Iran and shia transnational religious actors
Limits of political influence

O Irã e atores religiosos xiitas transnacionais
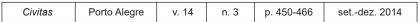### *Limites da influência política*

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Abstract: This paper has several objectives. First, it briefly examines the nature and characteristics of contemporary transnational religious actors and, second, identifies the concept of 'transnational religious soft power', which, I argue, such actors must have in order to achieve their objectives. Third, I focus on transnational Shia networks in the context of Iran's current attempt to acquire increased foreign policy influence in Iraq. The paper argues that transnational Shia networks in Iran and Iraq have relatively limited capacity to forge and pursue religious collective goals, as they are significantly undermined by nationalist and statist concerns. This is not to allege that nationalism and statism *necessarily* trump transnational religious goals – although in our case study this is indeed the case.

Keywords: Transnational religious actors. Shia Islam. Iran. Iraq. Nationalism.

Resumo: Este trabalho tem vários objetivos. Primeiro, ele analisa brevemente a natureza e as características dos atores religiosos transnacionais contemporâneas e, em segundo lugar, identifica o conceito de "soft power religioso transnacional", que, em minha opinião, esses atores devem ter em conta a fim de alcançarem seus objetivos. Em terceiro lugar, eu me concentro em redes xiitas transnacionais no contexto da atual tentativa do Irã de adquirir maior influência política externa no Iraque. O artigo argumenta que as redes xiitas transnacionais no Irã e Iraque têm uma capacidade relativamente limitada para forjar e perseguir metas religiosas coletivas porque elas são significativamente perpassadas por preocupações nacionalistas e estatistas. Não estou argumentando que o nacionalismo e o estatismo *necessariamente* sobrepassam metas religiosas transnacionais – embora no caso deste estudo isso seja realmente o caso.

Palavras-chave: Atores religiosos transnacionais. Islamismo xiita. Irã. Iraque. Nacionalismo.

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Introduction

The Shia are experiencing a revival fired by the interventions of the West in Afghanistan and Iraq, which have unleashed historic religious forces to fuel an age-old antagonism between the two sides that had not been anticipated by Washington or London. It is an antagonism that will determine the politics of the region for some time to come as, long marginalised from power, the Shia are now clamouring for greater rights and more political influence. By liberating and empowering Iraq's Shia majority, the West has also helped launch a broad Shia revival that will upset the sectarian balance in Iraq and in the rest of the Middle East for years to come (O'Mahony, 2006).

Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (2003) examines the implications of what she calls the 'fading of the state' for religion and the prospects for a universal 'ecumene'[1] in the expanding transnational space. Assuming that forms of polity and forms of religiosity have an effect on each other, she expects 'thinning' of state boundaries and associated expansion of transnational political, social, and economic institutions and epistemes to affect forms of religiosity and formulation of religious goals. Excluding the likelihood that this new transnationalism would favour resurrecting a universal (Christian) church, she comments on prospects and challenges posed by ecumenism – that is, 'universal religiosity' grounded in the principle that there is truth in all religions. Rudolph is correct to point to the circumstances of current globalisation as a key factor encouraging transnational religious actors of all kinds –Christian, Muslim, and others– to involve themselves in cross-border issues (Thomas, 2005; Haynes, 2007). However, there are not only deep rifts between main currents in Christianity but also between on the one hand, the main Shia-Sunni division in Islam and, on the other, as we shall see below, within the extant Shia community, especially when it is divided along national lines.

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[1] In recent years, the term 'ecumene' –a synonym for the more common 'ecumenism'– has been used to refer, within Christianity, to the promotion of unity or cooperation between distinct religious groups, such as, Protestants and Catholics. Rudolph is referring to the ideal of achieving a single believing community incorporating the various different Christian groups. To build ecumenism would require no doubt detailed and lengthy negotiations between, on the one hand, representatives of the various Christian denominations and, on the other, discussions involving inter-denominational organisations such as the World Council of Churches. Note however that ecumenism is not only a Christian issue but could also involve theoretically other religious groups, including Muslims. However, according to O'Mahony (2006), 'Muslim "ecuemenism" remains an intellectual exercise, with almost no place in the intimate dialogue between Shia hierarchy and believers.'

