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The Problem of the “Shi’a Crescent” in the Middle East: A Quantitative Analysis

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Abstract. The relevance of this research is due to the unabated interest of the international community in the struggle for regional leadership between Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), which has unfolded in the Middle East for a number of years. The growing concerns of the KSA and its geopolitical allies, the United States and the small Arabian monarchies, related to the increasing influence of Iran on the military-political situation in Syria and Iraq, have raised in international discourse the question of the reality or impossibility of creating the so-called “Shi’a crescent” under the auspices of Tehran. The idea is to unite the states of the Middle East, in which Shi’a Muslims constitute the vast majority or a significant minority of the population, which would ensure Iran’s decisive victory in the race for dominance in the region. However, until now, the question of a quantitative assessment of the real resources of the states included in the “Shi’a crescent” has so far remained out of researchers’ sight. In this regard, the aim of this article is to prove the absence of economic and military-political prerequisites for the formation of the “Shi’a crescent” by using the method of quantitative indicators from databases, rankings and indices and a network analysis of conventional arms supplies within the “Sunni” and “Shi’a” blocs. The databases of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Doing Business, Human Capital, Global Firepower, Global Terrorism, and Global Peace rankings, as well as World Bank statistical reports served as an empirical basis for the research. The theoretical and methodological basis of the study was constructive realism, which takes into account both quantitative indicators and the ideological and value attitudes of the state in the analysis of international relations. The study showed that the “Shi’a crescent” is a purely propaganda construct, and cannot become a real interstate association.

Key words: Shi’a crescent, Sunni states, Iran, economic indicators, military potential, quantitative analysis, Middle East

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
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Проблема существования «шиитского полумесяца» на Ближнем и Среднем Востоке: опыт количественного анализа

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Аннотация. Актуальность исследуемой темы обусловлена не ослабевающим уже в течение ряда лет интересом международного сообщества к борьбе за лидерство между Ираном и Королевством Саудовская Аравия (КСА), развернувшейся на Ближнем Востоке. Растущие опасения КСА и ее геополитических союзников в лице США и малых аравийских монархий, связанные с усиливающимся влиянием Ирана на военно-политическую обстановку в Сирии и Ираке, воскресили в международном дискурсе вопрос о реальности или невозможности создания так называемого «шиитского полумесяца» под эгидой Тегерана. Идея заключается в объединении государств Ближнего и Среднего Востока, в которых мусульмане-шииты составляют подавляющее большинство или значительное меньшинство населения, что позволило бы обеспечить Ирану решительную победу в гонке за доминирование в регионе. Однако до сих пор вне поля зрения исследователей оставался вопрос количественной оценки реальных ресурсов государств, включаемых в состав «шиитского полумесяца». В этой связи целью исследования является доказательство отсутствия экономических и военно-политических предпосылок для формирования «шиитского полумесяца» посредством использования метода количественных показателей с привлечением баз данных, рейтингов и индексов и сетевого анализа поставок обычных вооружений внутри «суннитского» и «шиитского» блоков государств. Эмпирическое исследование опирается на базы данных Конференции ООН по торговле и развитию (ЮНКТАД), Всемирной торговой организации (ВТО), Организации экономического сотрудничества и развития (ОЭСР), Регистра обычных вооружений ООН, Стокгольмского института мира (SIPRI), рейтинги Doing Business, Human Capital, Global Firepower и др. Теоретико-методологической базой исследования послужил конструктивный реализм, учитывающий как количественные показатели, так и идеологические и ценностные установки государства при анализе международных отношений. Исследование показало, что «шиитский полумесяц» является сугубо пропагандистским конструктом, который не может стать реальным межгосударственным объединением.

Ключевые слова: шиитский полумесяц, суннитские государства, Иран, экономические показатели, военный потенциал, количественный анализ, Ближний Восток

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Introduction

In recent years, the issue of forming the “Shi‘a arc” or “Shi‘a crescent,” controlled by Tehran and supposedly designed to destabilize

both Western countries and their Sunni allies in the Arab world, has become very relevant and escalated almost to a frenzy. This is due to the ongoing political instability in Lebanon and Iraq,

the civil war in Syria, the rise of Shi'a political activism in the Persian Gulf, and the unrelenting tensions around Iran. However, to what extent are the fears of the Sunni part of the "Islamic world" justified? Is the so-called "Shi'a crescent" a reality of contemporary world politics? Or are we witnessing yet another argument in the anti-Iranian polemic that has no real basis?

The growth of anti-Shi'a sentiments in the Middle East has been provoked by the growing influence of Shi'ites in various countries of the region, particularly in Iraq, both at the governmental level and at the level of non-traditional actors. These are Shi'a non-state armed organizations that have shown themselves in the fight against DAESH (ISIS, IS, Islamic State)¹ and other terrorist groups.²

Another factor contributing to the growth of Shi'a influence in the Middle East is Iran's commitment to its traditional foreign policy course, which is characterized by independence from situational changes in the international environment and any partnership obligations that membership in military-political blocs invariably leads to, as well as adherence to its own immutable principles, based on the Shi'a Islamic mentality.

It should also be emphasized that in the Sunni world, the continuing growth of Shi'a activism is causing concern, due, among other things, to the development of Shi'a political thought and the increasing activity of Shi'ite political parties and movements.

The concept of the "Shi'a arc," first used by the Saudi cleric Sefr al-Hawali in 1992, and then picked up by King Abdullah II of Jordan in 2004 (i.e., by the Sunni side),³ appears

¹ Hereinafter, an organization included in the list of terrorist organizations in the Russian Federation is mentioned.

² For more information, see: (Chikrizova, 2021).

³ Wright R., Baker P. Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election from Iran: Leaders Warn against Forming Religious State // Washington Post. December 8, 2004. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43980-2004Dec7.html> (accessed: 14.08.2021).

quite often in journalistic articles, as well as in serious academic publications by Russian (Kurshakov, 2012; Pukhovaya, 2013; Druzhilovskii, 2016; Sarab'ev, 2019; Khazanov & Gasratyan, 2021; Shumilin, 2021; Komleva, 2022) and foreign (Thual, 2007; Pahlavi, 2008; Nisan, 2009; Louër, 2009; 2019, pp. 98—99; Mabon, 2019; Balanche, 2021) authors.

