
GOVERNANCE AND THE SHIITE POLITICAL MOVEMENT IN IRAQ

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Abstract

Shortly after the death of prophet Muhammad in 632, the Shiite movement in Islam began and found an encouraging political climate to promote its growth and continuation as an opposition force to the successive political entities in the region of the Middle East. In Iraq, the Shiite political movement gained significance shortly after the creation of the modern state of Iraq in 1920 by the British colonial power. Although it was effective in its impact on the populace, the movement failed to gain a significant role in the making of the Iraqi political dynamics. The importance of the Shiite political movement in Iraq, however, changed after the collapse of the Iraqi Baath Party regime in 2003. This movement has emerged as a viable force in the construction of post-war Iraq and in the contribution to the progress of U.S. policy toward Iraq. This paper presents the historical development of Shiism in Islam as a whole and the trajectory of Shiism in contemporary Iraq as an opposition political movement in particular. In doing so, the paper uncovers several myths surrounding this movement that enabled it to become a sustained phenomenon in Iraqi history and political narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Shiism is both a religious sect and a political movement within Islam. It began shortly after the death of Prophet Muhammad as a popular resistance to privilege, and soon developed into an identity and opposition voice for the poor and the oppressed. Shiism, however, contains various sects and is not a unifying force to all those who claim themselves to be Shiites. The Shiites follow various religious leaderships, contain several wealthy families, and are composed of pacifists as well as revolutionaries. The Shiites includes various nationalities without allegiance to any

particular nation-state, and are represented by many political organizations that range from Communists, Baathists, nationalists, to fundamentalists.

This paper presents a historical approach toward Shiism in Islam as a whole and in Iraq in particular while uncovering various myths that regard Shiism as a unifying political and religious movement. In doing so, this paper will shed a light on the political trajectory of Shiism in Iraq and its impact on the historical narratives that went into the making of the Iraqi nation-state.

The Shiite political movement in Iraq is not a homogenous, unified and clearly defined movement. Throughout history, Shiism as a whole and the Shiite movement in Iraq in particular, acquired certain characteristics that became part of the Shiite identity. These myths, however, do not represent the true nature of Shiism. Instead, they represent a false façade of the myths that went into the making of Shiism both as a religious sect in Islam and as a political movement in Iraq. The following myths are examples of these characteristics.

SHIISM IS A CONTINUOUS REVOLT AGAINST PRIVILEGE

This myth is based on the assumption that Shiism began as a revolutionary movement against the affluent class in the early Islamic society and continued with the same spirit and nature to date. This assumption is not entirely correct.

Although Shiism began as a revolutionary movement shortly after the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 in a response to the affluent Arab tribes who wanted to regain their previous position of power in pre-Islamic Arab society, the movement lost its revolutionary spirit and turned throughout the years to a mere pacifist expression of resentment (Halm, 2003). Such pacifism continues to date. Except for limited numbers of revolutionary uprisings, the Shiite history remains the history of passive resistance and dissatisfaction (Nakash, 1994).

An example of pacifism in the Shiite religious leadership is the collaborative attitudes and positions of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani regarding the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003 and its confrontation with fellow Shiites who resisted the occupation in 2004 (ECSSR, 2005). Another example of this

pacifism occurred during the three decades of Shiite oppression by the Baath regime in Iraq from 1968-2003 (Davis, 2005). Cole (2004) reveals that the ranking Shiite religious leader at the time, Ayatollah al-Khoie, and his successor after his death in 1992, Ayatollah al-Sistani, both refrained from sanctioning or opposing the Baath government's oppressive policies toward the Shiites in Iraq. Policies that included execution, mass killing, and deportation.

There were, however, a few revolutionaries within the Shiite religious leadership in Iraq that opposed the repressive policies of the Baath Party's regime and stood in defiance of the pacifist Shiites. One of those Shiite revolutionaries was Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. Pollack (2002) explains that the Baath government was fearful of Ayatollah al-Sadr because of his outspokenness against the Baath's policies and his close association with Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

The contrast between the leadership styles of Ayatollah al-Khoie and Ayatollah al-Sadr represents a contrast between pacifism and revolutionary attitude in Shiism. This contrast continues to date in post-Baath Iraq between the pacifist leadership of Ayatollah al-Sistani and the revolutionary leadership of Muqtada al-Sadr, the nephew of Ayatollah al-Sadr (Escobar, 2004).

