BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF EUROPEAN STUDIES
DOCTORAL SCHOOL „THE EUROPEAN PARADIGM"

DOCTORAL THESIS

SUMMARY

GEOPOLITICAL ORIENTATIONS AND STRATEGIES IN THE MUSLIM WORLD AFTER THE COLD WAR

IRAQI SHI'ISM IN NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT: DYNAMIC IDENTITIES, POLITICAL ACTIVISMS, MILITANT CONTESTATIONS

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Cluj-Napoca
October 2012

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Summary

What is at the heart of our research is a reflection and an analysis of the evolution of Iraqi Shi'a in relation to the national building processes of the state and its interactions with his regional geopolitical environment where religious identities represent a decisive element in shaping the behaviors of states or of different sub - or supra-state actors. Iraq emerged, after World War I, as a product of Western geopolitical projects of dividing the Arab territories of the former Ottoman Empire. Like the other newly created states now, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, it must go through a complicated and difficult process of nation-building and identity construction through which not only to implement the new institutional statist structures and functionalities presupposed by a modern state but also to build a common space of identity reference, nationwide. What our research proposes, as central topic of analysis, is precisely the highlighting of the continuous difficulty of this national construction, which makes Iraq remain permanently a state with weak internal cohesion, the result of perpetuating imbalances in political representation, in the preservation of a patrimonial resource management system, in the generalization of violence as an instrument of regulating internal or external dissensions. Its destiny is not unique to the region: most countries in the Middle East have failed in autocratic systems, based on the economic support of an oligarchy depending on the elite in power, and which renders their domination permanent through control and repression systems of the population and of any competitors. We chose the case of Iraqi Shi'a because it illustrates, in a very visible way and with a national and regional impact, the dynamics of the processes of identity, social, political, ideological transformation of a community in the Middle East, defined religiously, but which tries to appropriate and to accommodate to the new mutations produced by the emergence of national states and of the need to rethink its own status in relation to new standards of modernity. To a very large extent, the central problem of the contemporary history of the Middle East (and of Central Asia) is that of the identities; attachments to multiple identity references (religious, ethnic, tribal, statist, supranational) has often proved conflicting, either within the national states or in a trans-national projection, conditioning, over the decades, a large part of the recurring crises and violence in the region.

What essentially defines, for centuries, Iraqi territories is the complexity of their community structure and the multiple identities built at the level of the population where sectarian, tribal, ethnic, regional, and even neighborhood affiliations mix - in urban environments. In general, the situation in contemporary Iraq, in terms of ethnicity, is as follows: most of the population is Arabic (75% - 80%) then follows the Kurdish community (15% - 20%) and the remaining approximately 5% consists from other minorities: Turkmens, Iranians, Circassians, Armenians, etc. Regarding the religious configuration, it is characterized by a predominance of the Shi'a community (60% - 65%)

although the Sunnis (32% -37%) were, from the Ottoman era until 2003, those who controlled the political and administrative Iraqi territory. Finally, there is a small percentage of Christian population (3%), represented by a multitude of pre-and post-Chalcedon churches.

The twelver Shi'as represents about 12% (140 million adherents) of the Muslim population inhabiting an area stretching from Lebanon to India and Central Asia. They are the majority in Iran (90-95%), Azerbaijan (85%), and Iraq (65%) and are the main community within the Muslim population in Lebanon (45% of the total Lebanese population. Over 70% of the population next to the Gulf is Shi'a although it is prevalent in countries - except Iran and recently Iraq, countries with Sunni political leadership where it often has a secondary status, being often subject to repression and discrimination. Thus, in Saudi Arabia, the Shi'a make up about 10-15% of the population but they are right in the Hassa oil province; in Kuwait they are in a percentage of 25-30%, in Qatar of 20%. However, Bahrain is the one with a particular situation, with 75% of the population being Shi'a, predominantly rural, under Sunni, town power, townhouse. Significant Shi'a minorities are also encountered in Pakistan (20%), Afghanistan (19%), and India.

In the contemporary Middle East, especially in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Shi'ism does not designate only an attachment of a part of the population to a religious identity reference, but it reifies as an active structures in the political, social, economic, security, even military field, it becomes an agent that interferes in processes of construction, management or, on the contrary, of challenging of the statist order. This is one of the major structural features of the Middle East (and also of Central Asia, or of the African continent): the perpetuation of religious, ethnic, tribal communities, that the modern state has failed to dissolve; on the contrary they not only persist in parallel with the state but also parasitize its operation based on institutional criteria, and even end up replacing it. Iraqi Shi'a is thus a category, sociological, religious, cultural and ideological, which interferes, through its multiple instances and representatives (the population as such, clerical leaders, politicians, communities, political parties, movements) as an active agent in the field of Iraqi political and public life or at the level of international interactions.

Our research was carried out permanently in a triple analytical dimension, corresponding to three space levels of approach: that of the regional and international context, with its multiple influences and conditioning, the national one, presenting the defining aspects of the Iraqi regimes and of their internal and external policies and finally, the analysis proper of the problem of Iraqi Shi'a as such. Between all these three levels of geopolitical projection there is a permanent interconditioning and the changes that occur within each one generate effects on the others, in a permanent feedback. Thus, if the core of the research is represented by the phenomenology of Iraqi Shi'a, it is always contextualized within the broader context of domestic political events in Iraq and the multiple geopolitical dynamics of the Persian Gulf and of the Middle East in general. Iraqi Shi'a exemplifies of a very typical phenomenon for the contemporary Middle Eastern area, the deep overlapping and mutual conditioning between domestic and foreign policies of the states here and the particular trajectories received here by the fundamental elements of classical political science: power, state, society, elites.

Our approach has tried to take into account the complexity of the theme, and is attached to a multidisciplinary methodological perspective, where the historical narrative is deepened by its integration into the unit of various specialized ways to read and understand political phenomena in Iraq and in the Middle East. In different ways, the conceptual frameworks and the explanatory principles of each of the major lines of analysis from the field International relations and of Middle Eastern Studies can be found here, with special attention paid to the way constructivism and

geopolitical analysis seem to be more malleable and pertinent in the capturing of the specific aspects of the researched topic.

a) The first part (***The building of modern Iraq and the impossible supracommunal national project***) follows the complex process of *nation-building* of Iraq, between 1914-1958, under British trusteeship, unwanted but persistent, and which failed to build a state consistent with European models and endowed with political representativeness and power management which is not dependent on the particular interests of different Iraqi communities. The formation of contemporary Iraq results from the overlapping of European colonial interests with the Arab nationalism in the early twentieth century   project their own representations on the fate of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. But the new state will encounter a number of difficulties in building a statist coherence and functionality on an extremely heterogeneous and anarchic social background. The community structure of Iraqi society was shared in many ways, based on religious (Sunni, Shi'a, Christian, Hebrew), ethnic (Arabs, Kurds, Persians, Turkmens) criteria and especially characterized by the existence of many rural populations attached to tribal identities and behavior. Occupying Mesopotamia in 1914, against the background of the war with the Ottoman Empire, British authorities had to reflect on the most pragmatic and beneficial formula to integrate all this ensemble with large entropy, made up of social-identity groups not only self-referential, but especially with a long history of rivalry and tensions, in a functional statist structure. The option chosen took into account not the possible interests of the Iraqi population but rather the British desire to build here a state to represent the interests of London and whose elite be dependent on the British authority. In implementing this model, the solutions were relatively limited: British strategists who now set out the political and institutional destiny of the new state had to select from the groups and persons with authority and experience not challenging, at least in fact, the legitimacy of the British mandate and London's claims of being the tutelary agent that manages the construction of the new Iraqi state.