The topic of the "Shi'a crescent" is based on a rough statement of the geographical continuity of Shi'ite territory: from northern India and Pakistan⁴ through Afghanistan to Iran, southern Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. It is also about threats to the production and movement of Middle Eastern hydrocarbons, since many of the Shi'ite communities live in close proximity to the fields where hydrocarbons are produced and from which they are transported to Western countries.

Most researchers look for the "Shi'a factor" in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, recalling that after the Islamic Revolution of 1978—1979, Tehran made the "export" of revolution to the states of the "Islamic world" the basis of its international activities (Mervin, 2007). But few mention the fact that Ayatollah R.M. Khomeini, the ideologist of the Iranian Revolution, never mentioned its Shi'a nature in his speeches, statements, and writings. On the contrary, he always emphasized the pan-Islamic content of the revolution, trying to convince the entire Muslim Ummah: despite the fact that the

⁴ In India, as in Pakistan, Shi'ites constitute 15—20% of the Muslim population of the country, making them one of the significant religious minorities in these countries. See: Mapping the Global Muslim Population // Pew Research Center. October 7, 2009. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/> (accessed: 10.05.2022); Pakistan 2021 International Religious Freedom Report // U.S. Department of State. 2022. P. 4. URL: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/PAKISTAN-2021-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf> (accessed: 10.05.2022). These states also face Sunni-Shi'a confrontation in domestic politics, as well as being involved in the global Sunni-Shi'a confrontation. However, this issue is beyond the scope of our study.

first Islamic revolution was carried out by Shi'ite forces, the state proclaimed in Iran is precisely "Islamic" in the sense that all Muslims put into that word,⁵ regardless of the current or madhhab.

The authors revealed a lack of studies analyzing the resource potential of Shi'a states, which are commonly included in the "Shi'a crescent." Consequently, most of the conclusions about the reality or ephemeral nature of the "Shi'a crescent" seem to be insufficiently substantiated, since they are not supported by quantitative data. The present study aims to fill this gap.

Theoretical and Methodological Basis of the Research

Given the uncertainty of the existence of the "Shi'a crescent," as well as the presence of complex and contradictory trends in the Middle East, the views of researchers who consider the system of international relations as a set of actions of actors characterized by unpredictable behavior are of particular interest. Such views are characteristic of one of the strands of the realist paradigm — constructive realism. Unlike its classical political version, constructive realism focuses not only on the economic, political, and military performance of countries, but also on a qualitative analysis of measuring the role of ideology (Lobell, 2017), religion, and national identity (meaning the system of state ideas) by examining dependent and independent variables (Barkin, 2010; Donnelly, 2008). Such variables may include state interests, economic and investment indicators, the system of values, etc. The combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators of the potential of the "Shi'a bloc" countries makes it possible to assess the prospect of the emergence of the "Shi'a crescent."

⁵ See: Khomeini R. M. *Islamic rule*. Almaty : Atamura, 1993. (In Russian); Imam Khomeini's Last Will and Testament. 1989. URL: <https://www.al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/39086> (accessed: 01.02.2021).

The methodology used by constructive realists is founded on inductive theory, based on the study of cultural or other value-oriented identities. At the same time, the authors face the inversion task — to prove that the countries making up the core of the "Shi'a crescent," despite having common views on the religious factor, do not have real domestic and foreign political resources to confront the "Sunni bloc." The objectives of the study are not only to examine the potential of the Shi'a countries, but also to search for evidence of the presence or absence of intra-bloc ties.

The novelty of the study lies in the fact that to assess the potential of the "Shi'a crescent" countries the data obtained from rankings and indices were taken as the basis. The so-called "charts power" makes it possible to form a verified system of views on the potential of the states in question due to the fact that a number of Middle Eastern countries do not publish data on their economic and military potential in open sources. In addition, it is with the help of rankings and indices that one can analyze state behavior, conduct systematic monitoring, and, after obtaining numerical indicators, rank groups of countries for comparison (Kelley & Simmons, 2015, p. 55).

The study is divided into two blocks. The first is represented by databases reflecting GDP indicators, the dynamics of exports and imports of goods, the volume of foreign debt and oil production of the so-called "Shi'a crescent" and the "Sunni bloc." Using the comparison method, the potential of each group is evaluated and possible competitive advantages are identified. The second block is represented by rankings/indices which basically rank the countries according to one or another principle. Economic rankings and security indices are chosen for comparative analysis. They are supposed to be used to assess the combined place of the countries of the "Shi'a crescent" and the "Sunni bloc" in the world economic and security system.

Rationale for the “Shi’a Bloc”

The selection of states for the “Shi’a bloc” was a rather difficult task, since there are only a few states in the world with an overwhelming majority of Shi’ite population, but not all of these countries seek to emphasize their confessional identity in the international arena. In this regard, as the study proceeds, reservations will be made for a number of states.

The inclusion of such states, as Iran (90—95% of Shi’ites), Lebanon (45—55% of Shi’ites), and Syria (15—20% of Shi’ites)⁶ in the states of the “Shi’a crescent,” is caused by the fact, that most authors, discussing the “Shi’a crescent” include the mentioned countries in it, because of close relations between political leaders of these states, as well as the dominance of Shi’ite Muslims there in all countries except Syria, where the Alawites (one of the branches of Shi’ism) are an ethno-religious minority, but it is the Alawites who currently dominate the government and the armed forces.

Also the “Shi’a bloc” includes the states where the majority of population are Shi’ites — Iraq (45—55%) and Bahrain (65—75%).⁷ Moreover, Iraq can be called the center of Shi’a Islam, since two major Shi’a shrines, Kerbela and Najaf, are located on Iraqi territory. The authoritative schools of Shi’a theology were established in these cities.

The inclusion of Yemen (35—40% of Shi’ites⁸) in the bloc of Shi’a states is due to the fact that in the academic and political environment it is widely believed that Tehran is supporting the Yemeni political Houthi movement Ansar Allah (Bröning, 2008; Itzhakov, 2018), which consists of Zaydi

Shi’ites.⁹ At the same time, the accusations against Tehran are not supported by convincing facts and documentary evidence. In this regard, one of the secondary objectives of this study will be to find evidence or refutation of Iran’s connection to the Yemeni Houthis.

