Musalem, A., 'Citizens, Not Subjects: Debunking the Sectarian Narrative of Bahrain's Pro-Democracy Movement', *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding* (July 2011 Report), pp. 19-24; Jones, 2007, p. 30; Bröning, 2008, p. 75; Louër, L., *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2008), pp. 99-103, 177-182, 291-301; Terhalle, 2007, pp. 71-75; Wehrey [et al.], 2009, pp. 30-1.

⁵⁰ See: Al Jazeera, 'Saudi Arabia's Intervention in Bahrain', *Al Jazeera (Inside Story)*, March 16th 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/insidestory/2011/03/2011316105616297611.html> (accessed on 14/05/2011), 02.00-02.20, 07.15-07.30, 9.00-10.00.

⁵¹ Parasiliti, 2003, p.161; Lustick, 1997, p. 675; Karshenas [et al.], 2008, p. 208.

⁵² Keen scholars have related the recent 'Arab Spring' to a lack of comprehensive and effective regionalism in the Arab sub region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA); they accurately argue that a change of national leadership will not bring fortune for the Arab masses –i.e. the unemployed youth- unless it comes together with a revised medium-term economic policy, linking up isolated national economies and their respective (often autocratic) political enterprises. (Cf. Malik, A. & Awadallah, B., 'The Economics of the Arab Spring', *OxCarre (Oxford Center for the Analysis of Resource Rich Economies)* (Research Paper No. 79, December 2011)

⁵³ Today, Turkey's export to the Arab world are worth \$32 billion a year. (Cf. Al Jazeera, 'The New Ottomans?', *Al Jazeera (Empire)*, June 16th 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/empire/2011/06/201161682640911172.html> (accessed on 20/06/2011), 09.10-09.20).

these abnormalities [terminology]. What is normality? Normality means economic interdependence. [...] Why do we need to call this Arab, Turkish or Iranian ['unions']; call it regionalism. [...] All countries want to play an important role. Some European countries want to play a global role and nobody questions this. When Turkey says we want to contribute to global peace [economic regionalism] then there is the question: 'Do you want to create an Ottoman Empire?' No!"⁵⁴

The increasing allegations regarding Turkey's so-called ambition to redeploy an 'Ottoman Empire' clearly parallels the 'question' of Iran's supposed aspiration to consolidate a 'Shi'a Crescent'. The terminology applied in both questions is in fact quite irrelevant when it comes to 21st century economic and political realities of the Greater Middle East (GME). Apparently, the geo-economic ambitions of certain substantial states in this strategic sub-region of the globe are today increasingly discoursed with highly distortive and culturalistic labels. It is not whatsoever overblown to state that they are actively created as threat images enforcing a sense of fear on the popular level of society. It can legitimately be argued that such queries signal foremost a-priori biased frameworks of questioning. When Iran would gradually integrate with neighbouring Iraq, it would not only generate vast welfare (oil block) but most probably also mitigate the recurrence of warfare between the two most populated Gulf states –a strategy similar to the visions of the early founders of the current European Union.⁵⁵ In this view, it is no surprise that Iran is investing millions of dollars to engrain its influence in its Iraqi neighbour (housing, charity, security etc.). Iran's policy calculations towards Iraq are not based on 'brotherly Shiite' support (sectarian altruism) but rather on prospects of economic and industrial integration schemes, certainly now they can enforce a

⁵⁴ Davutoğlu, A., 'The New Ottomans?', *Al Jazeera (Empire)*, June 16th 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/empire/2011/06/201161682640911172.html> (accessed on 20/06/2011), 44.45-45.45.

⁵⁵ A parallel can be made with the unifying economic cooperation scheme (EU) between key European powers (historical adversaries) such as France and Germany; the current strongmen and engine of the European economic and political project.

favourable dominance over an economically weaker Iraq.⁵⁶

Future dynamics of rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran are likely to intensify as Russian oil companies -who see the benefit in the absence of Western investors blocked by their own governments' sanctions, ruling out any private investments in the Iranian oil or gas industry- might gradually step in to reduce Iran's sectoral inefficiency. A Russian-Iranian oil partnership would strengthen the already existing political and military⁵⁷ ties between the two countries and subsequently further alarm Riyadh and the US about Iranian power-projection capabilities in the Gulf and the broader Middle East (Lebanon, Gaza).⁵⁸ Also China, widely believed to be "the only credible long-term rival to the United States"⁵⁹, has seemingly not felt intimidated by the US and its allies in working with Iran. Contrary to the EU, its companies invest daily in Iran's energy potential. Chinese investments⁶⁰ have also come with subsequent military and diplomatic ties. Interestingly, this Chinese attitude has triggered US media headlines such as '*How Dangerous is China?*'. Every potent nation-state post-Cold War era, which might oppose US or EU strategic interests in the Middle East, is apparently 'suspicious', to say the least (Iran, Turkey, China). In accordance with labels attributed to Iran ('*Shi'a Crescent*') and Turkey ('*Ottomanism*?'), one could arguably note an imminent tendency towards China-phobia that primarily stems from geo-economic (material) motives. Let us hereby not forget the joint 2010 Turkish-Brazilian initiative to try and broker a deal regarding Iran's controversial nuclear programme –the initiative was flagrantly slammed by the US.⁶¹ This dual, underlying and often asymmetric global relation with regard to Iran reflects in many ways the emerging multi-

⁵⁶ Terhalle, 2007, pp. 74-6.

⁵⁷ It's not a surprise that Russia together with China have traditionally blocked or softened Western economic and diplomatic pressure on Iran; this reflects deeper economic and political structures. See for example: Al Jazeera, 'China Against another Iran Sanction', *Al Jazeera*, July 4th 2007, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia-pacific/2007/07/2008525122313671306.html> (accessed on 11/05/2011); The Economist, 'An Iranian Nuclear Bomb, or the Bombing of Iran?', *The Economist*, December 3rd 2009, http://www.economist.com/node/15016192?story_id=E1_TVDTGTJN (accessed on 02/02/2011).