British preference, which will be finally determined at the conference in Cairo, in 1921, went, on the one hand, toward the person of Feisal, son of Sharif Hussein of Mecca; from the need to ensure the fastest resuming of state functionality and the implementation of new institutions, the British authorities in Iraq shall use much of the old frameworks and elites from the Ottoman period. As these were in the majority of Sunni origin, as Feisal himself, and his entourage recruited from members of former Arab nationalist movements, were also Sunni, it results that the first Iraqi political structures that are implemented by the British gain a strong religious character. Installed in power, they will be tempted to become permanent, including in an Iraqi political system in principle based on parliament elections and on governments representing the expression of national scale political forces. Thus, Iraqi national and state building shall perpetuate a sectarian dimension (and, to some extent, also Arabic, as the official identity reference will always be that of being Arabic, excluding Kurdish claims as to the recognition of a dual nationality character in the state), resulting not so much in a deliberate strategy but is an objective result of the perpetuation of solidarity networks already present in the field of statist institutions, since the beginning of the state, which recruits especially from among those who share the same religious, tribal, regional etc. identity. This way, the Iraqi Shi'a community, which represents over 60% of the population, saw, since the beginning of the British mandate, its capacities and options to participate in political life and in state institutions much reduced.

The British mandate installed in Iraq a modern type political and social system, but the background against which it was called to act remained largely tributary to its own tradition and especially to some mentalities still insufficiently prepared to work quickly in such a new structure. The failure of a coherent and stable statist construction in Iraq is due, to a large extent, to the persistence of a local vision about what it means to have power and to use it. The exclusion from important decision-making positions of Shi'a actors starts from the very formation of the state; even if during the monarchy period there will be a certain Shi'a political participation, it is well below the share represented by Shi'a population in Iraqi society. To a large extent, this elite present in power is made up of large landowners or of different tribal leaders, whose loyalty is captured by the assigning of political or economic functions or the granting of different privileges, by the Hashemite monarchs or the governments in power. In fact, these regimes are now trying to cover up the obvious sectarian character of the state, based on the promotion of Sunni elements, disseminating a series of Arabic ideologies, in order to create an abstract generic identity to mitigate the religious slip within the society. But the concept of an egalitarian society, specific to Western political culture, based on the category of citizenship and of universal rights, has little applicability in a tradition where *asabiyya* (fidelity to the proximal circle of solidarity the individual is participating in and in relation to which he constructs his specific identity) prevails and the relationships within the community are placed especially in terms of dominance / submission and of exclusive possession of power. The persistence with which the Iraqi political elites have promoted a system that privileged the Sunni produced a religious fracture within Iraqi society and forced the two communities to think of their relationships in terms of competition and rivalry for power. The position of the Shi'a at the beginning of the Iraqi state was weakened also by the fact that they did not have a tradition of political participation or elite in this sense. The traditional elite of the community, the clergy of the holy cities, assumed religious, but not political leadership and even the jihad in 1920 was being led in the name of religious principles of interpretation of the Iraqi territory. Shi'a political leaders emerged during the monarchy had little popular representation and their community identity was much subdued in favor of their personal interests or of those of their own clients.

The Iraqi Shi'a community is not a homogeneous block but it experiences, in resonance with the specificity of the area, a series of doctrinal, family, tribal, economic, political attitude, etc. fragmentations. Until the mid-twentieth century, Iraqi Shi'a was represented by three main structures: the clergy class, who inhabited mostly the theological academies in the sacred centers; a community and economic elite, consisting of groups of sheikhs (tribal leaders) and the class of traders and large land-owners, part of which revolved quite closely around the sacred centers whose interests they promoted and whose financial support they provided, through religious taxes and donations, and the bulk of the Shi'a population, established mainly in rural areas, and dealing with agriculture. Obviously, forced most of the times to exist within Sunni political entities, Shi'ism was obliged, in order to survive, to moderate their political ambitions and focus more on the cultural and doctrinal preserving of their themes. It is also the case of Iraqi Shi'a in the long history within the Ottoman Empire. Although the southern Shi'a regions, particularly the holy cities, have enjoyed relative freedom during the Ottoman rule, this resulted from the fact that the theological elite from here were not involved in various political ambitions. Najaf and Karbala were defined primarily as the main theological centers and sacred territories toward which the entire Shi'a space converged. The theological academies there were characterized as centers par excellence of an „Shi'i international", maintaining an intense cultural, educational, economic, human exchange, with the

other Shi'a regions (Iran first of all, Lebanon, the Gulf area, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, India, etc.), establish a genuine rule of the *marja'iyya* of Iraqi *Atabat* and *Hawza* representing a decisive influence on the whole Shi'a space. This conferred a distinct identity to these cities, unproblematic within an Ottoman Empire itself cosmopolitan, but which will face, from the moment of formation of independent, the pressures of a political environment had become the assuming of a national identity with Arabic reference. The suspicions permanently surrounding the „Iraqi" loyalty of the Shi'a originates precisely in the new Arab nationalist ideology underpinning the new state, circulated mainly by Sunni elements seizing the power, and for which the „foreign" character of Shi'a religious elites now becomes an argument to exclude their possible participation in power. However, the nationalist dimension of some *ulema* becomes apparent when the new Iraqi state is established in 1920, when a part of the *mujtahids* from the holy cities shall initiate the anti-British revolt and shall spread modernist political concepts, in Islamic grid, but which validate the classical notions of national independence, democracy, etc. Ever since 1924, together with the proclamation of the Law on Citizenship, continuing with the ba'thist discriminatory policies, the reality that much of the high clergy consisted mainly of Iranians motivated restricting projects of Shi'a traditional institutions that are considered as having an „anti-national" or even subversive character. This sliding occurs even within the clergy itself, where, the classical „internationalist" trend is accompanied by the emergence of a growing sense of Iraqi or Arab identity.

