"Mideast Shi'ites Defy Iranian Domination?"
12:00 -2:15 pm, Thursday, June 19, 2014
American Enterprise Institute
1150 Seventeenth Street, NW, Washington, DC

On Thursday, June 19, 2014, American Enterprise Institute hosted a conference entitled "Mideast Shi'ites Defy Iranian Domination?" upon the release of a new report based on fieldwork in the Gulf region, Iraq, and Azerbaijan.

The first talk, "The Diversity of Shi'ite Communities and Politics," featured **Jasim Husain**, former member of the Bahraini Parliament; **Abbas Kadhim**, senior fellow at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies; **Ahmad K. Majidyar**, fellow at AEI; **Toby Matthiesen**, research fellow in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge; **Brenda Shaffer**, visiting researcher at Georgetown University's Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies; and **Phillip Smyth**, researcher at the University of Maryland's Laboratory for Computational Cultural Dynamics. **Michael Rubin**, resident scholar at AEI and senior lecturer at the Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Civil-Military Relations, moderated the discussion.

Michael Rubin opened the discussion, throwing a question to the panelists about the independence of various Shi'ite communities from the Iranian influence. **Abbas Kadhim** focused on Iraq's Shi'ite community, noting that there are different groups within the community, and we have to approach it in different ways. He said Iran and Iraq both influence each other, and Iraq historically has more influence on Iran. He pointed to the function of Hawzas in these two countries to illustrate the competition between them, saying that the major interest of the Najaf Hawza is empowering the Shi'ite community within its own country, whereas the Qom Hawza views Iraq as its asset to empower the Iran-style Shiism. In addition, the Najaf Hawza is more focused on scholastic works and less on the political side. He then raised that the secular Shi'ites in Iraq "are not interested in seeing any Iranian domination," and "are curbing any attempt by Iran to influence" Iraq. The only groups who seek Iranian influence are the political parties because they are dependent on Iran for political and financial backing. **Jasim Husain** talked about the situation in Bahrain. He first noted that Bahraini Shi'ites usually do not view different Hawzas as having competition, and receiving education from the Qom Hawza plays a minor role in expanding Iran's influence in Bahrain. Instead, he argues that the Bahraini issue is a problem of mismanagement as the government allowed Iran to leverage its influence in Bahrain by inviting foreign forces, such as GCC, to intervene in its internal affairs when the "local problem" of the 2011 uprising could be solved by a "local solution." **Toby Matthiesen** then spoke on Saudi Arabia, noting that Najaf is traditionally an old center of religious study for most Saudi Shi'ites. It was because of Baath Party's heavy crackdown in the 1970s, they had to go to Qom instead. He said the population that follows al-Sistani as a Marja is much bigger than the population of Khamenei followers. He then pointed out another Hawza center in Iraq and the 1993 deal that allowed all Shi'ite opposition abroad to return to Saudi Arabia as two factors limiting Iran's influence on the Shi'ite community. **Phillip Smyth** talked about Lebanese Shi'ite community, mentioning that opposition to Khomeini's Wilayat al-Faqih exists on the religious front, but various groups have business connections and electoral deals with Iran. He concluded that it is not impossible to counter the Iranian influence, but it will be very hard.

Then, **Brenda Shaffer** spoke on "a different model" Azerbaijan, noting that Azerbaijan poses big challenges for Iran. As Iran itself has a relatively big Azerbaijiani community, it views Azerbaijan through an ethnic lens, fearing Azerbaijan's prosperity might destabilize the unity of Iran. Besides, Azerbaijan is a relatively secular country that separates religion and the state, and therefore poses a threat to Iran. **Ahmad K. Majidyar** concluded the discussion with Pakistan, saying that Shi'ite community in Pakistan is overlooked by the Pakistani state and even the whole world. There is an "alarming rise" in the number of Shi'ite killings within Pakistan, but so far, the Shi'ite community shows a "tremendous constraint" to seek aid from external powers to retaliate as it remains loyal to the country. The Shi'ite community in Pakistan historically rejected Iranian influence, but as pressure grows, it would turn to Iran, the "only potential patron."

Rubin then opened the Q&A session, asking about Iran's influence on the 2011 Bahraini unrest, given that many Shi'ites in Bahrain follow Iranian Ayatollahs. Husain responded that Iran was not the investor of the Bahraini unrest, and following an Ayatollah usually does not equal to the endorsement of their political and social allegiance.

The second talk, "Assessing quietists versus Wilayat al-Faqih today" assessing the trend in Shi'ite communities outside of Iran, featured Kadhim; **Ali Alfoneh**, senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies; and **Ahmed Ali**, Iraq senior research analyst and Iraq team lead at the Institute for the Study of War. Rubin moderated the discussion.

