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ROLE OF THE "SHIITE CRESCENT" IN THE PRESENT
SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST (2000–2020)

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Abstract. The article reveals the meaning of the geopolitical term "Shiite crescent". This term is used to refer to the region of the spread of Shiism in the Middle East. At present, Iran which is trying to create a broad coalition of states where the majority of the population is Shiites is claiming strategic dominance in the "Shiite crescent".

"Shiite crescent" is a geopolitical term used to refer to the area of the spread of Shiism in the Middle East. It includes Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, a number of Persian Gulf states. The term "Shiite crescent" was first used by King Abdullah II of Jordan. In 2004, Abdullah II, in an interview, warned against the danger of a "Shiite crescent", which, after the overthrow of the Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein, would spread from Iran through Iraq, Syria to Lebanon. "This crescent can play a very destabilizing role for the states of the Persian Gulf and for the entire region," the King of Jordan said at the time. Since then, the "Shiite crescent" has become a frequently mentioned geopolitical phenomenon, which is especially often spoken of by the conservative Sunni states of the Persian Gulf, primarily Saudi Arabia. This kingdom is the strongest regional opponent of the Shiite regime in Iran (of course, with the exception of Israel) (although 4 million Shiites live in Saudi Arabia, i.e. 15 per cent of the total population).

Saudi rulers consider themselves surrounded by "vassals" of Tehran. Saudi Arabia uses fear of Iran to justify not only its brutal suppression of the Shiite minority in its own country, but also its military operations in neighboring countries - Bahrain and Yemen.

What is the "Shiite crescent" really? Lebanon forms the left edge of the crescent. In Lebanon, the Shiites are the largest community. An accurate assessment of the percentage of the Shiite population in Lebanon faces a difficult problem: since 1932, the country has not conducted a census based on religion. According to estimates, 2 million inhabitants of Lebanon are Shiites, i.e. 55 per cent of the country's population. At the same time, the US State Department estimates the Shiite population of Lebanon at 27 per cent of the country's total population¹. Shiites live in the poorest southwestern region of Beirut, as well as in Saida, Nabatiyah and in villages in southern Lebanon².

The most significant military force in Lebanon is the pro-Iranian Shiite organization Hezbollah (Party of Allah), whose

armed units are conducting military operations against Israel. In Beirut and all over Lebanon, multicolored Hezbollah flags are hung. They feature a Kalashnikov assault rifle and the inscription: "Moslem resistance. Hizbullah will win."³

Hezbollah is currently fighting in Syria on the side of the government of Bashar al-Assad. During this time, thousands of its militants died there. The Syrian war has cost Hezbollah far more casualties than the conflict with Israel that has been going on for more than 30 years.

In Syria, Shiites make up 5 per cent of the population (these are mainly Alawites). But the Alawites are in power there. President Bashar al-Assad himself and his inner circle are Alawites. English historian and journalist Peter Mansfield, who spent many years in the Middle East, argued in 1980: "The Syrians have a strong sense of belonging to a particular community, it was fueled by the French among the minorities in different parts of Syria - 160,000 Druze living in the Jebel Druz region and 500,000 Alawites near Latakia".⁴

According to the Russian researcher V.A. Ushakov, "in general, the Islamic factor, on the one hand, brings Tehran and Damascus closer, especially considering that the President of the SAR, H. Assad, is an Alawite, i.e. adheres to religious views close to Shiite, on the other hand, Islam also separates them. The fact is that, representing the country's Sunni majority, Damascus assigns a secondary role to Islam in its political program, which in the 1980s envisaged an orientation towards the Arab model of socialism. This was unacceptable for Islamic Iran, a theocratic state that is alien and even hostile to the ideals of socialism and democratic principles, as Imam R. Khomeini has repeatedly stated".⁵

However, coming to power in Syria of the new President Bashar al-Assad has radically changed the situation. In order to stay in power in the conditions of the war with the jihadists, Bashar al-Assad is forced to resort to the help of Iran and Shiite volunteers from other countries. In particular, in addition to

