THE KHAYAMI FOUNDATION

Is there a Sunni-Shi'a Divide in the Middle East?

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Conference Report
Rapporteur: Naureen Chowdhury Fink

Opening Address

Host: **Professor Victor Bulmer-Thomas**, Director, Chatham House

Speakers: **HRH Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan** (recorded message) introduced by **HRH, Princess Badiya El Hassan of Jordan**
Rt Hon Sir Malcolm Rifkind QC MP
Mahmoud Khayami, Khayami Foundation, represented by **Dr Ahmad Ghoreishi**

Professor Victor Bulmer-Thomas opened the conference noting that while this was one of those topics which continued to make international relations interesting, it would have been thought strange 10-15 years ago to hold a conference on such a topic. In addition, he emphasized the question mark in the conference title, reiterating that the answer was not predetermined and that no-one was pre-judging the answer.

Professor Bulmer-Thomas expressed Chatham House's gratitude to the Khayami Foundation for sponsoring and helping to run the event.

Dr Ahmad Ghoreishi, on behalf of **Mahmoud Khayami**

As Mahmoud Khayami was unable to attend the opening session, his address was read by Dr Ahmad Ghoreishi. In his address Mr Khayami said it was a great honour for the Khayami Foundation to cooperate with Chatham House in organizing the conference.

As a proud Muslim, Mr Khayami particularly hoped that the deliberations would go some way towards correcting the wronged image and reputation of the religion of Islam, by helping provide world public opinion with an image that was free of distortion and negative discrimination.

He believed that few people could question the importance of the topics that would be discussed by the distinguished scholars and personalities who had gathered at Chatham House to share their thoughts.

Mr Khayami was convinced that that the overwhelming majority of the 1.2 billion Muslims around the word sought nothing other than to live in peace and tranquillity, with their pride and dignity intact. When confronted with the daily dosage of news concerning the much publicized rifts that are purported to exist between Sunnis and Shi'a across the Islamic world, he could not but reflect on the most basic source of inspiration and belief amongst all Muslims – Sunni and Shi'a – which declared لااله الاالله- محمد رسول الله meaning "*There Is No God But One God, And Mohammad Is His Messenger*". He said that he was thus convinced that we had to look for ways and issues that brought us closer together instead of dividing us.

He ended by saying that the Khayami Foundation was proud to have played a role in having promoted this important debate, and it was his hope that they might continue to lend a helping hand in furthering these exchanges and thus contributing in a small way to eradicating misconceptions whilst promoting better mutual understanding and cooperation.

Princess Badiya el Hassan of Jordan

Princess Badiya El Hassan introduced a video-recorded speech by her father, Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan. She said that although her father had warned for so long of the Balkanisation of the Middle East, he had continued to work in the belief that sectarianism was neither an inherent nor an inevitable development. Instead, she noted, the Prince wanted to build peace through moderation and wisdom, working for both inter-faith and intra-faith understanding.

Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan

Through a pre-recorded message, Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan addressed the audience at Chatham House. He began by stating his belief that the confrontation between cultures was a confrontation between inclusion and exclusion. Regarding Iraq, he said that we are told that there is a Sunni-Shi'a divide, saying that there was a "mixing of apples and oranges among co-religionists". However, he reiterated his preference for a civil state - not a "secular one", he emphasized, as "secular" had a negative connotation for many Muslims - in which all could coexist.

Prince Hassan commended the achievements of Shi'a groups, all walks of Shi'as, such as the Directorship of Al-Azhar in the 1960s. He added that what was now necessary was a Sunni-Shi'a 'conversation', a communications strategy, a strategic alliance between academia, think-tanks etc. He added that he was currently working with 100 Muslims on such a networking strategy.

The real problem in Iraq, Prince Hassan noted, was a fight between the "haves" and "have-nots": he highlighted the inequality of per-capita incomes. While the cost of the war to the United States reached nearly $8 trillion, only 15% of the US investment was directed toward helping ordinary Iraqis who were instead confronted by high levels of unemployment and poverty.

He said that for too long, Islam had been invoked to justify tyranny and authoritarian regimes,. Instead, multilateral organisations should act as vehicles to develop international codes of good conduct, especially among the 5 nuclear partners. He added that Iran's statement of peaceful intentions should be taken at face value. Unfortunately, however, he noted that it seemed that the unilateral move was proving to be the order of the day, as evidenced in Palestine, Iraq etc. He said that he sometimes wondered whether the G8 had found new sources of oil, and consequently ceased to care about events in the Muslim world or the Middle East,.

Regarding the most suitable exit strategy in Iraq, Prince Hassan referred the audience to a recent *Foreign Affairs* article and concluded by noting that for too long, Israel had been criticized for its actions in Jerusalem. He said that instead, it was time to turn to think about what was happening in cities such as Najaf and Mecca and said that such religious centres should act as points of reference and illumination, not only ritual centres of prayer.

Malcolm Rifkind

Sir Malcolm began with a story, according to which, when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, Adam turned to her and remarked, "You know my dear, we live in an age of transition." As the Garden was said to be located in the area which is now refered to as the Middle East, Sir Malcolm remarked that a similar assessment could be made of the region today.

Sir Malcolm returned to the question of whether there was a Sunni-Shi'a divide in the Middle East. He reflected that the possibility of conflict based on religious schism should not sound strange, Sir Malcolm remarked as he recalled that Europe had been divided by cataclysmic religious wars in the aftermath of the Reformation. However, he cautioned that we should not always assume that sectarian conflict was necessarily a consequence of religious fervour. Rather, it was often the result of cultural difference or political opportunism.

Sir Malcolm noted that throughout most of Islamic history, the Sunni-Shi'a divide had been relatively peaceful, thanks mostly to geography which had kept the two groups relatively far apart. He noted that the Shi'a thus tended to be isolated communities, minorities - only in Iraq and Bahrain were the Shi'a a majority in the population. As Iran is not an Arab state, he said that it was thus possible to say that the Shi'a had never been dominant in an Arab country, which was why today Iraq was so important, especially as the rulers of all 22 Arab states had been Sunni, even in the face of a Shi'a majority.

Sir Malcolm reflected that it looked likely that the Shi'a would dominate Iraq and with Shi'a Iran nearby flexing its muscles and becoming more dominant in the region, it was understandable that the Sunnis were worried. In 2004, King Abdullah II warned of a "Shi'a Crescent" destabilising all the Gulf countries and President Mubarak of Egypt had added to this by stating that most Shi'a were loyal to Iran and not their countries of residence. The Iraqi government, all three strands of it (Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurdish) had condemned this statement as a stab in the back while others had called such comments dangerous.

Sir Malcolm asked why both President Mubarak and King Abdullah had spoken like this: he suggested that three interconnected developments had contributed to such sentiments. First, of all, he cited the extraordinary growth of political Islam and its growing appeal. The Middle East had seen secular regimes which had suppressed

their Muslim opposition groups (with the exception of Turkey) and yet political Islam's progress has been undeniable. The development of Hizbullah in Lebanon, the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution, the popularity of Islamic candidates in Middle Eastern elections - all testified to the growing appeal of political Islam. This growth had transcended Sunni-Shi'a divides. A second factor contributing to the fears voiced by President Mubarak and King Abdullah, was the rise of Iran. A decade of sanctions had caused considerable harm yet now Iran was the regional hegemon, popular throughout the Middle East because of its radicalism and anti-Americanism as well as its strong links with Shi'a holy places. He also noted Iran's ambiguous relationship with Syria. The third factor that Sir Malcolm noted was the invasion of Iraq which had created a major political vacuum with two implications. The US had proscribed the Ba'ath Party, barring from power anyone involved in the previous regime; a measure which had hit Iraqi Sunnis hard. However, the Americans had not only excluded the Sunni elite but had also insisted on the democratisation of Iraqi politics with multi-party elections on the assumption that elections would be based on the candidates' competing policies. Instead, under circumstances where Shi'as had access to political power for the first time and Kurds were free to align themselves with Kurdish interests, Iraqis had voted along sectarian lines.

Sir Malcolm reiterated that the growth of political Islam did not in itself prove that there was a Shi'a Crescent, nor that Shi'a had loyalties outside their home countries. This conflict was not necessarily one over religion or doctrine but rather, reflected the aspirations of a group that had been marginalised for generations and was now seeking to achieve political power.

The relative artificiality of the Iraqi state merely served to exacerbate these trends as, for the majority of Iraqis, their religious affiliations dictated loyalties within Iraq and the removal of strong centralised power had allowed these elements to come to the forefront. Sir Malcolm said that consequently it was greater political power in Iraq that the Shi'a sought, not the domination of Iraq by Iran. Sir Malcolm noted that in his opinions Iranians were stirred more by their belief in their sovereign right to nuclear power than by the promotion of the Shi'a faith. In Iraq, the political divide between Sunnis and Shi'a already existed, but it had been exacerbated by the operations of Al Qaeda. In Bahrain, the tensions between groups had increased throughout the latter years of the twentieth century. However, Sir Malcolm cautioned that, as the world grew nervous about Al-Qaeda, it ought to be remembered that Al-Qaeda was a Sunni creation, not one supported by the Shi'a Ayatollahs.

Sir Malcolm conceded that there were indeed people within Shi'ism with a political agenda, a factor accounting for Al-Qaeda's motivations in Iraq (the Sunni insurgency). However, he noted that there was little evidence of Arab Shi'a having a greater allegiance to Iran and that Iran did not entertain a grand pan-Shi'a design but rather espoused political opportunism. For Iran, as for most governments, Sir Malcolm concluded, *realpolitik* would be more important than religion and there would not be a grand Shi'a alliance using religion as a cloak.

Within Iraq itself, however, Sir Malcolm observed that the Sunni-Shi'a divide was real. If there was to be a civil war, the Sunnis would not be able to regain their former status. If the Shi'a win, the final bulwark against Iran, a powerful and determined nation, will be removed. This is something that not only the Arabs and Sunnis will have to come to terms with, but the United States and the Western world as well, he concluded.

Session I: The Significance of the Shi'a Crescent

Chair: **Sir Harold Walker,** The Royal Society for Asian Affairs

Speakers: **Professor Vali Nasr**, Department of National Security Affairs, Naval Postgraduate School
Professor Tariq Ramadan, Visiting Professor, St. Antony's College, University of Oxford
Roger Hardy, Middle East and Islamic Affairs Analyst, BBC World Service

Professor Vali Nasr

Professor Nasr, who recently authored *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future,* began by thanking Chatham House and the Khayami Foundation for organising the event.

The question, he said, was whether or not we were facing a new Middle East and consequently, did we need a new paradigm? To both, he answered an emphatic "Yes," noting that there was no way to go back to the previous *status quo*.

The war in Iraq, Professor Nasr noted, had focused attention on both the Shi'a in Iraq and in Iran. As the largest country in the region, Iran was benefiting from cultural dynamism and a growing economy and the Iraq war had provided only an opportunity to develop these strands further. Professor Nasr said that there had consequently been a recalibration of the sectarian balance in the region, which should have been inevitable as the Shi'a constituted 10%-15% of the Muslim world, "Wherever there is oil, there are Shi'a," he noted, so they would feature in all debates regarding the region.