⁵⁸ Wehrey [et al.], 2009, pp. 72-3.

⁵⁹ Tsang, S., in Nasr [et al.], 2007, pp. 44-5.

⁶⁰ Which are also present in Saudi Arabia and Iraq; Beijing's FDI strategy is typed by extreme global diversification.

⁶¹ BBC News, 'Iran Signs Nuclear Fuel-Swap Deal with Turkey', *BBC News*, May 17th 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8685846.stm (accessed on 10/03/2011).

polar world economy (BRICS)⁶², certainly now that US economic control over Latin America⁶³ (IMF, World Bank, CIA sponsored military coups) seems to be fading and vast Asian economies are advancing.⁶⁴ It is not often mentioned, but the energy demands coming from Asian emerging economies, are today playing an increasingly important role in Middle Eastern political antagonisms, especially between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This is exemplified by recent media reports on India's (US-backed)⁶⁵ altering commercial relations with Middle Eastern energy-exporting countries:

"Iran's oil industry has come under increasing pressure in recent months due to international sanctions. India, one of Iran's major customers, owes Tehran billions of dollars in dues which it cannot pay due to banking sanctions; Iran has threatened to cut back its exports to India, which has started buying more Saudi oil in response."⁶⁶

Since oil is still key in determining the national budget of both countries, an Iraqi alliance within OPEC would certainly serve to be a strategic and lucrative asset. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran hope that their Iraqi neighbour –with its 115 billion barrels of oil reserves- will endorse their preferred market strategy and geopolitical outlook. Saudi Arabia and Iran do not only have opposing geopolitical agendas as regards their regional security stance –Iran has always urged for a more indigenous security arrangement in the Persian Gulf, even before 1979, they are in a complementary sense also actively economically opposed. Moreover, if one inquires into military expenditure in the Persian Gulf, one is rendered with the impression

⁶² I do not whatsoever want to apply this term –conceptualized in a Goldman Sachs desk room- in a sensationalistic manner to elucidate to a changing political 'world order', since I actively recognize this group to be a highly heterogenic one, which is today more an imagined political alliance of convenience –i.e. technical terminology to describe equally immense economic growth in a set of diverse countries outside the traditional developed centers of capitalist accumulation (US, EU, Japan etc.)- than an actual set of tangible cooperation mechanisms (investment banks, political decision making platforms etc.) challenging any other global scheme.

⁶³ The best example is Brasil, which is lobbying for a permanent UNSC position and has over the years taken quite some high-profiled diplomatic actions. The most important was its agreement, reached together with Turkey and Iran over the latter's nuclear program, which was, interestingly disregarded by the US and the EU.

⁶⁴ Chomsky, 2007, 'Targeting...', pp. 38-40; see also: Solmirano, C. & Wezeman, P.D., 'Military Spending and Arms Procurement in the Gulf States', *SIPRI Factsheet*, October 2010, <http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers> (accessed on 03/04/2011), p. 3.

⁶⁵ This is of course interrelated with the US' (shifting) relations with India and Pakistan in the backdrop of the Chinese challenge (alternative regional power house).

⁶⁶ Al Jazeera, 'Ahmadinejad Names General to Run Oil Ministry', *Al Jazeera*, July 27th 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/07/201172713519795674.html> (accessed on 27/07/2011); Al Jazeera, 'Clinton urges India to cut Iran oil Imports', *Al Jazeera*, May 7th 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2012/05/20125711716342472.html> (accessed on 07/05/2011).

of a regional arms race –leaving out the additional presence of the US fifth fleet, based in Bahrain.⁶⁷ For Iran, a post-Saddam Iraq, ‘Shi’a’ dominated or not, is in this sense no a-priori win-win situation. An independent or more Saudi-oriented Iraqi stand in the oil market would directly affect Iran’s current OPEC runner-up position. Tehran thus has a substantial economic incentive to further influence politics in Iraq: they can either lose or win a lot of petro-dollars. Much of this will be decided in the coming years during the political stabilization of Iraq.⁶⁸ This is an assessment the US administration also incorporated whilst trying to locate their ‘Axis of Evil’ during their 9/11 retaliation campaigns –as renowned journalist Robert Fisk contemplated: “let’s remember that most of the 9/11 killers were indeed Saudis”.⁶⁹ Clearly, political discourse and political policy, based on lucrative incentives, are two very distinctive matters.

Today, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have easily manoeuvred themselves into a patronizing position of disadvantaged confessional (and ethnic) groups in Iraq, Lebanon and ‘Palestine’, thus creating a distortive all-over image of sectarian politics throughout the Middle East. However, as the sectarian tradition in politics, in Lebanon for example, is of much structural nature -rooting in French colonial times (divide-and-rule, confessional favouritism)- the current status quo (institutionalized confessionalism) in some of these areas cannot simply nor solely be attributed to modern dynamics. Nevertheless, both countries probably perceive this contemporary setting as an utterly suitable momentum giving the importance of sectarian and

⁶⁷ Currently, Gulf states are among the highest (percentage of GDP) spenders on military resources in the world. (Cf. Gause, 2007, 120; Luomi, M., ‘Sectarian Identities or Geopolitics?: The Regional Shia-Sunni Divide in the Middle East’, *The Finnish Institute of International Affairs* (Working Paper No. 56, 2008), available at www.fiia.fi/assets/publications/WP56.pdf, pp. 35-6 (accessed on 15/12/2012); Malik, A. & Awadallah, B., ‘The Economics of the Arab Spring’, *OxCarre (Oxford Center for the Analysis of Resource Rich Economies)* (Research Paper No. 79, December 2011), pp. 10-1, available at: <http://www.oxcarre.ox.ac.uk/files/OxCarreRP201179.pdf>; Solmirano, C. & Wezeman, 2010.

⁶⁸ Bröning, 2008, p. 70; Wehrey [et al.], 2009, pp. 72-3; Vaitheeswaran, 2003, pp. 70-1; Taghavi, R., ‘Iran vs. Iraq: Why Tehran is Nervous About Iraqi Oil’, *Time Magazine*, April 22nd 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2066791,00.html?xid=rss-fullworld-yahoo> (accessed 10/05/2011); Wehrey [et al.], 2009, pp. 72-3; Vaitheeswaran, 2003, pp. 70-1.