Rationale for the “Sunni Bloc”

Given the fact that the number of states where Sunnis make up the majority of the population is much larger than countries with a Shi’a majority, the authors were forced to decide on the composition of the “Sunni bloc”, excluding a number of states that have a significant weight in the “Islamic world” (e.g. Kuwait and Jordan). This was necessary in order for the blocs to be comparable in terms of the number of states. Otherwise, the superiority of the “Sunni bloc” would be explained by the simple demographic dominance of Sunnis in the world, which would make a comparative analysis of the two blocs irrelevant.

For the “Sunni bloc” we selected countries that are members of the so-called “Sunni NATO” (another simulacrum, the analysis of which, however, is beyond the scope of this study) and actively oppose the Zaydi movement Ansar Allah in Yemen. This choice is due to the anti-Shi’a orientation of the Saudi-led coalition of countries in Yemen. In particular, Morocco, the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt were included in the “Sunni bloc” on the grounds that these states took an active part in operations “Determination Storm” and “Renewal of Hope” during the invasion of Yemen to overthrow the Houthi regime.

Pakistan, which has declared its support for these operations and its interest in mediating in the Yemeni crisis, is also included in this bloc on the grounds that, according to the Constitution (1973), Islam is the state religion of the Islamic Republic of

⁶ Lipka M. The Sunni-Shia Divide: Where They Live, What They Believe and How They View Each Other // Pew Research Center. June 18, 2014. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/18/the-sunni-shia-divide-where-they-live-what-they-believe-and-how-they-view-each-other/> (accessed: 02.02.2021).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mapping the Global Muslim Population // Pew Research Center. October 7, 2009. URL: <https://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/> (accessed: 02.02.2021).

⁹ Zaydism (az-Zaydiyya) is the common name for the religious and political groups that recognized the Imamate of Zayd ibn Ali, the most moderate branch of Shi’ism. It was established in the 30s of the 8th century.

Pakistan (Art. 2).¹⁰ This is manifested in the foreign policy strategy in Islamabad's desire to establish itself as one of the leaders of the "Islamic world."

Most experts on Pakistan point out that Islam is central to Islamabad's "ideological outlook,"¹¹ making the issues of Islamic solidarity and promoting the unity of the Muslim Ummah as key to Pakistan's foreign policy. Islamabad actively cooperates with Sunni countries, especially Saudi Arabia, on security agenda. It was Pakistani General Raheel Sharif who led the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT), established in 2017 at the initiative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.¹² Thus, Pakistan fits very naturally into the design of our study.

The Arab Republic of Egypt (ARE) has traditionally been one of the leading and most powerful states in the Middle East and North Africa, often referred to as the "head of the Arab world." After the 2013 counter-revolution that toppled the regime of M. Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood Association,¹³ Egypt, led by President A. al-Sisi, began to implement the task of reviving the country's former power in the regional arena, which served as the impetus for the growing involvement of the ARE in the struggle for dominance in the Middle East and in counter-terrorism activities. Relying on

partnership with Western countries and their satellites in the Middle East, Egypt naturally became a member of the anti-Houthi coalition.

The Kingdom of Morocco, in turn, has been called a "showcase of the West" in North Africa for its close ties with the United States, France and other European states. Moreover, in recent years Morocco has intensified its efforts to implement the concept of "spiritual security," that is based on the defense of the "doctrinal unity of Moroccan Islam," which, in turn, is threatened by the growing influence of Shi'ite political activism in the Kingdom (Chikrizova & Morozova, 2020). This gives us reason to include Morocco in the "Sunni bloc."

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has recently been increasingly positioned in the academic literature as the growing leader of the Middle East. While the country's economic potential is beyond doubt, the increasing political ambitions of the UAE are evidenced by its growing activity in regional processes, such as the Syrian crisis, the civil war in Yemen, and the diplomatic blockade of Qatar (2017). In addition, the inclusion of the UAE in the "Sunni bloc" can also be justified by the fact that it has a long-standing territorial dispute with Iran over the islands of Abu Musa, Greater and Lesser Tunb, whose belonging to the UAE is disputed by Tehran.

Türkiye's inclusion in the "Sunni bloc" is due to the fact that it is actively involved in the struggle for regional leadership against Iran and Saudi Arabia, as evidenced by Ankara's active intervention in the Syrian crisis and the civil war in Libya. There is an opinion that the process of rallying Shi'ites around Iran was initiated by the Syrian crisis, which was perceived by the Shi'ites as a threat to their existence (Balanche, 2021).

In addition, mindful of its recent imperial past, Türkiye often appeals to the fact that for several centuries it was the Ottoman sultan who owned the title of caliph of the Islamic world (more precisely, its Sunni part), and currently Türkiye has successfully managed to combine

¹⁰ The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. 1973 // Law & Justice Commission of Pakistan. URL: <http://www.ljcp.gov.pk/Menu%20Items/1973%20Constitution/constitution.htm> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

¹¹ See, for example: Karim U. Pakistan's Foreign Policy Outlook: Islamic Solidarity and the Uyghur Question // RUSI. June 8, 2021. URL: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/pakistans-foreign-policy-outlook-islamic-solidarity-and-uyghur-question> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

¹² Kapila S. 'Sunni Muslim NATO Alliance' 2017 Commanded by Former Pak Army Chief Reviewed // Indian Defence Review. May 15, 2017. URL: <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/sunni-muslim-nato-alliance-2017-commanded-by-former-pak-army-chief-reviewed/> (accessed: 12.01.2023).

¹³ Hereinafter, an organization included in the list of terrorist organizations in the Russian Federation is mentioned.

moderate Islam and democratic principles in its political system. This makes the Turkish model attractive to many Middle Eastern states and allows researchers to consider Türkiye as an integral part of the “Sunni bloc.”

