The Investigation of the Effect of Arabia Shia Minority in Convergence or Divergence of This Country with Iran

Dr. Mohsen Diyanat¹, Somayeh Ghaffari²

¹Assistant Professor at Payame Noor University of Iran
²Lecturer at Payame Noor University of Iran

ABSTRACT

In this study, it is attempted to study the role of Shia minority population of Saudi Arabia in regional convergence or divergence of this country with Iran with the major population of Shia Muslims. Here different aspects of Iran and Saudi Arabia relations are investigated by relying on the role of this Shia minority and it is defined that due to the fact that Saudi government have instrumental behavior with this Shia minority and the lack of considering social-political position to them, the effect of this minority is mostly divergent rather than convergent.

KEYWORDS: Iran; Arabia; Convergence; divergence; Shia; Sunni

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important constructive factors of domestic and international policies of political units in Middle East is religion. Two governments with important role of religion in their international policies are Iran and Arabia. These two countries are the most important political units in the region whose relations and conflicts affect the entire region. Arabia was considered by monotheists since Ibrahim built Kaaba and it became the great Islamic civilization center at prophethood of Mohammad (pbuh). This land is of great value to Muslims due to its special characteristics such as revelation center, God House, Holy shrines, etc and their official religion is Wahabiat. Iran with 895 of Shia population is considered the leader of Shia people all over the world.

Since the collapse of Ottoman emperor and Safavid government, Iran and Arabia are considered two rivals who have hegemony dream on all the region and Islam world. So, considering their different ideological structure, this study aims at indicating that Shia people as forming 10% of Arabia population, are considered convergent or divergent factor in Iran, Arabia relations?

Table (1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population in Million</th>
<th>Shia percent</th>
<th>Sunni percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabia</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Shehab, Zakki (2007)*

Considering the above table and the presence of Sunni minority in Iran and Shia minority in Arabia, we attempt to investigate the effect of Shia minority in Arabia in convergence and divergence of this country toward Iran.

At first, we define the concepts of convergence and divergence to clarify this issue. Convergence means close relation of two countries to take common positions in different fields of political, economical and military and so on. In political and economical convergence, convergent countries try to present common policies in global issues and investigate the support of governments from national economy and their economical relations. The convergence and divergence factors with important roles in formation of these phenomena among various communities are shown obviously in the following table.

Table (2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Convergence factors</th>
<th>Divergence factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Common enemy</td>
<td>Uncommon enemy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical and geographical similarities</td>
<td>Historical and geographical differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural similarities including religion, language and unit race</td>
<td>Cultural, religion, language and race differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common or consistent political aims</td>
<td>Uncommon or opposite political aims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common parallel national interest†</td>
<td>Contradictory national interest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The census is for 2007, while the population of Iran and Arabia and the percent of Shia and Sunni are increased recently.

*Corresponding Author: Somayeh Ghaffari, lecturer at Payame Noor University of Iran
The term “divergence” is opposite to convergence and divergence means social interaction due to latent and obvious factors in political and social structure avoid social, political and economical unity and due to the lack of encouraging political units to collaboration in international policy field that result into the cold relation between these countries.

The factors affecting can influence convergence of two countries, Iran and Arabia are some issues as geographical proximity, their enmity with Israel, their common religion, Islam, the influence of Arabic language on Persian language and supporting Palestine and these factors are convergence factors of these two countries in the region. The term “divergence” is opposite to convergence and divergence means social interaction due to latent and obvious factors in political and social structure avoid social, political and economical unity and due to the lack of encouraging political units to collaboration in international policy field that result into the cold relation between these countries.

Divergence factors from Iran and Arabia are different and they are more than convergence factors. Divergence factors from Iran are including riot of Arabia Shia after Revolution, hostile relation with America, claiming possession of Iranian 3 Islands, restricting Sunni minority and Iran supporting Bahrain.