⁶⁹ Fisk, R., ‘Why No Outcry over these Torturing Tyrants?’, *The Independent*, May 14th 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-why-no-outcry-over-these-torturing-tyrants-2283907.html> (accessed on 14/05/2011); Chomsky, 2007, ‘Targeting...’, p. 55; Abrahamian, 2003, p. 1; De Ley, H., ‘The Danish Cartoons: Contextualizing their Publication and the Muslim Response to it’, *Centrum voor Islam in Europa* (2006), <http://www.flw.ugent.be/cie/CIE2/deley36.htm#n12> (accessed on 02/03/2011); Hunt, 2002, pp. 416-21.

religious components in their own political enterprises (mythology) and the geopolitical gains that can be made through such sectarian patronage.⁷⁰

The Case of Iraqi Refugee Displacement to Jordan

When assessing the Iraqi refugee *debacle*, one immediately comes to note that the US has admitted less than a marginal 500 Iraqi refugees for asylum between 2003 and 2007. This stands in stark contrast to Sweden for instance, which accepted over 9,000 refugees during that period.⁷¹ After the Vietnam War, however, the former had accepted 130,000 Vietnamese and Washington furthermore received over 80,000 Kosovars after the post-Yugoslav crisis in the late 1990s. Only after increasing international pressure (e.g. UNHCR, IOM) did it eventually admit 7,000 Iraqi refugees to enter its territory. This humanitarian apathy is best explained by the political climate subsequent to 9/11, dominated by the ‘War on Terror’. This fierce though vague anti-terror policy implied a direct neglect of human rights and the rule of law (accountability, responsibility) and furthermore propagated a dichotomous worldview (‘The Green Peril’) –building on an older dualism dating back to the Cold War and the ‘Communist Threat’- and endorsed unilateral US military action (Bush Doctrine) in both Iraq and Afghanistan. It is best represented by neo-conservative policy monologues as ‘either you are with us or against us’. The persistence of this political discourse is reflected by the fact that US policy makers have, up until this very day, not paid substantial attention to the unfolding humanitarian *debacle* in Iraq, which is surely, as many experts have stated, “one of the least covered humanitarian crises in decades”.⁷²

Although European countries have relatively accepted more Iraqi refugees, a similar apathy pertained among the political elites in this part of the industrialized world. Displaced Iraqis have as such endured considerable difficulty to get recognized (or registered) as

⁷⁰ Wehrey [et al.], 2009, pp. 66-7,75-6, 94-5.

⁷¹ UNHCR, ‘Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World’, UNHCR, September 2007, <http://www.unhcr.org/470387fc2.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011).

⁷² Peteet, J., ‘The Unsettling Categories of Displacement’, *Middle East Report* (No. 244, Fall 2007), p 8; Amir-Yusefi, 2009, p. 124; Ehteshami, 2007, pp. 160-1.

‘refugees’. Today, they are more and more being pushed into the category of the unknown set of refugees (Somalis, Armenians⁷³, Afghans, Greek Cypriots) clearly contrasting other examples (Darfuri Somalis, Kosovars, etc.). Hitherto, there are therefore almost no visual images or voices that trail of this ongoing Iraqi crisis in the Western public sphere. During the previous decade a political lethargy vis-à-vis Iraq was accompanied by an increasing absurd societal focus on ‘identity’ (Muslim, *Shi‘a*, *Sunni*) –further encouraged by sensationalist academics (e.g. Huntington) who reinvented the racial ‘threats’ of the 19th and 20th centuries through the imagery of encroaching ‘civilizations’- inevitably crystallizing in a rise of global xenophobia. Viewed to the background of the aforementioned statistics of displaced Iraqis, one can fully understand the danger of applying such hollow anti-*Shi‘a* or anti-Muslim discourses.⁷⁴

Applying this framework of global governance (‘War on Terror’), the largest donor of the UN, the United States, was seen to drastically decrease its humanitarian funding whereby countries such as Jordan and Syria have received minimal logistic and financial support in handling with the Iraqi refugee *debacle*. Since the dreadful events of September 11, displaced people in the Middle East are thought of less and less in humanitarian terms (human rights, international law), but all too often in merely dehumanized security terms (suspicion). In this way, refugees have increasingly been coded (‘character’) as potential threats, both in the Middle itself as on a broader global scale.⁷⁵ Rather than taking up any responsibility for post-war societal affairs, the US administration seems keen on systematically denying the war’s devastating impact, so as to keep up its discourse of political goodwill –‘Wilsonian idealism’,

⁷³ Armenian genocide (Cf. Peteet, p. 2).

⁷⁴ Abrahamian, E., *Khomeinism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), pp. 530, 538; Amir-Yusefi, 2009, p. 124; Bröning, 2008, pp. 60-3, 74; Hunt, 2002, pp. 416-21; Jabar, F.A., ‘The Worldly Roots of Religiosity in Post-Saddam Iraq’, *Middle East Report* (No. 227, Summer 2003), p.13; Lary, D., ‘Edward Said: Orientalism and Occidentalism’, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association (Revue de la Société historique du Canada)* (Vol. 17, No. 2, Summer 2006), p. 7; Peteet, 2007, pp. 2, 4, 7- 9; UNHCR, ‘Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World’, *UNHCR*, September 2007, <http://www.unhcr.org/470387fc2.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011); Zemni, S., ‘Islam, European Identity and the Limits of Multiculturalism’, in *Religious Freedom and the Neutrality of the State: The Position of the European Union*, eds. Shadid, W.A.R. & Van Koningsveld, P.S. (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), available at <http://www.menarg.ugent.be/media/905/islam-european-identity-and-the-limits-of-multiculturalism.pdf> (see this format for page reference, accessed on 30/04/2011), pp. 8-9; Žižek, S., ‘Tolerance as an Ideological Category’, *Critical Inquiry* (Vol. 34, No. 4, Summer 2008), p. 661.

