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Laurence Louër. *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East*. Translated by John King. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. xii + 154 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-70328-4; ISBN 978-0-231-80094-5.

Reviewed by Ioana Emy Matesan (Syracuse University)

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As the initial optimism of the “Arab Spring” dissipated, one of the rising concerns in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is the growing Sunni-Shia divide, which is no longer contained to Iraq but is resurfacing in countries like Lebanon and Bahrain. Yet, academic research on Shia movements beyond Iran is relatively sparse, and eclipsed by the vast body of work on Sunni movements (especially those with hard-line interpretations) that has grown exponentially since 9/11 across the disciplines. Laurence Louër’s book *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East* is therefore a welcome addition that offers valuable insight and incredible detail, accessible to scholars, policymakers, and general audiences interested in the topic.

Louër sets out to offer a “framework for comprehensive analysis” that helps the reader understand both the transnational aspect of Shia movements and their local specificities (p. 2). This framework does not take the form of a concise theoretical formulation, but rather is centered on exploring and understanding the different actors involved at the local, national, and transnational levels, from the laymen to the clergy and the *marja’* (supreme religious authority). The chapters are therefore organized thematically, looking first at the clergy and the split between clergy and laymen, then at the development and role of transnational networks, and ultimately at the Islamic Republic of Iran, before zooming in on the developments since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Interspersed throughout these chapters are details on the emergence and development of the Shia movements in Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.

The book offers an impressive historical sociological overview that traces concisely yet systematically the

physical movements, social interactions, ideological developments, and political strategies of the clergy that is at the base of these Shia movements. At times, the narrative treats the clergy (or a particular subgroup thereof) as a collective actor, and at other times the author narrows in on specific figures (such as Mohammed al-Shirazi, Ali al-Sistani, or Mohammed al-Sadr). While the reader might get lost in some of the rich details, overall Louër succeeds in weaving an interesting story line through different times and spaces, and which centers on three main issues: the diffusion, the domestication, and the secularization of the transnational Shia movement.

The concept of diffusion has become widely used in the social sciences, especially as scholars have turned their attention to the spread of norms and the development of transnational social movements. Yet a continuing critique of much of this literature has been the dearth of explanations of actual causal mechanisms through which diffusion happens. In this regard, Louër’s book is a welcome contribution to the works on diffusion beyond Islamic movements or the MENA region.

The author starts from the premise that “ideologies and models of political action are seldom propagated by a simple process of indoctrination and imitation,” but rather they spread through the physical travel and personal connections by individuals, who build transnational networks (p. 52). From this perspective, the author traces the diffusion of Shia movements to the eighteenth century, when in the aftermath of a Sunni invasion from Afghanistan, the new Afsharid dynasty sought to reduce the Shia aspect of the state, and many *ulama* went into exile in Mesopotamia or the Indian subcontinent. Mapping out this movement of clergy, Louër shows how Najaf and Qom in contemporary Iraq and Iran

emerged as the “twin cradles” of Shiism (p. 7), and subsequently traces the emergence of transnational clerical networks and Shia Islamic movements, such as al-Da’wa. It is through these transnational clerical networks that the ideology of the Iranian revolution was subsequently spread.

In spite of the diffusion of the Iranian model and the initial “absorption of the Shia movements by Iran” (p. 66), Louër argues that what is emerging is a “drift towards autonomy from the traditional centers of power constituted by Iraq and Iran,” so that the current Shia world is increasingly “multipolar” (p. 125). This move away from the center to the periphery is coupled with the domestication of the Shia movements, as they are becoming increasingly concerned with local issues.

One of the factors contributing to this push against the center is the growing debate over Iran’s expansionist foreign policies, especially as was the case in 1982, when it did not accept Saddam Hussein’s ceasefire offer. After Ayatollah Khomeini’s death, Ali Khamenei struggled to impose his religious authority internally and externally, which created a “deep split between pro and anti-Iranian forces” (p. 78) that continues today and that according to the author reflects in some sense the “classical pattern of competition” for the *marja’iyya* (religious authority) (p. 79). More generally, however, whereas the 1970s and 1980s were marked by regional consideration, the period between 1990 and 2005 in particular saw a reorientation towards domestic concerns, so that the continuing relations with Iran became primarily tactical.

Most scholars agree that the Iranian model has lost its appeal, and in a recent Brookings report Geneive Abdo suggests that in this new era after the 2011 uprisings, Iran will “find it increasingly difficult to influence Arab states and societies through religious and ideological means.”[1] This is partly because the brutal suppression of protests in 2009 questioned the legitimacy of the Islamic republic, and partly because the newly restored Najaf is re-emerging as a theological center that challenges Iran’s guardianship over Shiism.[2] Yet in light of the recent events unfolding in Bahrain and Syria there is still a possibility that Iran will once again rise to prominence, increase the salience of regional concerns, and pull the transnational movement towards the center again.