For transnational religious actors, globalisation theoretically increases ability to spread messages and to link up with like-minded groups across international borders. In addition, over the past two decades or so, global migration patterns have also spawned more active transnational religious communities (Cesari, 2010). The overall result is that cross-border links between various religious actors have recently multiplied, and so have their international and transnational concerns (Rudolph and Piscatori, 1997; Haynes, 2001; Fox and Sandler, 2004; Thomas, 2005). In short, as Banchoff (2008) claims, globalisation has led to more active transnational religious networks, creating a powerful force in international relations, including the Roman Catholic Church, al Qaeda and the focus of this paper: Shia networks in the Gulf region of the Middle East. Some transnational religious actors affect international order, especially al Qaeda and other networks of Islamic extremists and terrorists, such as Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba. Extremist pathologies present themselves in various order-challenging forms, including the 9/11 outrages in the USA, the 7/7 bombings in London and India's 9/11: the November 2008 atrocity in Mumbai, India, that killed 170 people, and wounded many more, carried out by Lashkar-e-Taiba operatives.

Transnational religious soft power and international relations

Although many authors attest to the current significance of religion in international relations –with some observers noting a recent widespread religious resurgence (Rudolph, 2003; 2005; Fox and Sandler, 2004; Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Thomas, 2005; Haynes, 2007; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2009)– there have been few recent attempts to seek to assess how *transnational* religious actors affect international relations. This is surprising given the widespread agreement that such actors can be influential. For example, the numerous extant cross border Islamic movements all have soft power that enhances their strength (Voll, 2008, p. 262-266). However, as Fox and Sandler (2004, p. 168) note, religion can also affect international outcomes via 'its significant influence on domestic politics. It is a motivating force that guides many policy makers'. This is a way of saying that some countries may well use religion as an instrumental component of their foreign policies in order to achieve national interest goals. As we shall see, this is what the current government of Iran does in relation to its relations with Iraq, seeking to use existing Shia networks to increase its foreign policy influence.

The concept of 'soft power' refers to 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When

our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced' (Nye, 2004a). When Joseph Nye (1990) introduced the concept into international relations two decades ago, it was a useful reminder that hard power is not the only tool available to achieve goals. Power is the ability to influence others to get them to do what you want. There are three main ways to do this: (1) threaten them with sticks; (2) pay them with carrots; and (3) attract them or co-opt them, so that they want what you want. As Nye (2004b) points out, if you can get others to be attracted, to want what you want, it costs you much less in both carrots and sticks.

'Soft power' refers to the capability of an entity, usually but not necessarily a state, to influence what others do through persuasion, not force or threats. Soft power attracts or co-opts people; it does not coerce them. Soft power influences people by *appealing* to them not by *forcing* them to comply. Soft power covers certain attributes –including, culture, values, ideas– collectively representing different, but not necessarily lesser, forms of influence compared to 'hard' power. The latter implies more direct, forceful measures typically involving the threat or use of armed force or economic coercion. In short, soft power is neither 'sticks nor carrots' but a 'third way' of achieving objectives. It goes beyond simple influence –that can rest on hard power threats both military or diplomatic as well as financial payments– to involve *persuasion* and *encouragement* rooted in shared norms, values and beliefs. To exercise soft power relies on (1) *persuasion*, or the ability to convince by argument, and on (2) ability to *attract*.

> If I am persuaded to go along with your purposes without any explicit threat or exchange taking place –in short, if my behavior is determined by an observable but intangible attraction– soft power is at work. *Soft power* uses a different type of currency –not force, not money– to engender cooperation. It *uses an attraction to shared values, and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values* (Nye, 2004c; italics added).

In sum, whereas hard power –military or economic influence, involving overt leverage and/or coercion– is the ability to *force* people to do things, irrespective of whether or not they agree with them, soft power moulds preferences to encourage people to *want* to do things. In other words, soft power is the power of attractive ideas, capable of persuading people to act in a certain way.

Religious soft power expands the use of the term 'soft power' beyond Nye's original argument. Initially, soft power was the influence one *government*

exercises over another to try to achieve its goals. Over time, however, Nye accepts the plausibility of a non-state actor having soft power. For example, commenting on Hezbollah's war with Israel in early 2009, Nye makes it plain that the concept of soft power can include non-state cultural and religious actors who seek to influence policy by encouraging policymakers to incorporate into their policies religious beliefs, norms and values. For example,

> Israel used its hard military power in a manner that bolstered Hezbollah's soft power and legitimacy in Arab eyes, including many Sunnis who were originally skeptical of a Shi'ite organization with ties to non-Arab Iran. We know that terrorist organizations most often lose popular support by their own excesses – witness the drop among Jordanians in the soft power of Al Qaeda in Iraq, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, after the organization bombed a wedding in an Amman hotel (Nye, 2009).