⁷⁵ Peteet, 2007, 4, 7- 9; UNHCR, ‘Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World’, *UNHCR*, September 2007, <http://www.unhcr.org/470387fc2.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011).

as critics such as Chomsky like to brand it.⁷⁶ Paul Bremer for instance, the head of the coalition provision that ran Iraq after the invasion, fragrantly declared in front of the US congress that “the country was in chaos, socially, politically and economically [post-2003]; the deep crisis has been brought about not by war, not by sanctions, but by decades of corruption and incompetence of the Saddam regime”.⁷⁷ Although Saddam’s destructive legacy is surely known, it is quite interesting to see how the global power has had the monopoly on this matter, consistently attributing all (humanitarian) failures to the character of the political establishment predating the invasion. Similar arguments can be found in Yitzhak Nakash’s study entitled *Reaching for Power: the Shi’a in the Modern Arab World*, which often tries to provide US policy towards Iraq with a noble *raison d’être*, hence establishing a gentle (civilizational) mythology that is often not only at odds with history and reality –US apathy for Saddam’s repression⁷⁸ inside its borders during the First Gulf War is conveniently left out of the genealogy of bilateral affairs, as is the devastating US enforced UN embargo⁷⁹ in the early 1990s that mainly devastated Iraq’s civil society- there is, moreover, no attention given to the vast civil cost (‘collateral damage’)⁸⁰ of the US military project from 2003 onwards.⁸¹

Words are no mere objective markers that simply convey objective information. Surely in political affairs, certain words or concepts may imply different matters according to the definition one attributes to them or depending on the pretext in which they are used, e.g. ‘democracy’, ‘influence’, ‘destabilizing’ or ‘stabilizing’ [a country]. At times, their mere application can signal moral and philosophical orientations; how one perceives the world and

⁷⁶ Chomsky, N., *Interventions* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2007), p.143.

⁷⁷ Bremer, P., ‘Iraq to Chase Missing Billions’, *Al Jazeera*, June 20th 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/06/201162044042488179.html> (accessed on 20/06/2011), 0.50-01.40.

⁷⁸ Estimates reach up to a 100.000 of ‘Shiites’ that lost their lives, not to speak of the vast repression in the Kurdish areas (Cf. Norton, 2007, p. 437).

⁷⁹ Cf. UN Security Council Resolutions on Iraq 661, 687.

⁸⁰ This is an utterly despicable term that actively tries to divert ‘listeners’ from what warfare actually generates. It was first applied during the Vietnam War, which is quite significant in itself, bearing in mind the civil opposition to the war that was created by visual imagery (coded messages); cf. ‘Kim Phuc’ by photographer Nic Ut.

⁸¹ Nakash, Y., *Reaching for Power: The Shi’a in the Modern Arab World* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 164; Norton, 2007, p. 437.

how one propagates the world (ideology).⁸² Discursive silence itself hence signifies not the boundary of an articulated idea, but rather forms an integral part of it and thus functions immediately along side of what *is* expressed. By gaining understanding into what is so actively and conveniently left out, one simultaneously sheds light on the very *nature* of a particular narrative and its underlying function (goal).⁸³

The aforementioned global humanitarian pretext implies that countries such as Jordan and Syria, which had already experienced Iraqi refugee influxes during the 1980s (Iran-Iraq war) and 1990s (First Gulf War), were in the post-war aftermath (2003) left mainly to themselves in coping with a new, but unseen mass refugee displacement.⁸⁴ Moreover, a 2007 UNHCR report literally stated: “the [contemporary] ability of neighbouring states to handle such larger numbers is close to a breaking point. In recent months visa restrictions have been considered, which, if implemented, will result in Iraqis having greater difficulty finding a safe haven”.⁸⁵ These comments ventilate a build-up of logistic and economic pressure experienced by such leading host countries. Additionally, an assessment of the ‘sectarian whereabouts’ of these Iraqi refugees indicated that 27% of the Iraqi population seeking refuge in Jordan was affiliated to ‘Shiite culture’.⁸⁶ This is again quite significant when we recapitulate that the whole idea of a ‘*Shi’a* Crescent’ actually initiated in Jordan.⁸⁷

Although figures indicate that everywhere, except for Lebanon, the majority of Iraqi refugees were ‘*Sunni*’, one should note that Jordan has never harboured a substantial Shiite minority (‘sectarian make-up/ecology’), which, next to its geopolitical orientation, made the country a more feasible ground for discriminatory propaganda (top-down) and dialectic

⁸² Chomsky, N., ‘The US and its Allies will Do Anything to Prevent Democracy in the Arab World’, *Democracy Now*, May 11th 2011, http://www.democracynow.org/2011/5/11/noam_chomsky_the_us_and_its (accessed on 15/05/2011), 55.00 & 57.00. See also: _____, *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* (Boston: South End Press, 1987), pp. 256, 266, 268, 269, 271.

⁸³ Abrahamian, 2003, p. 529.

⁸⁴ UNHCR, ‘Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World’, *UNHCR*, September 2007, <http://www.unhcr.org/470387fe2.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ UNHCR, ‘Iraqi Situation Update’, *UNHCR*, August 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/491956a02.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011).