Louër relates the move away from the Iranian model to a larger challenge to the traditional religious authority, which she interprets as a process of the secularization of the Shia movement. The main drive of this process of secularization is the division between the laymen and the

clergy, which has been present from the beginning but has intensified in recent decades. From this perspective, the author argues that both the al-Da’wa movement in Iraq and the Amal movement in Lebanon have achieved secularization, “by the simple fact that clerics no longer occupy the executive positions within them and that they seek no connection with the *marja’iyya*” (p. 126). The author goes as far as arguing that even Ali Khamenei “has been swept up by the movement towards the secularization of politics” (p. 135), as evidenced by the fact that he is becoming increasingly weary of making public statements about the affairs of other countries with significant Shia populations, and instead offers more general and vague opinions that allow the activists on the ground to make the final decisions about how to implement general principles (p. 134). Louër also interprets the millenarianism expressed by leaders such as Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who claims divine inspiration for his policies, as a manifestation of this anti-clericalism and secularization of the Shia movement, emphasizing that secularization should not be mistaken for moderation.

While Louër does an excellent job documenting some of the tensions between clergy and laymen and traces their impact on the decision-making process in movements like al-Da’wa, if we accept her definition of secularism as “the attenuation of the status of religion as an organizing principle of society” and “a source determining the making of political decisions” (p. 126), it remains unclear why the decentralization and perhaps even democratization of religious authority should be equated with secularization. Just as secularization does not equal moderation, the shift of authority from the clergy to the laymen in and of itself is not necessarily indicative of a diminution of the role of religion in the political sphere, or a decoupling of religion and politics. Even though in Shia movements the presence of clerics in the highest ranks of decision making is a defining characteristic, a more compelling term is what Louër refers to as the “Sunnification” of these movements (p. 129).

For a more convincing argument about the secularization of a movement, the author could have also examined more explicitly the changes in policies and ideological tenets more broadly, and a shift towards the separation of religion and politics. Louër shows that the leaders of these movements are increasingly pragmatic and responding to the situation on the ground, which is why clerical opinions are increasingly seen as guiding opinions rather than hard and concrete rules of behavior. Secularization might indeed be the ultimate outcome

of these developments, but this should be proven rather than assumed.

The process that Louër describes resembles the framework of two-pronged ideology, which some scholars have also applied to differentiate between the long-term principles of Hamas, and the organization's short-term reactions to constraints and circumstances.[3] Beyond Islamic groups, M. Seliger suggests that for any party or movement holding or competing for power, "the need for a more or less frank restatement of the immediate goals inevitably arises," which leads to action-oriented thought.[4] Alongside the fundamental principles then, a new line of argument emerges, which Seliger calls "operative ideology," whose purpose is to justify particular policies that are executed by the party. Operative ideology pays more attention to prudence, expediency, and efficiency than to the absolute principles of the group, and it is more concerned with technical prescriptions than overarching moral prescriptions. In other words, the difference between the fundamental and the operative ideology is one between "the original doctrine" and "the twists of application," which is a phenomenon much broader than the transformation of decision making and religious authority in Shia movements.[5]

Given Louër's definition of secularization, it is also interesting to reflect on the connection between secularization and levels of piety in society. Vali Nasr, for instance, argues that it is "a mistake to confuse hostility to the Islamic Republic and its clerical rulers with a turning away from Shia piety at the popular level." He interprets the push for "an older and less politicized faith" as unhappiness with the Khomeini-crafted regime, rather than a diminishment of the role of religion in society.[6]

Such disillusionment with the politicization of religious movements extends beyond the Shia world. Asef Bayat, for instance, contends that much of the Muslim world, from Egypt to Iran, is moving towards post-Islamism after a period of trial and error with Islamism, which reveals the "anomalies and inadequacies" of the system and makes it susceptible to questioning. However, Bayat also emphasizes that post-Islamism is "neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic or secular" but rather should be seen as "an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty," and to marry Islam with democracy while also "breaking down the monopoly of religious truth." [7] What this suggests is that the shifts in authority within the transnational Shia movements that Louër discusses might be a broader phenomenon that crosses the Sunni-Shia divide, and that

might be more complex than a process of secularization.

In other words, some of the processes that Louër identifies might be reflective of changing patterns of politics that go beyond the specificities of the Shia movements that she delves into. That being said, the rich detail and broad historical and temporal span of the book offer an invaluable contribution towards a subject that is likely to receive increasing academic attention in the near future. In doing so, Louër also dispels some existing misperceptions, such as the presumed antagonism between Arabs and Iranians, or the alarmist views that Iran dominates and controls all the Shia movements and followers in the Muslim world. She also critiques the argument that Shiism is intrinsically revolutionary, and rejects any simplistic assumption that Shia clergy are either inherently quietist or revolutionary. The fact that some of the changes that she describes in the Shia movements are similar to the processes witnessed by Sunni groups or political movements more generally doesn't undermine the lucid account of these transformations, but rather strengthens the argument that Shia movements are neither static nor exceptional.

Shiism and Politics in the Middle East makes an important contribution to the study of Islamic movements by exploring transnational Shia movements, tracing the physical and ideological movement of the actors involved, and pushing scholars to explore the tensions between laymen and clergy and the dynamics of religious authority. Rather than providing a parsimonious or clear theoretical framework, the larger value of the book is providing a strong springboard and opening new avenues for future research into a timely and important issue.

Notes

[1]. Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2013), 53.

[2]. *Ibid.*, 54.

[3]. Menachem Klein, "Hamas in Power," *The Middle East Journal* 61, no. 3 (2007).

[4]. M. Seliger, "Fundamental and Operative Ideology: The Two Principal Dimensions of Political Argumentation," *Policy Sciences* 1(1970): 326.

[5]. *Ibid.*, 329.

[6]. Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton &

Company, 2007), 219.

[7]. Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 243.

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