The power relations within the clerical class depend essentially on theological prestige, the main factor influencing the Shi'a community. The Shi'a osulite system is based on the idea of a full fidelity of the believer to the teachings (religious, behavioral, legal and even political) promoted by one of the great ayatollahs, which it takes as a „source" (*marja'*- pl. *maraji* '). *Marja'*, by virtue of its outstanding qualities and of its theological prestige, is conceived as the only one able to make correct decisions, in accordance with the teachings of the Islam and of the Imams, towards the various issues concerning the life of the believer. It makes the great clerics get hold of an immense power, either symbolic or explicit, over the community, and therefore the *marja'iya* institution was seen by most modern Iraqi leaders as a permanent threat to their desire to fully seize the entire field of Iraqi community events.

As a result, one of the recurring crises crossing the contemporary history of Iraq is that of the relationships between the political powers and the Shi'a aspirations in relation to ratio of their representation in decision-making. The Ottoman Empire was a political structure based on the ancient oriental governance model of some communities identified primarily from a religious and not a national point of view. The concepts of nation and nationalism are emerging in the Middle East only from the second half of the nineteenth century, together with the increase of the European political and cultural influence and of that of their own national emancipation movements in Europe. But the formation of Iraq, as well as of the other new Arab states in the Middle East, was more like a colonial act and less the actual expression of a local Iraqi nationalism. Besides the Sunni nationalist elites, recruited partially from among Iraqi officers from the former Ottoman army (and grouped in several secret movements, that will then direct their loyalty to the new Hashemite sovereign of Iraq, al-Feisal), the other coherent manifestation of Iraqi national consciousness was represented precisely by the opposition of the Shi'a clerical circles, whose anti-British revolt had been led on behalf of the independence of a yet unstructured Iraqi space as a new state identity but inferred as such. The formation of the Iraqi state thus forced the Shi'a community to enter the logic of a national identity and to rethink its status in terms of the relations that it is now required maintaining with the other communities. What is called „the Iraqi problem" is owed precisely to the

failure to create a sense of cohesion between the three major ethno-religious communities that are now included in the skeleton of the Iraqi state (the Shi'a, the Sunni, the Kurds) and to actually transcend the segregations within the society.

b) **The second part** (*The Leviathan state vs. militant shi'ism: the national and regional security challenges of republican Iraq*) follows the changes made by the institution of the republican regimes in Iraq and the way that, within the whole regional context they contributed to the emergence of activism among the Shi'a community, which tries to offer a feed-back to the rising authoritarianism of the power elites. The 1958 military *coup d'Etat* which leads to the fall of the Hashemite monarchy and to the proclamation of the republic is part of the regional wave of challenges to the old colonial political order, to the persistency of some regimes that were considers as excessively dependent on the Western powers and especially lacking in popular authority. The new mobilizing myth of the fifth and sixth decades is that of the Arab nationalism, predominantly resuscitated in a political and militant dimension, ideologically enveloping the doctrine themes that were developed by the classic theorists in the Inter-Wars period, with a regenerating calling both over the state and the individual consciences.

As a consequence, Iraq's inclusion in the same revolutionary process was inevitable. The lack of legitimacy and popular support of the monarchy facilitates the 1958 revolution, made by a group of nationalist military men lead by general Qassem and supported by the Nasserian and Ba'th forces. The proclamation of the republic draws Iraq out of the block of the western allied states and leaves the impression that it will join the Pan-Arabic union project started between Syria and Egypt. In reality, the personal rivalry between Nasser and Qassem, doubled by Iraq's own ambition of regional leadership and the apprehension of letting itself being drawn in an ambiguous structure, in Egypt's wake, lead to the failure of the Union projects, even though they are regularly resuscitated at the official discourse level.

The toppling of the old monarchy order at the moment of the 1958 revolution, the support which the, at that time, Shi'a dominated Iraqi Communist Party offers to the new republic within its first two years, adopting some reforms and social programs that brought benefits firstly to the underprivileged Shi'a environments, offered the illusion that finally, the members of the Shi'a community can accede to govern and that the interests of the Shi'a will be taken into account. The Iraqi revolution process lead, however, like in other Arab countries, to the emergence of a new political actor, the Army, from within which new leaders will now be recruited. As the officer corps was almost entirely made out of Sunni officers, the rapports of force within Iraqi society remain unbalanced in favor of the Sunni minority from within the ranks of which management and administration leaders are promoted, often on account of solidarity networks of a regional, tribal, family etc. nature. The failure of president Qassem's socialism of constructing an Iraqi society on the principles of equality is also based on the opposition which the Sunni structures manifest towards the idea of a Shi'a political emancipation, which would have led to the forfeit of an important part of the owned privileges. This is the moment in which the Shi'a Islamist Movement appears (*al-Da'wa, Munazzamat al-'Amal al-Islami*), which aims at both preserving the Shi'a values in the face of modernity and the new laic ideologies and an effective political action program, pursuing the installation of a government in conformity with the principles of Islam. As with all the Islamic movements of the Muslim world, the Iraqi Shi'a Islam sets off with a spatial projection at a trans-national scale and realizes a lecture of the reality within and using the theological conceptual apparatus. Ideologues like ayatollah Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr are

interested by the rebirth of the Islamic principles and of the construction of a utopian Muslim society governed by the *Shari'a*. Only once with the installation of the authoritarianism of the two Arif presidents, between 1963 and 1968, the *al-Da'wa* Party starts to „nationalize" its discourse and strategies of action, gradually linking the general problem of Shi'a resurrection to the one of the emancipation of the Iraqi Shi'a community.

The sixth decade is structurally marked by multiple rivalries within the ensemble of the Arabic countries, which made Malcolm Kerr utilize the term „Arab Cold War" to define the regional political context. The tensions are both ideological (the nationalist reference vs. the traditional, Islamic one), political (republican systems vs. conservatory monarchies) or options regarding the blocks of the Cold War. The republican regimes are close to, within different gradations, to the USSR and the communist countries, with which they entertain rising collaborations at both an economical and military level. The fragmentation is however transferred, including within the republican group, where the traditional rivalries within states and the hegemonic ambitions of each of them (Egypt, Syria, Iraq) is doubled with the breakage of the Arab nationalist movement in the two great poles, Nasserism and Ba'thism, the last one fracturing in its turn in the two „regional" commandments, the Syrian and Iraqi ones, between which a tenacious rivalry will take place. Finally, these multiple schisms are as well projected at the level of the internal stability of the states, polarizing the different groups that ideologically originate in the different factions that are confronted within the Arab nationalist movement but in fact, being often mobilized by the temptation of obtaining an exclusive power control. Iraq is thusly traversed by a ferocious rivalry between the nationalist group centered around Qassem, to which the support of the important communist movement is added and the Ba'th group, formed by laics, that manages to attract a part of the former military partners of the *Zaim*, led by the Arif brothers. The new 1963 revolution puts a new regime in place in which the elites are military men as well as civilians but which retain the same selection preferences from the ranks of the solidarity networks originated in different Sunni regions. Once more, the political life is marked by authoritarianism and a rising security control, especially on the basis of the rapid rupture between the Arif group, which draws near Egypt and the Ba'th, drawn out from power and obligated once more to minimize its expectancies. This is the period in which, like in the case of its Syrian branch, in the Party there are a series of cleansings and changes of the old elites that that take place, in their great part Shi'a ones. The rivalries between different factions of the party, oftentimes ferocious, end through the definitive ascension of the „Tikriti" clan, led by Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr and his nephew, Saddam Hussein.