Collectively, however, revolutionary Shiites are minorities when compared with the pacifist trend that constitutes majority of Shiites and their movement in history. From the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 until today, there are only eight significant revolts led by revolutionary Shiites against their oppressors. Interestingly, all these revolts originated or took place in Iraq. Momen (1985) suggests that the first revolt took place in 655 against Othman, Islam's Third Caliph, as a protest against Othman's mismanagement of the young Islamic state's financial affairs and for appointing his relatives in key governmental positions. The revolt resulted in the killing of Othman and the selection of Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin, as Islam's Fourth Caliph. This revolt marks the inauguration of radicalism in Shiism and the beginning of tragedy in Shiite history (wponline, 2004).

The Shiites' second revolt was in October 680, led by Ali's son Hussein against the new Umayyad rulers of Islam. Hussein was killed in a battle near Karbala in southern Iraq (Al-Mufid, 2004). According to Pinault (1993), this event is observed annually as a day of mourning for all Shiites.

Ali's burial place in the city of Najaf and Hussein's in the city of Karbala (both in Iraq) are holy sites for Shiites, many of whom feel that a pilgrimage to both sites is equal to a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

The importance of Hussein's revolution and martyrdom to the Shiites cannot be underemphasized. Simmons (1994) offers that the event led the Shiites to carve their own separate political identity. Most notably, they began to view themselves as the opposition to privilege and power, believing that after the death of Ali in 661 and the ascension of the Umayyads to the caliphate, Islam took a wrong path. Because of this wrong path in governance, obedience to temporal authority by the Shiites became nonobligatory. Furthermore, in sacrificing his life for a just cause, Hussein became the symbol that inspired generations of Shiites to fight for social equality and economic justice (Al-Mufid, 2004).

The third significant Shiite revolt was in 813, led by the Imam (leader), Reza (765-813). This revolt was in collaboration with the Abbasid leader, al-Mamoon, who used the revolt to oust his brother, the Abbasid Caliph al-Ameen, from power (Hourani, 2000). Pinault (1993) states that Reza died in Iran while on the road to Baghdad because of poison injected to his food. A major shrine, and eventually the city of Mashhad, grew around his tomb, which has become the most important pilgrimage center in Iran. Several theological schools are located in Mashhad, associated with Reza's shrine (Sacred Sites, 2004).

Reza's death was a shock to his followers, many of whom believed that al-Mamoon, out of jealousy for Reza's increasing popularity had the Imam poisoned. Al-Mamoon's suspected treachery against Reza reinforced a feeling already prevalent among the Shiites that the rulers were untrustworthy (Newman, 2000).

How did Reza become an ally of al-Mamoon? During the Umayyad period from 661-750, the Shiites in Iraq led many unsuccessful insurgencies. Those who managed to escape the Umayyads' wrath fled to Khorasan (in today's Iran). Gradually, Iran became a safe haven for the Shiites and their opposition to the Umayyad rulers of Islam (Hourani, 2000). Non-Arab ethnic groups in Iran, who were unhappy about losing their previous autonomous and economic privileges to the conquering Arab Muslims, welcomed Shiism as a vehicle for opposing Arab domination of the new Islamic state (WSU, 2004).

Hitti (1968) explains that this political voice gained momentum in 750, when the Abbasids toppled the Umayyads and established the Abbasid Dynasty, making Iraq the center of the Islamic state. Although Sunni Muslims, the Abbasids were hoping to shift the Shiite opposition movement to their side or at least neutralize it (WSU, 2004).

In 806 and after the death of the Abbasids' fourth Caliph, al-Rashid, his sons, al-Ameen and al-Mamoon, quarreled over succession to the caliphate. Momen (1985) suggests that this dispute soon erupted into a full-scale civil war. The Sunni Arabs backed al-Ameen because both his parents were Sunni Arabs, while the Shiites backed al-Mamoon because his mother was a Shiite. With Reza and the Shiites' support, Al-Mammon won and was able to take Baghdad in 813. But, after Reza's death, the honeymoon between the Abbasids and the Shiites came to an abrupt end.

