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Laurence Louër, Shiism and Politics in the Middle East (Hurst, 2012)

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Laurence Louër's *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East* is a shorter version of *Transnational Shia Politics* (Hurst, 2008), a groundbreaking monograph on the hitherto understudied Shia Islamic movements in the Gulf monarchies. In *Shiism and Politics*, Louër adopts a broader scope by including the cases of Iraq and Lebanon. She focuses on three key issues: first, the process of transnationalisation of Shia Islamic movements; second, the nature of the relations between these movements and Shiism's religious and political centres in Iran and Iraq; third, the relationship between the clergy and laymen within Shia political Islam. With regard to the second issue, the author argues that Shia movements have undergone a process of "domestication", thereby growing increasingly autonomous from their Iraqi and Iranian centres. As for the relations between the clergy and laymen, Louër sees them as both increasingly distant and characterised by the declining influence of the men of religion, which she interprets as marks of a process of secularisation.

Although Louër does not formulate it this way, her account of the transnationalisation of Iraqi Shia Islamic movements from the 1960s onwards offers interesting parallels with the regional diffusion of their Sunni counterparts. First, just like Syrian and Iraqi Sunni religious students embraced the project of the Muslim Brotherhood during their studies at al-Azhar, then once back from Egypt, established chapters of the organisation in their homelands, foreign students who were trained in the Shia *Hawza* of Najaf joined the Da'wa party during their time in Iraq, then presided over the creation of similar movements in their countries of origin. Second, similarly to those many Sunni Islamists from Egypt and the Fertile Crescent who migrated to petromonarchies in order to fill well-paid positions in these countries' religious and educational institutions, Shia clerics from Iraq were contracted by merchant coreligionists from Gulf emirates that lacked a tradition of Shia scholarship, such as Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. Third, like Sunni Islamists from the revolutionary republics, Iraqi Shia Islamists sought refuge in the Gulf from persecution at the hands of the Ba'athist regime. In both cases, these migrations led to the introduction of more activist conceptions of Islam into the host countries, while the latter's oil wealth provided expatriate Islamists with significant funding to support their transnational activities.

The two main transnational networks studied by Louër are the Da'wa party and the Shirazists, a group that was named after a scholarly family from Karbala. Although they had largely escaped the attention of Western scholars before Louër's work, the Shirazists have been influential in the Gulf and, due to their privileged ties to Khomeini, initially played a major role in exporting the ideals of the Iranian Islamic revolution in the region. As noted by Louër, this reliance on non-state actors contrasted with Iran's policy in Lebanon, where the establishment of Hezbollah owed much to the direct intervention of an Iranian state agency, namely, the Pasdarans. These two approaches also brought about different results in the long-term. For complex reasons masterfully explained in the book, both al-Da'wa and the Shirazists gradually distanced themselves from Iran, to which the latter responded by expanding a regional network of "Hezbollahs", that is, affiliates of strict Khomeinist obedience. Besides the Lebanese Hezbollah, this network included organisations such as the Supreme

Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (known as the Supreme Islamic Council in Iraq since 2007) and its military wing the Badr Corps, the Saudi Hezbollah (suspected of the attack against the US barrack of Khobar in 1996), and the National Islamic Alliance in Kuwait.

Shiism and Politics thus provides a nuanced assessment of the relationship between Iran and Shia Islamic movements in the Middle East. It does so by emphasising the abovementioned fragmentation of these movements between rival transnational networks, but also by identifying important turning points in the evolution of this relationship. Indeed, whereas in the 1980s the Iranian revolutionary model exerted strong attraction over foreign Shia movements, the exhaustion of revolutionary enthusiasm in Iran itself after 1990 facilitated a domestication of the political concerns of non-Iranian Shia groups. The situation changed again in 2005 due to the election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran, and growing Iranian ascendancy in the region following the rise of Shia political forces in post-Saddam Iraq, on the one hand, and the expansion of Hezbollah's political role in Lebanon after the Syrian withdrawal, on the other hand. Yet, the author challenges the assumption that these developments pushed Shia movements in the Middle East away from the process of domestication towards the re-embrace of a regional agenda defined by Iran.