Sectarianism had been an anchor of regional politics for some time, said Dr Nasr. Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution had challenged the region: the manner in which regional attempts were made to contain him had effectively promoted a Sunni identity, as regional states invested in Sunni extremism, creating a Sunni war to Iran's east. However, the Saudi strategy of containing Iran had backfired due to the threat posed by Al-Qaeda, both domestically and internationally, and since the United States had removed a Sunni bulwark in Afghanistan. Thus, sectarianism had always been there and recent events had only brought it to the fore.

Iran supported the Shi'a with the purpose of creating a pan-Shi'a wave but Professor Nasr said that what we were seeing today was not the same thing. The model developed in Iraq was simple - one man, one vote - thus, the Shi'a were gaining power, especially when compared to Shi'a in other places who were looking at the Iraqi model which created new opportunities for them. The changes in the Middle East had been good for them. All were following the same mantra, but not the same leadership. Iraq was a model because voting benefited the Shi'a and even the Shi'a in Saudi had been looking at the Iraqi model to promote greater participation in elections.

The political model in most places, with the exception of Iran, was one put forward by Ayatollah Sistani, where government and religion remain separate. As there was no preconceived blueprint for Islamic government, the model put forward a political system that reflected the values of the religion and Sistani's system of keeping

politics and religion separate was becoming the preferred model, said Professor Nasr.

After the bombing of the Askariya shrine, however, the Shi'a felt that turning the other cheek was no longer a viable option, Professor Nasr continued. They felt that the United States was favouring the Sunni insurgency and the Shi'a felt that there was a greater need for action. He noted that even Sistani's son had said that one more bombing like Askariya would completely eradicate Sistani's control over the Iraqi Shi'a. He recalled that even in places like Sarajevo or India before 1945 where for example, mixed marriages had been prevalent and there were inter-communal ties, extreme violence could not be halted. The violence took on a force of its own and pre-existing relationships failed to halt the flow of violence.

Professor Nasr reiterated that there was a Shi'a revival afoot, whether it was seen negatively or positively. He said that there was a force in the region based on networks of clerics and seminaries, on hundreds of thousands of pilgrims going to Iraq and taking with them ideas and investments. He added that Iran's 'soft power' was closely related to its relationship with the many Iraqi Shi'a who had sought refuge in Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. However, he cautioned, that there was a reverse side, namely a Sunni backlash that had been instituted by Saddam Hussein himself. Hussein had often compared the fall of Baghdad in 2003 to its fall in 1258, a theme that was often reflected in speeches made by Al-Qaeda and Al Zarqawi.

Some, like Egypt, feared that the centre of gravity was shifting towards the Gulf and that that they would no longer be able to manage Washington. Professor Nasr added that many felt that democracy would remove the Sunni hold on power. However, he noted that the culture of identity was changing and that the Shi'a identity was, in fact, part of a nationalist identity in Iraq. Consequently, in a country where the Shi'a constituted a majority, the Shi'a identity would be part of Iraqi nationalism and Arabism would have to include Shiism.

Professor Nasr disagreed that there was no doctrinal dimension to the issues. He said that there was a doctrinal dimension among Salafis and Sunnis too, for example. The former believe that Americans have taken Islam and given it to a 'heretical' sect, i.e. the Shi'a in Iraq. He noted that the Shi'a are often defined as being outside the Muslim community and thus there was a politics of doctrinal exclusion affecting the Shi'a. The bombing of Askariya by a Tunisian bomber reflected that such sentiments were shared across political boundaries. Although Osama bin Laden had been trying to recruit Al-Qaeda members on the basis of anti-Americanism, Abu Musab Al Zarqawi had been recruiting on the basis of anti-Shiism and now, bin Laden could be seen as adopting Al Zarqawi's mantra, Professor Nasr observed.

The Middle East could no longer go back to the previous status quo, Professor Nasr concluded. The Shi'a would no longer accept being left on the outside looking in. Using the analogy of "Humpty Dumpty" ("All the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again"), he said that even if Iraq was "put back together again" it could no longer place Sunnis in the position they had occupied before the war. In addition, he noted the increasing tensions surrounding the Shi'a communities elsewhere in the region, in Lebanon and Bahrain for example, and reiterated that when thinking about solutions for Iraq, we needed to think more broadly about the regional dimensions.

Professor Tariq Ramadan

Professor Ramadan began by noting that we could not think about this issue without understanding more of what was being said within Islam, without understanding more of the theological and Islamic reference points. It was important, he said, to begin with understanding what was going on and why, on theological grounds, there was a Shi'a attraction? Subsequently, he said that he would address the political level and look for areas of convergence. In this context, he emphasised, one could not avoid discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Professor Ramadan noted that differences between Sunni and Shi'a trends first arose through a political discussion. Consequently, there was a sense among the Shi'a that they had not been included within the Muslim tradition, a discourse strongly promoted by the Saudis, whose views of the Shi'a prompted a far more cautionary approach towards the issue. Thus, the Iranian Revolution was not supported by all the Sunni countries in the Middle East. Literalists and Traditionalists, such as the Taliban for example, or the Salafists, did not view the Shi'a as real Muslims. The Reformist traditions within political Islam were not too far from each other, said Professor Ramadan. However, there was a trend of citing the idea that Sunnis and Shi'a could not work together, and a sense among Sunnis that the Shi'a were external to their political communities. Consequently, there was a lack of intra-community dialogue, a missing level of communal or political interaction alternative to that of the Sunni-Shi'a debate.

Professor Ramadan noted that an attractive element in the current Shi'a tradition was that of *ijtihad* (the process of making a legal decision by independent interpretation of the legal sources) and the visible dynamism of Shi'a in seeking to deal with the political field. The Sunni Muslim dialogue, he remarked, was sometimes less attractive than what was heard from the Shi'a. However, Professor Ramadan cautioned that we could not just think about politics: the political and religious debate had been more organised within the Shi'a tradition but Sunnis needed to "strain their ears and listen more carefully."

At the political level, Professor Ramadan said that the Sunni-Shi'a divide could not be solely responsible for the political divide. Indeed, he was not sure that only the Salafis were happy with this divide, he felt there were other forces that were not unhappy to see these divisions, that it was not as simple as blaming everything on the "outsiders" as the "outsiders" were not the only players in Iraq.

He recalled that that the first countries to react negatively to the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent 30 years of the Islamic Republic had been Arab countries, as the revolution had been, and still was, a threat to Saudi regional power. In addition, Egypt, for example, saw the possible connections between Iran and Lebanon and Iraq as a threat not only to the Sunni tradition but to the regimes affiliated with it. However, he reiterated that at the regional level there was a geo-strategic reality that was more complex than simply "the Shi'a" and that Iran's political stance was based not only on religion, but politics, here echoing Sir Malcolm Rifkind's statement.

Professor Ramadan asked what had made the Shi'a attractive? He asked who was supporting the Palestinians, noting that it was Iran. Additionally, it was Hizbullah, supported by Iran, who were acting as a resistance force to Israel in Lebanon. These were factors making Shi'a power attractive. This issue was not disconnected from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the rising influence of Iran was tied to its support for the predominantly Sunni Palestinians and those assisting them in the resistance. Additionally, the example of Iraq demonstrated the flexibility of the Shi'a, who could

accept American presence when it helped them and resist it [as in Iran?] when it didn't. Professor Ramadan argued that these examples demonstrated that the issue was one governed by politics and not by religion.

Consequently, while there were divisions between the Sunnis and Shi'a, there were also possible convergences. Firstly, whatever position Iran and the Sunnis and the Shi'a adopted in the region, it would be important to see how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was resolved. There was no doubt, said Professor Ramadan, that there was a natural regional convergence on this issue. Second, there was the issue of political Islam and the way in which countries were dealing with it, although he questioned whether political Islam was made up of many trends, or just one. He said that at the end of the day, it was the convergence of these two policies at the local and regional level that demonstrated that there were some issues upon which people, both Sunni and Shi'a, would gather and have one voice in the region. Perhaps not one voice, Professor Ramadan reconsidered, but a shared perception of resistance.

To conclude, Professor Ramadan put forth four points regarding the Shi'a issue. He first noted that it was important to listen to the debate on inclusiveness, as elaborated by HRH Prince Hassan of Jordan earlier, and that there was an intra-communal theological debate which was missing everywhere. Second, "What does it mean to promote democratisation?" he asked. It was important to assess whether democratisation would be independent. Would any kind of democratisation work if it was not independent? It was important, he emphasised, to know what kind of policies we were promoting and who our partners were. Third, regarding the opposition to political Islam – he asked whether such resistance arose because one group or trend was dominant such as Salafists or the Shi'a? Professor Ramadan said that *how* political Islam was promoted was an important factor, because many of its groups would not follow "secularity". He noted that a reaction to secularity would be one of dismissal, with Muslims saying 'salaam', or farewell, to it. He acknowledged that political Islam was attractive to some and that it would be necessary to deal with some forms of government that made reference to Islam.

To conclude, Professor Ramadan reiterated that it was a shame that we were silent about the oppression of Palestinians and that this issue was not put at the centre of the geo-strategic debate. He called for a stronger discourse on the subject.

Roger Hardy

Mr Hardy began by noting that he believed the "Shi'a Crescent" to be an imperfect metaphor. If the term was intended to suggest that there was a broad swathe of a Shi'a majority, then it was a fact, one based on geography and population. However, if it was to indicate that there was a "Shi'a axis", then the idea was less self-evident.

Mr Hardy believed that we needed to go back in time in order to understand that a Shi'a revival of sorts has been underway for some time. Its first phase, the Iranian Revolution, excited many Arab Shi'a and alarmed Sunni Arab governments. During the second phase, both fear and hope subsided because, broadly speaking, the Arab Shi'a changed and they began to believe that the Islamic Revolution was not going to get them anywhere. Instead, they believed that the future lay in seeking democratic reform within the countries where they lived. Phase three began with the American-led invasion of Iraq; the intervention reversed the internal balance of power and challenged, or appeared to challenge, the regional balance of power. Each phase

has been different to the other two and Mr Hardy recommended *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World.*

There were different ways of thinking about the Shi'a revival, Mr Hardy noted. Some thought of it as having a polarising effect on the region, others as a "Shi'a revival" or "empowerment", or, in a term close to the Arabic, an "awakening," countered by a Sunni backlash. Among the Shi'a, however, there was a heightened sense of self-consciousness and elation that cities like Najaf and Karbala were once again centres of Shi'a learning and pilgrimage. The Sunni backlash was taking a different form, being driven by Salafism, which had originally been a Wahhabi backlash but had now taken on a global dimension. Mr Hardy said that the most troubling manifestation of it was the presence of foreign fighters in Iraq making it an arena for 'global jihad' and directing their violence at the Iraqi Shi'a. They had intellectually and religiously demonised the Shi'a and especially as their websites are so important now, the demonisation of the Shi'a in ideological terms was almost as important as the violence against them. "Sectarian cleansing," he noted, had become part of the Sunni package.