Of course, the authors do not claim that a “Sunni NATO” exists. Moreover, it is advisable to point out the existence of numerous problems in the bilateral relations of some countries included in the “Sunni bloc” (mainly the Saudi-Qatari, Saudi-Turkish, Turkish-Egyptian contradictions). The interaction of some Sunni countries with states included in the “Shi’a bloc” (economic contacts between the UAE and Iran, interaction between Türkiye and Iran over the Syrian crisis) is not a secret for us either. However, the authors did not seek an answer to the question of whether an alliance of Sunni states acts as a single actor in world politics, since this requires a separate study. Nevertheless, this article will draw some conclusions, which may serve as a basis for further scientific research on the problem of a “Sunni NATO” using the methodology and tools applied to assess the possibility/impossibility of creating a “Shi’a crescent.”

Economic and Military Indicators of the “Shi’a” and “Sunni” Blocs

In order to prove or disprove the existence of the “Shi’a bloc,” it is necessary to determine the total potential of the countries included in the “Shi’a crescent” and to clarify the possibility of their aggregate competition with the “Sunni bloc.” In this regard, it is possible to use materials, statistical indicators of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) databases, as well as indicators of the World Bank, etc. (Tables 1 and 2).

Based on the database materials, the following intermediate conclusions can be made.

The total GDP potential of the Sunni countries is twice as much as that of the “Shi’a bloc.” At the same time, the external debt of the “Sunni bloc” is larger, as are the export-import indicators, which indicates their greater involvement in the world economy. This confirms the theoretical thesis of constructive realism that the presence of strong ties between individual state units increases the potential for their involvement in individual economic systems.

Based on the data in Table 2 on the foreign trade partners of the “Shi’a” and “Sunni” blocs, it is clear that Sunni countries are more open to cooperation with the world’s strongest economies and also do not exclude cooperation with countries in the opposite camp. At the same time, the states also included in the “Sunni bloc” are not among the top five foreign trade partners for all but Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE. This is due to the fact that Sunni countries have similar categories of export goods. Therefore, it is natural that they supply their goods to states outside the Middle East.

What Sunni countries have in common in their value system is that they are more open to interaction with non-Muslim countries. This is explained, first of all, by the secular nature of the regimes in the vast majority of Sunni countries, i.e., religious authorities there do not have a significant influence on politics. Moreover, in Saudi Arabia, the only theocratic state, clerics often serve the interests of the ruling regime by issuing fatwas justifying the Saudi state’s cooperation with non-Muslim countries (Kosach, 2013).

In turn, the values and ideology of the states included in the “Shi’a bloc,” due to the very essence of Shi’a doctrine, should be based on the concept of justice and the postulate of the struggle against oppressors (Chikrizova, 2017), which mainly include countries that implement the policy of neocolonialism. Struggle, therefore, excludes cooperation and close interaction with such countries, which limits the range of potential economic partners of the “Shi’a bloc.”

Table 1

Comparative Indicators of the Economic Potential of the “Sunni” and “Shi’a” Blocs in 2021

| Country | GDP, mln USD | Total external debt, mln USD | Oil production, mln tons | Export of goods, mln USD | Import of goods, mln USD |
|---------------------|------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| “Sunni bloc” | | | | | |
| Morocco | 130 255 | 65.414 | n/a | 35 843 | 58 034 |
| UAE | 418 279 | 237.6* | 164.4 | 425 160 | 347 529 |
| KSA | 830 325 | 205.1* | 515.0 | 276 179 | 152 850 |
| Qatar | 185 666 | 167.8* | 73.3 | 87 203 | 27 985 |
| Türkiye | 808 338 | 435.451 | n/a | 225 218 | 271 426 |
| Egypt | 405 911 | 143.246 | 29.6 | 43 626 | 83 503 |
| Pakistan | 293 935 | 130.433 | n/a | 28 319 | 72 515 |
| Total: | 3 072 709 | 1 385.044 | 782.3 | 1 121 548 | 941 327 |
| “Shi’a bloc” | | | | | |
| IRI | 1 410 912 | 10.349 | 167.7 | 71 646 | 48 978 |
| Lebanon | n/a | 66.893 | n/a | 4 590 | 13 857 |
| Syria | n/a | 5.029 | 4.6 | 739 | 6 463 |
| Iraq | 202 449 | 25.263 | 200.8 | 86 298 | 66 217 |
| Yemen | 33 755 | 7.587 | 2.8 | 662 | 5 204 |
| Bahrain | 38 313 | 52.15* | n/a | 22 369 | 14 188 |
| Total: | 1 685 429 | 167.271 | 375.9 | 186 304 | 154 907 |

Source: UNCTADStat Country Profile // UNCTAD. URL: <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/CountryProfile/en-GB/index.html> (accessed: 12.12.2022); International Debt Statistics (IDS) // The World Bank. URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/debt-statistics/ids> (accessed: 12.12.2022); BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2022 // BP. URL: <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2022-full-report.pdf> (accessed: 12.12.2022).

* — The World Bank reports do not contain data on the external debt of a number of countries. In this case, the authors resorted to the data of the CIA World Factbook (2017). URL: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/> (accessed: 12.12.2022).

Note: n/a — no data available.

Table 2

Top 5 Foreign Trade Partners for the “Sunni” and “Shi’a” Blocs in 2021

| “Sunni bloc” | | | “Shi’a bloc” | | |
|--------------|---|--|--------------|--|--|
| Country | Top 5 partners | Export volume, mln USD | Country | Top 5 partners | Export volume, mln USD |
| Morocco | 1. Spain 2. France 3. India 4. Brazil 5. Italy | 8 473 8 153 1 936 1 663 1 652 | Iran | 1. China 2. China (Taiwan) 3. Iraq 4. India 5. <i>Türkiye</i> | 15 367 8 797 7 631 6 616 5 670 |
| UAE | 1. India 2. China 3. Japan 4. <i>Iraq</i> 5. KSA | 60 650 40 102 36 690 28 028 23 934 | Lebanon | 1. Switzerland + Liechtenstein 2. <i>UAE</i> 3. <i>KSA</i> 4. Republic of Korea 5. Iraq | 860 577 261 195 184 |
| KSA | 1. China 2. India 3. Japan 4. Republic of Korea 5. UAE | 57 591 29 443 29 211 25 261 15 376 | Syria | 1. Iraq 2. <i>KSA</i> 3. Lebanon 4. <i>Türkiye</i> 5. Algeria | 599 29 24 18 16 |