Hezbollah, other Shiite armed formations are fighting on the side of Damascus. There is, for example, Liwa - Fatimiyun - detachments numbering more than 10,000 people. Liwa recruits its fighters among the Hazaras, the Shiite minority in Afghanistan. In addition, there is the Liwa Zainabiyun armed formation, in which Pakistani Shiites are fighting. This group has several hundred militants. Both of these formations, with their yellow banners adorned with green lettering and a Kalashnikov assault rifle, clearly show that they are taking lead from Hezbollah, whose logo looks much the same. There is no doubt that Syria is the most important player for the Iranian project in the region. For several decades, the Iranians have invested in many sectors of the Syrian economy. Their investments and influence in Syria have grown since President Bashar al-Assad came to power. Unlike his father Hafez al-Assad, whom the Iranians called the "big mountain" that prevented their penetration into Syria, Bashar was forced to accept Iranian help during the civil war, including on the battlefields with ISIS militants and jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra" and others. For their part, the Iranians view the civil war in Syria as part of their struggle against the Saudis and the United States, which see Iran as a possible rival and power capable of dominating the Middle East. In addition, and this is very important, Iran is the world's most important oil supplier, and therefore a competitor to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United States, and is trying to seize the initiative in the energy market.

In this regard, the statement of the commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) K. Soleimani is quite characteristic: "The battle for Aleppo (Syria) is the first line of defense of the Iranian Islamic revolution."

It should be noted that there is an attempt to introduce anti-Shiite sentiments in Syria. This is manifested in speeches against B. Assad himself and his Alawite entourage, although the Syrian Alawites are a fairly liberal secular sect that categorically rejects religious extremism.

In Iraq, Shiites (there are 22 million of them) make up approximately 65 per cent of the country's population. Under the regime of Saddam Hussein, they were subjected to the most severe discrimination. After the overthrow of S. Hussein, the Americans counted on the support of the Iraqi Shiites. However, the leader of the Iraqi Shiites, Muqtada al-Sadr, strongly opposed the American occupation and formed an armed group called the Mahdi Army. The leaflets he published contained calls to "fight the American occupiers." It was Muqtada al-Sadr who led the armed Shiite resistance. He repeatedly stated: "The current Iraqi president (J. Talabani from 2006 to 2014 – ed.) says that America is our partner. And I declare that America is our enemy." ⁶

Since the Shiites came to power in Iraq with the help of the United States, Tehran has included it in its plans to spread its influence. Iraq has become a strategic foothold for Iran in the struggle for dominating influence in the region.

Many Iraqi oppositionists were hiding in Iran. In particular, it was there that Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim (1939-2003) created the Badr Brigades, which initially fought against Saddam Hussein. This brigade had about 10,000 equipped and trained soldiers. Later the "Badr Brigades" began to fight against ISIS. Today they are fighting in Syria.

In Iraq itself, the situation remains precarious due to persistent unemployment and corruption. And here, just as in Syria, they are trying to impose anti-Iranian sentiments on the population. However, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei blamed the Western intelligence services for organizing the protests in Iraq. Stakeholders in the anti-Iranian protests in Iraq are both Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates, which very likely provided money through their emissaries to the Iraqi rioters. In Yemen, where the Shiites make up a significant part of the population, a civil war has been going on for many years, which forced more than 2 million people to flee the country and cost the lives of more than 10,000 civilians. 80 per cent of the population of Yemen, in order to survive, are forced to rely on international

assistance. Since March 2015, a military alliance led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE has been fighting against the Iranian-backed Houthi militia. The Houthis have controlled, since 2012, the northwestern region of Yemen. Tehran has been active in Yemen, including providing humanitarian aid, since 2011. Since then, Iran has trained hundreds of militants and for some time supplied weapons to the rebels by sea.