Although Zarqawi had been killed four weeks previously, the ideology he expounded, the visceral hatred of the Shi'a, might outlast him. The Sunni backlash was however also taking a more mainstream approach in the comments made by King Abdullah of Jordan and President Mubarak of Egypt. According to Mr Hardy, their comments signified a mixture of old fashioned cultural difference and old fashioned geopolitics (where Arab politics was a "Sunni Club") confronted with a new role for the Shi'a, which was seen as contrary to the "natural order," as was the new degree of Iranian involvement in Arab affairs.

Here, Mr Hardy said he wished to part company a little with Dr Nasr. He believed that we shouldn't confuse empowerment with power, asking which Shi'a majority had gained concrete political power? Only the Shi'a in Iraq had gained concrete political power. If by "power" we mean "reaching for power", it was a different concept from actually achieving it.

Some had inflated Iran's role as a regional godfather, he said. For a decade or more, Arab Shi'a had come to rediscover or re-emphasise their ethnic roots. Hizbullah, Mr Hardy noted, now saw itself as a patriotic *Lebanese* party, rather than a revolutionary Islamic power. The Saudi Shi'a too, were beginning to identify themselves with a broad movement of change within their own country, a movement whose aim was not to overthrow the House of Saud but to loosen the reins of Wahhabism, which was a Sunni project.

The Iraqi Shi'a, for all their many ties to Iran, rejected through the quietist stance of their religious figures the Iranian model of clerical rule; the Iraqi Shi'a saw themselves as Iraqi and Arab, "sons of the soil." Consequently, it was necessary to assess just how far Iran exerted real clout and how far it claimed to do so, said Mr Hardy. Iran had an obvious interest in playing up its own role, he added.

Iranians had made it expressly clear that if they were to be placed under intense pressure by the United States regarding the nuclear question, they would use their "cards in Iraq" and exert their levers. If Mr Hardy were a policymaker in Washington (and he jokingly remarked that he heard many sighs of relief in the audience that this was not the case), he would heed the threat. But as to the Iranian influence in other parts, he asked himself how far this was a bluff. Few, if any, of Iran's regional allies were slaves to Iranian foreign policy, Mr Hardy noted. In the event of a crisis, even

Hizbullah would think twice before sacrificing its own interests for Iran. “The Arab Shi’a have other fish to fry,” Mr Hardy concluded.

Discussion

Nicholas Noe
Mr Noe asked Professor Ramadan to elaborate on the issue of convergence regarding Israel and Palestine as he said that he felt a little confused. Turning to Professor Nasr, he asked whether he could speak specifically about Lebanon, where the violence had halted Shi’a efforts to develop the “one man, one vote” model.

Professor Tariq Ramadan
Professor Ramadan responded that beyond the religious divisions, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, at a political level, was unifying Shi’a and Sunnis; even the Salafis didn't have a handle on this. For example, Hizbullah and Hamas shared a perception of ‘resisting’ Israeli policy and did not draw a line between Shi’a and Sunni. On this issue there was unified resistance; the Al Qaeda/Salafi discourse was marginal to this political discourse today.

Dr Vali Nasr
Regarding Lebanon, Dr Nasr pointed out that one of the arguments Hizbullah made was, “Let’s have real democracy in Lebanon.” He said that the Shi’a would win. People were stuck in thinking of this as an Iranian vs. Arab conflict but things were more complex; there had been a “rude awakening” with the violence in Iraq. Furthermore, Professor Nasr added that the expectation of empowerment was a driving force. Regarding Hizbullah, for example, the expectation was that it would stand with Sunni insurgents because of its tradition of resisting the occupation, but Hizbullah had began to be closer to Sadr from SCIRI, because there was a feeling that they had to support the Shi’a. Shi’a supremacists in Iran believed that it was necessary to take to the battle to the Wahhabis; but Ahmadinejad’s followers believed that Sunni resistance needed to be mitigated through a focus on Israel and anti-Americanism; that in order to gain legitimacy, it was necessary to take everything post-Oslo off the table.

Reza Hosseinbor
Regarding the discussion exclusion and inclusion, Mr Hosseinbor noted that in Kuwait, the Chief of the Army was Shi’a in spite of a Sunni majority; in Pakistan there had been Shi’a in power (such as Benazir Bhutto); but in Iran there had been a total exclusion of Sunnis. Furthermore, in Iraq 150 Sunni mosques had been closed by Shi’a. Was there, therefore, a very real threat of excluding Sunnis in places governed by Shi’a authority?

Professor Tariq Ramadan
Professor Ramadan responded, saying that he would not take the bait, and say that the Sunni were quite good. Even before the Revolution, it had been clear that some wanted greater inclusion. But he warned that to blame the other for being exclusive would not help and he said that he didn’t wish to follow this train of thought, because it was dangerous.

Dr Vali Nasr
Professor Nasr responded that, about Iran, it was true, but that it would be necessary to see in other places how the Shi’a handled the Sunni community. In pre-revolutionary Iran, there had been Sunni generals and so on and therefore their exclusion was a post-revolutionary problem.

Iftekhar Karim
Mr Karim noted that the Persian and Iranian identity had always been Shi'a and that this had not really been questioned by other Muslims. The Iran-Iraq war however had been about two nationalisms. His concern was that there had been an effort to divert attention from the illegality of intervention in Iraq by emphasizing a Sunni-Shi'a divide.

Professor Vali Nasr
Professor Nasr said that he did not agree. He said that he believed that this conflict had often been repeated and people could often find anecdotes to demonstrate that the division didn't exist. However, the conflicts and demands and aspirations were real. How pervasive and dominant they became was a different matter, he acknowledged. However, these conflicts had a force of their own and took on a rationale of their own. Of course Iraqi Shi'a had fought Iranian Shi'a, but after the massacre of 1991, (which Saudi Arabia had influenced Washington to repress because it was characterized as Shi'a) during 1990s, many Shi'a had taken refuge in Iran. Dr Nasr said that nothing drives the Iraqi reliance on Iran more than the fear of a Sunni restoration. Two stories had dominated: the first, that there was a Sunni majority in Iraq and that the Shi'a majority was a fabrication of the Americans and Israelis. The second, they believed that Sunni authority could be restored and the Shi'a driven back.

Professor Tariq Ramadan
Professor Ramadan reiterated that while it was true that we needed to resist essentialising what was happening now as characteristic of Sunni-Shi'a relations, there were divisions and they were reflected on the ground: the Salafis, for example, had two main objectives. Firstly, they wished to define what constituted a 'true Muslim'. Secondly, this discourse could be used to influence the political discussion. Professor Ramadan pointed out that the situation was more complex than denying the existence of a division, saying "It doesn't exist." He said that such a division did exist and that therefore, it required a holistic approach taking into account the theoretical, political and religious elements.

Roger Hardy
Mr Hardy reiterated also that it was important to differentiate between real and manufactured tensions. The tension was coming from above and below and taking on a dynamic of its own. Should America take some responsibility for the 'Lebanonisation' of Iraq? The US should take some responsibility, Mr Hardy said, but the parties themselves also bore some responsibility for aligning on the basis of sectarian tensions.

Chris Rundell
Mr Rundell asked to what extent Shi'a and Sunni were divided at mosque level? He reminded the audience that in many places, such as Mazar-i-Sharif, there had been Sunni cooperation in maintaining a Shi'a shrine.

A member of the audience asked whether the "Shi'a Crescent" fear had been created to discourage Americans from proceeding with their democratization.

Session II: The Iraq Conflict and its Regional Ramifications

Chair: **Sir Stephen Egerton**, British School of Archaeology in Iraq

Speakers: **Dr Charles Tripp,** Reader in Politics, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
Zaki Chehab, London Bureau Chief, Al-Hayat and LBC TV
Dr Ghassan Atiyyah, Director, Iraq Foundation for Development and Democracy

Dr Ghassan Atiyyah

Dr Atiyyah began by pointing out that when one spoke of a Sunni-Shi'a divide, there was a temptation to generalize but it was important to remember that the case of Iraq was different to those of Pakistan or Bahrain, for example.

While he acknowledged that there was indeed a divide now in Iraq, he noted that it had always been as prominent as it was today. The Shi'a had always been second class citizens and excluded from government in Iraq but they had maintained their autonomy and formed a sort of "shadow administration". Given the historical context of conflict between Iran and the Ottoman Empire, Iraqis were used to being on the battleground between "Turks" and "Persians." Consequently, Dr Atiyyah noted, Baghdadis realized that they had to live together and in fact, in 1913, the largest ethno-religious community had been the Jewish community, followed closely by the Shi'a. However, in the 1950s, and especially after 1958, the divides had been between Nationalists and Communists and by the 1960s, it was the Shi'a leading the Ba'ath Party. Today, the Shi'a could warn the Sunnis not to attempt an uprising against the force of the majority and consequently suffering marginalization, as they felt they had made that mistake themselves.

The Sunni-Shi'a problem was very complex, Dr Atiyyah reiterated. The Shi'a in Iraq had benefited from the royal regime. In the 1950s, they had been educated by government scholarships. There had been a rapprochement in the 1950s and divides were social and political, but not sectarian. It was under Saddam Hussein that sectarianism had taken on its most ugly form.

Dr Atiyyah stated that those who were really suffering now were the Iraqi Shi'a. He pointed out that those who were benefiting from the changes in Iraq were the Shi'a elite, not the ordinary people. The thing that was uniting them now, however, was the Sunni insurgency. In a sectarian society, if you imposed a particular interpretation of Islam, it was an invitation to sectarian strife, he said. In order to avoid this divide, it was important to emphasise secularism.

He acknowledged that those, including himself, who had been opposed to Saddam had believed that they needed American assistance, because they felt they could not do the job themselves. They believed America was necessary in order to defend them from their neighbours and even themselves. However, he said they had hoped that the United States would play the role of arbiter rather than ruler. Instead, the US had made the grave mistake of imposing themselves as rulers. This had been their first mistake, or miscalculation.

The second had been a failure to acknowledge that Iraq was an impoverished country where poverty was breeding discontent. Dr Atiyyah recounted a story

recalling an elderly lady who tried to go to the market three or four days after the fall of Saddam and noted that, given the lack of amenities, services and available goods, things had been better in the "good old days" under Saddam. He reiterated that poor conditions and poverty were a potent source of political discontent.

The third miscalculation, he noted, had been the US' failure to anticipate the political vacuum – who would now fill it? What kind of apparatus could make a trinitarian state (Sunnis, Shi'a and Kurds) operate successfully? He noted that the Iranians had been helping certain Iraqi groups, using the same jargon as democracy, to extend their influence. How could Iraq be expected to have a constitution ready in 4 months when the US itself had taken about 13-15 years? Dr Atiyyah emphasized that he was not blaming America for all the mistakes made in Iraq and commented that the Iraqis had been good at making their own mistakes. For example, he observed, the Shi'a had made Basra "worse than Iran". They were not better off nor were they making things better for themselves, he said.