From the moment in which the Ba'th party reaches leadership, in 1968, any Shi'a political ambition of participating in power in the name of the community's interests is excluded. Although it claims to be founded on a Pan-Arabian doctrine, the Ba'th represents an avatar of applying tribalism in policy and of the persistency of a patrimonial vision over the State institution. After 1968, the Ba'th is centered around a nuclei formed by members united by the solidarity conferred by the common past within the party, family links and the affiliation to the same tribal area and Sunni identity. Learning from the past lessons of the Iraqi history and especially of the recent republic, they are convinced that the only efficient modality of keeping the power is on one side, the winning over the membership of as many of the population as it is possible and on the other on the elimination of any possible competitor. This is what will describe the Ba'th politics, especially in the seventh decade. Lecturing the social Iraqi landscape in this exclusivist perspective of power, the

Ba'th leaders see the religious and Shi'a community institutions as an opponent to their absolute hegemony.

There are five major themes of conflict: 1) the first one is political, based on blocking any political project of the Shi'a community; a partial participation is permitted at the most, within the limits imposed by the Ba'th power and one that has a formal, non-decisional nature; 2) the economical conflict, between the secular tendency of Bagdad and the Shi'a commercial classes. After the agrarian reform of 1959, which disintegrated the class of agricultural owners, the nationalizations of 1964, 1970, 1977 affected the Shi'a commercial and industrial elites, leading to the disappearance of the middle class, which, in part, will be deported to Iran and will convert itself towards intellectual activities or will take up the exile path; 3) the cultural rupture between the Ba'th discourse, which puts accent on national identity or on the Arab character and the values of the Shi'a leaders, which are religious by excellence; more so, the clerical institutions are largely restricted, seen as a rival in winning the total fidelity of the population; 4) the problem of the public rights of the Shi'a population, which is often discriminated and even subjected to reprisals on account of their confession (the massive deportation of Shi'as, under the accusation that they are „Iranian" subjects, not Iraqi); 5) the policy of secularization, that not only affects the social influence of the Shi'a religious discourse but has destroyed the control system that the clergy benefited from in administering its rapports with the faithful (justice, education, collecting of religious taxes, the disappearance of the medium Shi'a class that assured the financial sustenance of the *Hawza* programs etc.)

The restrictive Ba'th policies towards the traditional instances of the Shi'a community leaves only a single organized actor inclined to a contesting reaction, the Islamist movement. Since the `60s, the Shi'a *al-Da'wa* party spread its influence especially among the urban population, workers and intellectuals. In the seventh decade, the Islamist opposition will stand behind several protest movements, on the occasion of the great popular mobilizations of the Shi'a pilgrimage rituals. Their violent repression and that of the Islamic groups announces the installation of a totalitarian system that does not hesitate to turn to mass repressions in order to defend its privileges. The rapports between the clerical institutions, devotes and militants and the Ba'th power now become radically antagonistic. For *Hawza*, the problem is posed in terms of survival and of at least retaining the institution as such and in no way assuming political ambitions: it is the traditional line of the great *maraji`*, like ayatollah al-Kho`i.

The success of the Iranian Revolution offers yet again the illusion of the possibility to seize power through the mobilization of the masses but such a scenario fails. Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the leader of the Iraqi Shi'a resistance is executed, the Islamist movement is yet again subjected to reprisals and in front of the appeals to destabilization of the country addressed by Khomeyni to the Iraqi Shi'a population, Iraq decides starting a war with Iran. The Iran-Iraq conflict differentially affected the destiny of the Iraqi Shi'as. Those that remained in the country will choose to rather assume the Iraqi identity than the confessional one and will show great patriotism, even if the aversion toward the Ba'th Party remained unchanged. This also represented a success of the intense Iraqi propagandistic efforts that pools all the possible resources in favor of enticing the fidelity of the population towards the country's territory, means through which the Ba'th power maintains its position. On the other hand, the war allowed a accumulated mobilization of the exiled Shi'a opposition groups, that largely move their headquarters and resources in Iran, participating alongside in the war effort, in hope of a possible regime change in Iraq and seizure of power. The Supreme Council of the Iraqi Islamic Revolution (SCIRI), *al-Da'wa*, the Islamic Action

Organization and other militant movements develop an entire political, cultural, military and doctrinaire infrastructure, a prelude to the hoped of, future exercise of governance after the Ba'th regime would fall.

For Iran, however, the Shi'a opposition is more of an instrument of its Iraqi policies, and the declarations of independence and nationalism displayed by some Iraqi militants are not always to the Teheran leaders' liking. Furthermore, the end of the war, Khomeyni's death, adopting a strategy that discards the principle of exporting the revolution in the favor of national interests makes the Iranian support of the Shi'a opposition fall. Except ASRII, a great part of the groups will move their headquarters in other capitals, mostly in Europe, where the freedom of speech and the rising number of Iraqi refugees permits a much more efficient propagandistic and recruiting activity.

The invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf war reopens a new stage in Iraq's history and that of the Shi'a mobilization. Firstly, the Kuwaiti crisis permitted the United States' to become the main external influence over the Middle Eastern, especially in the zone of the Persian Gulf, and in assuming the management of the Palestinian problem. Iraq and Iran are subjected to a policy of containment which aims at limiting their autonomous regional actions against the interests of the United States. Iraq is the most affected one, in the measure in which the international embargo is added to the destruction caused by the war. For the power in Bagdad, the problem is not regional supremacy anymore, like in the previous years but its very survival. The international restrictions, in fact, only strengthened Saddam's authoritarian policy and he is now open to any strategy in order to conserve his power. He demonstrated this through the violent repression of the Shi'a and Kurdish revolts in March 1991, which probably represented the most powerful internal threat to the Ba'th regime since its installment. In order to compensate for the lack of institutional authority and that of the Party in the Shi'a southern zones, Saddam reverts to a new strategy of winning the fidelity of some clients, that would serve as agents within the Shi'a communities and the Iraqi population in general. This is the case of the tribal leaders, who are bestowed upon a series of privileges, having been awarded the duty of maintaining local order in the name of the state. This „re-tribalisation" of Iraq is accompanied by promoting an Islamic discourse and policies in a Sunni manner, Wahhabi even, the regime's last ideological resource towards the winning of the attachment of an exhausted Iraqi population. This does not mean that all of this was accompanied by a liberalization of the attitudes towards the Shi'a elite, and the Shi'a community's cultural guidelines: *Hawza* continues to be restricted and a last great visible opponent from within the clergy, ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr is executed in 1999.