Louër's demonstration is undoubtedly convincing with regard to Gulf monarchies, where the Shia's position of inferiority generally makes domestication the only credible option anyway. Things become more complicated when it comes to Iraq. Louër is correct to assert that major Iraqi Shia political forces like the Da'wa party and the Sadrist movement are not Iranian proxies, and that even an arch-client of Teheran like the Supreme Council has displayed a level of autonomy by placing itself under the religious authority of Iraq-based Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Louër argues that Iran has accommodated to this process because it has enhanced the political standing of Teheran's allies in Iraq, hence indirectly benefitting its influence in the country. However, another aspect of the Islamic Republic's strategy in Iraq is missing here, namely, the establishment of a network of proxy militias placed under the direct tutelage of the Pasdarans such as 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq (a splinter of the Sadrist movement) and Kata'ib Hezbollah. Although these groups acquired greater visibility by fighting alongside the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war, then by joining the Popular Mobilisation (*al-hashd al-sha'bi*) against the Islamic State's advance in Iraq in 2014 (that is, in both cases, after Louër wrote her book), several of these US-designated "Special Groups" were already operating in Iraq against foreign troops during the previous decade.

Regarding the Lebanese Hezbollah, Louër recognizes the genuine limits to its integration into the Lebanese political system, while stressing the primacy of domestic concerns over external ones in the definition of the party's strategy. Hezbollah's chief aim is to strengthen its domestic position, she argues, and what fundamentally hinders the movement's integration into Lebanese politics is the nature of the Lebanese state itself, to the extent that it does not sufficiently take into account the interests of the Shia community. This is debatable, and given the scale and nature of Iran's logistical support for Hezbollah, it would not have been

unreasonable to more thoroughly discuss the fact that the alliance with Iran operates not only as a resource for the Lebanese movement, but also as a constraint.

The third main highlight of Louër's book is her discussion of the tensions between the clergy and laymen, and more broadly between religious and political authorities, within Shia Islam. A major strength of her analysis is that she takes religious authority seriously, that is, as a position that can be sought for itself, rather than as a mere proxy for political authority. This critical distinction allows the author to unveil the logics behind developments like the split of pro-Iranian clerics from the Iraqi Da'wa party in the late 1980s, and the resistance put up by senior ayatollahs like Muhammad al-Shirazi and Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah to Ali Khamenei's attempt to impose his *marja'yya* in the 1990s. Louër's emphasis on the growing role of laymen in Shia Islamic movements, and acceptance of this situation by senior ayatollahs, also constitutes a useful counterpoint to the assumption that, unlike Sunni Islamism, Shia Islamism is dominated by clerics. Yet, Louër's claim that even the Guide of the Islamic Revolution Ali Khamenei "has been swept up by the movement towards the secularisation of politics" is less convincing because it mainly relies on scarce and questionable evidence regarding Khamenei's non-interventionist stance towards the Lebanese Hezbollah's decision-making. One might also take issue with Louër's use of the concept of "secularisation", by which she describes not only the diminishing role of the ulama in mainstream Shia Islamic movements, but also millenarian challenges to the religious elite such as those embodied by Muqtada Sadr and Ahmadinejad. In both cases, it might have been fruitful to explore the possibility that both the ulama's distance from daily politics and millenarianism actually replicate traditional patterns of Shia politics, whereas the concept of secularisation endows these developments with a distinctly modernist connotation.

In conclusion, this book is essential reading for whoever looks for a solid and accessible introduction to the transnational dimension of Shia politics in the Middle East. It also provides valuable background to more recent developments that are not covered in the book like execution of Shirazi Sheikh Nimr Nimr by the Saudi regime in 2015,¹ and the stripping of the citizenship of Bahraini Sheikh Isa Qasim the following year. More fundamentally, *Shiism and Politics* sets out important question that will undoubtedly shape the research agenda on the matter for the years to come.

¹ For a more recent and detailed close-up on Saudi Shia, see Toby Matthiesen's *The Other Saudis. Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).