Divergence factors from Arabia are: Imposing pressure on Shia minority, close relation with America, taking position against Iran 3 islands via the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), dispute on the name of Persian Gulf and changing it to Arabic Gulf from Emirate and Arabia, supporting Vahabi and Selphi radical movements opposing Shia in the world and in Iran, Arabia support of Iran and Syria oppositions.

Generally, convergence and divergence factors are language, religion, race, ethnicity, balanced or unbalanced regional development, and the participation of population groups in regional and national political management, ethnical social structure and international support of divergent force (Karimipour, 2001, p.44). Generally, religion and common ideology are one factor of divergence and convergence factors but they have strong role in comparison with other cultural-social factors (Kamran & Karamipour, 2002).

As Arabia Shia people are common factor between Iran and this country, Arabia with a percent of Shia population have some similarities with Iran, thus this issue is the common factor in relations of these two countries and can help the convergence of these two countries.

Since Arabia Shias are common factors between Iran and this country, Arabia with having percent of Shia population has similarity with Iran. So, this issue discharges as a common factor in the relation of these countries and can help convergence to these countries.

This research is searching for the main question that whether common religious minority in Arabia cause convergence to Iran or divergence with them?

The current study, in addition to showing Arabia Shia as divergent factor in Iran and Arabia relation, it deals with the reason that why Shia people are considered as divergent factor in the relation of these two countries. The most important factor is pessimistic ideas of Arabia to Iran, its old rival that by exaggerating about the danger of Iran that is under the influence of great powers policies, attempts to put aside its country from Iran and they are fearful of approaching to Iran. Because they think that Shia people under the influence of Iran are turned into a strong riot force against Iran but ideological and religious difference of these two countries are of great importance in making these two countries far from each other.

**Shia history in Saudi Arabia**

The condition of Shia in Arabia and putting them under pressure from Arabia is the most importing factor turning Shia people of this country as divergent factors in Iran-Arabia relations. Thus, it is necessary to deal a little with Shia history in Arabia and Shia measurements in that country and Arabia policies to them to clarify their divergence fields in the relations between two countries.

Shia history in Arabia Peninsula dates back to 1st century Hejri (Islamic calendar), since 4th century to the early 20th century, Arabia Shia were under the external dominance except, 3 quarters century of the presence of Portuguese in 16th century, this dominance was the dominance of foreign Sunnis but Shia people kept their power. They performed their religious rituals without any fear and they were in touch with Shia communities beyond the borders.

In 1913, Saudi clan by attacking eastern province took the power of the region from ottoman control and to consolidate their control were strongly reliant upon religious aspirations of tribes. The necessity to fight against unbelievers and pagans were religious beliefs of tribes and Shia people were their main target. Tribes force put the

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† When national interest development of a country cause limitation of the position of a country in the region, they are called contradictory interest but if national interest development of two countries in the region doesn’t increase concern or enmity among them, they are called parallel or common national interest.

‡ According to some Sunni radical groups in Iran
next king, Malek Abdolaziz under more pressure to force Shia people convert to another religion, otherwise, they will be killed. His refusal caused the riot of tribes force in 1962 that Al-e Soud suppressed it but tribes killed a great number of Shia people by their own power (International crisis group, 2005). Since 1932 that Saudi Arabia was established, Shia minority were under the sects threats, Saudi kingdom at the same time, used various methods to suppress and calm Shia minorities and Sunni rulers in Shia regions of Arabia by building new towns and trade centers acted rarely for the benefit of Shia people and Shia people couldn’t not even achieve management positions.

Saudis alternately resort to control politics and suppression or attraction and threat. They know big danger of shias that address Saudi economics. Sauds try to go out Ahsa region’s shias of their lac and decrease them by organized setting of sunni in Arabs in this region, in the population of whole country, with addition to sever control of this population. (Fransowa Twal, 1383-128).

Saudis restricted Shia rituals seriously; for example, banning Azan broadcast in public areas, destroying holy places, limitation of building mosque, establishing modern Saudi Arabia and developing government organization resulted into serious weakening of Shia institutions. Shia religious authorities were active lonely and Shia clergy men instead of fighting against Saudi power tolerated the difficult conditions and didn’t oppose or they didn’t defend more freedom.