c) The third part (*The Shi'a revival in post-Saddam Iraq*), based on an analysis of the resurrection of Shi'ism in the post-Saddam period, has a nuanced analytical character, pursuing an application of the methodology of practical geopolitics in the study of the different types of rivalries and conflicts that traverse Iraq and are reflected at a regional scale, activating new alignments and attitudes centered on the Sunni-Shi'a rivalry. The fall of Saddam's regime, following the military campaign proposed and coordinated by the United States, together with some symbolic allies leaves room, for the second time in Iraq's history, to a nation-building process, imagined by the American neoconservatives ideologues but who's application is extremely difficult in an Iraq destroyed by conflicts, embargo, the emergence of a generalized violence that blocks for several years any coherent attempt of implementing a functional order at the institutional and service levels. It is one of history's ironies that, if in 1920 the British chose to rely on the Sunni elites, thusly setting the foundation of a communalization of power, in 2003, the American troops brought with them the old

exiled Shi'a and Kurd opponents, installed in the new public positions, also in accordance with a logic that takes in account the premises of demographic partitions of the ethnic and confessional communities (*muhasasa*). Once again, the destiny of the new Iraq will succumb in front of an incapacity to imagine a political formulae that would make subsidiary the particular identities of the groups that make up the Iraqi society. On the contrary, post-Saddam Iraq has known the most violent instrumentation of the sectarian differences that paroxysmal reflected a current which already traverses the Muslim world for some decades after the Iranian Revolution, that of the elevated geopolitical tensions between Sunni and Shi'a. The Islamization of the identity references at the scale of the whole Muslim world is thusly reflected through this elevated objectification of the social corps defined through the affiliation to a particular confessional Islamic group. Thusly, the recent modernity did not bring a reinforcement of the attachment toward the state and the national identity; on the contrary, in the Muslim societies one can observe an ever more clear distancing towards the state officials (which the states provoke by their transformation in oppression systems and privileged distribution of resources) and a rising attachment of the masses towards sub-national or supra-national references.

The American optimistic view of a new nation building project for Iraq, based on Western patterns, has been called into question by the extreme entropy of Iraqi society, in which the fall of the Ba'thism has been followed by rivalries, tensions and intra- as well as inter-community violence. One of the main characteristics of post-Saddam Iraq is precisely the reemergence of a community identity (religious, ethnic or tribal) against the background of an increasingly weak state which, in the first years after 2003, cannot provide its citizens with either a coherent sense of identity or efficient economic, administrative and security resources. As a result, older and more recent conflicts are refueled and a context of violence and complex rivalry becomes the pattern of everyday life, especially in the large cities. The Shi'as does not escape this fragmentation and polarization: the community is permeated by tensions among the spiritual leaders in the major religious centers, and especially among the political parties and the activist organizations that claim a Shi'a identity (a classic example is the conflict between the Badr brigades and Sadrist militia). However, at the national level, the Shi'a and Kurdish social, political and economic revival is regarded as a threat by the Sunni community. As a consequence, heavy inter-sectarian violence between 2003 and 2008 results in tens of thousands of deaths (both in the Shi'a and the Sunni communities) and triggers an exodus of millions of refugees to the neighboring countries. Anti-Shi'a feelings become a constant of the Takfiri movements in Iraq and lead to a new Sunni regional front unified against what is regarded as the Pan-Shi'a threat instrumented by Tehran.

As proven during the years that followed the 2003 military campaign, the main drawback of the project devised by American strategists with reference to a post-Saddam Iraq is the fact that such projects resemble too closely 'laboratory' experiments and rely too much on ideological reasons and the efficiency of the American military apparatus. The weakness of the geopolitical construction envisaged by the United States for Iraq derives from underestimating the entropy of the population to which it was to be applied: Iraq offers a compelling example of how difficult it is to apply a laboratory geopolitical project to a population that behaves unpredictably. Even if the institutions of a democratic political system are implemented in the new post-Saddam Iraq, this situation does not simultaneously lead to an unconditional allegiance of the population to the liberating power. Traditional Iraqi politics have been conducted for too long by successive authoritarian regimes (during which there were constant conflicts between the state and various ethnic or religious communities) for the nation to be able to immediately adjust to Western-style

democracy. One can notice here an obvious conflict between different representations of the fate of Iraq and of the region: there is, on the one hand, the model proposed by neoconservative American ideologists, which originates in the Western socio-political tradition. On the other hand, there are various models derived from a more or less 'modernist' interpretation of the Islamic tradition. On both sides geopolitical motivations are expressed in specific types of discourse but it is clear that during the first years after Saddam's fall the Americans find it particularly difficult to make credible their free democratic offer to a Muslim population that shares an a priori distrust towards any "foreigner's gift" (Fouad Ajami).

The Shi'a community in Iraq was, and has remained, a heterogeneous entity, within which various groups and attitudes co-exist. The fall of the Ba'th regime has freed religious life and the resources and projects of the Shi'a population after decades of exclusion, interdiction and violent reprisals. The supremacy of such religious leaders as al-Sistani, Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim and Muqtada al-Sadr derives from this feeling of a newly found collective identity previously repressed; the institution of *marja'iyya* serves best as its herald. The first months of post-Saddam Iraq are characterized, on the one hand, by the willingness of the Shi'a, Kurdish and Sunni parties (all returned from exile) to become involved in the political process although it unfolded under the control of a Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). On the other hand, a bitter and often violent competition emerges between groups and parties which want to secure various leadership positions for their members in the local administration. It is the moment when, transferring to Iraq the logistics and human resources they had in their former countries of residence, Shiites movements from exile begin to establish their own militias, whose role is often to win over new areas of influence and to control and administer the territories held under the authority of various parties.

Except for the classical institution of *marja'iyya*, which has prudently kept a pious altitude and avoided direct political involvement, the main Shi'a players, who come to forefront in the very first days after Saddam's fall, have at the same time a political and a religious target for their actions and discourses. It is especially the case of Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution of Iraq (SCIRI) – later (after May 11, 2007) to be known as Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC). Established in Iran in 1982, the Council remains throughout the following period the main Shi'a resistance movement in exile, although a certain closeness towards Iranian leaders and especially the fact that the al-Hakim family comes to hold important leadership positions gradually leads to an estrangement of some allied Shi'a groups. During its Iranian period, SCIRI defines itself primarily as a mass movement, focused on the charismatic personality of ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, who takes advantage of the vast resources and international influence of his family in order to promote his image as a possible future leader of a Islamic regime in a freed Iraq. However, returning to Najaf and wishing to become a member of *marja'iyya*, Baqir al-Hakim makes efforts to change his previously pro-Iranian image and his discourse takes on increasingly nationalistic tones with a focus on the need for an independent Iraq. His assassination, in August 2003, deprived SCIRI of its key ideological figure. The new leader, Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, has neither the religious authority nor the charisma and prestige of his brother but during the following years the party still remains the main Shi'a political force, its influence being strengthened by the fact that al-Sistani is acknowledged as *marja'* of the movement. Also, the military wing of the party – the Badr brigades – unofficially offer security and military support to *Hawza* at the difficult times of Sadrist contestation.

