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# From the Iranian Corridor to the Shia Crescent

DEMOGRAPHY AND GEOPOLITICS

BY FABRICE BALANCHE

In December 2004, the king of Jordan asserted his fear of a Shia crescent forming in the Middle East from Iran to Lebanon, what we call the Iranian Corridor.<sup>1</sup> Yet many observers and researchers were skeptical about King Abdullah's assertion.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the Shiite-Sunni clash was not viewed as a serious component in the dynamics of the Middle East. During the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88), Iraqi Shiites had remained loyal to the Sunni Saddam Hussein and analysts drew the conclusion that the religious divide was no longer relevant. In general, Western analysts are reluctant to see religion or tribalism as important for fear of being accused of "Orientalism," an accusation popularized by Edward Said and still stifling discussion about the region. On the other hand, King Abdullah's prescient claim of a decade and a half ago seemed implausible. It was difficult to see how a Shiite crescent could exist, since the Shiite population remains a minority across the Iranian Corridor.

However, the face of the Middle East is changing. Violent conflict in Syria and Iraq is reshaping the demographic distribution in the area by creating millions of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). In particular, the war in Syria may lead to a reversal of the demographic balance in the Iranian Corridor in favor of the Shiites, as refugees who are Sunni Syrians testify to the large-scale political and ethnic cleansing pursued by the Assad regime.

Similar concerns have been raised with regard to the demographic consequences of the recapture of Mosul and Kirkuk by the Iraqi army and the Shia militias. In this arena, memories of the 1980s remain vivid. Iraqi Kurds then faced a violent policy of Arabization and forced displacement and they are fearful of a repetition today. Meanwhile, within Iraq, demographic shifts have favored the politically and economically powerful Shiite population, which has been detrimental for Sunni Arabs. Lastly, the victory of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, the elimination of the Islamic State in Iraq, and the growing role of Hezbollah in Lebanon all point to a Shia ascendancy throughout the area, confirming King Abdullah's prediction.

## The perceived domination of the "minorities"

A major part of the Arab Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq) is Sunni Arab territory. The bigger cities in Syria are Sunni-majority. In Iraq, Baghdad was a Sunni-majority city



until the last decade. The Shia Twelvers are concentrated in southeastern Iraq and Lebanon (south Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley).<sup>3</sup> The Levantine mountains are home to the Alawite, Druze, Ismaelian, and Christian minorities who spread to the interior plains during the nineteenth century. The Kurds, Sunnis, and Yazidis originated in the mountains of northern Iraq and Turkey before descending into the plains as agricultural employment opportunities increased with the decline of the Bedouins in the nineteenth century. The Turkmen minorities of northern Syria and northern Iraq, as in Kirkuk and Tal Afar, are reminders of the Ottoman military conquest. Indeed, the population map in general is a legacy of the Ottoman Empire, which had stabilized relations among the communities for the benefit of Sunni Arabs. The post-World War I French and British mandates did modify this established order, with the exception of Lebanon, where France promoted the Christian community. The American intervention in Iraq, which led to a reversal of power, benefited the Shiites and led to a dramatic demographic consequence—the Shiitization of Baghdad.

During the Ottoman Empire, dominant communities (Sunni Arabs) and their protected Jews and Christians (Melkites) lived in cities, where power and wealth were concentrated. They also owned the best agricultural land. Heterodox communities (Alawites, Druze, Twelver Shiites, Maronite Christians, Yazidis, etc.), on the other hand, were often persecuted and forced to geographical peripheries (mountain refuges, desert margins, and swamps). In the cities, each community occupied a particular residential area: Muslims were found around the main places of power and the Great Mosque, and Christians and Jews next to their churches and synagogues. Non-Muslims did not represent more than a third of the urban population, and Sunni Muslims were uniformly the majority.<sup>4</sup>

Regime changes in the twentieth century did initiate some demographic modifications, especially in cities. In the early 1920s, during the French Mandate in Lebanon, the Maronites descended from the mountains to settle in Beirut, the center of French power. Similarly, because of the 1963 Baathist coup in Syria, the Alawites—who practice a branch of Shia—came to Damascus to secure new Alawite-regime jobs. Hafez al-Assad, then the president of Syria, settled Alawites who were members of the military around Damascus in order to control that Sunni metropolis.