In 1977, Al-Safar and his followers in Qatif, claimed political and religious power and tried to play political role and by getting inspired of external events, namely Islamic Revolution of Iran negotiated directly with the regime and discussed about religious and social problems of Shia people and in 1979, the first and the great civil defiance was done by Saudi Shia people (ibid).

Current generation of Shia political leaders of Qatif and Al-Hasa due to their schooling period in Iraq, tried not to be silent anymore and helped to establish political-religious networks and it was dominant till now on anti-Shia policies of Saudi Arabia (ibid).

Shia protestors in Arabia attempted to achieve the followings: elimination of discrimination, having more share of oil, job opportunities and renovation of Shia people residences that was with the streets full of sewage for epidemics of various diseases.

America was against Iraq and prioritizing Shia people, made Arabia Shia more courageous and they wanted to have some privileges that finally successor of that time, Abdollah promised Shia leadership to focus on their requests but this request is not fulfilled until now and whenever Shia leaders blamed them, they were arrested. Thus, until the rights of this religious minority are ignored in Arabia community, they were more inclined toward Iran and tried to create tension in social and political conditions of the community but the limited consideration of the government in fulfilling their needs, moved them to have more loyalty to this regime.

To investigate the fact that Shia people are divergent or convergent factors in Iran and Arabia relations, this issue should be investigated from where that whether Shia people are increasing in the region or not? If the number of Shia people are increasing, this is for the benefit of Iran and if this increased is restricted, this is for the benefit of Arabia. After that by giving some images of Iran and Arabia competition on Islam world leadership, Arabia and America relations, OPEC, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), 3 islands, Palestine and Bahrain are shown that Arabia Shia are as divergent factor in the relations of these two countries.

Shia rise in Persian Gulf

Maximilian Terhalle said about Shia rise in the countries in the region, namely Saudi Arabia believe that four factors constrain Shia rise: domestic politics, international politics, nationalism and economics.

To Maximilian Terhalle, the first factor is domestic politics. On political grounds, four factors constrain the “Shia rise”: domestic politics, international politics, nationalism and economics.

Domestic politics is the fact that government considers fulfilling people rights that increases people loyalty to the government not an external power. It is the domestic politics of the Gulf States, not the rhetoric of Iran’s leaders that has critically shaped the extent of revolutionary Shii aspiration since 1979. A political solution, however imperfect, between Sunni rulers and the Gulf’s Shia has been found. The examples of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain illustrate distinctive approaches that governments have taken to accommodate their Shia populations.

Saudi Arabia has successfully engaged its Shia population despite continuing religious affronts by conservative clerics, who branded them rafida (rejectionists). Having used state force to crack down on Shia riots in 1979 and 1980, and after massive internal disputes emanating from a socioeconomic crisis, the Saudi royal elite recognized in the 1990s that accommodating the Shia opposition could easily temper a serious conflict.

Dr. Terhalle serves as an expert on the Gulf region with the German Army
In 1993, when the rulers were under severe pressure, this allowed for an understanding between the two parties as to an enhancement of the Shia community’s rights. Immediately afterwards, the aforementioned organization, which was considered the largest of the Iranian-influenced groups, decided to dissolve itself. At that time, Iran had not been capable of competing with the Al Saud government for influence with the Shia population of the kingdom.

After September 11, 2001, the heated internal disputes that followed and, most important, the Riyadh bombings of May 2003 impelled the Saudi government again to adopt a double strategy. On the one hand, the police cracked down on what were depicted as terrorists. On the other hand, Crown Prince Abdullah wisely pursued the idea of an unprecedented National Dialogue to attract both official Wahhabi clerics, and the Shia community. In such condition, the court had carefully observed that the Shia had not taken advantage of a chaotic moment in Saudi politics and accepted to welcome Shia as an actor in politics and society of Saudi (Terhalle, 2007).

Thus, taking internal politics is very influential in loyalty or disloyalty of religious minorities to them and the governments should considerably focus on this issue.