However, Dr Atiyyah continued, the keyword for Iraq was "stabilization". The fight now, he observed, was for Baghdad and the search was on for those who could stabilize it. He said that, at the beginning, the Americans had shown a little naiveté. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, they had assessed the Sunnis as "the baddies" and the Shi'a as "the goodies." Thus, once in Baghdad, they treated the Ba'athists as they did the Nazis, seeking to de-Ba'athify Iraq. However, Dr Atiyyah stressed, Iraq was not like Nazi Germany.in so far as it was not possible, or necessary to remove all the Ba'athists from power or even from low-level administration posts.

Dr Atiyyah noted that now people felt that if religion could not be separated from the state in Iraq, then they were doomed. He added that this sense was increasing and that minorities were being "eradicated." He noted that the all the Christians were leaving Iraq.

He pointed out that there was no single Shi'a political group but that there was rivalry among Shi'a groups and little consensus as to who could keep them united. Here was the window of opportunity for Iran, he added, noting that they had managed to keep the Shi'a united. However, although Ayatollah Sistani had repeated that Iraq wouldn't become a theocracy like Iran, Dr Atiyyah said that he felt that Iraq was becoming worse than Iran.

During the elections, people had voted along sectarian lines and the moderates had been left out. Now, he noted, the US had realized that they needed the help of other Arab states. They had "handed the Shi'a to Iran" and as Iran had been constructive, it now had a strong lever in Iraq. Dr Atiyyah wondered how they might use their influence. He added that if the US were to fight Iran, Iraq would once again be the battleground. Furthermore, he added that such a conflict would be high in intensity and that it would pull other regional actors into the conflict, noting particularly that the Turks felt that the US had been too partial to the Kurds. However, Dr Atiyyah said that the Kurds had realised that being "Iraqi" was the only way out of the crisis; that the only way to maintain their achievements and recent political gains was to maintain a united "Iraq" without losing the trust of the Shi'a, Sunnis and Turks.

If the US decided that they were willing to accept Arab help with the regional problem, then they should note that no Arab state would want to play second fiddle, Dr Atiyyah cautioned. Instead, they would want to enter into an equal partnership with the Americans. If the US thought that things were getting better, the Iraqis would face bigger trouble, he said.

Dr Atiyyah asked how one could move out of this situation: he noted some possible exit strategies and conclusions. First, the question of regional democratization was finished, he concluded. Events had shown that the dictators had provided stability while American democracy had brought chaos. Another complication was the sectarian balance – if the Shi'a were pushed too far, they would lean towards Iran. However, if the Sunnis remained afraid, they might also look to other regional actors. The Iraqi Kurds were too small a group on their own and would not be a viable independent entity. Consequently, Dr Atiyyah concluded, that Iraqis needed external help because they could not do it alone and suggested intervention by Europe, Russia and the UN. However, he stressed that Iraq should not become a proxy for other regional wars.

He concluded by noting that it was important for Washington to admit its mistakes and that a regional conference, including guarantors such as the Europeans and Russians, would be an important vehicle for beginning a more regional approach to the problem. He added that force alone would not solve the problem and what was needed, in order to solve the problems of Iraq today, was a set of wise political solutions.

Zaki Chehab

Mr Chehab, who recently authored *Iraq Ablaze: Inside the Insurgency*, began by highlighting a few facts that he believed were little known. He recounted a story that as a youth in a Palestinian refugee camp sponsored by Fateh, he and his friends used to play football with some Iranians. After Khomeini's return, they became big figures within the Iranian political establishment, signifying a long-standing history between Fateh and the Iranians that went back to the 1970s but which was not widely recognized. He added that it wasn't just conservative or religious Iranians who had come to work with Fateh. However, he noted that the same man with whom he used to play football, now an Iranian minister, was not happy with the transformation of Fateh into a more secular nationalist movement, recalling that Arafat had once ordered PLO fighters to give armed support to Moussa Sadr, an Iranian, and threatened those who dealt with Israelis with a fatwa. Mr Chehab also recounted that Khomeini had only been seen smiling in public once, and that was with Arafat, who was the first dignitary to visit Khomeini after the Iranian Revolution.

Mr Chehab pointed out that consequently, the PLO had been asked to mediate on behalf of the Americans regarding the hostage crisis and that the Iranians had been shocked that Arafat would assist the US with mediation efforts. Indeed, Iranians were shocked that Arafat had been trying to "solve the problem" rather than side with them.

Regarding Iranian assistance to Palestinian organizations, such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad or others, Mr Chehab said that, in all likelihood, it amounted to little more than the salaries or aid to 400-500 families, including those who were dependent on family members either killed by Israelis or currently in Israeli jails. However, Mr Chehab added, Iran had benefited from the widespread impression that they were giving greater assistance to the Palestinians. He added that the Iranian Parliament had promised $20 million to the Palestinian rejectionist parties, but that the Iranian elections had aborted this venture, which meant the money had never been transmitted. In addition, Iranian help was directed towards "Shaheed" foundations providing assistance to families of martyrs and that Iran had denied providing any form of military training.

This background was presented in order to reflect on the question of the Sunni-Shi'a divide. Mr Chehab noted that although Palestinians were Sunni in general, they had a special relationship with Tehran. He suggested that this would be a strange relationship if there were a strong Sunni-Shi'a political divide. Furthermore he asked how Hamas, with its special relationship with Shi'a Iran, was then praising Zarqawi, who was a militant Sunni.

He added that the Iranian leadership had refused to comment on their willingness to engage in talks with the US, which had indicated that it might be prepared to speak with Tehran via their respective Ambassadors. Iran had, however, realized that, with little extra effort on their part, they had backed the most important political party or organization in Iraq and that a Shi'a government more favourable to Iran, would not allow US bases in Iraq, thus acting on behalf of Iran's national interests.

Furthermore, Mr Chehab noted that the number of Sunni-Shi'a intermarriages was extraordinarily high, indicating the difficulty of a simple Sunni-Shi'a political divide. Consequently, he believed that the bombing of the shrine at Askariya was an act of weakness on the part of Zarqawi, indicating his desperation to incite a sectarian conflict and the difficulty of doing so. As some insurgent leaders were seen as willing to speak with the Americans, Zarqawi believed that the only way to retain power was to incite a sectarian conflict. However, Mr Chehab noted that enough wisdom had been shown by some Sunni leaders, who condemned the attack, and Shi'a leaders like al-Sistani, who had called on his followers to remain calm.

Mr Chehab said that Iraq was far from a civil war and that that if such a war had been going to happen, it would have happened much earlier. However, the Shi'a were, for the first time, close to ruling a rich gulf state and they would stand to lose everything in a sectarian war with the Sunnis. However, the Sunnis would not give up easily and the Kurds would not allow the Shi'a to extend their rule to the north. He added that Kurds were often referred to as a third actor in the Iraqi political scene but it was important to remember that 95% of Kurds were Sunnis. Thus, he concluded by noting that there were a number of complexities within the situation on the ground and that consequently it was not possible to draw a clean dividing line between Sunnis and Shi'a.

Dr Charles Tripp

Dr Tripp began by noting that 25 years ago, someone else had used the terminology of an "axis of Shi'a." He was supported in that view by many in the region and subsequently began the Iran-Iraq war. That was of course, Saddam Hussein.

He added that the way one looked at the region, and how others represented it, did indeed affect what happened. The accelerating horror of Iraq did induce despair, he said, because of the complexity of the situation and the sectarian, class, ethnic and ideological differences involved. He noted that the common metaphor of "Pandora's Box" was being used to describe the situation in Iraq, implying that the hatred and violence seen currently had always been present, that the American regime change had allowed it a natural outlet.

However, Dr Tripp believed that this terminology was dangerous. It had been used by Saddam Hussein to justify his hold on power as he had often asked, "Do you want to be like Lebanon?" His answer pointed out that his presence was necessary to avoid

such an outcome for Iraq. Furthermore, the kind of government that Iraq had suffered had benefited from the carefully constructed idea that a strong hand was needed to control these violent emotions.

There were alternative ways of looking at sectarian conflict, he pointed out. Sectarian conflict was not a default position of Iraqi society but he acknowledged that there was an awareness of “difference”, and acknowledged that prejudice and bigotry did exist. He added that the signals of difference were there, that many saw them in different ways of praying and even ways of walking and talking. However, the elements of what were considered sectarian conflict were in fact indicators of other forms of differences, Dr Tripp said.

Dr Tripp asked why these differences had become political differences: he said that he believed that the answer lay in three factors. Firstly, political differences arose from the power differentials which existed among the groups and the legacy of Iraq’s state formation. These included layers of privilege, exclusion, violence and discrimination against categories of Iraqis and the subsequent development of groups to protect those marginalized groups. Under Saddam Hussein, the destruction of “horizontal roots” had been perfected and people in power were chosen based on levels of trust. Rewards had been channelled along group lines, as collective punishment had been. While neither took place along sectarian lines, these relationships had enforced sectarian distinctions.

Secondly, the American invasion had enforced this pattern because the only visible organizations were communal resistance organizations. This had also involved the community of exiles as the question arose as to who was able to represent the Iraqi Shi’a. The “wilfully ill-prepared” invaders looked to local formations to establish social order, Dr Tripp continued, and consequently the resistance and insurgency had followed similar communal lines. Many were attracted to Iraq as “the new battlefield” and people increasingly saw it as a testing ground, especially for the venting of anti-Shi’a sentiment. The Shi’a had now assumed the role assigned earlier to the Syrians, as “agents of foreigners” demanding a greater share of power. The danger, he cautioned, was that the situation might become fair game for manipulation.

Regarding the social problems fuelling political conflict, Dr Tripp noted those who felt they had lost their jobs or been denied positions based on their Shi’a identity were becoming increasingly politicized. Consequently, if the Shi’a acted to protect their own interests, it would only serve to politicize the sectarian difference further. What one had to live with, he continued, was not only the legacy of 2003 but the Prime Ministership of Jafari and the Iraqi government that had assumed power in 2005. Could one really uproot the shadow state, the way concessions, militias and privilege has been farmed out, he asked? Could one inculcate public identities or really ensure that the framework of Iraqi politics was not coloured by sectarian conflict? To that end, he noted that it would be important to “de-sectarianise" the constitution and also to remove the occupying power. How could one make sure that Iraqis were not looking beyond their borders, especially given that many were willing to ignore Iraqi sovereignty and to meddle in Iraqi politics? He asked whether Maliki’s policy of friendship and an iron fist could work. Dr Tripp concluded that if these factors were successful – having a non-sectarian constitution, inculcating public, Iraqi identities and using a combination of friendship and an iron fist – then sectarianism might play a lesser role in Iraqi politics and violence. If not, then he said that the worst case scenario would be a civil war.

Discussion

Samir Nassif
Mr Nassif asked Dr Tripp what he thought of Maliki's declaration that Saddam would be executed soon and that his group were behind the insurgency. Did he think that what Maliki was signifying by this declaration would enhance his hopes for unity?