In contrast, in rural areas, major demographic changes have been associated with ethnic cleansing. This was the case in the Lebanese region of Shouf in 1983–84, when the Druze expelled the Christians, and in the 1980s when Saddam Hussein destroyed thousands of Kurdish villages in the Nineveh plains. However, apart from such episodes of massive violence, evolutions in rural areas are slower and more limited because these territories are typically far from the centers of power. Less is at stake.

Viewing the Levant as Sunni-dominated is a mistake because the large desert between Syria and Iraq, although majority Sunni Arab, is largely uninhabited. A focus on territory alone

is misleading. Maps tend to overemphasize the large size of rural areas, no matter how low the population density, while minimizing the significance of cities. Instead, assessing the numerical weight—rather than geographical expanse—of different Levant communities better explains the limited strength of Sunni Arabs in the region.

In 2004, Shia Twelvers constituted 35 percent of the Lebanese population (1.4 million out of 4 million inhabitants), 1 percent of the Syrian population (180,000 out of 18 million), but 55 percent of Iraqis (15.4 million out of 28 million).<sup>5</sup> In comparison, Sunni Arabs represented 28 percent of the Lebanese population (1.1 million), 65 percent of the Syrian population (11.7 million), and 25 percent of the Iraqi population (7.8 million). Of a total population in the area of 50 million, Sunni Arabs make up 41 percent (20.6 million) and the Shia Twelvers 34 percent (17 million).

Eight million Kurds—2.5 million in Syria and 5.5 million in Iraq (16 percent of the population)—live in the area, most of whom are Sunni Arabs. The remaining 10 percent are Christian (1.5 million in Lebanon, 1.2 million in Syria, and 1.5 million in Iraq), Druze, Alawite, and other tiny minority denominations. Since 2004, Christians have left Syria and Iraq in droves. Yet the biggest change by far has to do with the Syrian refugees, overwhelmingly Sunni, who are very unlikely to be able to return due to specific Assad regime policies. This will significantly reduce Sunni presence in the region.<sup>6</sup>

If the king of Jordan had included the Druze, Alawite, Ismaili, and Yazidi minorities in his understanding of the Shia crescent, the Shiite proportion, especially in Lebanon and Syria, would have been even larger. However, in Lebanon, the Druze have sometimes inclined toward the pro-Saudi camp and have little in common with the Shiite Twelvers from a religious standpoint. Similarly, although the Alawites belong historically to the Shiite family, they are quite distinct in terms of religious traditions.<sup>7</sup> The Alawites' proximity to Iran results less from shared theology than from the geopolitical alliance struck between Hafez al-Assad and the Islamic Republic in 1981. Meanwhile, the 8 million Sunni Kurds living in Syria and Iraq dissociate themselves from Sunni Arabs and form separate communities. In the end, neither Arab Shiite Twelvers nor Arab Sunnis have a clear majority in the Levant, but the Alawites' ties to the Shia are more reliable than any Sunni connection between Kurds and Sunni Arabs. As a result, the Shiites and their allies have a relative majority that is strengthening.

### **The threat of ethnic cleansing**

The Syrian civil war began in 2011, a rebellion against the Shia-aligned Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad. The conflict quickly came to be interpreted as a threat to all Shiites in the Middle East. The rapid rise of Sunni jihadists, attacks on Shia minorities, and threats against the Sit Zainab mausoleum contributed to mobilization in the Shia world. As early as winter 2012, attacks on Shiite villages on the outskirts of Homs forced Hezbollah to



intervene. Otherwise, the Shiite clans of the Beqaa would have come to Syria themselves in the name of tribal solidarity.<sup>8</sup> Damascus and Homs are close to the Lebanese border, so it could have made sense for Hezbollah to send fighters to secure the border against jihadist incursions. On the other hand, it was harder to justify sending Hezbollah fighters to Aleppo. Yet the defense of the Shiite villages of Nubol-Zahra and Fua-Kaferaya in Syria were used as propaganda for mobilization, just as a Shiite history of medieval Aleppo, like the Fua origin of many Lebanese families, was conjured up to justify Shia sentiment.