The Shiites' fourth significant revolt took place in 1920 against the British colonial forces in Iraq. Batatu (1978) states that in early May 1920, Sunni and Shiite religious leaders temporarily put aside their differences in an alliance against British colonialism and its occupation of Iraq. Through nationalistic poetry and oratory, these religious leaders exhorted the Iraqi people to reject the British mandate.

Iraqi nationalist political activity was stepped up, and the grand religious scholar of Karbala, Imam Shirazi, began to organize an uprising. According to Marr (2004), Arab flags were distributed and pamphlets were handed out urging the Iraqi tribes to revolt. Shirazi then issued a *fatwa* (a religious decree), pointing out that it was against Islamic Law for Muslims to be ruled by non-Muslims, and he called for a *jihad* (a holy war) against the British.

Longrigg (1925) suggests that the Shiites tribes in Iraq that cherished their long-held political autonomy needed little incentive to join the uprising. British forces were obliged to send for reinforcements from India (Nakash, 1994). The uprising brought the Shiites and Sunnis together, if only briefly. Longrigg (1953) offers that this collaboration constituted an important first step in the long process of forging the Iraqi nation-state.

One feature of the new state, however, was the absence of any Shiite appointees to senior administrative positions. The old Sunni-dominated

order of the Ottoman period was re-established and the Shiites were once again excluded from important governmental positions (Tripp, 2001).

The fifth significant Shiite revolt came against the Baath regime during the mid-1970s. The Baath government was weary of increased political activities against the regime by some Shiite political organizations, such as al-Dawah Party. As a consequence, the regime imposed strict censorship on Shiite religious publications, shutdown various Shiite theological schools, and began harassing the Shiite religious leadership, including the pacifists (Jabar, 2003).

Batatu (1986) recommends that widespread Shiite demonstrations took place in February 1977 when the government closed Karbala to pilgrimage at the height of a religious ceremony. Abdulghani (1984) states that this action by the government triggered off rioting that spread to many Shiite cities, including Najaf. Hiro (2001) explains that the rioting persisted for several days and the authorities called troops to quell it. This rioting was the first Shiite uprising in the history of the independent Iraqi nation-state. Simmons (1994) adds that the Shiite grievance went beyond an opposition to censorship and the closing of a few religious centers. It pointed out to the Shiite under-representation in the upper echelons of the state apparatus (Jabar, 2003).

These events caused anxiety and debate within the Baath government. Some leaders, such as then Iraqi President Bakr, advocated conciliating the Shiite protesters and accommodating the Baath Party's ideology to the rising wave of Islamic revivalism, while others, such as then Vice-President Saddam Hussein, proposed repressing the Shiite dissents and reiterating the Baath Party's commitment to secularism. Saddam won (Davis, 2005).

The sixth major Shiite revolt was that of Ayatollah Khomeini that toppled the Iranian regime of the Shah in 1979. Although Khomeini's revolution took place in Iran, its immediate impact was on the Iraqi Shiites (Hiro, 2001).

Batatu (1978) offers that for much of Iraqi history, the Shiites have been politically impotent and economically depressed. Although the Shiites constitute nearly 65 percent of the population in Iraq, they occupied a relatively insignificant number of influential posts. On the economic level and

aside from a small number of wealthy Shiite landowners and merchants, majority of the Shiites were exploited as sharecropping or menially employed slum dwellers.

It was Khomeini's 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran that transformed the Iraqi Shiites' historic dissatisfaction into an organized, religiously based opposition (Pollack, 2002). The leadership of the Baath regime feared that the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran would serve as an inspiration to Iraqi Shiites. Batatu (1986) examines that these fears escalated in July 1979 when riots broke out in the Shiite cities of Najaf and Karbala after the government refused a request by Ayatollah al-Sadr to lead a congratulatory delegation to Iran.