In sum, whatever their objectives, transnational religious actors aim to spread influence by establishment and development of cross-border networks. They seek to do this through application and development of 'transnational religious soft power'. They must seek to use soft power because such actors very rarely have any hard power worth speaking of. Extending the sue of the term soft power in this way allows us to include transnational religious actors, such as the Roman Catholic Church and al Qaeda, who have sought to apply soft power, aiming to encourage significant religious and political changes in, for example, Poland or Saudi Arabia.

Iran and Shia network in the Middle East: a threat to regional security?

Most discussions of Islamic transnational religious actors focus on Sunni extremist groups, notably transnational *jihadi* organisations such as al Qaeda or Lashkar-e-Taiba. Relatively little has been written on transnational Shia groups, active not only in the Middle East but also Europe and elsewhere. It is estimated that between 10-13% of the world's Muslims are Shia, that is, between 150-200 million Shia Muslims worldwide (Pew Forum, 2009). The largest Shia group is mainstream (Twelver) Shiism. More than Sunnism, Shiism often appears to be inherently transnational, partly because of the cross-border geographical distribution of core shared symbols and places, in both Iraq and Iran (Louër, 2008). For some, Shiism in the Middle East is almost a synonym for Iranian interests. This perception is clear in the continuing debate about where exactly Shia loyalties lie: in the transnational religious community or

with the nation-state. In December 2004 King Abdullah of (mainly Sunni) Jordan warned of an emerging 'Shia crescent'. Abdullah characterised the Shia communities in the Gulf, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon as a 'fifth column', controlled by and from Tehran, which inherently and imminently threatens regional Sunni interests (Cole, 2009). Soon after, Egypt's then president, Hosni Mubarak, went further. He claimed that historically the Shia in the (mainly Sunni) Arab world show more loyalty to Iran than to their home countries (Helfont, 2009). As well as politicians like Abdullah and Mubarak, some academics, including Vali Nasr (2006) a leading US expert on political Islam, also highlight what might be called the theory of Shiiism='Iranism'. Nasr contends that the Shia victory in the 2006 Iraqi general election served to remobilise the region's Shia, in pursuit of common demands and identity claims, which in turn would serve Iranian foreign policy interests. In sum, the thread connecting the claims of Abdullah, Mubarak and Nasr is their shared concern that Shia transnational networks will work towards goals connected to the foreign policy interests of Iran, which threatens the stability and security of the entire region.

In these view, Iran has clear ambitions of regional hegemony, although it lacks the hard power to achieve its goals. Instead, Iran's government seeks to exploit its religious soft power to develop multifaceted –cultural, spiritual, religious, economic and political– ties with Shia populations and movements throughout the region, including in Iraq. Others maintain, however, that this is a simplistic, one-sided assessment which overlooks the very significant power of national feeling and nationalism among regional states and Shia populations. For example, Iraqi nationalism is likely to prove more than a match for the transnational solidarities of Shiism, when it comes to Iran's foreign policy goals in Iraq. Put another way, it seems inherently unlikely that presumed inter-Shia solidarity would be powerful enough to transcend the basic historical enmity and suspicion which traditionally separates (Iraqi) Arabs and (Iranian) Persians. It is worth recalling that little more than two decades ago, Iraqi Shia fought their Iranian counterparts in the bloodiest conflict of the second half of the 20th century: the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88. In this confrontation an estimated half million soldiers from each side were killed. How likely then that just a few years later, Shia Iraqis, even those who lived in exile in Iran during the years of Saddam's rule, would welcome with open arms Iran's growing influence in their country?