Sunni Gulf governments accused Iran of a willing Shiitization in the Levant and the Syrian opposition claimed Tehran wants to settle new Shiite populations in Syria to strengthen the demographic balance at the expense of Sunnis. In fact, 80 percent of the nearly 7 million Syrian refugees are Arab Sunnis.<sup>9</sup> It is true that the Arab Sunni area has been especially targeted because it is an opposition stronghold. In reality, the Christian community has suffered even more than the Arab Sunnis in Syria with half of the community now in exile. Similarly, in Iraq, Gulf media denounce the recapture of Mosul by the Iraqi army and the Shiite militias as the prelude to a large-scale ethnic cleansing. It is also clear that Iran relies primarily on Shiite communities and tries to strengthen them. Ethnic cleansing is taking place, but there are also exaggerations about ethnic cleansing, as it actually occurs in limited areas and happens across all parties.

In Iraq, the most prominent example is Baghdad because the capital of Iraq has seen the Arab Sunni population decrease dramatically since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Yet looking at smaller cities shows a more complicated pattern. The case of Touzkhurmatu, a mixed Turkmen Shiite and Sunni Kurdish city, is telling.<sup>10</sup> The city is disputed between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi state. In October 2017, the Shiite militias seized the city by repelling the Kurdish Peshmerga, resulting in the flight of thousands of Kurdish inhabitants. It is still too early to tell whether this is their final exodus, but the Touzkhurmatu case is significant in that it represents an ongoing ethnic cleansing process, aimed above all at securing strategic points.

An additional example involves Tal Afar, a Sunni-Shiite Turkmen city lying west of Mosul. In 2014, when the Islamic State seized the city, the Shia population fled to escape massacre. Afterwards, many men of Tal Afar joined the Shiite militias, determined to return as victors in their homeland; they successfully achieved this goal during the summer of 2017. Since the Shiite inhabitants have returned, however, no ethnic cleansing has taken place so far against the Sunni population.

In Syria, minorities were behind the regime while Arab Sunnis were the social base of the rebellion.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the entire Arab Sunni population did not join the opposition, giving evidence that the political cleavage was also social, urban-rural, and tribal. However, the regime considers the cities and neighborhoods that revolted as collectively responsible and has targeted them for brutal assaults. In some cases, residents have been prevented from

returning home, turning them into permanent refugees and definitively reengineering the demographic balance.

Such is the case of Qusayr. This city of about fifty thousand inhabitants, located between Homs and Lebanon, participated in the revolt from the very beginning. The authorities immediately fled, as did the Christian and Shiite minorities. In June 2012, a call by the mosque from minarets urged Christians to leave Qusayr quickly.<sup>12</sup> However, nearly a year later, in May 2013, Hezbollah took control of the city after a violent battle. In response, almost the entire civilian population, now all Sunni, followed the rebels who fled to Lebanon, and it now seems impossible for them ever to return to Qusayr. In fact, those who have tried to return have been immediately jailed by the regime.<sup>13</sup> Qusayr occupies a strategic location near the crossroads of Homs. Moreover, it was historically a strong Sunni enclave lodged in Shiite and Alawite territory, on which Islamists could rely to connect between the Sunni interior of Syria and Tripoli, the Sunni fortress of northern Lebanon. In this particular example, it is clear that we are facing overt ethnic cleansing as a form of demographic reengineering to secure strategic advantages.

