

National-Islamism : an Iranian Paradox?

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Sometimes “pan-Shi’a”, sometimes “Perso-centric”, what seems to be an Iranian paradox is not. In reality, there is a traditional dialectic between these two articulations : pan-Shi’ism reinforces the positions of the Iranian nation-state as a regional actor while the existence of a Shi’a sanctuary reinforces the will for the whole Moslem world to convert to Shi’ism.

One of the successes of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in its long war against Khomeyni’s Iran (1980-1988) is to have contributed to the regional isolation of Teheran and to have succeeded in countering the pan-Islamist policy of the nascent theocracy, since the Arab countries were pro-Iraqi in their majority. Teheran was also depicted in Arab propaganda as the capital of a community of heretics that were only referred to as “Persians” or “Magi”, in an allusion to the ancient Zoroastrian religion that was said to have turned true, orthodox Islam over to Shi’a heresy. Teheran only managed to restore relations of confidence with its Arab neighbors (with the exception of Baasist Iraq) one decade after the cease-fire of July 1988. Only Hafez el-Assad’s Baasist Syria was an exception since it found it profitable to support Iran, from the conflict’s inception, against its Baasist Iraqi rival.

In spite of the religious and nationalist isolation caused by this bloody conflict, Khomeyni attempted in vain to assert his hegemonic claims over the Moslem world: the attempt to control the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1987¹, the claim to the total defense of the Koran by the *fatwa*² delivered against the British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie (accused of apostasy and blasphemy) in 1989... The frequent calls for the eradication of the state of Israel by the current Iranian president are doubtless to be situated in the continuation of this strategy of seduction essentially intended for the Moslems of the Middle-East.

The discourse of Teheran’s leaders is not however simple rhetoric, an effect of rivalry masking a traditional policy of regional influence. Thus Azerbaijan has been dominated for centuries by Azeri Shi’as. But in its dispute with Christian Armenia, Teheran supports the latter, along with Moscow, to face the irredentist tendencies of the Azeris in their province in northern Iran. So the Hazara Shi’a minority of Afghanistan (25%) has for decades been subjected to the yoke of the rigorist Sunni majority of the Pashtuns, to the total indifference of the Iranians who have never provided them with enough arms or material to constitute a real political force in the country. On the other hand, in the Palestinian territories, devoid of Shi’as, Iran is becoming the champion of the Palestinian cause and the principal supporter of terrorist groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, that are very close and are both Sunni fundamentalist movements. Iran that has difficulty extending its influence over Iraq and stopping the slaughter between Shi’as and Sunnis in this country can doubtless see no other solution than turning both parties against an enemy, the Jewish state, a more “neutral” target that would create unanimity between Moslems.

¹ Since the proclamation of the Islamic régime in Iran in 1979 the annual pilgrimage to the Moslem holy places of Mecca and Medina has become the scene of regular confrontations between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi policemen.

² A legal ruling handed down by a specialist of Islamic religious law regarding a particular question.

The primary aim of Iranian diplomacy is to maintain the regional power of Iran and, in order to achieve that, to keep its two traditional rivals at bay: the Turkish power, with which it finds itself in a position of rivalry in the Caucasus, and with Saudi Arabia, whose rivalry in the Persian Gulf is aggravated by the lasting split between the hard-line Sunni Islam of the Wahabites³ and Iranian orthodox Shi'ism. Added to that, for the leaders of Teheran, there are other "threats", such as that of Pakistan, with which Iran is competing with in Afghanistan and Central Asia. In general, the three Sunni powers we have mentioned (Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) are perceived as the agents of American imperialism — since they all have military agreements with the United States and NATO — that reserve a fate that is hardly enviable pour Shi'a Moslems.

For the Iranian leaders the Shi'a communities of the Middle East are at the service of Shi'ism — true Islam. And since Iran is the leader of the Islamic Revolution these communities must serve them.

³ Wahabism refers to the doctrine of salafism, a rigorist form of Sunni Islam, as taught by the theologian Mohamed ibn Adb al-Wahab (1703-1792).