Dr Charles Tripp
Dr Tripp replied that there was a very real danger in seeing the insurgency as coming from one mastermind or one source, such as Saddam Hussein or his sons, or Zarqawi. He said that it was not the case that the insurgency was controlled by Saddam Hussein or indeed by any one person. Regarding the execution, he thought that there was a danger of arousing public sympathy. Such statements made it seem like a show trial and the danger was that show trials intended to send one message often sent out another. They intended to inspire hatred but often inspired public sympathy: indeed there had been cases in the 1950s where some people were let off because their trials aroused public sympathy. In Iraq, however, those pressing for Hussein's execution might be exerting stronger pressure on Maliki than he could resist.

Khalid Nadeem
Mr Nadeem asked Mr Chehab about the Iranian influence in Iraq today and whether it was exaggerated. He commented that it was sad to see that institutions of democracy were so weak in Iraq, with members of Saddam Hussein's defence team getting killed and he asked how it would be possible for someone like Hussein to get a fair trial under such circumstances.

Zaki Chehab
Mr Chehab noted that while a large number of Shi'a had Iranian sympathies, it did not seem that they had less influence than the Americans. It was very difficult to get a clear picture regarding the Shi'a in Iraq as it was very difficult for independent journalists to get there. Furthermore, he noted, it was clear that there was a big gap between the reality of the Shi'a militias and the US perceptions of the situation, noting that each leader had their own support group within the Iranian regime. While it was difficult to see how it worked, one could see the influence that Iran had in Shi'a neighbourhoods, he said. Some Shi'a neighbourhoods were even stricter than Iran in terms of religious observance. He said that he didn't think Iran wanted the US to fail but that they didn't want the American presence in Iraq to threaten the Iranian regime. He said that the conflict between America and Iran was not about nuclear weapons but rather centred on a struggle for influence in Iran.

Dr Charles Tripp
Dr Tripp added that anyone in power in Iraq needed to deal with Iran.

A member of the audience said that Iraq was not as divided between ethnic sects as other countries like Bahrain and added that he thought that nationalist feelings would bring them together when the occupation forces left, as for thousands of years Sunnis and Shi'a had lived together. He asked whom the panel believed was really behind Zarqawi, asking if it really was an old man in a cave of Afghanistan. He asked why suicide bombers on TV were never targeting occupation forces/vehicles etc and why we had seen these bombers only killing innocent women and children? He suggested that someone really wanted to create divisions in Iraqi society.

Dr Ghassan Atiyyah
Dr Atiyyah said that Zarqawi was just a symptom of what was happening. He noted that ordinary people had supported Zarqawi, that Amman had only turned against him after the hotel bombings in the summer of 2005. For people like Zarqawi, Iraq was just a battleground to fight the US. Foreign fundamentalist fighters were destructive forces - they were ideologically driven and motivated – and this phenomenon would not subside until the Arab world had provided a viable alternative.

What Iraqis needed now was a national reconciliation dialogue, Dr Atiyyah said. The Iraqi opposition used to oppose it, but now even the government was calling for it. However, they were emptying the process of any significance by applying so many rules and conditions to the process. Furthermore, he noted that many Ba'athists were anti-Saddam and had hoped to play a part in the government, but the Bremer days had marginalized them. At that time, there was a chance to incorporate them since they had wanted to be more moderate but now they were saying that anyone who attempted reconciliation with the government was guilty of treason. It was necessary to "dry the swamp to get rid of fish," Dr Atiyyah acknowledged, but by political methods, not the use of force.

Zaki Chehabi
Mr Chehabi added that most of Zarqawi's supporters were Iraqis. The scale of killing for the last few months had demonstrated the strength of Zarqawi's power which was visible in the lists of those willing to die.

Yousef Al-Khoei
Mr Al Khoei said that his uncle was one of those Shi'a leaders mentioned earlier, the one who had been killed by a Shi'a mob. He acknowledged that in the Muslim world, there was a problem with dealing with minorities. He disagreed with the view that Shi'a had been in power during the Iraqi monarchy, as Dr Atiyyah had stated, and stated that if things were based on statistics, one could argue that there were more Sunnis in power now since Kurds were generally Sunni. He recalled that there had been no recognition of Shi'ism in schools, nor were their celebrations and holidays acknowledged.

The Shi'a people felt they had a right to lead the nation given their demographic majority and said that he felt that the problem did not lie with the Shi'a leadership, recalling Sistani's statement that Sunnis were not only "our brothers" but "us."

Secularist ideology should not dictate how one viewed Shi'ism, he said, asking the three panellists to be more objective. Of course there were Shi'a who oppressed women and killed, but the overall trend was one characterised by moderation and compromise. There was a trend that said "we want to live with our brothers, Sunnis, Christians" but there were also Sunnis who did not want to see the Shi'a in power. The problem, he reiterated, was not Sunnis vs. Shi'a but moderation vs. extremism.

Dr Ghassan Atiyyah
Dr Atiyyah agreed that, in such situations, the first casualties were usually the moderates. He said he wished that an eminent Shi'a leader would condemn the extremist acts but that the only leaders willing to condemn them were secular. He added that adherence to a sectarian agenda, including quotas and so on, meant that one could not be objective. However, he, himself a Shi'a, also acknowledged that the Shi'a bore some responsibility for the deterioration of Iraq since 2005.

Zaki Chehabi
Mr Chehabi added that extremists now had guns and were able to silence the moderate Sunnis and Shi'a

A member of the audience was sceptical about the use of marriages between Sunnis and Shi'a to discount the strength of the political divide, noting that Arabs used to trade women and that women had sometimes been married off to their enemies. However, the problem, she believed, was that Arabs had imported the idea of a nation-state from the West but not the full range of restraints on the ruling power. She said that the problem was not sectarianism but the lack of restraint on the political powers of rulers. Se added that it seemed that we were witnessing the "Wahhabisation" of Shi'ism. Seeing what was happening in Southern Iraq, it seemed that the Sunnis had no monopoly on Salafism. She further added that it seemed the most radical Salafis were in Washington! She asked Dr Atiyyah who the "neighbour" was that the exiled Iraqis were most afraid of, to the extent that they had needed American intervention. She also asked where they really thought America would leave without securing any benefits, that the US would sacrifice its boys and taxes for the Iraqis?

Dr Ghassan Atiyyah
Dr Atiyyah acknowledged some naiveté on the part of Iraqi exiles in asking the West for help given that they had thought that they would get help in 1990, and it hadn't worked. In 2003 when they had asked for help, they had asked for help, not an invasion. He concluded by noting that they now needed to salvage Iraq but that people were taking sides along sectarian lines.

Session III: Iranian-Arab Relations

Chair: **Sir Eldon Griffiths,** National Patron, World Affairs Councils of America

Speakers: **Dr Judith Yaphe,** Distinguished Research Professor, National Defense University
Dr Mehrdad Khonsari, Senior Research Consultant, Centre for Arab and Iranian Studies
Dr Kassem Jaffar, Diplomatic Advisor and Political Consultant

Sir Eldon Griffiths mentioned that one was conscious of the important role of Iran in countries throughout the Middle East, from Bahrain to Oman, where many of the ruling members owed the Iranians some of their political security

Dr Kassem Jaffar

Dr Jaffar began by stating that Arab-Iranian affairs needed to be handled from a historical as well as from a contemporary point of view. Consequently, one had to have a clear idea of the factors that had characteristically featured in Arab-Iranian relations before the advent of Islam. The most dominant feature of this relationship, Dr Jaffar continued, was mutual mistrust, especially in the past two decades. Such mistrust was historically and traditionally present and even predated the Islamic Revolution. Many people were mistaken in the idea that the regional perception of

Iran started with the Revolution, as such mistrust could easily be traced back to earlier regimes.

On the Arab side, such mistrust had been fairly consistent, especially on the part of Nasser's Egypt, and Ba'ath Party of Iraq and Syria. The Shah and his ambitions for a superior Iran were always viewed at best, as a potential threat, and at worst, as a real and immediate danger. This situation had not changed with the fall of the Shah. Instead, the negative Arab view had been magnified and consolidated, especially after Khomeini advocated the export of the Iranian Revolution. One exception to this had been Syria, which for more than 25 years has had a very strong strategic alliance with Iran. Even an Iraq run by the Shi'a might not have as close and strategic an alliance as that between Syria and Iran.

Dr Jaffar asked why this mistrust existed and why it transcended the usual schism between the Arab masses. Regarding the latter question, Dr Jaffar said that it was possible to transcend the divide because it didn't really exist, that Arab governments and the people have historically been aligned in their views of Iran. However, there were two factors at play affecting the historical, geographical and political elements of mistrust. First, there was sectarianism, the difference between the Shi'a and the Sunnis. He added that he believed these differences were more subtle and sophisticated than for example the difference between various churches. Since the 16th century, Iran had been the only major Shi'a power in the region – indeed, within Islam as a whole – it was a major Shi'a centre of population and historical gravitas in the middle of an overwhelmingly Sunni population. The Arab world had always been ruled by Sunni states, Arab or non-Arab, and Iran was the only exception. Consequently, Iran had traditionally been viewed as a Shi'a aberration which served to block attempts at achieving cultural or political integration. The Shi'a minorities however, had of course, a different view of Iran, seeing it as a potential strategic backup.

The second factor breeding mistrust between Arabs and Iran, according to Dr Jaffar, was the ethnic differences between Persians and Arabs, each of which was proud of their heritage and background. The concept of ethnicity had become a predominant feature of political, economic, cultural and military life in the Arab and Muslim world. It was also worth mentioning, said Dr Jaffar, that from the Arab "purist" point of view, the only true Arab state had in fact been that of the Umayyads. The staunchly Arab and Sunni Umayyads were then succeeded by the first model of a multiracial and multicultural Islamic state – the Abbasids. The Arabs, as an ethnic group, never recovered from this loss of privilege, and the Arabs as such were never to rule themselves again, continued DrJaffar. Persian influence retreated to Iran and the Turkish influence became the dominant power. There was however, a schizophrenic element within the Arab psyche in so far as they did not like being dominated by another Muslim entity, even if they were Sunni, such as the Ottomans. Consequently, he continued, Arab nationalism originally developed to resist Ottoman rule. This same idea of Arab nationalism later evolved in to a typical anti-colonial nationalist movement. Nowadays, it was manifested in anti-Americanism but one had to remember that the same idea had made the Arabs equally sensitive about any non-Arab entity trying to achieve political and strategic supremacy. The worst case scenario would be domination by a regional Muslim non-Arab power, especially one like Iran which was both religiously driven and fundamentalist.

The political strategic factors that removed Iran from its regional neighbours were now understandable given this background, Dr Jaffar continued. The Shah's declared ambition had been to turn Iran into a regional superpower and consequently, all these factors had combined to make the Shah into a kind of "bogeyman" for the

Arabs. But unfortunately for the Arabs, the new Islamic Iranian regime was ill-disposed towards them. So once again, there had been a major setback in Arab-Iranian relations.

