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Shiite Radicals: Rising Wrath Jars the Mideast

By JOHN KIFNER

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CAIRO, March 21 — From the bleak, stony hills of southern Lebanon to the oilfields of the Persian Gulf, Shiite Moslems inspired by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Iranian Revolution have emerged as a formidable, if unstable, political force.

Outside Iran, the most conspicuous focal point of this new force has been the shell-pocked southern suburbs of Beirut, where militant followers of the Party of God have resisted the Syrian Army's effort to impose order. The loosely knit movement is believed to have been behind the kidnapping of foreigners in Lebanon and three suicide truck bombings that killed more than 250 American servicemen and diplomats in Beirut in 1983.

Ruling Establishments Shaken

Elsewhere in the Middle East, the rulers of Kuwait were shaken when 16 Shiite citizens were arrested and charged recently with bombing oil installations.

And in the snowy mountains of northern Iraq, Iran's devout would-be "martyrs" have seized more ground in the seemingly endless gulf war.

The Shiites themselves are hardly monolithic. Only in Iran, where most of the population is Shiite, do they wield full political power. But even in Lebanon they range from the radical poor to a comfortable, if relatively powerless, middle class, many of whose members acquired substantial wealth as traders in West Africa. Moreover, Shiite anger is but one of the roots of violence in the Middle East.

By one estimate, Shiites make up 95 percent of the population of Iran but only 45 percent of the population of Lebanon and 40 percent of the population of the United Arab Emirates. In Egypt, Jordan and North Africa, their numbers are negligible.

Still, in many places, the growing Shiite fundamentalist challenge threatens the established Arab order, which is largely Sunni Moslem. The struggle reflects a bitter schism between the Sunni and Shiite branches of Islam that dates to the religion's earliest days, according to scholars and diplomats.

"This is a seventh-century battle, a primitive, atavistic struggle being re-fought with the arguments — and the weapons — of the 20th century," said a Lebanese-born scholar who lives in Washington, Fouad Ajami.

An Underclass Emerges

The violent emergence of a disenfranchised Shiite underclass has been most dramatic in Lebanon. There, the middle class leadership of the reformist Shiite movement Amal has been overtaken by the militant slum-dwellers of the angry Iranian-oriented Party of God. Shiites are also challenging established power in other areas of the Middle East, where religion still defines social and political life. These areas include Kuwait, Bahrain, the oil-rich eastern province of Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

Iran's fundamentalist revolution and its subsequent successes in six years of

war with Iraq have catalyzed Shiites in a number of Arab lands, experts say. They say the very rituals and rhetoric of Shiism are inherently revolutionary.

"The Shiites have a long tradition of opposition, of not identifying with the state, which is Sunni," a European diplomat said. "In most societies of the Middle East they are the social and economic underdogs."

"The new element," the European diplomat added, "is that they have gotten through Khomeini the idea of the Islamic republic, of a state of their own."

Dr. Ajami, himself a Shiite from southern Lebanon, says he sees in the recent developments a defeat for moderation and reform and a reversion to "the tribe, the clan and the sect that has always dominated Arab social organization."

"For Islamic modernists, reformers, the middle ground has caved in," Dr. Ajami, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, said in a telephone interview. "There isn't any middle ground. It's economic privilege on one side and wrath on the other. We're in for a long season of carnage."

The roots of the conflict are in the death of Mohammed in 632 and the split of the religion that he founded into two main branches, Sunni and Shiite.

Islam was both a religion and a state, embarking on its first conquests of the Arabian Peninsula, and it needed a new leader to survive.

Mohammed's companions chose Abu Bakr to become the Caliph, or deputy. But some felt the choice should have been Ali ibn Ali Talib, who was married to Mohammed's daughter, Fatima. His followers became the "shia," meaning "partisans," of Ali.

The death in battle in 680 of Ali's second son, Hussein, in the desert at Karbala, in what is now Iraq, crystallized the schism and gave the Shiites their emphasis on suffering and martyrdom.

"In their own perception, the Shia were the opposition in Islam, the defenders of the oppressed, the critics and opponents of privilege and power," Edward Lewis, an authority on Islam, has written. "The Sunni Moslems, broadly speaking, stood for the status quo, the maintenance of the existing political, social, and above all religious

The 'Hidden Imam': A Powerful Symbol

In Islam's rich legacy of internal conflict, a succession of subsequent Shiite leaders, or Imams, were slain. The Twelfth Imam, still a child, was concealed from his enemies in 872.

Shiites believe that this "Hidden Imam" will one day return as the Mahdi, or Redeemer, to establish the perfect society, and that until then, all temporal authority is illegitimate. This belief has lent Shiism a messianic cast and presaged its political radicalism.

"It's a terribly fertile religion in terms of its mobilization symbols," said an Arabist who teaches at West Point, Lieut. Col. Richard Augustus Norton.

The fine points of Shiite doctrine are important in understanding the adherents' political behavior, one diplomat noted. He said attempts by outsiders to mediate the gulf war or the plight of hostages run into difficulty "because mediation is something with strong negative religious connotations."