The situation is similar for the Sadrist movement, which originates in the activism of ayatollah Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr (Sadr II, murdered in 1999) who was himself a member of

another important Shi'a clerical dynasty that gave several major political and religious Iraqi leaders. Three important elements define Sadiq al-Sadr's program, which will last after 2003. First, Sadrism displays the characteristics of a classic Islamist movement, which is especially clear in the manner in which conservative patterns of behavior are encouraged while, at the same time, traditional tribal social norms and values are allowed, in addition to *Shari'a*. Second, Sadrism shares a nationalistic and Iraq-centered vision, which marks a breach with the pan-Shi'a tradition usually embraced by the historical Shi'a parties. Moreover, as he argues in favor of an all-Arab *marja'iyya*, Sadr II denies the legitimacy of the high clergy in Najaf and Karbala, most of whom are non-Iraqi and whose relative political passivity is explained as a result of their being foreigners with a weak sense of belonging to the Iraqi nation. Third, Sadiq al-Sadr is one of the main initiators of a phenomenon which becomes very important in post-Saddam Iraq, namely the emergence of a messianic feeling referring to the imminent arrival of the hidden Imam and the establishment of a Mahdist state. Although it claims a religious dimension, the Sadrist movement has mostly a social and political character. As he did not have the religious authority necessary to emerge as a leader of the Shi'a community according to traditional canonical norms, Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Sadrist movement after 2003, chooses the alternative of a militant and populist Shi'a movement, focused on mass actions and militia that target the Americans as well as Iraqi leaders, both religious (*Hawza*) and political (those returned from exile). During the first years of his leadership, Muqtada takes advantage of the human resources and territories under his control (Sadr-City, the poor neighborhoods on the outskirts of the large Shi'a cities, the tribal areas in Maysan) in an attempt to impose, often by force, his hegemony on the Iraqi Shi'a community. After a period when he takes a radical attitude against almost all Iraqi authorities (the new political elites, the international forces, the high clergy) – which reaches a peak during the Sadrist insurgence in 2004 – Muqtada chooses to become involved in the political process. Thus, the Sadrist movement ends up by acquiring a triple dimension (like the Lebanese Hezbollah): mass movement (mostly put into action by a large network of minor clergy and secular militants), militia (*Jaish al-Mahdi*, which becomes the most important paramilitary force of any Iraqi party), and political body involved in governing the state.

The historical party *al-Da'wa* – the first Islamist Iraqi Shi'a movement emerged in the 1950s – has an infrastructure and a capacity for militant action that are both inferior to those of the two previous movements. Repeatedly fractured during the exile of its main leaders, the party has been represented since 2003 by two main branches: one which brings together the party members who spent their exile in London or some European countries, and the Iranian branch that is closer to the religious model promoted by Tehran leaders. The former branch, known as *Da'wa islamiya,* is led by secular members even if it largely remains faithful to the Islamist agenda upheld by its historical leaders. Although it has fewer human resources than SCIRI or the Sadrist movement, *Da'wa islamiya* has succeeded in effectively controlling Iraqi politics and, after 2005, has given the country two prime-ministers: Ibrahim al-Jafari and Nuri al-Maliki.

The fall of Saddam's regime and the implementation of a political system based on popular representation give Iraq, for the first time after 1958, the opportunity to establish a democratic form of government. The Shi'a community in particular (the spiritual and political leaders, as well as the Shi'a population at large) welcomes the possibility that an electoral process might translate their democratic representation into political power. The difficulty, however, consists in the fact that both Iraqi leaders and the forces within the Iraqi community have proven to be extremely heterogeneous, and the projects referring to the structure and functioning of the new state (based on a Western pattern) have not been unanimously accepted. The lack of representativeness of the new political

leaders – who come to power as a result of the U.S. anti-Saddam military operation –, as well as their inability to efficiently establish and control the state's authority throughout Iraq are the main factors which contribute to the failure of the goal of transforming Iraq into a democratic model for the Islamic world. Social fragmentation (along ethnic, religious, tribal, regional or party lines) quickly spreads throughout the Iraqi society and violence becomes, more and more often, the preferred method of solving tensions and conflicts among various groups. The fast deterioration of the economic situation makes motivations concerning the quality of life become an important factor in the mobilization of the underprivileged population against the post-Saddam political order.

In fact, the views on Iraq's political future have been highly diverse according to the ideology, political orientation, and social composition of each of the many Iraqi parties and organizations which have come into being both within the country and outside it (at the time when the Ba'thist repression made even their illegal functioning impossible). To some extent, these parties and organizations are influenced by the regimes and political milieus of the countries in which they have found residence. This is the case of Islamist Shi'a parties in Iran (such as SCIRI or some pro-Iranian factions of *al-Da'wa*) or of those in European countries (Iraqi National Congress, Iraqi National Accord), which started to embrace the project of implementing Western political and cultural values in a freed Iraq. The influences exerted by the great international or regional powers play a significant role at a time when, in the wake of Saddam's fall, establishing a new political authority in Iraq becomes necessary. The ideological and geopolitical tensions between Washington and Tehran are equally reflected in the power games within the opposition coalition that comes to the forefront of the political stage. For the U.S., one key priority remains to prevent Iran from taking advantage of the power void in Iraq, given the latter's territorial proximity and the authority it had over the most influential Iraqi opposition parties.

The January elections, as well as the final ones in December 2005, offer another clear image of the fragmentation of the Iraqi community along religious or ethnic lines. For each of the major political forces, the criterion for parties or movements to group together is not a similar ideology or common programs but, almost exclusively, the fact of belonging to one of the ethnic and/or confessional structures of Iraqi society. The elections clearly indicate that the most effective means of mobilizing the population is the reference to a shared religious or ethnic background. This ethnic and religious enclavisation of the major Iraqi communities has made almost impossible, for a while, the emergence of parties or programs with nationwide support.

The elections in December 15, 2005 put an end to the process of establishing a legitimate Iraqi authority. The main novelty brought by these elections is the participation of the main Sunni parties, now persuaded that staying out of national politics was inefficient and would only allow the Shi'a and Kurdish communities to promote their programs and interests. Since the beginning of his mandate, the new prime-minister Nuri al-Maliki has to deal with the disastrous economic situation of the country as well as its lack of security. His main tasks are to restore state authority by dissolving all militias, to prevent the expansion of inter-sectarian violence and to attempt to offer a solution acceptable to all parties to the problem of federalization. The difficulties within the country are accompanied by immense pressure from the great international powers that have an interest in the Iraqi situation: the United States and Iran. After 2007 the arguments between various factions within the government tend to follow the logic of sectarian rivalry, as Sunni parties accuse Maliki of sacrificing the national interest to that of the Shi'a community. However, political fragmentation becomes increasingly obvious within the Shi'a movement itself, as group interests, conflicting strategic views on the future of Iraq, and personal rivalry among the leaders become more radical.