The second factor according to Terhalle is the constraints of international politics trying to undercut Iranian Shiism. This can be shown through reference to Iran’s foreign policy before and during the second Gulf War (1990-91). Iran did not side with the Shiia majority of Iraq. On the contrary, after Khomeini’s death in 1989, and having to face the miserable state of affairs the country was left in, the new president redefined the national interest; Rafsanjani could reduce the ideological pursuit of the export of the revolution and apply a more pragmatic approach. Iran international belongings including the hope to improve relations with the Gulf States and with Western countries interested in investing with western countries propelled Rafsanjani to make a decision that left little room for calculations on Shiism (ibid).

Thus, international relations and pursuing national interest rarely avoid the dispersion of a transnational movement based on public belief system because taking foreign politics with ideological and religious positions and claiming about Helal Shia strategy from Iran, stimulated Arabia Shia people and other countries in the region against their governments and increased Arabia suspect to Iran.

The third factor that constrain Shia rise is nationalism. Nationalism has proved capable of outweighing religion where the Shias loyalty to the state is concerned.

The prominent example of that is the war of Iraq with Iran that Iraqi shia soldiers fight against Iran side with Arabs.

However, the main aim of the majority of Shia people under the serious pressure of Saudi regime was at the beginning the overthrow of the Saudi government, but now despite Iran in the early times of revolution, don’t want the overthrow of Saudi government and they want social and political reforms in the society Wataniyya” (citizenship) was the term the Shia adhered to and used to express their allegiance to the regime ,to some extent, there has been a process of reciprocal reassurance of the willingness to cooperate, which has led to a mutual recognition between the government and the Shia community within the domestic structure of Saudi politics. It has been the result of ideas of community, of collective identity and of collective interests based upon the given state structures, and not an imagined transnational Shia community led by Tehran — that made Riyadh the Saudi Shia point of reference (ibid).

Although Arabia Shia at first were strongly influenced by Iran revolutionary model and tried to have an autonomous country, it seems that by creating an international crisis such as Iraqi Shia soldiers in imposed war of Iraq against Iran that under Arabic nationalism prefer national interest of Iran to religious interest as Terhalleh believes and at this time by resorting to Arabic ethnicity and by little consideration from Saudi government to them cause that this religious minority is alleged to his government not Iran and at such situation, it acts as a neutral factor and it doesn’t influence the convergence between Iran and Arabia.

Finally, the fourth factor is economics. The limited extent to which Iran has been able to do business with regional countries in 2006 has undercut the influence of Shiism and the countries that do business with Iran are non-regional (ibid).

Political disputes of Iran and Arabia influenced economical issues and achieving this bilateral understanding in economical collaborations and determining the production and price of oil in OPEC are difficult and as Terhalleh believes Iran’s minimal trade with neighboring countries does not contribute to strengthening of Iranian influence to affect Shia of the regions and other issues.

These four factors (domestic politics, international politics, nationalism and economics) indicate the fact that Shia people are as divergent factor and not convergent factor in Iran and Arabia relations as Shia people played as neutral factor in Iran and Arabia relations and they didn’t have any influence on convergence between Iran and Arabia.

Now we should consider that whey Shia people can be considered as convergent factor in Iran-Arabia relations and they act as divergent factor and they increase the distance between Iran and Arabia.
In introduction section we named convergence and divergence factors between Iran and Arabia and as it was considered, regional convergence factors between these two countries are not considerable in comparison with divergence factors, due to this, in this part of research, we consider regional divergence factors and the fact that why Shia people are regarded as divergent factors in Iran-Arabia relations:

The investigation of divergence reasons of Shia people in Iran and Arabia relations (regional divergence factors):

Arabia and Iran are the greatest independent governments of this region and each pursue to increase their influence in Middle East and Persian Gulf region and in Islam world and this cause increasing competition between these two countries. After Islamic Revolution, Iran claimed to be the chief of Islam world and this approach is directly against Arabia and its power. These increasing competitions caused that common factors between these two countries such as the presence of Shia people in Arabia didn’t influence convergence and closeness of these two countries.