One way of clarifying this issue is to focus on how Shia religious actors in Iran seek to influence Shia actors in other regional countries, including not only Iraq but also Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait; each country has significant Shia minorities (see table 1). Louër (2008) seeks to test the proposition

that there is a politically powerful 'Shiite crescent', orchestrated by Iran, which is regionally influential among Shiite populations in these countries. Surprisingly, what she finds is that over time –that is, since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution– there has been a move *away* from a more transnational orientation, to one accepting of national identity ('Politics is domestic', as the title of chapter 7 in her 2008 book puts it). Louër (2008) explains that in three regional monarchies: Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, Shia Islamic groups are the offspring of various Iraqi movements that have developed in recent decades. They managed to penetrate local societies by espousing the networks of Shiite clergymen. But that was not the end of the matter: instead of accepting leadership and orientation from outside, what happened was that both factional quarrels and the Iranian revolution of 1979 helped to mould the landscape of Shiite Islamic activism in the Gulf monarchies. The reshaping of geopolitics after the Gulf War and the fall of Saddam Hussein in April 2003 had a profound impact on transnational Shiite networks. New political opportunities encouraged these groups to concentrate on national issues, such as becoming fierce opponents of the Saudi monarchy. Yet the question still remains: How deeply have these new beliefs taken root in Islamic society? Are Shiites Saudi or Kuwaiti patriots of the countries? Or do their ultimate –'religious'– loyalties lie with 'Shia' Iran?

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are Arab Muslim countries with Sunni majorities and Shia minorities of respectively 10-15% and 20-25%. Both countries' governments regard the regional rise of Shia-majority Iran with great trepidation. They believe Iran is a significant regional security threat – not simply because Iran's revolutionary Islamist regime has long been expected to try to alter the balance of regional (hard) power, but also because of its perceived ability to encourage religious-revolutionary contagion, act irrationally and/or support religious extremism/terrorism. There is also fear that Iran is able to project its soft power in such a way as to help undermine regional political stability. The (Sunni) Saudi regime fears (Shia) Iran's capacity to use religious symbols to undermine its legitimacy and facilitate collective political action, especially among Saudi Arabia's already disaffected Shia minority. In addition to 'hard balancing' against this transnational ideological/religious threat, both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait seek to employ soft power balancing strategies, consisting of resource mobilisation and counter-framing, to prevent symbols from being used as coordinating devices for collective political action against incumbent regimes.

Louër (2008) considers the transformation of Shia movements in the Gulf in relation to central religious authority. While they strive to formulate

independent political agendas, Shia networks remain linked to religious authorities (*marja'*) who reside either in Iraq or Iran. This connection becomes all the more problematic should the *marja'* also be the head of a state, as with Iran's Ali Khamenei. In conclusion, Louër (2008) argues that the Shia will one day achieve political autonomy, especially as the *marja'*, in order to retain transnational religious authority, begin to meddle less and less in the political affairs of other countries. Overall, however, 'it takes more than religion to form a homogeneous whole at a regional or national level as demonstrated by the internal divisions within Iraq's Shia community. Their loyalties are unpredictable' (Harling and Yasin, 2006)

How then to understand Iranian-based Shia transnational actors active in Iraq and elsewhere in the Gulf region? Does Shia transnational non-state soft power work with or independently of Iranian state hard power? Does the coming together of hard and soft power produce Nye's 'smart power' in Iraq, whereby outcomes primarily benefit Iranian national and foreign policy interests? Or, is the fact of Iraqi-Iranian suspicions and hostilities most significant in denying Iran's goals in Iraq? The conclusion we shall draw is that, despite the undoubted existence of non-state Shia transnational religious networks, such organisations do not manage to undermine or refocus popular loyalties away from national allegiances in favour of undeniably attractive yet somewhat abstract and fuzzy notion of transnational religious identity and associated goals.

Iran state power and Shia transnational religious networks

A central development in the perceptions of Iran's new powerful position in the region is the post-2006 emergence of Iraq's Shia-dominated regime. This in turn links to a wider security concern: Arab/Sunni incumbent regimes regard non-Arab/Shia/Islamist regimes with limited military capabilities, such as that of Iran, as threats to their security because of the potential of religious soft power to undermine their position. How do Arab incumbent regimes, the great majority of which have Sunni Islam as the majority religion, manage what they perceive as an ideological threat from Iran, a country which is happy to work with minority Shia groups to help it achieve its regional foreign policy objectives?[2] Table 1 indicates the approximate percentage of Shia Muslims in 13 Middle Eastern countries.