End of table 2

| “Sunni bloc” | | | “Shi’a bloc” | | |
|--------------|--|--|--------------|---|---|
| Country | Top 5 partners | Export volume, mln USD | Country | Top 5 partners | Export volume, mln USD |
| Qatar | 1. China 2. Japan 3. India 4. Republic of Korea 5. Singapore | 13 336 11 740 11 590 11 552 5 237 | Iraq | 1. China 2. India 3. Republic of Korea 4. USA 5. Greece | 21 630 20 825 6 662 6 464 4 578 |
| Türkiye | 1. Germany 2. USA 3. Great Britain 4. Italy 5. <i>Iraq</i> | 19 311 14 723 13 704 11 474 11 126 | Yemen | 1. China 2. Thailand 3. <i>KSA</i> 4. <i>UAE</i> 5. Austria | 176 133 67 44 40 |
| Egypt | 1. USA 2. KSA 3. India 4. Italy 5. Türkiye | 2 813 2 775 2 681 2 475 2 473 | Bahrain | 1. <i>UAE</i> 2. <i>KSA</i> 3. USA 4. Japan 5. Oman | 4 632 3 417 1 711 1 342 884 |
| Pakistan | 1. USA 2. China 3. Great Britain 4. Germany 5. Netherlands | 6 077 3 034 2 104 1 564 1 397 | | | |

Note. Partner countries belonging to the same bloc are shown in bold; partner countries in the opposite bloc are in italics. Source: UNCTADStat Country Profile // UNCTAD. URL: <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/CountryProfile/en-GB/index.html> (accessed: 12.12.2022).

The ideology based on the Shi’ite worldview is becoming a factor hindering the growth of the involvement of the states of the “Shi’a bloc” in the modern world economy. However, the data in Table 2 show that a number of countries (Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain) actively trade with both Western countries (mainly the United States) and pro-Western Eastern countries (Japan, South Korea). This may indicate either the unwillingness of these countries to be associated with the “Shi’a bloc,” or a desire to diversify trade and economic contacts. Additional data are needed to clarify the reason.

Based on the above, there is a direct correlation between the degree of openness of Sunni countries to the non-Islamic world and economic indicators.

The oil sector is a key to the economies of the Middle Eastern states. The indicators obtained by consulting the British Petroleum (BP) database suggest a lower potential for oil

exports from the “Shi’a bloc.” In addition, the low oil production indicators will not allow the countries included in the “Shi’a crescent” to establish a system of intra-bloc trade in hydrocarbons in order to meet their own needs (as, for example, the USSR could provide energy resources to its satellites from among the socialist bloc countries). Dumping oil prices for the allies would be an unaffordable luxury for Iran and Iraq, since then they would lose serious budget revenues of petrodollars from the sale of “black gold” to countries such as China.

To assess the military capabilities of the states in the “Sunni” and “Shi’a” blocs, the authors analyzed such indicators as total volume of military spending, the number of armed forces, and the number of imported conventional arms, using the UN Register of Conventional Arms, as well as SIPRI and Global Firepower (Table 3).

Table 3

**Comparative Indicators of the Military Potential
of the “Sunni” and “Shi’a” blocs in 2004—2023**

| Country | Total military expenditures, mln USD (2021) | Total number of armed forces, people (2023) | Number of imports of conventional arms (2004—2021), units |
|---------------------|---|---|---|
| “Sunni bloc” | | | |
| Morocco | 4997.4 | 375 000 | 1 627 |
| UAE | n/a | 77 000 | 21 103 |
| KSA | 53759.1 | 350 000 | 14 822 |
| Qatar | 11265.0 | 86 550 | 1 445 |
| Türkiye | 16708.8 | 775 000 | 30 094 |
| Egypt | 4876.5 | 1 220 000 | 8 099 |
| Pakistan | 10324.5 | 1 704 000 | 14 408 |
| Total: | 101 931.3 | 4 587 550 | 91 598 |
| “Shi’a bloc” | | | |
| IRI | 17574.9 | 1 015 000 | 0* |
| Lebanon | n/a | 105 000 | 519 |
| Syria | n/a | 150 000 | 114 |
| Iraq | 5359.5 | 330 000 | 8 325 |
| Yemen | n/a | 420 000 | 685 |
| Bahrain | 1367.7 | 133 000 | 1 884 |
| Total: | 24 302.1 | 2 153 000 | 11 527 |

Note. The designation “n/a” in the Total Military Expenditures column means that no data could be found for the indicated countries.

* — Since 2004, UNROCA has no data on the number of imports of conventional arms received by Iran, so it is not possible to calculate the total number of imports of conventional arms in the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database // Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. URL: <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri> (accessed: 12.12.2022); Global Firepower Nations Index (2023) // Global Firepower. URL: <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries.asp> (accessed: 12.01.2023); United Nations Register of Conventional Arms. URL: <https://www.unroca.org> (accessed: 12.12.2022).

Based on the data obtained, we can conclude that the military indicators of the Sunni countries are five times higher than those of the Shi’ite ones. This is due both to the economic superiority of the “Sunni bloc” described earlier, and to the existing international restrictions on the supply of various types of arms to the “Shi’a bloc.”

In addition, internal political contradictions in some Shi’ite states, in particular regarding the permissible level of interaction with Iran, have a negative impact on the intra-bloc consolidation of the so-called “Shi’a crescent,” including in the issue of supplying conventional arms. Let us briefly characterize these contradictions.

Bahrain, as already noted, is a Shi’ite-majority state, with the ruling dynasty, the Al Khalifa, practicing a Sunni interpretation of Islam. In addition, Bahrain is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and one of Saudi Arabia’s key trade and economic partners (see Table 2). The participation of GCC countries in the suppression of anti-government protests in Bahrain in 2011, as well as Manama’s pro-Saudi position in the 2017 diplomatic crisis around Qatar, is evidence of Bahrain’s strong political ties with its neighbors on the Arabian Peninsula. It should also not be forgotten that Manama has problems in its relations with Tehran, related, among other things, to the latter’s long-standing claims to include Bahrain’s territory into the Iranian state.