The Islamic Revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini that in 1979 toppled the Shah of Iran, who was seen as America's most powerful ally in the region, proved a historical watershed.

Iraq, with a Shiite majority controlled by President Saddam Hussein's secular Baathist regime, has been a prime target for the export of Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution. As an unalterable condition for ending its war with Iraq, Iran has demanded the ouster of Mr. Hussein.

"If Iran defeats Iraq and an Iraqi state emerges reflecting the power of the Shia, it will be a sea change in Arab politics," Dr. Ajami said.

Violence in Kuwait: Byproduct of War

Kuwait, roughly one-third of whose native population is made up of Shiites who are largely of Iranian origin, has been just one of the neighbors jarred by the war. On Dec. 12, 1983, suicide truck bombers from the Iraqi underground organization Al Daawa, or The Call, crashed into the American and French Embassies.

Seventeen Shiites were convicted in the bombings, and subsequent demands for their release prompted the kidnapping of American and French hostages in Beirut. Kuwait's ruler, Sheik Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah, narrowly escaped death when a suicide car bomber crashed into his limousine, killing his bodyguard.

According to Western intelligence sources, two of the 17 convicted terrorists are Lebanese who are related to families that are at the heart of Shiite fundamentalist cells.

In January, a Shiite underground cell bombed Kuwaiti oil installations as Kuwait prepared, over Iranian objections, to be host for a conference of leaders of Islamic countries.

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In neighboring Bahrain, a financial center with a Sunni ruling family and a heavily Shiite population, the authorities in 1981 uncovered a plot traced to Teheran to overthrow the Government.

The center of Saudi Arabia's oil wealth, its eastern province of Hasa, also has a majority Shiite population,

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according to Western diplomats, and the area experienced riots in 1979.

To the strict Sunni Wahhabi sect that reigns over Saudi Arabia, a diplomat said, "Shiites are seen as heretics" who "have no place in the Saudi theocracy." The human rights group Amnesty International reported recently that Shiites in the eastern province have been forbidden to practice their religion.

Heart of the Drama: A Struggle for Lebanon

But it is in Lebanon, from the remote Bekaa region in the east to the teeming slums and refugee districts of war-torn Beirut and the villages of the south, that the Shiite drama is most vivid.

Lebanon is a patchwork of warring sects that have been allocated power and privilege according to their religions. In the current order, Maronite Catholics have gotten the most and Shiite Moslems the least.

What Dr. Ajami calls the "Shia journey out of self-contempt and political quiescence" began in 1959 when the Iranian-born cleric Musa Sadr arrived as the religious mufti, or judge, in the southern Lebanese city of Tyre.

Before he disappeared during a visit to Libya in 1978, Musa Sadr forged the economic, political, and eventually military, movement known as Amal. "Arms are the adornment of the man," he declared.

Amal, now under Nabih Berri, has been primarily a reformist movement seeking a fairer share of power in a Lebanese government. But in the last few years it has been increasingly challenged by the pro-Iranian Party of God, which before the Syrian troops arrived plastered the once-gaudy streets of West Beirut with portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini calling for the creation of an Islamic Republic.

"The Shia 'street' is very different than 1982, when Amal represented moderate reformism," said Colonel Norton. "They were middle of the road, but the road has moved way over to the flank."

In West Beirut, the rise of the Shiites has not been universally welcomed. Last month, while the Amal militia besieged Palestinian guerrillas in the refugee districts, Druse militiamen, with Sunni backing, attacked the Amal fighters in some of the harshest street combat the battered city could recall.

A New Challenge: Confronting Syria

Syria stepped in with more than 7,000 troops to stop the fighting, and sent the fundamentalists a message by killing some 23 Party of God militiamen. The Syrian move was thought to have raised tension with Iran, Syria's uneasy ally.

Abbas Musawi, who Western intelligence sources believe heads a terrorist cell, declared at a recent rally in the southern city of Tyre that the intervention of Syrian troops was a "political scheme" and warned them to stay out of Beirut's southern suburbs.

"Our weapons will remain in our hands and we will not allow anyone to disarm us in the Bekaa, the south or Beirut," Mr. Musawi declared. "We are restraining ourselves, but if the situation explodes, we will blow up the whole world and its people."

Iran has increasingly become an arbiter in Lebanon, beginning in the

summer of 1982. During the Israeli invasion, it sent about 1,000 Revolutionary Guards to the Baalbek area of the Bekaa. This was the headquarters of Hussein Musawi, who had split from Mr. Berri's leadership to form a group known as Islamic Amal.

The Revolutionary Guards are one part of an Iranian apparatus reportedly directed through Iran's embassy in Damascus and ultimately responsible to an organization in Teheran that is headed by Ayatollah Khomeini's designated successor, Ayatollah Hussein Montazeri, and dedicated to exporting the Islamic Revolution.

By pouring money into the impoverished villages of the Bekaa and southern Lebanon and providing training by the Revolutionary Guards, the Iranians have built an increasingly effective Party of God force that has mounted attacks on the Israeli-controlled enclave that is patrolled by Israel's proxy militia, the South Lebanon Army.