The Sunni village of Qalat al Hossein, in the Homs area, is particularly representative of the current character of ethnic cleansing in Syria and Iraq today. In 2012, the village took up arms against the Assad regime. Rebels planted the flag of the Free Syrian Army on the crusader castle that overlooks the village: the Krak of the Knights. Meanwhile, the Christian villages of Wadi Nassara and the Alawite villages of the Akkar Plain formed their own self-defense militias to protect themselves from rebels. When the Syrian army, supported by these local self-defense militia, launched an offensive in March 2014, it found the Sunni village empty because residents had fled to Lebanon. Their houses were looted and burned to prevent people from coming back. At least one report suggests that the order did not come from Damascus, but that the local militias took the initiative because Christians and Alawites wanted to eliminate the Sunni enclave forever.

Examples of ethnic cleansing are not lacking on either side in the current sectarian civil war in Syria, as is the case in the rest of the Levant. The process of ethnic and religious homogenization continues, leading minorities to regroup in order to ensure their survival and security. When their numbers are insufficient, the last resort is emigration, notably by the Iraqi Christians. In contrast, isolated Shiite communities, if supported by Iran, may have the military means to survive even in very hostile environments, as is the case in Zahra and Nubol, two cities north of Aleppo. Sit Zainab is also becoming an entrenched camp where Syrian Shiites are invited to settle to protect the mausoleum. However, apart from these strategic points, it seems difficult for Iran to reverse the demographic balance.

Ethnic cleansing is contributing to the demographic profile of the region, but it is not the sole factor. The Sunni fertility rate is higher than for Shia and other non-Sunni groups. Even if the Shia and their allies have an overall advantage, the Sunni population will remain



large. In its pursuit of an Iranian Corridor, Tehran will have to find a way to divide or attract Arab Sunnis in order to reduce their political importance.

### **Iran neutralizes the Kurds**

The Kurds in Iraq and Syria do not show solidarity with the Arabs in the name of Sunnism. Certainly, Kurdish Islamist parties exist, such as the KRG, and some Kurds are fighting with the al-Nusra Front in Syria. But overall the Kurds are attracted to secular parties. Tehran can therefore play the Kurdish card against Sunni Arabs. However, it must also be careful, because Iran faces its own problems with Kurdish irredentism. Within the KRG, Iran can rely on strong political and economic ties with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by members of the Talabani family, as they are the historical rival of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Massoud Barzani. In Iraq, Sulaymanya, the Talabani stronghold, is Iran's main gateway to the country. Because the Iraqi city of Kirkuk lies closer to Tehran than the Iranian oil fields of the Persian Gulf, a pipeline project between Kirkuk and Tehran could also provide fuel to the Iranian capital. This would yield a comfortable income for the PUK, which could counterbalance the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which derives its own enormous revenue from exporting KRG oil to Turkey. The oil field victories of the Iraqi army in the fall of 2017 forced the Kurds to join the clientele of the Shia government in Baghdad in order to benefit from the oil rent. The independence of Iraqi Kurdistan is no longer on the agenda now that the Kurds no longer control the oil.

In Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) officially campaigns for a federal Syrian state; in reality, its sole concern is a Kurdish territorial project in the north of the country. Its goal is to connect the Kurdish territories of Afrin to the Tigris River. As early as 2011, the Syrian regime and Tehran understood that the PYD could become a tactical ally against the Syrian rebellion, since its project was incompatible with that of Sunni Arab rebels. The Syrian army has therefore abandoned control of the Kurdish areas to the People's Protection Units (YPG), which serve as the militia of the PYD. Instead, Damascus provided the YPG with weapons to fight the Islamic State and to participate in the battle of Aleppo in 2016. The regime of Bashar al-Assad knows that the PYD does not want a regime change in Syria. The PYD is just as authoritarian, if not worse, than the Baath party.

