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Review of Shia Islam and Politics: Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon

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***Shia Islam and Politics: Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon.* Jon Armajani. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020, hardback, xiii + 252 pp., ISBN: 9781793621351.**

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Shi'i Muslims make up only an estimated ten to fifteen percent of the world's approximately 1.9 billion Muslims, with the vast majority of the rest belonging to the majority Sunni sect. The majority of Shi'is come from the Twelver (Ithna 'Ashari) or Imami Shi'i group with different Isma'ili groups and the Zaydis making up the remainder of the world's Shi'is. Despite their small numbers, in relation to the Sunnis, Shi'is continue to play an influential role in global and regional affairs, particularly in the Middle East, in large part because of the centrality of the latter to geopolitics.

The book begins with a brief overview of Twelver Shi'ism including its theological beliefs and ritual practices as well as its history vis-à-vis Sunni Islam. The centrality of the martyrdom of the third Shi'i Imam, Husayn, and most of his male companions in 680 on the plain of Karbala and the belief in the forthcoming salvation brought by the twelfth Imam, Imam al-Mahdi, are all laid out for the reader. This is a useful introduction to readers who may not be as familiar with the details of Twelver Shi'i belief and culture. The book then proceeds with country-focused chapters on Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, which were chosen because they all have large Shi'i populations, strong Shi'i religious and political institutions, and house centers for Shi'i religious and political activities.

Iran, which is the focus of Chapters Two and Three, is one of only Shi'i majority countries – the other being Bahrain whose population is estimated to be roughly 62-70% Shi'i. Iran is the only country in the world ruled by a Shi'i Islamist government. Iran has established alliances with a number of other mostly, but not entirely, Shi'i organizations and political parties, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah, as well as Shi'i proxy groups connected to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Iran also is of key geopolitical importance because it is geographically one of the largest and, numerically, one of the two most populous Middle Eastern states and, geopolitically, has an active nuclear program. Iran is also the only regional country to have experienced a full-fledged revolution that brought Islamists to power and is the main patron of the Middle East's Shi'i Islamist groups, though its influence extends beyond the Middle East to Shi'i communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and North America. Armajani details how, since the 1979 Iranian Revolution and its takeover by supporters of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran has utilized religion, specifically Twelver Shi'ism, as a political tool to expand the reach of the Iranian state throughout the Middle East and beyond.

The book's Introduction includes a brief history of the Safavid Empire, which ruled Iran between 1501 and 1736, the state which oversaw the transformation of Iran from a majority Sunni to a majority Twelver Shi'i state during its two centuries of existence. Most importantly, the advent of the Safavid dynasty and a Shi'i polity had a profound impact on Shi'i jurists (*fuqaha*) and religious scholars (*ulama*) because they were faced, for the first time, with a publicly Shi'i political authority. Internal debates among Shi'i scholars in what is today Lebanon, Bahrain, and

Iraq discussed issues including the legitimacy of the Safavid state, since Shi'i theology holds that the only truly legitimate state will be established by Imam al-Mahdi, and related issues, including whether the scholars could work for the Safavid government and whether Friday congregational prayers now could be held and were, or were not, obligatory. The "Shi'i" identity of the Safavid state influenced the increasing "Sunnitization" of its main rival to the west, the Ottoman Empire.

Chapter Two traces the fall of the Safavid dynasty and empire in the 1720s and 1730s through the Qajar dynasty, which ruled Iran between 1794 and 1925, and the reigns of the two Pahlavi *shahs* between 1925 and 1979. The chapter places Iran within the broader context of European imperial competition, in particular between Russia and Britain, with the former seeking to expand territorially at Iran's expense and the latter seeking to safeguard its holdings on the Indian Subcontinent. Reza Khan and his son, Muhammad Reza, oversaw the weakening of Iran's Shi'i religious scholars and jurists, after two periods when they played a major role, during the Tobacco Protest of 1890 and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911). The establishment of state university faculties of theology, enfranchisement of women, state seizure of control over family and personal status law, and adoption of "Westernization" also fueled a growing divide between the Pahlavi state and many Iranian Shi'i jurists and religious scholars.

The Islamization of the Iranian Revolution, the focus of Chapter Three, was orchestrated by skilled political activists aligned with Khomeini, including Muhammad Beheshti, head of the Islamic Republican Party until his June 1981 assassination in a bombing perpetrated by the Mujahedin-i Khalq, one of the groups involved in the 1979 protests that brought about the flight from Iran of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. The Mujahedin-i Khalq continues to exist today as a militant group built around the cult of personality of Massoud Rajavi, who disappeared during the 2003 U.S. and British invasion of Iraq, and his wife, Maryam.

The Shi'i experience in Iraq is the subject of Chapters Four and Five. Home to a great number of important Shi'i shrines in Baghdad, Samarra, Karbala, Najaf, and Kufah and to what used to be the preeminent centers of Shi'i religious learning and scholarship (Najaf), Iraq has a rich Shi'i history. The country's Shi'is and Shi'i students from foreign countries, particularly those from Iran, were the targets of major government crackdowns during the reign of the Iraqi Ba'th Party under Saddam Hussein. The 2003 U.S. and British invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq, which overthrew the Saddam regime, led to the political and societal empowerment of Iraqi Shi'is, who are the largest community in the country. Iran continues to play a major role in Iraqi internal politics, but it has never had a monopoly of influence or control over Iraqi Shi'is and there are growing signs that Iranian influence is continuing to decline significantly.

Lebanon, the focus of Chapter Six, is home to some of the region's oldest and longest-established Shi'i communities in what is today southern (or "South") Lebanon and in the eastern Bekaa Valley bordering Syria. Lebanon, which was for most of history a region of Greater Syria (Bilad al-Sham), was also home to two of Shi'ism's most exalted martyred scholars, "The First Martyr" (*al-Shahid al-Awwal*) and "The Second Martyr" (*al-Shahid al-Thani*) in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively. After Lebanon became an independent republic in the twentieth century, Lebanese Shi'is, particularly in the southern part of the country, were among the country's poorest and most politically disenfranchised. This started to change in the 1960s and 1970s due to the political activism and organization of Musa al-Sadr, an Iranian Shi'i cleric of Lebanese/Syrian

descent. By the late 1980s and the post-civil war 1990s, Lebanese Shi'is had become politically and militarily empowered, with official representation in the country's parliament and the existence of Hezbollah, which is a political party, social movement, and paramilitary organization.

Shia Islam and Politics is the latest book for a general, rather than a specialized/academic, readership by Jon Armajani, a religious studies scholar and professor of peace studies at the College of St. Benedict/Saint John's University. The book is aimed at a non-specialist audience, with undergraduate students particularly in mind, and is written in the form of a chronological, narrative history placing the Iranian Revolution and its causes alongside the histories of the Iraqi and Lebanese Shi'i communities and experiences. Armajani provides a highly readable narrative covering three of the Middle East's largest and most influential Twelver Shi'i Muslim communities, noting how they and their evolutions have and continue to be interconnected. Though its use of primary sources is limited, *Shia Islam and Politics* synthesizes the existing scholarly literature well and the author has succeeded in producing a book that will serve well as an undergraduate text as well as one that will be approachable to interested, non-specialist readers.