Within a short time, a major divide had emerged again. The Iran-Iraq War was to become the first indication of the shape of things to come. Saddam Hussein had shaped the war as a great struggle between Arabs and Persians. Even for ordinary Iraqis, it had become a nationalist struggle to preserve Arab Iraq against the Persians. This was reflected in the wide range of Arab states which allied themselves with Saddam including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, even Yemen, Tunisia and Morocco. During the war, the level of coordination among Arab states and the level of their support outdid anything they ever offered against Israel. Arab public opinion in this period was firmly behind their governments' fight with Iran and they fully supported the Iraqi war effort.

Dr Jaffar said that nothing had changed today: Iran continued to be a source of suspicion. However, the focus was on the strategic concern. No matter who was in power, there was always a negative position from which the Arabs perceived Iran and this perspective was fuelled by sectarian and ethnic tension.

Dr Jaffar added that Syria was a strategic trusted ally of the Levant, and vice versa, and consequently there was the vital extension of Iran into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through Hizbullah in Lebanon and the Shi'a community in Lebanon. Consequently, Dr Jaffar was not sure what would happen in Iraq – he said that it was in such flux that it was difficult to be certain whether Iraq would be a strategic ally or a minor partner for Iran. However, he concluded by noting that the Middle East was approaching so many crucial turning points, that it would be unwise to try and make predictions.

Dr Merhad Khonsari

Dr Khonsari's discussion focused on the "flipside" of Dr Jaffar's presentation by looking at Arab-Persian relations from an Iranian perspective. He recalled General Patton's statement about the British and Americans being two people separated by a common language and noted that Iranians and Arabs were separated by a common religion as well as by geography. He added that it was important to remember that Arab-Iranian relations involved a number of Arab countries with differing perspectives, which accounted for the difference, for example, between Iranian relations with Syria or Lebanon, and other Arab countries like Egypt and Jordan. Furthermore, he noted that the Iranian government's vocal and material support for hard-line Palestinian elements and its aggressive and uncompromising attitude towards Israel – "something that the more measured, more media conscious Arab leaders cannot match" – was resonating in an effective way with the Arab public across the region. Hence, it was important to distinguish between the "state" and the "public" in any discussion concerning Iran-Arab relations.

Dr Khonsari wanted to focus on 5 particular problematic areas of the Arab-Iranian relationship:

1. Divergent ethno-religious backgrounds
2. Divergent views on oil
3. Unresolved territorial disputes
4. Reaction to outside influences in the region
5. Arab perceptions and reactions to the Islamic Revolution

Divergent ethno-religious backgrounds

The primary source of divergence between Iranians and Arabs stemmed from ancient hostilities between Persians and Arabs, or the Shi'a and Sunni sects of Islam respectively, Dr Khonsari said. Shi'a ideology had played a prominent role in assisting modern Iran's rise to power and, contrary to the belief that this influence began in 1979, Shi'a ideology had long played an important role in Iranian political thinking. One result was that the Shi'a "Ulema" had prevented Reza Shah from declaring a very secular republic along the lines of Ataturk's Turkey. The majority of Arabs adhered to the Sunni sect and there were ideological differences between the two sects that should be highlighted. The basic difference, Dr Khonsari said, was the Shi'a's refusal to recognize the spiritual legitimacy of the first three Caliphs of Islam. Shi'ism supported the cause of Iranian nationalism against the Arab occupiers and by the 16th century, had become the state religion of Iran, as it still was today. Although the Shi'a had flourished elsewhere in the region (chiefly in Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon but even in substantial minorities in Afghanistan and the GCC countries), until the recent transformation in Iraq, the Shi'a were only actually in power in Iran.

While the religious split had been a negative factor in Arab-Iranian relations, Dr Khonsari also pointed out that race and language differences also posed challenges in communication between the two peoples. Unfortunately, he continued, negative stereotypes of Arabs had been perpetuated and reinforced throughout Iranian history by Iranian scholars, administrators and artisans. Therefore, unless Iranians took concrete steps to project Arabs in a more positive light, these negative perceptions would not disappear. Such an effort would require a national will expressed at the grassroots level, something that was simply not there in Iran, especially in the atmosphere following the eight year war with Iraq, Dr Khonsari pointed out.

Divergent views on oil

Diverging views on oil policy within OPEC, between Iran and Arab oil producers, had also been an important barometer in Iran-Arab relations, Dr Khonsari said. While in the past, issues such as the price and the production output of oil dominated areas of disagreements between Iran and the major Arab producers, today in the 'high oil price milieu', the emphasis had switched to arguments that pitted "boosting production capacity" - a position favoured by the Saudis, against "maximizing oil revenues"- something that was of prime interest to Iran. This crucial issue was augmented by other factors such as continuous rivalries, in addition to unresolved problems concerning ownership of assets and the division of spoils regarding fields that were located between Iran and some of her Arab neighbours in the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, he noted that such disputes could expand should major expansions in the Iraqi petroleum sector ever become a reality.

The most prominent bone of contention, however, was the dispute over what the Qataris called the "North Dome" and the Iranians called the "South Pars field."

Unresolved territorial disputes

Two important, but as yet unresolved, territorial disputes added pressure to the Iran-Arab relationship. The first dispute concerned navigation rights in the Shatt-al Arab waterway (at the mouth of the Tigris-Euphrates), supposedly resolved in the March 1975 OPEC Summit. Since then, Saddam Hussein abrogated the treaty when he wanted to attack Iran in 1980 and re-ratified it when he tried to prevent Iran from joining the American led coalition in 1991. It was also important to note that no formal

treaty existed between Iran and Iraq terminating the 8 year war. Consequently, the reaffirmation of the 1975 Algiers Treaty and the issue of reparations to be paid by Iraq for their aggression in 1980 were key outstanding issues.

The second territorial dispute was over the two Islands of the Tunbs (Lesser Tunb and Greater Tunb) and Abu Musa, with the small sheikhdom of Ras Al-Kheimeh and Sharjah respectively. This dispute had remained unresolved for the past 35 years. However Dr Khonsari wanted to point out that a Memorandum of Understanding agreed between Iran and Sharjah regarding Abu Musa had provided both parties with a pragmatic *modus vivendi* in the only island which had local inhabitants. Moreover, contrary to Arab rhetoric which condemned Iran as yet another "occupier of Arab Land", it was crucial to emphasize that the exercise of Iranian sovereignty over the Tunb islands had not resulted in any serious displacement of an Arab population (a few hundred at most) and as such, the dispute should not be taken out of context, said Dr Khonsari.

Moreover, for sake of overall Iran-Arab relations, Dr Khonsari suggested that it was unhelpful for Arabs to attempt to utilize this disagreement with Iran to jeopardize regional security, for the sake of promoting nationalism or of displaying Arab unity in order to shield other perhaps more pressing issues. He believed that, in light of Iran's own experience, it was important for some of the region's Arab leaders not to become beguiled by certain supporting gestures from some of the major Western powers which were in fact an expression of political expediency due primarily to their existing differences with the current Iranian regime. These same powers did, in fact, provide tacit approval for the positions proposed by Iran in 1971. He was therefore convinced that it would make a great deal more sense for the disputing sides to settle their differences amongst themselves. Neither Iran or nor her Arab neighbours in the Persian Gulf stood to gain by attempting to settle the final outcome of this dispute through relying on the ultimate support of any external power, or alternatively, by engaging in a futile game of trying to score propaganda points against one another. Arab parties in particular, should not underestimate the extent of public sentiment inside Iran over this issue.

Reaction to outside influences in the region

Dr Khonsari observed that due to its economic and strategic significance, the Persian Gulf could not remain free of external pressures, influences and interventions. The overriding influence of all external players, whether American, Western European or Far Eastern, was the continued availability of Persian Gulf oil at bearable prices, he noted. However, Iranian and Arab perceptions of one another were greatly affected by the relationship each had with these key external players. Furthermore, he added that that the troubled relationship of Iran with the P5 (Permanent members of the UN Security Council) was not without diplomatic "flack" of its own for all Arab governments, particularly Iran's Arab neighbours to the south.

He said it was important to note that the whole region had suffered outside intervention for so long that they generally looked at foreign oil companies with some suspicion. For example, Saudi Arabia, while relying on Western technology, refused to open its oil fields to foreign oil companies. He pointed out that Iran had opened up a bit via the so-called buyback system but that it refused to allow direct foreign oil equity investments.

Reaction to the Islamic Revolution

In Dr Khonsari's opinion, the initial Arab response to the success of the Iranian Revolution was welcoming at both the state and public levels. Initially, the removal of an "overpowering regional strong man" was viewed with a sigh of relief and inspired the belief that perhaps, armed with Islam, Arab states too, might replicate the experience. However, the provocative rhetoric from Iran, their attempts at politicizing Islamic rituals like the Hajj, coupled with the start of the Iran-Iraq War, had brought this initial optimism to an end. Although things had looked promising at the end of the Cold War, it was as yet unclear how the election of Ahmadinejad, with his dogmatic reference to certain populist issues, would affect Iran-Arab relations at the state and public levels, he said.

Dr Khonsari concluded by saying that for Iran-Arab relations to move beyond their present scope, it was necessary for both sides to become better acquainted with one another, which would require bold policies on the part of both the Iranian and Arab governments. Cultural exchanges, the promotion of tourism, trade, investment and other economic activities, could help promote better understanding at both the "state" and "public" levels between Iran and the Arab world.

Dr Judith Yaphe

Dr Yaphe began by noting that her comments were personal remarks and that she was not speaking on behalf of the American government, commenting that she could explain government policies but could not defend all of them. Furthermore, she added, there had been several "elephants in the room" that no one had mentioned much, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the role of the USA.

She agreed with the American administration's decision to remove Saddam Hussein from power, stating that he was an evil that needed to be removed. But Dr Yaphe noted that while some policies could be defended as correct, others had damaged institutions within the United States, such as the Intelligence, diplomacy and others. She also added that poor planning and the perception that everything would be easy had all destroyed the tools on which the President could rely. Dr Yaphe acknowledged that to accuse the US of naiveté and optimism was possible, but that mistakes had been made on both sides, British and American.

She recalled that a number of people had asked her why the Americans and British insisted on democracy. A number of Arabs had asked her why the US couldn't put down the insurgency before speaking of democracy and had said that Iraq wasn't "ready" for democracy. However Dr Yaphe said that she felt that it was patronising to think that Iraqis were incapable of handling a democracy. She also added that she did not believe there was currently a civil war going on in Iraq, that if there was to be a civil war, it would be much worse than anything that we were currently seeing.

In addition to the other "elephants" in the room, Dr Yaphe also noted that few people had spoken of terrorism, and she noted that the following day marked a year since the 7/7 "Al Qaeda look-alike" bombings in London.

Regarding the view of Iran from Washington, she said that Iran was perceived to be "encircled" by pro-American governments. She asked whether a nuclear-armed Iran would be a problem for peace in the region and reiterated that all in the West had spoken with one voice to Iran, saying that they stood against proliferation. She added

that if Iran assumed nuclear weaponisation, the NPT would be dead. She asked where it would end, questioning whether the outcome of US policy regarding Iran was intended to be regime change or whether that was no longer a primary goal, adding that it was not necessary to engage in a ground war to make Iran aware that the US didn't like its policies. She noted a fundamental turnaround in American policy taking place under Condoleeza Rice as Secretary of State as signified by recent hints that the US might be willing to talk with Iran.