The most important reasons of divergence are classified as the followings:

First: the main reason of Arabia to react to Iran Shia Islam was the fact that, it was not only concerned about the development of political Islam in the region, but also it was worried about that Iran by supporting Shia of the region, namely Iraq with maximum Shia people, turn into a great power in the region.

Second: Arabia is a religious country that its rules are based on Wahhabi Islam. Wahhabi religion plays important role in Arabia and nothing is done against this religion and all the politics of Arabia is based on its formal religion. Wahhabiat overlapping with Saudi ethnicity led into kingdom, in which other Islamic religions couldn’t not develop, namely Shia people due to stating their opposition to this religion, are in bad conditions full of discrimination and opposition. In the history, Wahhabiat put Shia people under pressure and provided the divergence grounds of Iran and Arabia. Thus, ideological and religious disputes of Wahbion with Shia religious minority in Arabia is one of the factors that cause Shia people are considered as divergent factor in Arabia and Iran relations as such view of Wahbion to Shia people has negative effect on Iran-Arabia relation.

Third: Iran policy in Islamic Republic of Iran affected Shia of Arabia in 1979 and they protested against their government and Saudi government showed its dislike from Iran policy against Arab countries in the region (riot against dictator regimes) and suppressed the protestors strongly and by Iraq attack to Iran in 1980, supported Iraq financially to avoid revolutionary Iranian Islam develop to other parts of the world (Amir sajedi, 1993). Thus, the influence of Iran on Arabia Shia is one of the factors that made this country worried and it caused that this factor (Shia) don’t have convergence role in Iran-Arabia relations.

Fourth: Against the influence of Iran on Arabia Shia, Arabia use pressure tools against Iran and one of them is Wahhabiat propaganda in other countries in the region including Iran to unite all non-Wahabi Sunnis of the countries in the region even Iran, to their Wahabi beliefs to prevent the actions of Iran in the region.

As Arabia government for its anti-Shia and anti-Iran actions sent 4000 Wahabi clergymen as immigrants to Iran and this group planned for 20’000 propaganda based in villages (www.shia-new.com , 2011) and Arabia government published conflicting religious books in Tehran and used Hij event to attract Iranian political elites. Saudi Arabia by these pressures attempt to avoid developing creativity in Islamic countries by Iran and considering the deep conflicts, Saudi Shia can not be considered as convergent factors in Iran- Arabia relations.

The regional competition and dispute of Iran and Arabia:

This group of divergence factors with the exception of factors resulting minority of shia.

First: another fact that changes Shia people as divergent factor in Iran-Arabia relations is the relation of Arabia with America, the old enemy of Islamic Republic of Iran.

The relation between America and Saudi Arabia is challenging, both countries are strategic allies for more than 60 years. In 2009, Crown prince, Feisal in a news conference with Hilary Clinton said that threat is made from Iran and he requested an immediate solution than sanction, but these words were denied by Iranian authorities (Wikipedia, 2011). It is not impossible that in case of the war between America and Israel against Iran, Arabia is used as the military basis of these two countries.

Times, published in London wrote that Riad is agree to use aerial channel of Arabia instead of common path to shorten the distance of Israel bombers for Iran bombardment (www.parsine.com, 2011).

Second: Another dispute factor between Iran and Arabia is Persia Gulf Cooperation Council that was founded with the aim of controlling Iran revolution in 1988. This council denounced in most of their meetings, Iran actions in 3 Islands and activity in nuclear activities and they try to change Persian Gulf to Arabic Gulf.
Third: Another reasons of divergence between Iran and Arabia are hostile position of Arabia against Iran nuclear program. As at the end of June 2010, Iran is the main issue of discussion between American leaders and Arabia, Obama and King Abdullah in a visit regarding restricting Iran nuclear plan and improving defense positions of Arabia against Iran by purchasing 72 F-15 Eagle bombers were agreed (ibid).