⁸⁷ Bröning, 2008, p. 61; Jones, 2005, pp. 24-5; Haji-Yousefi, 2009, p. 116; Wright, R. & Baker, P., ‘Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election From Iran’, *Washington Post*, December 8th 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43980-2004Dec7.html> (accessed on 09/09/2010).

xenophobia (bottom-up) at a time when a visually ‘different’ population entered the country. While recognizing the fact that Iraqi refugees of the *Sunni* sect almost constituted double than that of the Shiite one in Jordan, it could nevertheless be argued that, to such a ‘*Sunni*’ scenery/backdrop, the ‘Shiite’ –i.e. Iraqi; the only unbiased denominator- influx must have had some visual effect on the societal level. It was most probably big enough to render a utile pretext, which enabled the most visible ‘immigrants’, that is, the (often impoverished) ‘*Shi’a*’, to become the symbolic focal point of right-wing, government-led sectarian propaganda, serving both the political and economic agenda of the anti-Iranian establishment in Amman through (1) the spreading of anti-Shiite sentiment (associated with Iran) on a popular level and additionally through (2) the mitigation of humanitarian-related costs (visa restrictions), thus subtly pushing back domestic compliance with (basic) humanitarian solidarity stipulated by international law.⁸⁸ Critics have accurately dubbed the Jordanian policy on Iraqi refugees as “a mixture of making life manageable so as to avoid criticism, but difficult enough so that Iraqis will never feel comfortable enough to stay”.⁸⁹ In this light, it is remarkable that Bashar al-Assad hasn’t spoken of a ‘Shiite Infiltration’, a ‘*Shi’a* Expansion’ or ‘*tashayyu*’ (doctrinal conversion to Shiism); such a *political* discourse would in fact not match with Syria’s geopolitical agenda –being a major ally of Iran and the Lebanese Hizbullah.

While reflecting on Iraqi migration in Jordan, Asher Susser has keenly pointed out a historical perspective by stating that fluxes of (Palestinian) migration and their subsequent political implications (PLO, *Black September*) have always posed a serious concern to the now experienced Jordanian establishment. The ruling Jordanian elite has often maintained a tensed relationship with segments of their (militant) Palestinian subjects. Notwithstanding the fact that the influx of an extremely wealthy Iraqi (Bathist) elite in 2003 initially contributed favourably to various sectors of the Jordanian economy, continuing Iraqi migration did seem

⁸⁸ Peteet, 2007, p. 3; Puelings, 2010, p. 41; UNHCR, ‘Iraqi Situation Update’, *UNHCR*, August 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/491956a02.html> (accessed on 02/03/2011).

⁸⁹ Nanes, S., ‘Jordan’s Unwelcome “Guests”’, *Middle East Report* (No. 244, Fall 2007), p. 24.

to grow out to a serious domestic concern for a country heading towards recession –the US invasion did of course also affect Iraq’s main neighbouring countries (Turkey, Syria, Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia). While at first, the Jordanian establishment interpreted the occurrence as a favourable elitist dynamic to counter the Palestinian demography and their (economic) influence in domestic affairs, after the numbers kept on augmenting, there was increasing anxiety about the kingdom’s political stability and economic viability. However, it is hereby also quite important not to overstate the economic impact of Iraqi refugees on the Jordanian economy since they only constituted one facet of many that caused pressure during the early 2000s.⁹⁰

Research has, for instance, interestingly indicated that Jordan’s contemporary inflation indeed related to the 2003 war, but also to structural shifts in the global movement of capital and government austerity measures predating the war.⁹¹ The increase in domestic food prices, for instance, related directly to Jordan’s increasing exports to Iraq and the subsequent increase of (foreign-produced and) imported food to Jordan. The high oil prices in Jordan, which had quadrupled between 2002 and 2006, stemmed from the abolished (lucrative) contract with Saddam, but also from a gradual decrease of government subsidies of fuel as part of Jordan’s compliance with its pre-war implemented ‘Structural Adjustment Programme’ (SAP, IMF, WB). Increasing costs connected to land and housing purchase, particularly in Amman, also relate to events prior to the Iraqi refugee influx, namely 9/11. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, many wealthy investors from Gulf countries (e.g. Kuwaitis) became nervous about their US invested capital and therefore relocated large amounts of their foreign invested assets to nearby Jordan. This was mainly due to the fact that much of the country’s real estate and company shares were strongly undervalued. On top of all that, the Jordanian establishment’s monetary policy has always been to peg the Jordanian dinar to the US dollar, implying that

⁹⁰ Susser, A. ‘Jordan: Preserving Domestic Order in a Setting of Regional Turmoil’, *Middle East Brief* (No. 27, March 2008), available at http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb_index.html, pp. 2-3; Peteet, 2007, p. 3.

⁹¹ Nanes, 2007, p. 22.

the weak dollar and dramatic problems in the US economy in the early 2000s consequently put severe and increasing pressure on the Jordanian economy as well. Hitherto, the Hashemite regime and the state media have, however, scarcely ever comprehensively debated these structural factors. Many seem simply to prefer mainly, if not uniquely, to blame the Iraqi refugees (*'Shi'a'*) as scapegoats for the economic turmoil. Conveniently, however, their arrival did coincide and add-up with increasing but quite 'typical' 21st century economic hardship in Jordan.⁹² As some critics have been able to highlight, numerous distortive perceptions came into being in post-2003 Jordan with regard to the new 'invaders':⁹³

"Ask any Jordanian in Amman about Iraqis living in their country, and they will immediately tell you that Iraqis have driven up the prices of virtually anything in the capital. Apartments cost double what they did five years ago. The prices of food and gasoline have soared. Iraqis arrive with suitcases full of cash, drive around in expensive cars and make life much more difficult for Jordanians –or such is the widespread belief."⁹⁴

Moreover, when it comes to stereotyping Iraqi *Shi'a* in particular, it is even worse:

"Jordanians lower their voices to tell you that the *Shi'a* are not really Muslims, that they are trying to convert the *Sunnis*, that they are loyal to Iran and Hizbullah and that their creed sanctions sexual practices such as incest and group sex. References to a 'Shiite Crescent', a term coined by King Abdallah in late 2004, pop up spontaneously in conversations, indicating a sense that Jordan is surrounded by a hostile, alien force."⁹⁵

Keen and comprehensive scholarship has accurately pointed out that Jordan king Abdullah's coining of the term '*Shi'a* Crescent' actually signals an implicit political statement towards the US and the Arab Gulf: "Invest in me, and I will be the praetorian guard of the

⁹² Ibid., pp. 22-3.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 24.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