Dr Yaphe noted that there was often a problem with knowing what was rhetoric and what was believable. In the US, for example, she questioned which commitment to Iraq was the "real" one as the President repeatedly stated that the US was there "to win" and yet General Casey was speaking of pulling US troops out in the near future.

In response to the earlier statements that it was difficult to speak of the Arab world as a whole, or even as a unified pan-Shi'a or Sunni movement, Dr Yaphe pointed out that it was similarly impossible to speak of the West as a whole, noting that "the West" consisted of divergent areas such as the USA, Europe etc which often differed in their perspectives. She attributed this to the different histories each had experienced. The modern Middle East, she said, began with Napoleon's invasion in 1798. At this point, Europe was carving out areas of influence for itself in the region. The USA, however, was still close to its own revolution in 1776 and used channels such as education to access the rising voices of Christians, Shi'a and the middle classes; they had appealed to those rising to power but not already in position. She also recalled that the USA and Europe had argued over "dual containment" versus "critical dialogue" and that neither had been able to achieve anything in Iraq or affect Iran for a long time.

From an outsider's point of view, Dr Yaphe said, until the invasion of Iraq, few Americans knew about the sects in Islam, about Sunnis and Shi'as. Now they were more aware of such differences. However, she said that the administration's plans to endorse, or not endorse a "Shi'a Crescent" was based on national interest, that it was not religion driving either American or Iranian policies but pragmatism and national interest.

There was a fear on both sides of showing weakness, Dr Yaphe continued. She noted that religion seemed so fundamental on both sides. Both Blair and Bush were guided by basic religious values, she observed and both feared and voiced opposition to "the sins of the others". Both leaders were religious and populist.

Dr Yaphe concluded by noting that many of the arguments on both sides were based on concepts of national power, not religion, though neither side seemed to like liberal reformists. Her short term hope for Iraq and for the Middle East was that there would be discussions and negotiations but she didn't know how they would get "there" from "here."

Discussion

Mike Gates
Mr Gates noted the Iranian relationship with Hizbullah and other Shi'a groups and asked, "What is the Iranian perception of Hamas? What is their idea of supporting Hamas in the wider concept; what will Iran do in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestinian areas and in asymmetric areas if dialogue doesn't work out?"

Dr Mehrdad Khonsari
Dr Khonsari responded that the Iranian relationship with Hamas stemmed from its support of rejectionist Palestinian groups and similarly hard-line groups. It was therefore consistent with their policy of supporting rejectionist parties - so long as their policy involved no compromise with Israel, it opened a way for the Iranian administration to step in and play a bigger role.

Dr Judith Yaphe
Dr Yaphe added that it was necessary to anticipate the threat - individual groups might or might not want to risk their local gains; if Iran decided to use Iraq as its fighting ground it would also impact on US interests. Dr Yaphe noted that how Iran perceived itself was important: she asked whether perhaps Ahmadinejad saw himself as a political leader defending Arab interests.

A member of the audience asked, "In 1980s, US played off Iran and Iraq against each other, and now there is talk in Washington of supporting Arab separatists in Iran and Iraq; what do you think?"

Dr Judith Yaphe
Dr Yaphe said that initially the Americans were uncertain whether the Iranian Islamic regime was one that they could work with but the hostage situation had changed that. This had been a question of national self-interests, which had influenced them to support Iraq as Iran was not high on the preferred list of negotiating partners under the Reagan administration. They thought that there were moderates in Iran and had considered helping them but neither policy had worked.

Jihan Amer
Directing her comment to Dr Yaphe, Ms Amer said that regarding democracy in Arab world, most Arabs were in favour of it but it was the selective democracy of US and its selective application of it that was the problem. "It is not proper democracy," she stated and asked Dr Yaphe, "What kind of democracy would you like to teach us?"

Dr Judith Yaphe
Dr Yaphe acknowledged her point and said that it was especially notable when governments not favoured by the US were elected. But she also added that she believed it was really a fear of decentralisation and a lessening of power that other Arab leaders feared. She asked what countries feared so much from democracy based on the Iraqi model.

A member of the audience noted that when the Shah left Iran, an Arab state was the only one to give him a visa so their relationship could not have been too bad.

Dr Kassem Jaffar
Dr Jaffar pointed out that Sadat's decision to take in the Shah did not reflect Egyptian approval of Iran and cautioned that it was important to remember what happened to Sadat afterwards. In the so-called Arab street, there was an almost unanimous fear of Iran. He added however that perhaps, "We, as Arabs and Muslims, should change: instead of finding it so easy to find targets for our criticisms, we should look at ourselves and ask whether we have made mistakes?" He added that the emergence of the Khomeini-Husseini-jihadi tradition had led to a rejuvenation of Wahhabi Sunni Salafism. At the core, the struggle was one between moderates and extremes. He said that his main worry was that "this is a struggle where the tolerant Islam which we have been taught for 1400 years is sinking to the ground."

Dr Mehrdad Khonsari
Dr Khonsari also added that the positions of Shi'a in Iran mostly supported Ayatollah Sistani and noted that not even the Shi'a in Iraq were unified. Furthermore he pointed out that Iranians liked to project a greater impression of their capabilities than the reality.

A member of the audience asked, what was the motivation of the US in going into Iraq? Colin Powell had made a good presentation that there were WMDs, but, given the lack of international legal support for the invasion, the speaker asked whether the US hadn't committed aggression?

Dr Judith Yaphe
Dr Yaphe acknowledged that many in the US believed the false reports that Saddam was building up WMDs and was linked to Al-Qaeda and agreed that the reasons they gave were not provable or defensible. The latter accusation, that Saddam had close links to Al Qaeda was a blatant distortion. She could not defend when, why and how the invasion had been carried out. She also noted that no-one had talked of democracy as a goal in 2002 because they had focused on the two issues that people were afraid of, namely terrorism and WMDs.

A member of the audience stated that there was a widely held school of thought that American interests and Iranian interests coincided in wanting stability in Iraq. He asked whether the panel could foresee a time when the US and Iran might sit and talk together of ways to achieve a stable Iraq? He added that 20 years ago, the West had had the same reason for hating Iran, but whether it wouldn't be much cheaper now just to bring the Iranians to the negotiating table and ask them what they wanted?

Khalid Nadeem
Mr Nadeem added that, regarding Dr Yaphe's comment that there had been no dialogue between the US and Iran in last 20 years, both sides needed to sit down and not rely on third parties, and stressed that in his opinion a timetable really needed to be set.

Dr Kassem Jaffar
Dr Jaffar agreed that there was a potential bottom line of agreement between Iran and the United States on the issue of keeping an acceptable level of stability in Iraq - but he asked what constituted the threshold and what was the definition of stability? He stressed that such issues could not be separated from the regional equation; they could no longer be handled from a unilateral point of view or even a bilateral point of view, but needed to be looked at from a multilateral perspective. From day one, it had become clear that the "can of worms" was regional and each party had its own set of objectives. There was no exception among the powers that had intervened in Iraq. He asked whether Iraqi Shi'a and Iranians would see themselves as part of the same constituency. He pointed out that it would be a disaster for Iran if Najaf and Karbala eclipsed Qom, pointing out that Khomeini himself had tried to remove the 'glow' of those cities.

Dr Mehrdad Khonsari
Dr Khonsari noted that militant anti-Americanism was the cornerstone of the Islamic regime's foreign policy and there was no sign that it had changed. There had been American tactical moves, like the idea of sitting down at a table with Iranians. But although the US had had this option on table for over twenty years, it was Iran that set down the preconditions. Dr Khonsari asked whether Iran really wanted to end the low intensity conflict in Iraq or whether they wanted to maintain the status quo in

order to maintain their power. He said that he didn't believe that the Iranian regime was ready to set aside its policy favouring the low intensity conflict against the US on the ground. The Iranians wanted to extract an additional price from the US to abandon their policy of anti-Americanism. But he argued that trust between the parties had been so badly eroded that it called into question any such progress.

Dr Judith Yaphe
Dr Yaphe said that she was reminded of Regan's mantra regarding the Soviets, "Trust but verify…" If Iraq disintegrated, it would be against both interests, but there was a need to convince Iranians what their interests were. Yes, it would be cheaper to handle it by asking Iran what it wanted: she said that Iran wanted to be regional hegemon but argued that others didn't want this. It would be naïve to assume that US would totally withdraw since it was building bases in Iraq, Dr Yaphe added. She pointed out that Iranians saw Iraq primary as a security threat since they share a 1400 km border. If too many demands were made on the Iraqi government by the US or Iran, it would weaken the government.

Dr Kassem Jaffar
Dr Jaffar said that whether one liked it or not, Iran had made itself party to all regional conflicts; Iran had become party to the Arab-Israeli conflict, both politically and militarily; the Iranian nuclear question was not only related to Iranian issues, it was also linked to the Arab-Israeli conflict and regional security. In the next few years, he predicted that Iran would be a major player in the region whether other actors liked it or not and we would have to take this into account.

Session IV - Conclusions: The Sunni Shi'a Political Divide: Real or Imaginary?

Chair: **Dr Rosemary Hollis,** Director of Research. Chatham House

Speakers: **Dr Claire Spencer,** Head, Middle East Programme, Chatham House
Nadim Shehadi, Associate Fellow, Middle East Programme, Chatham House
Dr Ahmad Ghoreishi, Senior Lecturer, National Security Affairs, Naval Postgraduate School

Dr Ahmad Ghoreishi

Dr Ghoreishi observed that although the subject of Sunnis and Shi'as had been discussed in detail, few had mentioned the issues underlying their differences. To being with, he explained, there were three fundamentals agreed upon by all Muslims: first, a belief in the unity of God; second, that all the prophets were accepted; finally, a belief in a life hereafter and that one had to be accountable for one's behaviour. However, he said that the Shi'a had added two further concepts to these: they held that only direct descendants of the prophet Muhammad could rule in his absence. Although the twelfth Imam had disappeared, it was believed that he would reappear but meanwhile those who ruled would rule in his name. Consequently, those ruling needed to be learned figures and this led to the rule of the mullahs. The other concept added by the Shi'a was justice: governments must rule according to justice but, to be just, one had to be willing to implement the rule of the last imam. He added that for many, these were fundamental differences, not just variations on ritual.

In the 16th Century, Iran had adopted Shi'ism as the official version of Islam to single itself out among its Arab neighbours. At this time, almost 1000 years after the time of Muhammad, the call to prayer was changed to acknowledge the role of Ali and this ran contrary to the beliefs accepted by Sunnis. Indeed, he added that there was a gulf of ideological differences among Sunnis and Shi'a, not the least of which were reflected in Shi'a rituals such as self-flagellation. However, he noted that while the Shi'a were undoubtedly a significant minority, they were nonetheless a minority. Still, Sunni leaders feared the power that a Shi'a state would confer upon the mullahs, recalling the powerful influence of al-Sistani on Iraqi leaders like Jafari and Maliki.