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[2] Fox (2008, p. 219, table 8.1) notes that of 20 Middle Eastern and North African countries, at least 15 have Sunni Islam as the majority religion. Of the others, Israel is majority Jewish, while Yemen and Lebanon are noted by Fox to have the same majority religion: 'Islam'. Only Iran, Iraq and Bahrain have Shia Islam as the majority religion. Confusingly, however, Fox lists Bahrain as having as its majority religion, Sunni Islam.

Table 1. Middle Eastern countries with more than 100,000 Shia Muslims*

Country	Estimated Shiite population (millions)	Approximate percentage of Shia in Muslim population
Iran	66-70	90-95%
Bahrain	0.4-0.5	65-75%
Iraq	19-22	65-70%
Lebanon	1-2	45-55%
Yemen	8-10	35-40%
Kuwait	0.5-0.7	20-25%
Syria	3-4	15-20%
Afghanistan	3-4	10-15%
Saudi Arabia	2-4	10-15%
Turkey	7-11	10-15%
United Arab Emirates	0.3-0.4	c.10%
Qatar	0.1	c.10%
Oman	0.1-0.3	5-10%

* Regional countries with an estimated Shiite population of less than 1% of the country's Muslim population are not listed. The figures for Shias are generally given in a range because of the limitations of the secondary-source data. Sources: Pew Forum, 2009; Fox, 2008, p. 219, table 1.

Iran's regional significance has its foundations in a mix of hard and soft power. In relation to the later, the government of Iran seeks to exploit transnational Shia religious links to build its influence. Iran's Shia diplomacy focuses on Shia movements that either hold quasi-state power, like the Hezbollah in Lebanon, or which have remained shut out of political power completely, as is the case in Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. In those countries, a transnational network of Shia political activists inspired by the Iranian revolution and schooled in Shia seminaries in Iraq and Iran seeks to mobilise large-scale Shia support for Shia empowerment in the context of long-term Sunni domination (Porter, 2008).

This is not to contend that Iran's foreign policy is unique in its bid to exploit real or putative transnational solidarities. According to Sarioghalam

(2001, p. 1), 'Iran's foreign policy is shaped, not mainly by international forces, but by a series of intense post-revolutionary debates inside Iran regarding religion, ideology, and the necessity of engagement with the West and specifically the United States'. When the material interests of the state have conflicted with commitments to 'Islamic solidarity', Tehran has usually given preference to security and economic considerations. Post-revolution Iran has sought to use religion to pursue material state interests – as a way of contending with neighbouring regimes or trying to force changes in their policies. For example, it has long promoted Islamist radicals and anti-regime movements – such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories.

Iran's government appears to understand the value of soft and hard power working together to achieve optimum foreign policy outcomes. In March 2005, at the start of its fourth five-year economic development plan, the Iranian government issued 'Iran's 20-Year Economic Perspective'. The document set out the country's strategic economic, political, social and cultural directions over the next 20 years. The preamble promised that by 2025, i.e., after the completion of four five-year development plans, Iran would be a fully advanced country, the most economically, scientifically and technologically developed country among 28 Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian states. Iran was to achieve this by projecting its 'Islamic and revolutionary identity, offering a guiding light for the Islamic world while engaged in effective and constructive interaction with the rest of the global community' (Amuzegar, 2009).

Achieving these goals would require smart power: combined exercise of both hard and soft power. Yet, Iran's hard power is limited; on the other hand, the country potentially has considerable soft power. For Nye (2004a), a country's soft power can come from three resources: (1) Its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), (2) Its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and (3) Its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority). What might be the sources of Iran's soft power? For Maleki (2007), they are: *culture* (Persian language, Iranian traditions, mainstream [Twelver] Shiism), *political values* (democracy, elections, women's rights, civil society), and *foreign policies* (legitimacy, prestige, public relations).

Since the overthrow of Saddam in March 2003, Iran has sought to use both hard and soft power, including cultural, religious, political, and economic influences, to pursue national interests in Iraq. As Table 1 notes, Iraq is demographically a predominantly Shia majority country. However,

under Saddam Hussein's rule, the state privileged the Sunni minority, dealing consistently harshly with the Shia majority. During the immediate post-Saddam years, 2003-2006, Iran actively supported the position of the United States in supporting elections in Iraq. Iran hoped to use its cultural and religious soft power in Iraq to try to increase its influence by virtue of its position among Iraq's Shiite majority and, as a result, achieve an influential position. The 2003-2006 position contrasted with the approach that Iran adopted in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Then, the revolutionary government sought, primarily via hard power strategies, to export the revolution into Iraq 'through the funding of Shiite resistance groups'. However, Iran's hard power strategy failed and 'current circumstances encourage Iran to use soft power to help create some sort of Islamic government in Iraq' (Kemp, 2005, p. 6).