The fact that the Houthi (Houthis) are not Imami Shiites, like the Iranians themselves, but Zaidis, is not the reason why Tehran refuses to help them. Religious autocracy can be pragmatic if it serves its own ends. While Saudi Arabia and its allies are spending huge amounts of money to defeat the Houthis, Iran is pursuing a more cunning and less costly policy of using pinpricks to hurt their Sunni adversaries.

A similar scenario is possible in Bahrain. Most of the local population of this dwarf state are Shiites (more than 60 per cent). However, they are ruled by the Sunni ruling house. Since this island state in the Persian Gulf was once captured by the Persians, Iran from time to time has ideas to return this territory. The fact is that in 1602 the Persians conquered the island of Bahrain, and it remained under their rule until 1783. But in 1783 the island was captured by the Utubi tribe, who came from the coast of Qatar⁷. In 1822, the Persian authorities in Shiraz and the British political resident in the Gulf, Captain William Bruce, entered into an agreement by which the latter recognized Persian sovereignty over Bahrain. However, this agreement was not approved by the British government⁸.

Iranian politicians are calling Bahrain a "lost province" that should once again be returned to Tehran's control. During the Arab Spring in 2011, tens of thousands of Bahrainis protested against the royal house. It was only with the help of Saudi Arabian troops that it managed to crush this uprising. In Bahrain, there are radical underground groups Saraya al-Ashtar and Saraya al-Mukhtar, which the authorities accuse of committing dozens of arsons of police stations and security services in

Bahrain. Several members of these groups have already been executed.

The Arab Spring influenced the mood of the Shiite youth of Bahrain. Naturally, the discontent and dissatisfaction of young people is an ideal breeding ground for a social explosion. Under these conditions, the ruler of Bahrain, King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, pins his hopes on the presence of the Fifth American fleet in Bahrain.

In November 2010, WikiLeaks, a group led by Julian Asange, released hundreds of secret US diplomats' reports concerning the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Among them there was a telegram from Saudi King Abdullah (2009) in which he asks the US government to attack Iran in order to "cut off the head of this snake"⁹. In 2010, Bahrain's King Isa al-Khalifa met with US Central Command Commander General David Petraeus and asked him to take military action against Iran's nuclear program. "This program must be stopped," said the King of Bahrain. "The danger of allowing it to develop outweighs the danger of stopping it."¹⁰

The Shiite factor in Iran's foreign policy is explained by pragmatism and national interests. Behind the intensification of the Sunni-Shiite confrontation there is, first of all, Iran's attempt to create under its auspices the "Shiite Crescent" coalition - the unification of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon on the basis of a religious community. A series of events of the first decade of the 21st century led to increase of fear among Sunni governments, especially in the Gulf, of the possibility of such an alliance, dubbed the "Shiite Crescent".

This concern is aggravated by the policy of a number of Arab media, which form in the public opinion the image of the Shiites as enemies of the Sunni Arab world, and the interest of such important players in the Middle East as the United States and Israel in undermining Iran's positions.

Another important factor that influenced the formation of the image of the enemy in the person of the Shiites is the Arab

Spring. During the events of 2011-2012 in the Middle East, the Gulf States were particularly concerned about the Shiite uprising in Bahrain, which was crushed by Saudi forces.

Finally, the war in Syria exacerbates the Shiite-Sunni confrontation. The fact is that the United States and the Arabian monarchies, interested in the defeat of B. Assad, are trying to ignite a conflict between Sunnis and Shiites inside Syria, emphasizing that President B. Assad belongs to a small offshoot of Shiism. The Alawite community in Syria (from 10 to 12.5 per cent of the population) during the years of the rule of the Assad family – H. Assad and B. Assad – turned from a poorly educated layer into representatives of the middle class, they made up a significant part of the Syrian officer corps. According to the Arabian monarchies, a possible alliance between Damascus and Tehran could contribute to the rise of Iran, its formation as a regional power, and hinder Saudi Arabia's plans to lead the Moslem world.