Sunni order”.⁹⁶ Lebanon-specialist Augustus Richard Norton has briefly referred to the correlation between the anti-Shiite discourse and Iraqi migration in his article entitled *The Shiite ‘Treath’ Revisited*, however, without further elaborating on the matter.⁹⁷ Exclusivist political narratives are in fact quite widespread phenomena and often top-down generated for the sake of specific political and economic agendas. Clearly, the very social and economic pretext in Jordan (post-2003 refugee influx, inflation) was a ‘perfect’ converging setting for the king’s December 2004 proclamation of an Iranian-led ‘Shiite Crescent’, signalling a subjective reading and propagation of visible, underlying events occurring in the region. Hereby, a parallel can be made to recession-hit Europe, which has seen a consistent rise in xenophobic narratives over the last few years coming from right-wing populist parties; building up on the already existing institutional tradition of mythological propaganda, centred around a ‘unique’ European ‘identity’ –a top-down strategy to anticipate and cope with popular anxiety for the emerging liberal-economic experiment (EU).⁹⁸

In this sense, it is surely no coincidence that crucial geostrategic events (2003 Iraq war), migration flows and state-centric (right-wing) discourses of ‘identity’ coincide. In historical perspective the 1923 Greek-Turkish ‘population exchange’ (refugee dynamic) and the Armenian genocide roughly coincided with World War I and its geopolitical aftermath (Treaty of Lausanne) and, more importantly, with the politically led consolidation of Turkish, Greek and even Armenian nationalism (reflexive xenophobia, politicized identities).⁹⁹ Although Jordan had already known Iraqi refugee influxes in the 1990s, which of course included mainly ‘Shiites’ at the time since they had risen up against Saddam in central and South Iraq, back then, this did not enflame such a campaign of sectarian mistrust, thus implicitly signalling a different geopolitical setting. Iran was at the time fairly contained and

⁹⁶ Ajami [et al.], 2006, pp. 3-4.

⁹⁷ Norton, 2007, p. 434.

⁹⁸ Susser, 2008, p. 3; Zemni, S. & Parker, C., ‘European Union, Islam & the Challenges of Multiculturalism: Rethinking the Problematique’, in *Islam in Europe: The New Social, Cultural and Political Landscape*, ed. Hunter, S.T. (Westport/Washington: Praeger, 2002), available at <http://www.menarg.ugent.be/media/956/european-union-islam-and-the-challenges-of-multiculturalism.pdf> (see this format for page reference, accessed on 30/04/2011), p. 2.

⁹⁹ Peteet, 2007, 2.

it was Saddam who had mainly posed a problem to the US-enforced security paradigm in the Persian Gulf area.¹⁰⁰ The latter could then of course not be linked to alien ‘Shiism’ and the creeping Iranian ‘Threat’ and was thus conveniently discoursed as a fascist comparable to Hitler –comparisons often include the haunting imagery of Europe and the US, alluding the public which it is meant to serve-, as of course Nasser had for geopolitical motives such as the nationalization of the Suez Canal been depicted as “a Mussolini by the Nile” by Egypt’s former colonial rulers. At the eve of the First Gulf War all means were suitable as to ensure the steady flow of cheap oil to one of the world largest consuming domestic markets, the United States of America.¹⁰¹

The appearance and form of political discourses are always dependent on the regional economic reality (e.g. economic boom or recession, economic migration, war-inflicted migration) and the geopolitical setting (e.g. ‘War on Terror’, US-backed regional opposition to Iran). Regrettably, it is often the weak (migrated) groups within a society that become first and foremost target of such pseudo-intellectual operations, which then completely de-link the migrant from any nationality and strip him of any rationally-explainable social and economic motive. The ‘migrant’ *Other* is often used, that is, discoursed in a xenophobic manner, for the interest of certain other, often more powerful, groups within the same society. Today the ‘foreigner’, as the 21st century migrant, is often actively linked into a vague cultural matrix that directly problematizes his presence and existence, so this is, as indicated, not uniquely a Middle Eastern feature. This process is often a shaped monologue where the individual, the human face and true actor, is seen to disappear into a homogenized group, whereby he is totally absent for any rational input nor for crucially defending or alerting the outside world of his actual human needs.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Nasr [et al.], 2007, pp. 40-1; Parasiliti, 2003, pp. 160-1; Parsi, 2008, pp. 145-9, 152-3; Wehrey [et al.], pp. 1-4, 11-14, 87.

¹⁰¹ Lustick, I., ‘The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political “Backwardness” in Historical Perspective’, *International Organization* (Vol. 51, No. 4, Autumn 1997), p. 676; Vaitheeswaran, V.V., ‘Pipe Dreams in Iraq’, *Foreign Policy* (No. 138, September-October 2003), p.70.

¹⁰² Ashcroft [et al.], 2007, pp. 62-64, 154-7, 167; Chaturvedi, S., ‘Process of Othering in the Case of India and Pakistan’, *Royal Dutch*

It has interestingly been pointed out that after anti-*Shi'a* fears and rumours kicked in, all of a sudden, Hizbullah had lost some of its popularity in the Jordanian street. Seemingly, the Lebanese party had previously been thought of as an 'Arab vanguard' in popular terms after its July 2006 confrontation with the Israeli Defence Forces. However, this being said, research has significantly indicated that many of Jordan's population still believe that the sectarian campaign is somehow top-down inflated and stemming from geopolitical motives (Hizbullah, Iran) rather than from a genuine societal expression.¹⁰³ Jordanian (popular) resentment of '*Shi'a*' is often legitimized by making accusatorial reference to the (festivity) date of Saddam's 2006 execution, which was interpreted as a sectarian provocation. Today, Saddam's imagery is hence oddly but increasingly serving as a mythological '*Sunni-Arab hero*' in popular Jordanian consciousness –again the US's role in this supposed 'sectarian matter' falls blank here. Various scholars have nevertheless been elaborating on the idea of a 'Shiite Crescent' or, as many scholars in the West seem to prefer, on a '*Shi'a Rise*', reflecting the fundamental idea of a sectarian threat/conflict sprouting from an enshrined 'cultural divide' for explaining regional politics.¹⁰⁴ More realist inclined scholars can of course be referred to so as to remind us of one of the largest military campaigns of the previous decade:

"It took American power to break the state in Iraq. And we did; we broke it completely. We not only conquered and broke the regime, but we then broke the state by breaking up the army and turning the bureaucracy on its head. But that took American power to do it. Nowhere else had that happened. Even in the Iranian Revolution –was a huge change from below, but the Iranian state preserved."¹⁰⁵

Geographical Society KNAG (Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie - Vol. 93, No. 2, 2002), p 1; Hunt, 2002, pp. 416-21; Said, E.W., 'Traveling Theory', in *The Edward Said Reader*, eds. Bayoumi, M. & Rubin, A. (London: Granta Publications, 2001), pp. 63-93; Zemni & Parker, 2002, pp. 3, 7; Seaton, T., 'Purposeful Otherness: Approaches to the Management of Thanatourism', in *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism*, eds. Sharpley, R. & Stone, P.R. (Bristol: Short Run Press, 2009), pp. 77-82.