In light of the fact that political, as well as expert and academic circles are increasingly concerned about the spread of Iran’s influence on Bahraini Shi’ites, the leadership of the Kingdom is trying to “hide” its Shi’a identity by taking radical measures for this. Since the mid-2000s, the country has been implementing a program for the naturalization of foreign residents of the Sunni denomination in order to overcome the “skewed” demographic situation in favor of Shi’ites (Louër, 2012, p. 101).

As for Syria, which has traditionally been the “heart of the Arab world” and had one of the strongest armies in the region, the country is currently struggling to overcome the consequences of a long civil war: its infrastructure is destroyed, terrorist organizations have not yet been completely eradicated from Syria, and its economy

is in decline. This is evidenced by the ranking data, as well as the fact that in a number of rankings Syria simply could not be assessed.

Lebanon is one of the “solid middlings” of the “Shi‘a bloc.” At the same time, on the one hand, modern Lebanon suffers from the harmful influence of the situation in which neighboring Syria has been for 12 years. Moreover, within Lebanon itself there is a problem of ethno-religious imbalance: Christians are clearly no longer the majority of the population; Palestinian refugees are Sunni; Syrian refugees are also predominantly Sunni; there is a higher growth rate of Shi‘ite population than of Christian and Sunni. All of this may soon lead the country to a repeat of the bloody and destructive civil war of 1975—1990.

On the other hand, Lebanon has several advantages over other Shi‘a states. Beirut has friendly relations with Western (Christian) countries, which the government is trying to maintain and increase. As a secular state with a multi-confessional identity, Lebanon seeks to participate in all existing projects of inter-religious dialogue, and even initiates some of them. Thus, on September 16, 2019, at the initiative of Lebanese President M. Aoun, the UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/73/344 “Academy for Human Contacts and Dialogue” was adopted, which authorizes the creation of the Academy of the same name in the Lebanese capital, Beirut.¹⁴ The goal of the Academy was proclaimed “to establish contacts and dialogue between people.”¹⁵ Thus, Lebanon also does not position itself as a Shi‘a state.

¹⁴ Academy for Human Encounters and Dialogue // YouTube. October 24, 2019. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-0qm6BGHk0> (accessed: 12.10.2021).

¹⁵ Resolution A/RES/73/344 adopted by the General Assembly on 16 September 2019 “Academy for Human Encounters and Dialogue” // United Nations. 2019. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N19/284/24/PDF/N1928424.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed: 12.01.2023).

Today’s Iraq is currently facing such problems as the lack of effective state institutions capable of ensuring national security and fighting terrorism without the help of external forces and non-state armed actors; discrimination against the Sunni population as a result of the de-Ba’athification process and U.S. reliance on Shi‘ites; the lack of war-damaged infrastructure and a declining economy.

Yemen is a state where the Shi‘a factor has a serious influence on the political situation. However, Yemen has been in a state of periodic renewed civil war for almost 30 years. At present there is a very difficult situation in the health sector (epidemics, unsanitary conditions, lack of drinking water). Infrastructure is destroyed and the economy is in decline.

According to constructive realism, conventional arms exports are a direct dependent variable on military expenditures. It can be assumed that ideologically close countries should interact more closely with each other on mutual exchange/trade of arms. In order to understand whether the countries of the “Shi‘a bloc” fit into this assumption, it is necessary to assess the level of their arms trade through a network analysis of conventional arms exports among the bloc’s countries. The figures for the “Sunni bloc” are also presented for comparison (Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows that Iran and Türkiye are the key arms suppliers within the blocs (the thickness of the edges of the graph reflects the number of weapons transferred by the exporter to the importer). It is clear that the countries of the “Shi‘a bloc” do not have the technical ability to exchange arms, because they are dependent on arms exports, including from the “Sunni bloc.” In the event of a confrontation between countries of these two blocs, it would be easier for the Sunni countries to reorient themselves to a common military strategy and to exchange different types of conventional arms, given the existing indicators.