Iran is likely to continue to promote democratic structures and processes in Iraq – as a strategy to help consolidate a strong permanent Shiite voice in Iraq's government. On the one hand, Iran is likely to seek to continue to use its soft power as a key short- and medium-term means to try to facilitate achievement of its main objectives in Iraq: political stability and an accretion of Iran's influence. On the other hand, Iran's involvement in Iraq is also part of a long-term strategy that may involve exercise of both soft and hard power. Since 2003 Iran has opted for intervention through primarily soft power and religious ties, but it could choose to be a more significant and active (and violent) player should its strategic interests be challenged. In sum, 'Iran's capacity, capability, and will to influence events in Iraq are high in terms of both hard power and soft power' (Kemp, 2005, p. 7). Iran aims to develop a successful smart power strategy in Iraq via strategic use of political, economic, religious and cultural power.

Iran's political influence is focused on the development of close relationships with Iraq's Shia political parties, which has undoubtedly enhanced Iran's ability since 2003 to pursue its national objectives in Iraq. For example, Iran maintains close ties with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (formerly SCIRI) and has also funded the Islamic Dawa Party (Islamic Call Party), the Sadrist Trend (an Iraqi nationalist movement led by Muqtada al-Sadr), and other sympathetic political groups (Felter and Fishman, 2008, p. 13). Through such ties, Iran seeks to encourage Iraqi politicians to pursue policies favourable to Iranian interests. In this respect, Iran sought to ruin the 2008 US-Iraq Security Agreement and Strategic Framework Agreement (http://merln.ndu.edu/archivepdf/iraq/WH/20081204-6.pdf). On the other hand, the fact that they were agreed –albeit against strong Iranian opposition– shows that there are clear limits to Iran's political influence in

Iraq, even when the country is controlled by (Shia) politicians who, it might be claimed, are inherently sympathetic to Iran's goals because of shared religious ideology and beliefs. Indeed, the government of Iran continues to have close working relationships with many top officials in the current Iraqi administration. It was reported in mid-2009 that in the first three months of the year, there were numerous two-way visits involving high-level Iranian and Iraqi officials.[3]

Iran's economic influence in Iraq is significant. A few years after the 2003 US-led invasions, Iran had become Iraq's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching an estimated $4 billion (Katzman, 2009). In addition, the government of Iran and state-owned companies have invested heavily in Iraq's reconstruction. News reports indicate that two of Iraq's holiest cities –Najaf and Karbala, locations of the holiest Shia shrines, which receive hundreds of thousands of Iranian pilgrims each year– receive major investments from Iranian state-owned companies (Dreyfuss, 2008). The governor of Najaf province reports that Iran's government provides $20 million a year for construction projects aimed at improving the city's tourism infrastructure (Wong, 2007). In addition, Iranian government-owned tourism companies are key sponsors of pilgrimages to Iraq's holy cities. They have the power to select the Iraqi companies with which they work for pilgrims' transportation, protection and accommodation (Dagher, 2009). These Iraqi companies are often linked to Iraqi Shia political parties, via shared personnel, which obviously indicates further Iranian influence, as it brings together both political and economic considerations (Dagher, 2009).

Finally, Iran's cultural influence in Iraq is ambivalent. We noted above that Maleki (2007) characterises Iran's cultural soft power in three ways: Persian language; Iranian traditions; mainstream [Twelver] Shiism. Very few Iraqis speak Persian/Farsi, so it is difficult to see how this would be a soft power strength for Iran in Iraq. On the other hand, the high standard of reporting on the Iranian satellite television channel al-Alam is said to have won a large audience among Iraqi Shia. Second, it is not clear what 'Iranian traditions' Maleki has in mind; however, bearing in mind the fact that the two countries fought a bitter war less than 25 years ago, it is unlikely that Iranian traditions

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[3] This claim relies primarily on newspaper and other media reports. See, for example, 'Iran's Larijani arrives in Najaf', United Press International, March 24, 2009; 'Iran's Rafsanjani Visits Iraq', Voice of America News, March 2, 2009; Stephen Lee Meyers, 'Security Talks About Iraq Not Needed, Iran Signal', *The New York Times*, February 11, 2009; 'Talabani Arrives in Tehran', United Press International, February 27, 2009; Kimi Yoshino, 'Iraqi Prime Minister Visits Iran', *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 2009.

would be well regarded in Iraq. This brings us to the third and potentially most significant aspect of Iran's putative soft power in Iraq: mainstream Twelver Shiism. However, what we see is by no means clear indications of Iran's power in this regard. Instead, Shiism seems to be a further source of competition.