Forth: another issue that is competition field of Iran and Arabia is OPEC. Iran has always supported increasing oil price while, oil minister of Arabia, Ali Naeimi emphasized that considering demand and supply, oil price shouldn’t be very high, Arabia considers the price between 70 to 80$ as suitable but Iran believes that real value of oil is much more than that of current prices (www.escasb.com, 2011).

Arabia tries to take the position of Iran to provide oil demand of some of countries or by increasing oil production, reduces the oil price to decrease Iran revenues (www.mellatonline.ir, 2011). Even Persina Gulf Cooperation Council led by Arabia assured China to compensate energy and raw material issues for China in case of the attack to Iran (www.parsine.com, 2011).

Fifth: another factor is different comments of Iran and Arabia about Palestine and taking position against Israel. These two countries had common aspects about some issues of Palestine and in other aspect they have different view but normally Arabia supports compromise plan and Iran is for resistance against Israel.(www.mellatoline.ir,2011)

Iran president, Ahmadinejad denounced Israel attacks to Qazeh and put Arabic countries and other Muslims under pressure to help Hamas. He asked king Abdullah to talk against Israel attack to Qazeh, he accused King Abdullah and other Arabic countries leaders to participate in genocide against Palestine people, so, he emphasized on cutting their relations with Israel(www.wikipedia.com, 2011).

These disputes and conflicts between Iran and Arabia indicate negative effect of Arabia Shia minority in convergence of this country with Iran have been increased by increasing Arabia actions in suppressing defenseless people of Bahrain. Iran condemn Arabia to interfere in Bahrain affairs and Arabia and Bahrain condemn Iran to interfere in the affairs of this country (Bahrain).

Conclusion

Briefly, although Saudi Shia can play the role as convergent role in Iran-Arabia relations, it is not like this and due to the lack of trust between these two countries, this issue has always increased the distance between Iran and Arabia. Anti-Shia inclinations of some royal families and Wahabi clergymen and their pressure on the government caused that government view Shia as instrumental, thus this minority couldn’t be important in political system of Arabia and they are marginalized and they couldn’t play any role in convergence of two countries and sensitivity of Saudi authorities are doubled of the regional power development of Iran and Shia to other regions and they were concerned about the interference of Iran in Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen and of fear give some promises against Shia riot in their country to improve the conditions but they will not be fulfilled very soon. On the other side, Iran introduces Saudi Arabia as the agent of America in the region and the lack of trust and competition between these two countries for leadership of Islam world and the difference of political, religious and economical ideologies namely in OPEC, prevent that Shia people bond Iran and Arabia to each other.

Thus these two countries as two great countries in the region should be alert to making trust and approaching their views to each other to provide convergence to control the order of the region themselves, not foreigners: Iran and Arabia by observing the following points can take steps for convergence: (increasing trust)

1. The attempt to increase reciprocal trust
2. Considering political, cultural, economical, historical and religious common areas
3. Respecting history, culture, race and language of other countries
4. Assistance to develop religious democracy and the required actions to create the culture of accepting minorities and social patience between Iran and Arabia.
5. Repetitious visit of the heads of these two countries and their promise based on resolving the existing disputes between two countries to increase economical, political and social relations between two countries.
6. Reciprocal attempt of these two countries in avoiding foreigners intervention in the region and the lack of allowing foundation of basis from foreigners in these two countries.
7. Considering fulfillment of Shia minorities in Iran and Sunni in Arabia, not suffering from these two countries and their freedom in doing their religious rituals.
8. Authorities fighting against the most extreme issues of Sectarianism such as discriminatory procedures, anti-Shia actions and so on.
9. Realistic solutions from Iran and Arabia and wisdom of Shia leaders and prevalence of wise behavior of most of Sunni clergymen of the region to replace domestic coherence instead of sect stresses.
10. Guiding diplomacy system of these two countries to regional convergence strategy by avoiding religious and professional boundaries.
11. Neutralizing America government attempt that is inclined to maximizing regional danger of Iran and Shia in Middle East activated religious gaps and unite Arabic countries due to their fear of Iran religious products.
12. Emphasize on discussion and negotiation and suppressing extremist thoughts.

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