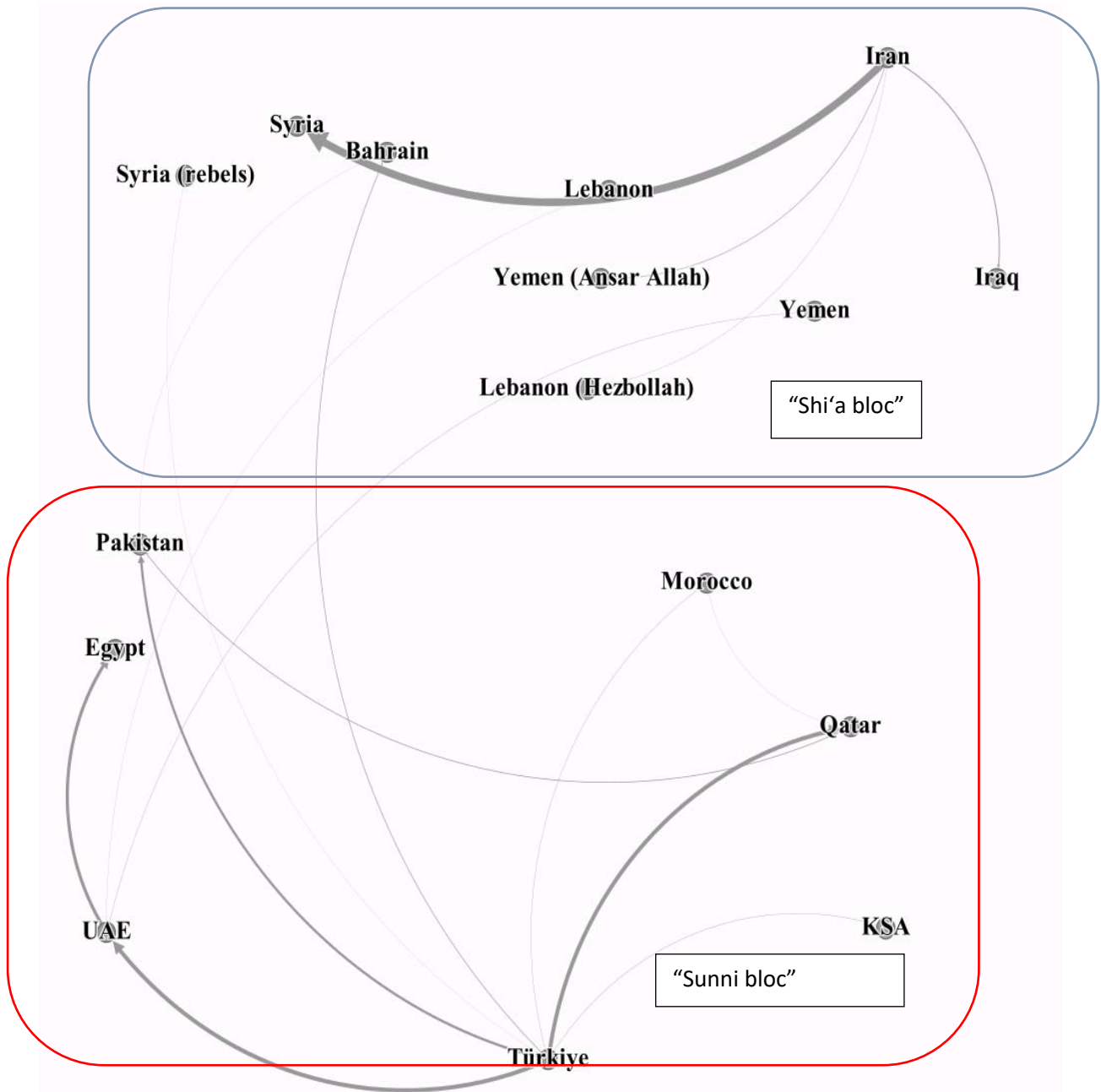


Figure 1. Network Analysis of Conventional Arms Exports between “Sunni” and “Shi’a” Blocs, 2018—2021*

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. URL: <https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php> (accessed: 22.10.2022).

* The SIPRI database does not contain information on arms deliveries from Iran for 2018—2021, but it does record information on the most recent announced deliveries in earlier years, as reflected in the figure: to Lebanese Hezbollah in 2006, to the Yemeni Houthis in 2017, to Iraq in 2014—2015, to Syria in 2006, 2008—2016.

Unlike the “Shi’a bloc,” the Sunni states have a more intensive arms exchange within it, which potentially serves as a reinforcing link in its military and political activities. This cannot

serve as direct evidence of the existence of a “Sunni NATO,” but it is an example of the growing dynamics of intra-bloc cooperation in the field of conventional arms.

Table 4

The Place of the “Sunni” and “Shi’a” Blocs in Economic and Security Rankings in 2020—2023

| No. | Ranking | “Sunni bloc” | | | | | | | Arithmetic mean | “Shi’a bloc” | | | | | | Arithmetic mean |
|------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|-----|-----|-------|---------|-------|----------|-----------------|--------------|---------|-------|------|-------|---------|-----------------|
| | | Morocco | UAE | KSA | Qatar | Türkiye | Egypt | Pakistan | | IRI | Lebanon | Syria | Iraq | Yemen | Bahrain | |
| ECONOMICS | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | Doing Business Index (2020) | 53 | 16 | 62 | 77 | 33 | 114 | 108 | 66 | 127 | 143 | 176 | 172 | 187 | 43 | 126 |
| 2 | Human Capital Index (2020) | 110 | 43 | 84 | 49 | 48 | 115 | 144 | 85 | 75 | 104 | — | 143 | 161 | 46 | 88 |
| SECURITY | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | Global Terrorism Index (2021) | 76 | 93 | 54 | 93 | 23 | 15 | 10 | 52 | 27 | 51 | 5 | 2 | 21 | 65 | 28 |
| 4 | Global Peace Index (2021) | 79 | 52 | 125 | 29 | 149 | 126 | 150 | 101 | 142 | 147 | 161 | 159 | 162 | 102 | 146 |
| 5 | Global Firepower Index (2023) | 61 | 56 | 22 | 65 | 11 | 14 | 7 | 34 | 17 | 111 | 64 | 45 | 74 | 79 | 65 |

Notes:

The countries with the highest economic rankings within each bloc and the lowest rankings in the Global Terrorism Index (the lower the state in this ranking, the lower the terrorist threat there) are highlighted in light grey.

The countries with the lowest economic rankings within each bloc and the highest rankings in the Global Terrorism Index are marked in dark grey.

Source: compiled by the authors based on: Doing Business Index. URL: https://www.doingbusiness.org/content/dam/doingBusiness/pdf/db2020/Doing-Business-2020_rankings.pdf (accessed: 10.02.2022); Human Capital Index. URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/human-capital> (accessed: 10.02.2022); Global Terrorism Index. URL: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/#/> (accessed: 10.02.2022); Global Peace Index. URL: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/> (accessed: 10.02.2022); Global Firepower Index. URL: <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

“Charts Power” of the “Shi’a Crescent”

In order to be able to assert the presence or absence of the “Shi’a crescent,” it is necessary to outline the main factors of the consolidation of bloc countries in the economic and security spheres. In this regard, in addition to the previously considered indicators of international databases, it is useful to assess the level of trust in Shi’a countries and the readiness of third countries (extra-regional actors) to support joint actions of the “Shi’a bloc” in the event of a crisis.

Let’s look at the rankings, which will help assess the potential ability of the “Shi’a bloc” to get new trade and economic partners, including on the basis of the domestic political situation (presence/absence of a terrorist threat, military potential) (Table 4).

According to security rankings, the situation in the “Shi’a bloc” countries is more unstable, if not critical, compared to the

situation in the Sunni states. This is due to the high level of terrorist threats, and with a shortage of conventional arms, this leads to an inability to ensure the normal functioning of the security system.

Based on the data in Table 4, it also becomes evident that the gap between the “leader” (2nd place) and the “outsider” (65th place) of the terrorist threat ranking within the “Shi’a bloc” is less significant (63 points) than within the “Sunni bloc” (83 points, provided that the index for the UAE and Qatar is not calculated, so they are automatically assigned the 93rd place). The situation in the Global Peace Index is similar, the gap between the best and worst place in the “Shi’a bloc” is 60 points. This is easily explained by the fact that two of the six Shi’a states are currently experiencing civil wars (Syria, Yemen), and Iraq has not yet fully restored its state institutions after the intervention of the US and

its allies (2003) and the terror of the Islamic State (ISIS, IS) banned in Russia.