¹⁰³ Nanes, 2007, p. 24.

¹⁰⁴ Bröning, 2008, p. 60; Helfont, S., 'The Muslim Brotherhood and the Emerging 'Shia Crescent', *Orbis* (Vol. 53, No. 2, 2009); Valbjørn, M. & Bank, A., 'Signs of a New Arab Cold War: The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunni-Shi'i Divide', *Middle East Report* (No. 242, Spring 2007).

¹⁰⁵ Gause, 2007, p. 123.

Hence, such popular Arab support for Hizbullah (2006) should in fact not impressionistically be interpreted as ‘trans-sectarian’ sympathy, or, even more sensational, as a sign of alleged wide scale *tashayyu*‘/conversion, but rather as a regional expression of political opposition to Israel and of communal (Arab) solidarity, to be viewed to a structural backdrop of modern regional warfare with or related to Israel (1948 Arab-Israeli war, 1956 Suez Crisis, 1967 Six-Day War, 1973 Yom Kippur War, 1982 Lebanon War, 1983 bombings of Osirak etc.) in which the *Palestinian Question*¹⁰⁶ has come to symbolize a highly sensitive geopolitical –and in the Arab and Muslim popular sphere even mythological- marker for structural and enduring Middle Eastern *malaise*.¹⁰⁷ In the Middle Eastern and North African region, this popular politicized sentiment regarding Palestinian symbolism roots in a now historical tradition, easily detectable in the regional musical folklore -e.g. in lyrics of one of the most popular bands in modern Moroccan history, *Nās al-Ghiwān*¹⁰⁸, i.c. songs as ‘*Sabra wa Shatilla*’¹⁰⁹, ‘*Intifada*’¹¹⁰ (1987) and ‘*Falastin*’¹¹¹. Although the whole trend of *Ra’i* music was about localized popular realities, it did carry a strong social component that often focused upon regional events to implicitly address and ventilate domestic and regional discontent - Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer have since long categorized music as an incredible art form that has the ability to mobilize people as no other.¹¹² Although simplistic media coverage and self-proclaimed experts have numerously depicted sectarian denominators as significant sociological and political categories, they do not whatsoever correspond with omnipresent heterogeneous socio-political realities and can thus not whatsoever be used to brew up sterile and homogenous communities with a supposed unity of purpose, both within Iraq and the region as a whole. The flare-up of anti-US and intra-Iraqi

¹⁰⁶ I use this term in reference to the unsolved Palestinian problem of absentee state-hood and refugees.

¹⁰⁷ Pappé, I., 2005, pp. 15-36.

¹⁰⁸ For more info, see, for instance, part of a French documentary (re-edited by Martin Scorcese), available online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDg2ZEzC2vs&playnext=1&list=PL62886399173A8F28> (accessed on 30/12/2012).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., E-demo: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bv1z2gWfu9k&feature=related> (accessed on 30/12/2012).

¹¹⁰ Ibid. E-demo: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aq_tRDnI3Nk&feature=player_embedded (accessed on 30/12/2012).

¹¹¹ Ibid. E-demo: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uu-0ARbZCC8&feature=related> (accessed on 30/12/2012).

¹¹² Pappé, 2005, pp. 165, 173-4, 179-80.

violence in the mid-2000s under the banner of religiosity and sectarian affiliation tell more of Iraq's post-war reality dubbed as one of 'existential insecurity' than of a supposed appearance of the country's authentic cultural fabric or of a regional sectarian clash.¹¹³

In accurately dismissing the concept of 'pan-Shiism', Vali Nasr, a leading *Shi'a* expert in the US, has already noted that historical transnational migration between Iraq and Iran created "numerous, layered connections between the two countries' Shiite communities".¹¹⁴ Hereby, he tries to explain the rise/usage of cultural ties in a rational manner, but strikingly enough, when migration is being assessed he does not whatsoever mention modern westward migration during the more recent post-Saddam era, nor does he signal the direct correlation between this dynamic and the emergence of culturalistic anti-Shiite rhetoric emanating from Jordan and its regional political allies. This logic is simply overlooked by those who tend to attribute a dominant position to culture in often sensationalist analyses –and not balance cultural realities to structural processes of economic, political and migratory nature. By portraying certain groups of Iraqi refugees as mere 'Shiites', one actually dehumanizes the Iraqi refugee *debacle* and, more importantly, almost denies and annihilates the geopolitical nature (2003 US-led invasion), which triggered this very crisis. By culturally politicizing weaker societal groups (refugees) within regional interstate conflicts with Iran, one also overlooks the seriousness of this humanitarian catastrophe and therefore one inevitably distracts the general public's attention away from more relevant/acute debates that carry a more humanitarian basis (housing, jobs, medical or psychological aid, political/legal accountability). Rather, it is all about 'cultural exceptionalism' (communitarian cages, 'tolerance') in today's age of pulp -branded as one of 'post-politics' by critics such as Slavoj Žižek- further undermining hard-won ideas regarding universal humanity.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Jabar, 2003, pp. 13, 18; Inglehart [et al.], 2006.

¹¹⁴ Luomi, 2008, p.17; See also: Nasr, V., 'When the Shiites Rise', *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 85, No. 4, July-August 2006).