After 2009 the prime-minister's ambition to efficiently control the executive power and to escape the pressure of his former Shi'a allies leads to a breach between Nuri al-Maliki and National Iraqi Alliance (controlled by SIIC). Around his party, *al-Da'wa*, al-Maliki establishes a new political structure, State of Law Coalition (*Dawlat al-Qanun*), which will be joined by several Sunni groups, and defends a political platform that aims to be trans-confessional and a program focused on the goal of a unified and national Iraq. However, the winner of the 2010 elections is Iraqi National Movement (*Iraqiyya*, which wins by a narrow margin over State of Law) of the former prime-minister Iyad Allawi, who returns to the political scene with the same message of trans-confessional unity and the modernization of Iraq. The ambiguity of the election result only comes to prove once more the complexity of the negotiations between Iraqi political forces, as well as the set of influences and pressure exerted from outside the country by Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States. To make the situation even more complicated, Muqtada al-Sadr chooses to return to Iraq and becomes, again, the king-maker of the new government. As he decides to put behind him the former conflict with al-Maliki, Muqtada gives the latter his support and helps him to be re-elected prime-minister. Thus, this political dead end and the fact that Iraqi politicians need the whole of 2010 to reach a viable agreement and form a functional government give a clear image of how politically vulnerable Iraq is, and how uncertain of its future.

One of the fundamental features of Iraqi Shi'ism in the aftermath of Saddam's fall from power has been the increased and sanctioned religious reference among the elites and the population, which placed Iraq on the regional map of the countries registering a revival of religious discourse and policies. Contrary to the expectations of the Americans who envisaged an Iraqi population accustomed to the secular policies imposed by the Ba'thist authorities over the decades, both the Shi'a and the Sunni communities are defined by a strong identity allegiance to the religious, axiological or activist structures postulated by the different religious authorities. Consequently, apart from the classic components specific to power struggles, such as political strategies, economic interests, personal ambition etc., the geopolitical configuration of Iraq after Saddam's fall is essentially marked by a religious turn: the axiological references, the main actors, the different types of mobilizing discourses are largely inspired by the Islamic traditions, history and imaginary. Prompted by the power vacuum and the absence of social, moral and political values following the fall of the Ba'thist regime, the Shi'a community overcomes its fear of acculturation by its attachment to traditional religious landmarks, not only because they are closest to its defining identity, but also because they contain in themselves the transcendent prestige serving as the fulcrum of spiritual and behavior balance in the times of profound social crises and imbalances that would affect Iraq after 2003.

Thus, besides providing the Iraqi Shi'a community with an opportunity to advance politically, the fall of Saddam's regime has been the cornerstone of a religious resurrection bringing to the fore the influence exerted by the great ayatollahs of the holy sites. Najaf, Karbala, Samarra, Kadhimiya and Kufa are places imbued with the greatest spiritual meaning to the Shi'a world and they are all situated on Iraqi soil. From the very first moments after the fall of the Ba'thist regime, the most important *ulema* in the holy cities or newly arrived here position themselves spontaneously as leaders of the great majority of the Shi'a population. This is firstly due to the fact that they themselves are charismatic figures of authority and traditional generators of canonical values and behaviours that the believers must follow and obey unconditionally. Secondly, because the institution of *Hawza* and its members have remained, throughout the years of repression, the only

valid identity landmarks for the Shi'a community to fall back on in its attempt to resist the official policies of forging a generic non-denominational and non-ethnic Iraqi identity.

A significant part of the clergy's authority comes not only from their religious prestige but from the fact that they reside in the holy cities and administer their symbolic and economic capital. Thus, these cities represent major rivalry sites, since controlling them brings not only material benefits resulting from the donations made by millions of pilgrims, but also ascendancy over the believers. In the aftermath of the fall of Saddam's regime, the traditional leadership provided by the clergymen of Najaf and Karbala gets to be rivaled - and sometimes even contested, by other members of the clergy. Not only Muqtada but also other influential Shi'a clergymen newly arrived on the Iraqi stage, such as al-Ha'iri, Muhammad Baqir al-Haqim, Muhammad al-Ya'qubi, Mahmud al-Hassani, are interested in breaking the monopoly held by al-Sistani and the other *maraji*' of the *Hawza* and imposing as far as possible their own vision of the religious and political revival that Iraqi Shi'ism would now enjoy. The reason is that all these new leaders emerging on the stage of Iraqi Shi'ism propose politicized interpretations of the Shi'a doctrine according to which the religious authority governing the Shi'a community has to be reinforced by political power, whether this is exerted by means of a democratic system (SCIRI) or a theocratic one (al-Ha'iri). This is why each of them uses resources that exceed the traditional discursive rivalries among clergymen; the power struggle stage within the Shi'a community takes on an explicitly violent dimension, with attempts on rivals' lives, clashes between militias and paramilitary groups and fights to gain control over different worship sites. Nevertheless, this initial period of rivalry ends, after 2005, with the traditional *marja'iyya* confirming its obvious supremacy: Najaf, Karbala, Kadhimiya are under the theological and administrative control of al-Sistani and the other *maraji*', who maintain and expand their influence over the international Shi'a world, arousing apprehension among the Iranian political and religious elite.

For all the permanent rivalries and tensions among the different Shi'a groups and militias, those are overshadowed by the fracture at territorial and societal level between the Sunni and Shi'a communities and, to a lesser extent, between the Sunnis and the Kurds. Increasingly after 2005, the emergence of a violent sectarian conflict has come to gradually substitute the classic expression of violence in the first two years after Saddam's fall, marked by Sunni and Shi'a insurgencies against foreign troops as well as against the new Iraqi authorities, whose legitimacy is contested. The cultural and social sectarianism that has characterized the Iraqi society for decades becomes politicized after 2003 and used by each of the actors as an instrument to exploit religious identity for political or broader geopolitical ends. In the period immediately following the fall of the ba'thist power, Iraq becomes the new Eldorado of Islamic movements from the whole Muslim world, and in the first few months these take advantage of the extremely porous borders to gain access to Iraq. Mainly based in the Sunni areas and Baghdad, the local or newly arrived jihadist groups are guided by the Salafi doctrine discrediting the concepts of nation or national state and pleading for a universal form of Islam. A sectarian conflict is seen as a method of blocking the process of political and social reconstruction, considered to be unfavorable to the Sunni community. The inevitable retaliations from the part of the Shi'as further contribute to the process of dissolution of any form of public security, leading to an endless chain reaction of acts of mutual violence carried out in the name of revenge. After the elections of January 2005 legitimizing the supremacy of the Shi'a and Kurdish parties, and once their effective control over the state's institutions and new security forces has grown, the Shi'a backlashes against the Sunni community become more frequent and more violent. Especially after the destruction of the Samarra mausoleum in February 2006, violence

against the Sunnis becomes widespread, threatening to take the form of a civil war on religious grounds. One of the most traumatizing consequences of Iraqi sectarian violence is the phenomenon of population displacement, either inside Iraq, from one region to another, or outside, to the neighboring countries.