Conclusion

Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (2003) believes that what she calls the 'fading of the state' will improve prospects for religion to develop a universal 'ecumene' in the expanding transnational space. She contends that forms of polity and forms of religiosity have an effect on each other and, as a result, she anticipates that 'thinning' of state boundaries and associated expansion of transnational political, social, and economic institutions and epistemes will impact upon forms of religiosity and formulation of religious goals. Her focus is on the global Christian community. She believes that expanding transnationalism in the context of globalisation will encourage a 'universal religiosity', informed by Christianity, with foundations in the principle that, as there is shared truth in all religions, the eventually a way forward will be found to work together and achieve peaceful and cooperative outcomes. While she is correct to point to the circumstances of current globalisation as a key factor encouraging transnational religious actors of all kinds –Christian, Muslim, and others– to involve themselves in cross-border issues, evidence from this article does not support her contention in two ways. First, focusing on the issue of Islamic 'ecumenism', we find not only deep and continuing rifts between Shias-Sunnis –expressed in the fears of a 'Shiite crescent' beholden to Iran– but also more within the supposedly more singular Shia community, deeply divided along national lines, as we saw in the case of relations between Iran and Iraq. Second, there is no evidence of a fading of the state as Hoeber Rudolph anticipates. Iran's state seems to be from fading, capable of addressing Iranian national interest goals in Iraq with apparently greater chance of success than transnational Shia networks have in undermining the state.

Evidence from the article also supports the contention that Iran's mix of hard and soft power is an effective strategy to maintain and possibly deepen national influence in post-Saddam Iraq. On the one hand, there are deep and continuing inter-elite links between senior religious and governmental figures from both countries. On the other hand, however, Iran's central position in post-Saddam Iraq cannot be fully consolidated due to the former's apparent lack of popularity with many (Shia) Iraqis.

Iran seeks to spread its influence through many channels. Tehran has encouraged its allies in Iraq to get fully involved in the political process, the

better to influence it. Given its political, economic and cultural, including religious, interests, Iran clearly has good reasons to seek to be influential in Iraq, utilising its resources: a mix of soft and hard power. Yet, as Iraq emerges and develops as a sovereign state, it will likely remain very wary of its eastern neighbour, seeking to limit Iran's influence within its borders. This necessarily will diminish the ability of Iran to achieve its goals.

In terms of the wider issue examined in this paper –transnational religious soft power– the case of Iran in Iraq provides interesting food for thought. Iran's national involvement in Iraq has clear policy relevance and important implications for the international relations literature on regional perceptions of threat and the balance of power, constructivist interpretations of what governments and other actors do, as well as wider issues of the links between religion and international security. The example examined in this paper also contributes to the literature on transnational Islamic political activism. For many Iraqis, the ideological, religious and political threat emanating from Iran appears to be an important factor that works to undermine any attempts to build a transnational Shia network involving the two countries.

To be successful it appears necessary that transnational religious actors accomplish two goals: disseminating an attractive cross-border global message while adapting to the local circumstances. The Roman Catholic Church was able to do this in relation to democratisation and human rights in the 1980s and 1990s and al Qaeda was able to do it for a while following the USSR's ejection from Afghanistan until its brutal methods dramatically undermined popular support. It comes as something of a surprise however to see the relatively limited capacity of Shia transnational religious actors to forge collective goals which are characterised by religion. Instead, as the case of Iraq shows very clearly any potential of such collective goals can be undermined by popular nationalist concerns. This is not to allege that nationalism necessarily trumps religious collectivity although it seems likely that in most cases this will indeed be the case. Further work is needed on religious transnational actors to determine whether this is likely to be the case, but the very limited evidence presented in this paper suggests that we underestimate the power of nationalism and locality at our peril when seeking to understand what religious transnationalism can accomplish.

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