

## Iran and the Changing Middle East

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### ***Abstract***

This study attempts to describe the changing Middle East and Iran's new role in it. It relates to current regional developments and their impact on the main players in the Middle East with an emphasis on Iran. The paper addresses the nature of this new regional dynamic, as well how the label "Shi'i Crescent" or "Shi'i Revival" fits the changing geopolitical environment. The tension between Sunnis and Shi'is has always been an integral part of the history of this region, however the intensity and nature of recent clashes between Sunnis and Shi'is is unprecedented in the modern history of the region. The paper proposes tackling the question of whether sectarian religious divisions are the proper way to view the changing dynamic in the region, as well as identifies other factors influencing and affecting the way this issue is being discussed in the region.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it appears as though Iran is emerging as the only regional super-power in the Middle East, and that there is no Arab state capable of challenging Iran's supremacy. Iran finds it convenient to view the issue of the Sunni-Shi'i conflict as a scheme concocted by America and the Zionist regime with the aim of deepening the conflict between Sunni Muslims and Shi'is, in order to increase America's ability to exploit the states of the region and their resources. In practice, meanwhile, as it has done for some time, Iran continues to

antagonize its Arab neighbors by fomenting divisions in Iraq and Lebanon and by extending material and moral aid to the Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories. As a result, on the one hand, Iran's adventurous regime has been very successful in its efforts to gain the sympathy of the Arab public, thanks to its anti-Western declarations and policies. On the other hand, its controversial behavior has deepened the Arab regimes' anxieties.

In sharp contrast to Iran's performance in the region and beyond, there are several acute domestic challenges which have created a unique contrast between the image Iran has been projecting of itself as a rising power and its fragile socio-economic situation. In other words, Iran seems to have reached a critical moment where it is facing difficult domestic issues, which it may be trying to gloss over or circumvent by focusing attention on its ambitious and controversial foreign policy.

This study focuses on three main areas in order to better exemplify the changing rhythm and special dynamics of developments in Iran. The first section concerns recent developments in Iranian domestic politics. Iran is fast approaching its 2009 presidential election, set for 12 June, which will be an important litmus test for the success and popularity of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's populist policies. The second section deals with the socio-economic sphere where rising inflation and unemployment have generated widespread discontent which may lead to popular protests against the regime. The socio-economic picture stands in stark contrast to President Ahmadinejad's 2005 campaign, which was based on promises to improve the lives of the Iranian people. The last

section addresses important new trends in Iran's civil society, especially the widely discussed phenomenon of Weblogistan. Weblogs or “blogs” have blurred the social boundaries in Iranian civil society, and provided Iranians both inside Iran and all over the world with a minute-by-minute opportunity to observe, comment, and, to some degree, participate, in the dynamic political and cultural changes taking place in Iran. Despite the government’s tight control over traditional media, new media—such as “blogs” and other Internet based outlets—offer an avenue for groups across the Iranian political spectrum, radical and reformist, to express their views.

In the final analysis, Iran can be characterized as a state navigating a delicate contrast between its rising regional ambitions and its internal socio-economic challenges which are placing a great deal of stress on the social fabric of Iranian society. The phrase, “a new Middle East,” turned into a cliché long ago. However, it might be correct to use a less pretentious, but more realistic and practical term, 'the changing Middle East'. This term is broad enough to encompass the developing tension between Iran and the Arab states, as well as the potential for new alliances in the region. As Iran continues its efforts to gain regional hegemony and develop nuclear capabilities, the moderate Arab states will undoubtedly be pushed moreso into an opposing camp. The lingering question in this 'changing Middle East' is whether and to what extent the Arab camp can restore the balance in the Arab-Iranian power equation.