Ali Alfoneh first analyzed the origin of Wilayat al-Faqih, namely Khomeini's innovation of having a person as the head of religious organizations and the state at the same time, noting that this notion made Khomeini the philosophical king in Shiism. He mentioned that all other Ayatollahs in Iran in fact opposed this idea, as it was a tradition that all Grand Ayatollahs should be equal. Those who followed him "were not qualified religiously." He raised the example that Mr. Khomeini became an Ayatollah "overnight." In addition, the requirements for the head of the state were changed as Iranians voted for a new institutional system. Accordingly, Khomeini, lacking the type of personal charisma of Khomeini and the clerical support, was able to maintain his status by using the institutional and financial tool. Alfoneh said the Islamic Republic is doing the same thing to impose this particular theory of state upon other Shi'ite communities through financial and military integration, affirming that Iran is abusing religion to promote its own interests, which is "one of the greatest dangers we are facing." **Ahmed Ali** then stated that, in Iraq, the quietest school of thought is dominant, with the Wilayat al-Faqih on the rise. The quietest school represented by Grand Ayatollah Sistani was able to maintain a dominant position even in 2003, but it is now facing a "great challenge" posed by a number of militant groups backed by the Iranian government. Ali said these groups believe in Wilayat al-Faqih by doctrine and seek to have a version of that in Iraq. However, according to Ali, Wilayat al-Faqih has not gained sufficient attraction so far. He raised the example of Sistani's fatwa in which he called on Shi'ite communities to go against ISIS, indicating that Sistani keeps a balance of power in Iraq. Kadhim concurred Alfoneh's opinions, saying that Iran's leadership relies heavily on institutional power. He then added the experience of Iran reduced the credit of Wilayat al-Faqih, noting that the practices have shown many "structural problems" of this theory. As for the groups outside of Iran who need Iranian support for their existence, they have always vocally agreed with the theory, but Kadhim believes that "it is very hard on an intellectual basis" to stick to the practices of the Islamic Republic.

In the Q&A session, Rubin asked a question about future transitions of the debate between these two general camps. Alfoneh proposed that Sunni rulers throughout the region give power and rights to their Shi'ite population, pointing to the issue of establishing religious seminaries in their own countries. He

explained that the insecurity that is prevailing in the region provides these rulers an opportunity to do so, because in fact many people in the Shi'ite community do not want to be connected with Iran. He also said that many of the Iranian scholars would go abroad to study for the "intellectual freedom" that they do not enjoy at home.

The third talk, "Should the US have a Shi'ite policy?" featured **J. Matthew McInnis**, resident fellow at the AEI; **Kenneth M. Pollack**, senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; and **Robert Rook**, professor of history and director of interdisciplinary studies at Towson University. **Danielle Pletka**, vice president for foreign and defense policy studies at AEI, moderated the discussion.

Robert Rook first mentioned his observation on the ground based on his teaching experiences in the Middle East and North Africa, noting that there is a complexity within of the variety of constituencies in the region that self-identify under the banner of Shi'ite. He said, "We should have a Shi'ite policy if it is only we consider constituencies within the grander spectrum of interests in the region." Within a general policy framework, he noted, U.S. policy making should be aware of the fact that various types of interests amongst the various groups of Shi'ite community throughout the region are unavoidably sometimes aligned with Iranian interests. **J. Matthew McInnis** pointed to the challenge that the U.S. is oftentimes constrained from engaging Shi'ite communities because that policy-making needs to take into consideration of its government-to-government relations with other countries. Then, he stated that overestimating Iranian influence in the "robust" and "vibrant" Shi'ite community throughout the region is a problem in U.S. policy-making, urging policy makers to overcome this difficulty by first establishing an effective policy toward the variety of Shi'ite groups as a foundation for further engaging Iran. He added that having a vibrant Shi'ite community that has more religious legitimacy would pose a challenge for Iran's leadership. **Kenneth M. Pollack** then voiced that the U.S. is neglecting human rights in this issue, and that is why the Shi'ite community does not trust the U.S. Respecting human rights is not a morally correct thing to do, according to Pollack, it also "makes strategic sense." Then, he pointed out that the issues that the U.S. is facing in the region are less "Sunni vs. Shi'ite," but more about "extremists vs. moderates." He noted that most of the unrests that emerged in the region started as general protests for freedom and equality, but devolved into sectarian conflicts as rulers exploited the sectarian division. He argues that the U.S. should support moderates on both sides.

In the Q&A session, an audience member asked about the U.S. military power in dealing with the problems in the Middle East. McInnis stressed the importance of U.S. military capacity, noting that it is only important when it does not need to be deployed. He also said that many cooperation mechanisms with communities on the ground can be utilized within the military context. Pollack added, in long-term, only non-military tools can be effective as solutions to deeply rooted problems.