Dr Ghoreishi continued, noting that Iran was one of the few countries in the Middle East with a long, uninterrupted history of self-governance. Consequently, this continuous history of 2500 years had bred a very strong Iranian nationalism. He added that Iranians were very proud of their cultural heritage and noted with pride that a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York reflected the wealth of Iran's artistic history.

He noted that Iran was somewhat the "odd man out" in the Persian Gulf, being neither Sunni nor Arab, and that it had a long history, rich traditions, one of the largest populations and that it was not a "temporary" presence in the region. However, he recalled that Iranian society used to be far more secular than it was today, that there had been poets who had spoken out against organized religion, for example.

Dr Ghoreishi was concerned about the radicalization of Islam and noted with concern that more Muslims seemed to be dying at the hands of other Muslims than any other groups.

Nadim Shehadi

Mr Shehadi began by stating that he believed the measure of a successful conference was one from which you come out feeling that you understood less than you had before. He added that the transnational element of all the problems spoken about, such as the doubts regarding the loyalty of Shi'a communities to their home countries, was very important in understanding the Shi'a phenomenon.

Mr Shehadi continued by observing that the concept of a cohesive state was a western, post-Westphalian construct based on an illusion regarding the possibility of realizing a cohesive state. He pointed out that the west had killed millions of people in order to make this concept a reality. The world was, he said, now faced with another illusion, which was "diversity" of identities. In the Arab world that had succeeded the Ottoman Empire, there were no borders, no "nationalisms" and identities were simply taken for granted - if you were Druze, you were Druze; if you were Christian, you were simply accepted as such. Identities did not need to be justified.

The West, Mr Shehadi suggested, had done the Arabs a favour by creating borders so they did not have to kill millions to achieve their states. They had got their borders cheaply, he suggested. However, the transnational element of the Arab communities, such as the Shi'a, for example had remained. For example, Lebanon had become a place where the Shi'a congregated and exchanged ideas, and Shi'a revivalism was born. Shi'a ulemmas of the radical mould wanted to revolt against their quietist leaders who were waiting for the Mahdi to return. Mr Shehadi continued to illustrate the transnational element of Shi'a revivalism by noting that some of the younger

radicals across the region had been inspired by the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood and had even became members of the organization. Thus, ideological elements were transported across borders. Consequently, Mr Shehadi noted that Hizbullah was as much Iranian as it was Lebanese. "When you don't have borders, you don't have majorities or minorities," he remarked.

Regarding the possibility of a Sunni-Shi'a political divide in Iraq, Mr Shehadi remarked that if you had, for example, a dry barn and then threw in a little spark, it would set the barn ablaze. Similarly, if the atmosphere in Iraq was ripe for a civil war, a small incident could set it off. The ensuing Sunni-Shi'a conflict would be global because ideologies and identities transcended political borders. Mr Shehadi added, however, that he did not yet believe there was a civil war in Iraq because although there had been numerous incidents capable of sparking one, a long history of coexistence had prevented its outbreak to date.

Mr Shehadi concluded by noting that, "Sectarianism is in the eye of the beholder." No group was uniform since within each group there were cleavages and differences. Internal debates and controversies, he observed, were sometimes more violent than those between the groups themselves.

Dr Claire Spencer

Dr Claire Spencer began by saying that although the subject seemed clearly to be a manipulation and, to certain extent, a fabrication, she noted that Dr Ghoreishi believed the theological divide to be very real. Responding to Dr Jaffar's earlier comment, she also recalled that the Protestant-Catholic divide had been very deep and had been based on ideological, philosophical and doctrinal differences. However, she continued, these need not be existential differences. Noting the comparable situation that had existed among communities in Ireland, she questioned whether these were really religious divides or whether they were not more conditioned by social, economic and political differences?

Dr Spencer also remarked that although the speakers at the conference had spoken of the complexity of the historical and religious issues, the US and the UK continued to see the region in simplistic terms. Why, she asked, given the wealth of knowledge on the region, did none of that seem to be reflected in American or British policy? She saw four possible reasons for this. First, politicians were new to the subject and could not catch up with its complexities. When they were in the region, there was always a fear that they were being manipulated so that everyone had a different history to their behaviour. The paradox was, however, that the politicians were being manipulated in any case. The second reason, Dr Spencer continued, was a fear that parts of the Middle East were completely unmanageable. How could they US and UK leave if all the building blocks were not in place? She noted in an aside that this had not been a problem for the Israelis leaving Gaza. The third reason, Dr Spencer continued, was a fear of getting further bogged down and getting "contaminated" by contemporary events. Labelling certain groups as "others" allowed them to observe events from a safe distance.

Dr Spencer recalled Charles Tripp's earlier statement that the American-led forces went into Iraq "wilfully unprepared". That was the worry, she reiterated, that there was a great deal of knowledge and experience regarding the Middle East but that it had not been utilised in planning the operation.

The fourth reason accounting for the simplistic terms in which the US and UK perceived the Middle East, Dr Spencer continued, was a fear of actually recognising the legitimacy of Iran in the region, the role that it could and should play. The focus on the nuclear issue had obliterated this role, she said: if everyone in the region could create policies to deal with their neighbours, why not Iran?

Dr Spencer concluded by noting that the US and UK would like to see Iran's ultra-nationalist tendencies moderated. However, she noted that Europe had moved on from assuming that the views of a regime reflected that of its whole populace. She pointed out that all Iranians did not hate Americans though many did not favour American *policies*. If Sunnis and Shi'a alike have a hostility or animosity towards the West, what could the West do to overcome that animosity, to overcome the potential Cold War between West and Islam?

Discussion

Christophe van Luten
Mr van Luten asked Dr Ghoreishi, who had argued that Iran should play a dominant role in the region and had told the audience that there was a stronger tendency to be tolerant and moderate, why was Iran not trying to be a *moderator* then in the region?

Hormoz Naficy
Mr Naficy disagreed with Mr Ghoreishi regarding Iranian hostility to the West and the Sunni-Shi'a divide. He acknowledged there was animosity towards the US on "the street", but he noted that if one were to speak to people on the Iranian street, one would note their disagreement with the Bush administration, not the West. Most of the Iranian youth wanted to emulate the West. Noting Mr Shehadi's Iranian suit, he added that he hoped Mr Shehadi would wear it well and remember that "We do not share Dr Ghoreishi's views about our brothers and sisters in the region".

Dr Ahmad Ghoreishi
Dr Ghoreishi replied that he was not seeking to make extreme comments but was just stating facts. Persian tradition and culture was often anti-Arab, he noted, in the same way that Wahhabis often did not consider the Shi'a to be "true" Muslims.

Dr Rosemary Hollis
Dr Hollis added that it was important to remember that the UK also had witnessed the use of some appalling language about others, and asked where that had got us today?

Dr Ahmad Ghoreishi
Dr Ghoreishi replied that there was a strong anti-Arab sentiment among Persians and vice-versa and that he was simply acknowledging that it existed.

Dr Claire Spencer
Dr Spencer noted that such oppositional emotions were circumstantial. If one were to go back far enough there were tensions and disagreements between all countries, such as the rivalries between the Scots and the English, for example. All had suffered transgressions that could not be taken into account for contemporary circumstance. She noted, for example, that an affluent Moroccan woman she recently spoke with had vehemently defended Iranian nuclear power, demonstrating a lack of the anti-Persian sentiment.

Nadim Shehadi
Mr Shehadi noted that in a recent survey, the country that most hated the US was Canada! Such animosity was more a consequence of America being a superpower, he said, not of Islam. If one were to look for militants one could find them, he added, but if one looked at what people were listening to, influenced by and excited by, it was often reflective of the West. The Iraq conflict was still 'hot', he continued, and the direction in which the region was headed would appear only in a few years. He noted that much of the younger generation was more interested in pop culture and transnational cultural elements such as music and movies, and recalled that there had been more demonstrations in Lebanon regarding events on "Star Academy" (a kind of Lebanese American Idol) than regarding the Palestinian question. Consequently, pop culture might be useful in reflecting trends more accurately and especially in countering journalists' image of the Arab world as very anti-Western.

A member of the audience remarked that pop culture was not indicative of any pro-Western leanings because pop culture was no longer an "American" thing, it had become universal. She added that there *were* differences and antipathies but the main issue of contention was that of Western influence. Why did the West interfere so much and not let the people in the Middle East deal with their differences themselves?

Another member of the audience noted that there were some moderate Shi'a in Iran but that they were excluded from power. Noting also that there was Shi'a bias against Sunnis, he recounted that in some areas, when a Sunni converted to Shi'ism there was a celebration marking his conversion into a "Muslim." The international community, he continued, had a tendency to act when it was too late. Were they willing to act now before it was too late?

A member of the audience noted that Colin Powell said he rejected the idea that there was an increase in anti-Americanism on the basis that lots of people wanted visas to get in. However, the American problem was that of Roman Empire, he added, recalling that the people who overthrew Rome did not intend to destroy it, but wanted instead the benefits of Rome.

Dr Mehrdad Khonsari
Dr Khonsari acknowledged that there *was* a Shi'a-Sunni divide, but wondered whether this would be politicized to an extent that would make the region far more insecure than it already was, and leave a legacy of insecurity. Western powers were already there in the region but what could they do to contain this violence, he asked. How can we stop this difference being inflamed?

Dr Ahmad Ghoreishi
Dr Ghoreishi said that what was needed now was for Shi'as and Sunnis to accept that there was a new Iraq and he believed that Iraq would come out of this experience stronger. As to what the West could do, he replied they could help solve the Arab-Israeli issue. He remarked that this issue needed to be solved in order for other problems to be solved. He added that the US was the only country that could achieve this and said that the settlement would have to be imposed because the Arabs and Israelis would never come to an agreement themselves.

Nadim Shehadi
Mr Shehadi remarked that this divide was imaginary, that a conflict was being waged between those that were religious and those who were secular; those who were globalised versus those who were fanatics. He said that undoubtedly Iraq was undergoing a period of violent change and transition but added that it would settle

down. Things would certainly change, he continued, but given the last 20 years, change could only be good. He added that the Palestine issue was simply an excuse, that it was an internal question and had a purely internal dimension.

Dr Claire Spencer
Dr Spencer replied that, as far as West was concerned, it seemed like a policy of "divide and rule". The divide was a way of containing and isolating groups even longer and keeping Hizbullah at distance. Policy should be "divide so others can rule," creating not a divide between Sunnis and Shi'as but between extremists and moderates, thereby aiming for the "middle ground" that we hear so much about but which never seemed to be politically favoured. What was being forgotten, she emphasised, was the fundamental security of Palestinians. The West had made a good case for the security of Israelis but the lack of concern for the security of ordinary Palestinians threatened the security of the region, she said. Without security in the region, the religious question and any divides could easily be manipulated, Dr Spencer concluded.

End of conference