The military capability ranking also demonstrates the leadership of the “Sunni bloc,” and the states with the highest positions in each bloc (Pakistan and Iran) are 10 points apart from each other. At the same time, there is a more significant difference between the leader and the outsider within the “Shi‘a bloc” (94 points), while all the Sunni states do not go beyond the top 65 of the Global Firepower Index. Thus, the data in this ranking only confirm the conclusions drawn in the assessment of military capability indicators (see Table 3).

Against the background of domestic political instability and lack of peace, external actors cannot have confidence in the “Shi‘a bloc” countries and, therefore, prefer not to invest in the development of their economies and not to do business in these countries.

On the contrary, the Sunni countries, which, according to the rankings, have a more positive security picture, have a higher place in the economic rankings. Under such conditions, foreign partners are more willing to cooperate with the “Sunni bloc,” and when combined with the greater openness of their economies as compared to the economies of Shi‘a states, as mentioned above, Sunni countries’ positions in the said rankings turn out to be so high. In the long term, the countries of the “Shi‘a bloc” do not yet have much hope for expanding investment flows into their economies.

Conclusion

Summarizing the results of the analysis of economic and security indicators, as well as the rankings that fix the economic potential of the “Sunni” and “Shi‘a” blocs and reflect the internal political situation in them, we can claim the invalidity of the assertions about the existence of the so-called “Shi‘a crescent.” This is evidenced, firstly, by the weak ties

within the “Shi‘a bloc,” as well as insufficient economic and military resources to position themselves as a collective actor. In addition, it has been shown that a number of states included in the “Shi‘a crescent” have closer contacts with Sunni states, including in security. This is especially true of Bahrain, which is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council and participates in all of the organization’s projects.

As for security, the authors, based on empirical data, confirmed the negative trends in the internal political situation in the states of the “Shi‘a bloc,” which are associated with a high level of terrorist threats, the active phase of armed conflicts in Syria and Yemen, the permanent instability in Iraq, as well as the protracted crisis in Lebanon, accompanied by civil unrest. A network analysis of conventional weapons transfers demonstrates the weakness of cooperation within the “Shi‘a bloc.” In particular, Tehran’s military support of the Yemeni Houthi movement over the past few years has not been confirmed, and no evidence has been found of Iran supplying arms to the Lebanese Shi‘a Hezbollah party since 2006.

The analysis of conventional arms transfers also demonstrated the existence of strong ties between a number of Shi‘a states and the “Sunni bloc”, primarily Türkiye, the UAE, and Pakistan. Such cooperation in the event of an armed confrontation (most likely, according to most experts, between Iran and Saudi Arabia) would undermine cooperation within the “Shi‘a bloc” and hinder coordination in the field of defense and security.

Separately, it should be highlighted the ideological differences within the “Shi‘a bloc,” which, although they are not the subject of research and require special close attention of scholars, nevertheless, cannot be completely ignored, since the authors analyze the “Shi‘a crescent” from the position of constructive realism. Such discrepancies include, firstly, the

fact that the population or the ruling elite of certain countries of the “Shi‘a bloc” belong to heterodox Shi‘ite currents, such as Zaydism (Yemen) and Alawism (Syria). It is noteworthy that the former, according to Islamic scholars, is much closer in spirit to Sunni Islam than to Shi‘a Islam, while Alawism, in turn, is a syncretic doctrine with elements not only of Islam, but also of Christianity. For its deification of Imam Ali, Alawism is considered by many Islamic scholars, both Sunni and Shi‘a, to be a heresy and even idolatry that violates the basic principle of Islam — monotheism (*al-tawhid*).

Secondly, researchers who discuss the “Shi‘a crescent” often ignore the deep ideological contradictions between various Shi‘a parties, which can be divided into pro-Iranian and anti-Iranian. In particular, the Shi‘a political parties of Bahrain, as well as Saudi Arabia, belong to the opponents of the Iranian model of development; they do not consider the Iranian Rahbar (Supreme Leader) Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as their spiritual leader and *marja al-taklid* (“role model”).¹⁶ Therefore, speaking about Iran’s influence on the Kingdom’s domestic political processes is to fall into a deep delusion.

Finally, the foreign policy practices of such “Shi‘a bloc” states as Bahrain and Lebanon (and only they, apart from Iran, are not currently experiencing an armed conflict) inherently demonstrate the unwillingness of the leaders of these countries to be associated with Iran, which in the eyes of its neighbors has the image of a regional pariah and a very

¹⁶ Marja al-taqid (Arabic for “role model”) is a title for Shi‘a spiritual authorities who have reached the highest level of knowledge in the Islamic sciences, which entitles them to serve as spiritual guides for ordinary believers.

unfriendly state. Sanctions have been imposed on Iran, which significantly limit Tehran’s political and economic opportunities, and could have negative consequences for its partners. Allied relations link Iran only with Syria, but only as long as Bashar al-Assad is in power there.

Iran’s relations with Iraq are based primarily on coordination of efforts to combat international terrorism, as well as on partnership in the trade and economic sphere, although Iran’s influence in that country has grown significantly in recent years. Nevertheless, all of this indicates the bilateral nature of Tehran’s interaction with the rest of the countries we have included in the “Shi‘a bloc,” and does not suggest that Iran or any other Shi‘ite state has plans to create the “Shi‘a crescent.” Thus, the opinion of some experts about the central role of Iran in consolidating the “Shi‘a crescent” (Nisan, 2009) is not supported by empirical data.

It has also been established that the real domestic and foreign political resources of the states united in the so-called “Shi‘a crescent” are insignificant in comparison with the potential of the “Sunni bloc.” Moreover, it is the countries of the “Shi‘a bloc” that are the source of regional conflict. Therefore, the obvious conclusion is that fears about the formation of an influential bloc of Shi‘ite states are greatly exaggerated. This benefits primarily Iran’s enemies (e.g., the US) and its rivals for regional leadership, mainly Saudi Arabia. Anti-Shi‘a hysteria allows Riyadh to justify many of its foreign policy actions, such as armed intervention in Yemen and its negotiations with Pakistan on the transfer of nuclear arms technology to Saudi Arabia.

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