However, Damascus also fears US assistance to the Kurds. If strengthened by US support, the PYD could decide to pursue more than merely de facto and weak autonomy of the Kurdish cantons. Indeed, US protection can only be temporary: between the Syrian-PKK offshoot and Turkey, a NATO ally, the United States has no choice. After the Iraqi offensive against the KRG, the Iraqi army controls the road between Syrian Kurdistan and the KRG. On the north, the Turkish border is closed, and to the south and west the Syrian army can interrupt traffic at any time. Furthermore, the region has no economic infrastructure capable of supporting genuine independence; its agriculture is heavily reliant on phosphate fertilizers imported from the rest of Syria.<sup>14</sup> Thus, although the PYD seeks to promote

economic self-sufficiency, it will take at least a generation of economic disruption in northeast Syria to achieve this. This is because the area was a true “inner colony” under the Baathist regime.<sup>15</sup> However, it is difficult to imagine that Turkey and Damascus will give it sufficient time to achieve its goal.

### **Division of the Sunni Arabs**

The Sunni Arab political situation is different in the three countries in the region, because they do not represent the same demographic weight. In Iraq, Sunni Arabs are a minority, split between three major groups: the urban society of Mosul and Baghdad; the tribes of the former Saddam Hussein triangle (Tikrit, Ramadi, and Fallujah); and the western tribes, themselves deeply divided. The Iraqi government’s post-Islamic State strategy toward this population has been to sustain military pressure and to use political patronage to maintain division. For example, to get access to oil revenue (the main source of income in Iraq), Sunni Arab groups must be under the patronage of a Shia politician. Since no Sunni Arab leader has direct access to the oil money, nobody is able to represent the interests of the Sunni Arab community as a whole. Additionally, the Iraqi government and Iran block alternative sources of income for the Sunni Arabs in order to maintain their dependence on the Iraqi state and to curtail the influence of the Gulf Sunni monarchies on Iraq.

Tehran’s other main concern in Iraq is the Shia community’s unity as a pro-Iranian group, obviously divided between an Iraqi nationalist current and a pro-Iranian one.<sup>16</sup> The fight against the Islamic State has temporarily unified these two currents, especially since Tehran immediately gave military aid to Iraq in June 2014 when Mosul fell and Baghdad threatened to follow. However, the destruction of the Islamic State does not mean the end of anti-Shia terrorism in Iraq. As a result, Iran may continue to rely on Shiite fear of Sunni jihadists.

The situation is more complex in Syria, where two-thirds of the population is Sunni Arab. After seizing power in 1970, Hafez al-Assad successfully utilized the weaknesses of the Sunni Arabs to his advantage.<sup>17</sup> He played on the rivalry between Aleppo and Damascus, made use of the disagreements between the bourgeoisie and the lower classes, and cleverly maintained the tribal system, among other strategies. Space does not permit an exploration of all the techniques and tricks used by the Lion of Damascus to maintain the fragmented sectarianism that organizes Syrian society. On the other hand, he did not tolerate any opposition at all within the Alawite community, which he erected as a monolith. The key to Hafez al-Assad’s power was the unlimited loyalty of his own community, which dominated the intelligence services and the army.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, Bashar al-Assad forgot his father’s fundamental principles and faced a revolt in 2011. The frustrations that had accumulated in Syria almost succeeded in uniting the Sunni Arabs against him. The money and the political support of the Arab Gulf nearly brought





down the Assad regime, as it was viewed as the weak link in the Iranian axis. Nevertheless, the Syrian regime and its allies managed to keep a lid on the revolt. Looking ahead, the issue for the Assad regime and Iran is to restore the Sunni Arab division and to block the economic influence of the Arab Gulf countries, as they are considered a threat in Syria just as they are in Iraq.

In the past, the most difficult challenge for Iran was Lebanon, where it has to fight the influence of Saudi Arabia as well as Western powers. UN resolution 1559 in 2004 and the Syrian troop withdrawal in 2005 seriously weakened Hezbollah.<sup>19</sup> Yet today, paradoxically, Lebanon seems to have become an Iranian protectorate, with Hezbollah the main military and therefore political force. Even if the constitution limits the electoral weight of the Shiites—they represent 35 percent of the population but only 20 percent of the deputies (and the powerless presidency of the parliament)—Hezbollah has the informal power to impose conditions on the president of the republic (Maronite) and the prime minister (Sunni). The election of Michel Aoun to the Lebanese presidency in October 2016 marked the political victory of Hezbollah and therefore of Iran against Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the war in Syria has strengthened Hezbollah's military capabilities. Hezbollah has played a crucial role in rescuing the Assad regime while at the same time protecting Lebanon from the spread of the conflict. For both these reasons, the Iranian proxy now appeals to the majority of the Lebanese as the guarantor of stability. Iran's Lebanese supporters even include Christians, who do not wish to suffer the same fate as those of Syria and Iraq.<sup>20</sup>