Baghdad is a special case, concentrating all the greatest tensions and conflicts of the Iraqi society, due to its ethnic and religious composition. One of the essential characteristics of the capital city's internal geopolitics between 2006 and 2008 is the huge population displacement caused by the extreme acts of violence registered here. Such displacement leads to a change in Baghdad's sectarian configuration, in line with the dynamics of the forces clashing over control of certain neighborhoods, or as a direct result of the inhabitants' fleeing certain areas because of terrorist attacks and the permanent lack of security.

Despite the successful security strategy implemented by general Petraeus, and the beginning of the process of withdrawal of the American military forces, daily reality in Iraq after 2009 continues to be marred by violence of many causes. It becomes obvious after 2008 that the inter-sectarian conflict which had escalated into a civil war has gradually subsided in intensity, as a result of the Sadrist insurgents' withdrawal from some neighborhoods in Baghdad, from Basra and from other Shi'a towns, and with the elimination of a significant part of the Sunni and foreign jihadist strongholds. However, the climate of insecurity persists, and the anti-Shi'a attacks against official institutions, members of the police and security forces, as well as kidnappings, are still common enough events, especially in the capital city or in other sensitive towns, such as Tell Afar, Kirkuk and Karbala. On the other hand, the generalized and commonplace nature of the aggressive acts owes much to a phenomenon of multiplication of violence-triggering agents. Violence is provoked not only by political or religious motives, or by aversion to other communities. It originates at the heart of the tragic failure to reconstruct post-Saddam Iraq rapidly and efficiently.

The event of the Shi'a and Kurdish parties' securing the political and administrative key positions and the subsequent limitation of the Sunni influence get interpreted as a Shi'a geopolitical threat to Sunni space. An important role in generating this anti-Shi'a opinion, especially among the masses, is played by some of the Sunni religious leaders, the *ulema* or the many ideologists of the radical groups. Faithful to their religious reading of reality and of their regional geopolitical background, they come to interpret the political and religious revival of the Shi'a communities as a threat to Sunni identity. A feeling of solidarity with the Iraqi Sunnis makes itself felt throughout most of the space inhabited by Sunnis, manifest in the form of financial, logistic and military support provided to the resistance movement or to different political and religious groups. Projecting the Iraqi inter-sectarian conflict onto the regional scale of Sunni-Shi'a opposition, equally motivated by diverging community representations, historical geopolitical rivalries and doctrinaire aversion, render the events in Iraq even more complex.

After the Khomeini period, during which the concept of export of revolution and a rhetoric centered on glorifying the Shi'a principles cause an initial outcry from the Sunni countries, now the domination of the Iraqi political scene by parties asserting their inherently religious identity is renewing the anxiety over further Shi'a regional threat. In 2004, King Abdullah of Jordan is one of the first officials to publicly voice their concern about the direction that the phenomenon of political revival of the Shi'a communities in the region might take. A state of Iran re-engaged on a hard line of radical discourse and in a nuclear program of ambiguous ends, a state of Iraq where, despite attempted American control, Shi'a leaders gained an increasingly greater autonomy of action in pursuit of their own goals, a state of Lebanon where Hezbollah has proved, in 2006, to be able to

withstand an Israeli military attack, all of these are perceived as manifestations of a new Shi'a order, most often thought of as being controlled by Teheran. This hypothetical common front of the Shi'a powers, lately referred to by the generic name of the „Shi'a crescent", covering, furthermore, a good deal of the oil-rich territories around the Persian Gulf, is not desired either by Israel (for which a possible united front among Teheran, Beirut and Baghdad would revive the old anxieties over regional threats to Israeli national security) or by the Sunni states, especially Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies or Pakistan, the last still needing to handle the tense relations involving their own Shi'a minorities.

In order to confirm the thesis, which have become almost classic, about the permanence of certain types of political behavior of an autocratic nature in Iraq, Nuri al-Maliki has shown, over the course of his role as a prime minister, an unsuspected tendency towards an ever more accentuated control of power, short-circuiting at often times the role of the Parliament and that of other state institutions. He ends up constructing his own network of clients, carefully placed individuals in key positions, especially in vital institutions like the Army, the Police, Secret Services and those implicated in the country's economical and administrative management, often defying the regulations or the different political arrangements with the other partners. Operating this way, he utilizes without a doubt a good strategy of preserving the stability of his power and of blocking the disorders that have fragmented Iraq until 2008. On the other hand, he certifies the real impossibility of the implementation of a new model of democracy in the extensive manner imagined by the American ideologues in the optimistic moments of the anti-Saddam campaign. Contemporary Iraq, with all its political, cultural and mental mutations brought on by modernity and its integration, moderated but effective, especially at the level of its educated elites, arduously manages to transcend the political conditioning that was part of the Iraqi tradition for centuries and which we have constantly tried to present through our research.

Evidently, Nuri al-Maliki is not a new Saddam, because the new Iraq is already more complex and dynamic than in any of its previous historical periods; at the same time, the regional and international context makes it even harder for a re-actualization of a new dictatorship, on the very basis of a general dismantling of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. Even so, one can observe a failure of a utopia, of the western illusion of the universalism of its specific democratic model and especially in the capacity to impose a set of political, cultural, ideological values from the exterior, over some human environments that only practice a selective receptivity towards them and which manifest their attachment towards other axiological models or are, structurally conditioned to function according to other behavior or representations derived from their own historical experience. Nuri al-Maliki's authoritarian adrift almost does not constitute a surprise but a natural manifestation of the Iraqi political matrix. Today's Iraqi political climate is characterized by a dynamic and a fluidity that hardly make possible the installation of an autocratic regime in the old manner. After the period of a rising sectarization in the political field, the leaders and the population have become, after 2008, more attached to the Iraqi identity, trying to once more reconstruct the national state, exiting the disastrous logic of the sectarian conflict that almost ended with dismantling the country. The fragility of the institutions, the profound political fracture, the unpredictability of the confessional relations as well as the defiance of the regional geopolitical environment, which itself suffers uncertain transformations and is characterized by a rising problem of the anti-Iranian attitudes and of exacerbating the Syrian crisis, all of these contribute to the coherent unpredictability of Iraq's destiny.