It should be noted that modern Shiism still relies on that part of the population that is acutely aware of social injustice. At one time, the famous Arabist E.A. Belyaev explained the spread of Shiism in Iran by the class struggle between the feudal lords and the peasantry. In his opinion, the feudal lords of Iran adopted Islam in its Sunni form, and the peasants, in defiance of the feudal lords, adopted Shiism. "In Iran," he argued, "... the peasants, who made up the bulk of the population, began to convert to Islam only when Shiism began to spread, a special form of Islam that was opposed to the dominant direction of this religion (Sunnism)"¹¹.

As Arif Aliyev writes, "Shiism is sometimes mistakenly considered a product of the Iranians, a kind of Persian understanding of the ideology of Islam, a reaction of the Iranian spirit against Arabism."

The first Shiites were undoubtedly the Arabs, and only during the years of the Umayyad Caliphate (660-750) with its

capital in Damascus did a significant part of the Mawali¹² from among the indigenous population of Iran¹³ join them.

Academician V.V. Bartold remarked on this occasion: "Shiiteism found fertile ground among the Persian people, but the element of opposition was in this case more important than the element of nationality"¹⁴. As a result, in ethnically diverse Iran, a religious homogeneity of the population arose, the majority of which were Moslems – Shiites.

Shiism is not a holistic unified doctrine or a single church organization. It has numerous sects: Zaidis, Imamis, Ismailis, Alawites and many others. All of them are connected by common historical roots and ideological fundamental provisions. The main one is the recognition of the fourth Caliph Ali and his descendants as the only legitimate successors of the Prophet Muhammad as the spiritual and secular head of the Moslem community (Imam).

Among them, the rather moderate sect of the Zaidis, who live mainly in Yemen, attracts attention. In the civil war, which has been going on for more than a year on the territory of Yemen, belonging to Zaidism contributes to the rallying of northerners who opposed the alliance of the country's authorities with Saudi Arabia, who supported the idea of restoring the imamate that existed in Yemen until 1962¹⁵.

Druzes are also classified as Shiites, since the doctrine originated in Fatimid Egypt, where the authorities adhered to Shiism. This direction arose in 1017 in the mountains of Lebanon. The Druze doctrine bizarrely combines the provisions of Islam and Christianity. On Thursdays, Druzes read the Quran and the Bible. They do not recognize the concepts of heaven and hell mandatory for Moslems and Christians. They have their own sacred book, which cannot even be touched. You can't become a Druze, you have to be born. Druzes practice monogamy¹⁶. Believers are divided into initiates, who have the right to participate in special rituals, and the uninitiated, which includes most of the women. Druzes live in Lebanon, Syria and Israel. It is

curious that in Israel they are subject to conscription into the army¹⁷.

It should, however, be noted that the modern Druzes consider themselves a separate religious movement.

A special place in the family of those who profess Shiism is occupied by the Ismailis, some of whom live outside the Middle East. The beginning of the Ismaili movement is traditionally associated with a split among the Shiites in the middle of the 8th century. They got their name from Imam Ismail ibn Ja'far, the appointed spiritual successor of Ja'far as-Sadiq. The other branch, the Imamites, accept Musa al-Kazim (d. 799), Ismail's younger brother, as the true Imam. There are several branches within Ismailism. In particular, the spiritual head of the largest branch, the Nizari, is the Aga Khan IV. The core of the religious and political doctrine of the Ismailis was the doctrine of the imamate, the need for the existence of an infallible imam from the descendants of Ali¹⁸.

From all of the above, it should be concluded that the Islamic Republic of Iran interprets the current events in the Middle East from the standpoint of Shiite philosophy as a sign of the imminent arrival of the Mahdi and as an opportunity to establish its dominant influence in the so-called "Shiite Crescent" – the region where Shiism spread in the Middle East. To varying degrees, Iran exerts its influence on four countries – Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Bahrain. Moreover, it is trying to create under his auspices a broad coalition with the participation of all countries where Shiites live.

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