### **A long-term process of demographic change**

Since 2011, millions of people have left Syria and Iraq without hope of return. Millions more are IDPs who will also find it difficult to return to their homes because of the process of ethnic homogenization of the territories inherent in any sectarian civil war, in addition to the massive destruction of some urban residential areas. Christian and Shiite minorities are also victims of this process, but in the Levant, the Arab Sunnis are the most numerous victims of ethnic cleansing. The regimes view the Arab Sunni working class as the “dangerous class” for social order. It is this ethnic-social group that supported the rebellion in Syria as well as the Islamic State in Iraq, and it still sustains high unemployment and fertility rates.

As part of building a network of “Iranian” strategic roads, Iran must find reliable populations to secure strategic routes. This means that Shiite enclaves such as Tal Afar, Zahra-Nubol and Sit Zeynab—in Sunni Arab territory—must be strengthened. Transfers of Shiite populations are possible in specific locations, but only for a few tens of thousands. The attempt to reduce the Sunni numerical advantage is real, but it has had limited results. In contrast, the strategy of promoting internal division among the Sunnis promises to be more effective.

A longer-term process is under way that will allow Shiites and their allies to dominate the three countries, among which the demographic situations differ. In Iraq, Shiites are not

worried because they are the majority; meanwhile, Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds remain antagonistic to each other and divided among themselves. However, problems may emerge in those areas where Shia are virtually absent: the northern and western regions of Iraq and Iraq's Syrian border. In such cases, Baghdad may choose to rely on cultivating relations with some Sunni Arab tribes to solve the problem.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah has become the main political and military actor; it has nothing to fear from its atomized opponents. Hezbollah's alliance with the Free Patriotic Movement (Michel Aoun's Christian party) creates a political sectarian majority to govern Lebanon, with no likely challenge in sight. In contrast, the situation is not as comfortable for Tehran in Syria, which is why the expulsion of millions of Arab Sunnis seems to be a real strategy of war. In these three countries, the strengthening of "Shiite" power will involve processes of ethnic cleansing, whether through violence or nonviolent forms of coercion.

The pursuit of the Iranian Corridor, therefore, is deeply connected to questions of demography. Iran and its allies must be able to rely on a loyal population because of the solidarity it provides at the sectarian level. In the case of conflict, sectarian ties can build resiliency, as has been the case in Syria, where Alawite cohesion provides the main inner strength of Bashar al-Assad. The Iranian and pro-Iranian leaders are fully aware of these demographic issues, but they always deny sectarianism in public, denouncing it as an invention of "Western imperialism" to divide the Middle East. It is nonetheless vital to understand that there is a conflict between Shia and Sunni, although it is not about religious tenets. It is about Tehran's long-term strategy to fortify the Iranian Corridor as a Shiite crescent, which requires demographic reengineering. It remains to be seen if this effort to transform the shape of the population on the ground in the Levant will succeed. But this Iranian project to subordinate and ultimately crush the Sunni Arabs of the region has all the ingredients of a new sectarian civil war in the future.

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## About the Author



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Fabrice Balanche, a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution, is a political geographer specializing in the Middle East. He was previously the director of the Urban Observatory at the French Institute of the Near East in Beirut, the director of GREMMO (Research Group on the Mediterranean and the Middle East) at the Université Lyon 2, and a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He is an associate professor and research director at Université Lyon 2. His latest book, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War* (in English), was published in February 2018.

## *The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order*

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world. Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.

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