¹¹⁵ Ehteshami, 2007, pp. 47-57, 160-4; Peteet, 2007, pp. 2-9; Zemni & Parker, 2002, pp. 3, 7; Žižek, 2008, pp. 660, 673-5..

Conclusion

It is clear that a dynamic of US inflicted warfare (2003), regional political instability and transnational refugee displacement, rather than any imagined Iranian-promoted conversion to Shiism is able to explain the societal susceptibility for such a sectarian political discourse as that of the 'Shiite Crescent'. Numerous migratory influxes of deprived Iraqis will inevitably have stepped up 'Shi'a' ('foreign') visibility within the region's public consciousness. This dynamic also coincided with Iran post-2003 decontainment -serving as the deeper political pretext for this specific sectarian campaign- Hizbullah's July 2006 *decharge* and a deteriorating intra-Iraqi security situation in the mid-2000s, slipping beyond the US's control. As such, not only Iran's geopolitical ascendance in the post-Saddam era, but also a flow of regional migration might explain a perception of a regional 'Shiitization' and furthermore accurately contextualize the Jordanian and Saudi elites' response to these events.

Moreover, as regards Iraq's structural significance, there is much at stake for both Iran and Saudi Arabia –one of Jordan's main regional allies, aspiring to become the new Arab powerhouse- since effective and suitable bilateral political relations with the newly emerging Iraqi elite will certainly bring about a subsequent partnership during any OPEC deliberations to settle the cartel's market strategy (commodity prices). Since oil is still key to any economy in the Gulf (rentier model), Iraq's potential has the crucial ability to decisively impact the decision making process within the oil cartel. These dynamics are all the more important now that energy demands (fossil fuels) are gradually increasing due to the enormous expansion of emerging Asian economies (China, India etc.) and as long as the volatile security paradigm in the Persian Gulf persists. Iraq's contemporary relevance was demonstrated recently, during the popular uprising in the Arab world (June 2011), when the OPEC summit that had convened in Vienna was unable to reach a new consensus on global oil supply (production quotas) and commodity prices. Hereby, a revenue-hungry Iraq interestingly joined Iran in its

obstruction to the Saudi-led GCC offer to industrialized nations of generously filling up Libya's supply deficit and setting the price at a fixed \$80 a barrel (market stabilization). In this sense, rumours about a 'Shiite Danger', a 'Shiite Block' or a 'Shiite Crescent' rather relate to petro-dollars and geo-economic rivalry (new alliances) than any bottom-up cultural opposition. So, when we recapitulate the words of Nawaf Obaid, a former security advisor of Saudi King Abdullah, one is left with different impression (material incentive) on why Saudi Arabia would intervene into Iraqi affairs: "As the birthplace of Islam and the de facto leader of the world's *Sunni* community (which comprises 85 percent of all Muslims), Saudi Arabia has both the means and the religious responsibility to intervene [in Iraq]."¹¹⁶

It is quite striking to see how the US's interventionist role in the region, along with some of its specific humanitarian consequences such as the Iraqi refugee *debacle*, are depicted as 'mere' short-term and marginal phenomena, while sectarian-induced violence –there can never be enough culturalistic name-dropping- is claimed to be the 'fundamental' and long-term problem causing the failure of the Iraqi state and its societal co-existence; this serving as a prototype of the 'problematic' Middle East, which is somehow in itself and by its 'nature' irreconcilable to the ideas of modern day, market-driven civil coexistence. The contemporary dominance of this treat of political and social apathy (e.g. disregard for internal law, humanitarian needs) is equally symbolized by the ongoing dehumanization of the Gazan civilian population. By solely speaking of Hamas and of 'Islam' during the Israeli 2009 military assault, one effectively ignores the question of accountability for (disproportionate) human suffering –ventilated by numerous UN resolutions- and, moreover, loses all touch with the reality of human universality (human rights). By indicating an Iraqi ('*Shi'a*') refugee dynamic one thus comes to a more balanced and rational comprehension for the emergence of regional *Shi'a* phobia on both the political and societal level.

¹¹⁶ Obaid, N., 'Stepping into Iraq', *The Washington Post*, November 29th 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/28/AR2006112801277.html> (accessed on 03/03/2011).

Comprehensively, global and Middle Eastern protagonists (politicians, clerics, journalists) claiming to engage ‘Shiism’ or ‘*Shi‘a*’ as a (transnational) ‘whole’, often merely convey highly politicized (ideological) messages that do not intend to relate to religion itself, but rather to geopolitics, geo-economics and even reactionary domestic politics, *in casu* the promotion of Iran’s regional containment, of decreasing the power of its Levantine allies/proxies (Hizbullah, Hamas, Syria), lobbying for Iraq’s strategic OPEC shares and even mitigating domestic political opposition (Bahrain) to reinforce autocratic (monarchical) rule. In the latter case, activists calling for democratic liberalization (participation) and the redistribution of wealth in the lucrative Gulf were flagrantly met with accusations of foreign conspiracy. Ultimately, the narrow notion of politicized, monolith and linear (reflexive) sectarian identities (‘continua’) were and are mainly propagated by key Arab states such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt -i.e. the previous Mubarak regime- to reaffirm their post-9/11 geopolitical alignment with the US in the post-Saddam Middle Eastern order, to safeguard their regional interests vis-à-vis Iran’s apparent post-2003 political ascendance, and to intelligently (perception, media) engage the latter regionally by propagating threat images of Shiism and Shiites. The Iranian nation state is, however, not fundamentally driven by (‘warmongering’) ideology, but as any geopolitical unit, it rather bases its foreign policy on mainly rational (material) considerations, such as the mitigation of US hegemonic projections in the energy-rich Persian Gulf in favour of a more endogenous security paradigm, which it would conveniently but also quite naturally (geographical size, demography, resources, industrial potential etc.) come to dominate in the medium-term. The ‘*Shi‘a* Crescent’ conception, which has in various ways been applied in academia, is a highly phantasmagorical and distortive theory that should be discarded entirely by any serious and unbiased scrutiny of contemporary Middle Eastern politics.