How did Khomeini come to play such an important role in influencing the Shiite political movement in Iraq? Abdulghani (1984) explains that in 1964, Ayatollah Khomeini was expelled from Iran to Turkey, and he was then granted asylum in Iraq in October 1965. Khomeini's theological idealism earned him a significant following in Najaf, where Shiite religious leaders and students from various parts of the Shiite world gathered together to form an important circle of learned men. While in Najaf, the Ayatollah was unhappy at the way the Baath regime was treating the Iraqi Shiites and expressed a wish to leave for London in 1972, only to have it rejected by the authorities (Marr, 2004).

In an effort to quell a Shiite unrest in southern Iraq in 1978 and to gain the Shah's favor at the same time, the Baath government expelled Ayatollah Khomeini from Iraq. Khomeini sought refuge in France and remained there until his return to Iran with the Islamic revolution of 1979 (Abdulghani, 1984). Many Iraqi Shiites resented the Ayatollah's expulsion, especially when it was followed by the Shah's wife visit to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala (Hiro, 2001).

Following Ayatollah al-Sadr's congratulatory telegram to Khomeini, the Baath government placed al-Sadr under house arrest in Najaf, and then transferred him to Baghdad. The news triggered demonstrations in the south and Baghdad's Shiite district of al-Thawra (renamed "Al-Sadr City" after the fall of the Baath regime in 2003). The suppression of the demonstrations by the Iraqi Army led to scores of deaths and some 3,000 arrests (Simmons, 1994).

On June 10, 1979, Saddam submitted a list of men to be executed to President Bakr for his signature. Beside the leaders of the Shiite demonstrations, the list included a number of senior military officers who had allegedly been in secret touch with the Shiite political organizations. When Bakr objected to the inclusion of these officers, he found himself under house arrest. Some weeks later he resigned for health reasons. On July 16, 1979, Saddam became president of Iraq (Hiro, 2001).

According to Tripp (2001), confrontations between the Baath security forces and members of the Shiite community continued, encouraged by the revival of some of the militant Shiite political organizations. The regime responded with mass arrest and executions.

Batatu (1986) offers that on April 1, 1980, the al-Dawah Party's militants tried to assassinate Iraqi foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, but they failed. Shortly after the failed attack on Tariq Aziz, al-Dawah Party tried to assassinate Lateef Nesayf Jasim, the Baath's Minister of Culture and information. They failed again.

These assassination attempts made Saddam more ruthless in his drive against the Shiite underground. He also extended his ruthlessness to include the expulsion of thousands of Iraqis of Iranian descent. Then, on April 8, 1980, he ordered the execution of Ayatollah al-Sadr (Henderson, 1991).

Khomeini was eager to support the Iraq Shiites and depose the Baath government. He considered the Iraqi Shiite political organizations, such as the al-Dawah Party, worthy of Iranian help. He also began giving guerrilla training to Iraqi Shiites and then sending them back to Iraq (Henderson, 1991).

All anti-Baath Shiite organization, including the al-Dawah Party, came under the political, religious, and financial influence of the ruling clergy in Iran (Jaber, 2003). On November 17, 1982, Iran helped with the creation of an umbrella group to assemble all the anti-Baath Shiites organizations. The umbrella group was named the Supreme Assembly of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI) and Ayatollah Muhammad al-Hakim was chosen to lead it (Batatu, 1986). After the fall of the Baath regime in 2003, al-Hakim returned to Iraq, only to be assassinated by a car bomb near a mosque in Karbala. His

younger brother, Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim was chosen as his successor (Davis, 2005).

Cole (2004) declares that establishing SAIRI was a step toward unifying the political and military work of all Iraqi Shiite groups under a single command, supervised by Iran. SAIRI, in return, acknowledged the leadership of Khomeini as the supreme commander of the Islamic nation.

Abdulghani (1984) asserts that on September 23, 1980, Iraqi troops marched into Iranian territory, beginning what was to be an extremely costly war that lasted for eight years. The Iran-Iraq War, according to Ritter (1999) prompted Khomeini to double his efforts within the Iraqi Shiites to oust Saddam. His efforts, however, were unsuccessful. Saddam remained in power until his downfall by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The Shiites' seventh significant revolt took place on March 1, 1991 once Saddam's grip on power was weakened after the Gulf War of 1991. Iraq's crushing defeat in Kuwait allowed the Shiites to revolt against his regime. The revolt began in the Shiite city of Basra in southern Iraq with tired, hungry, and angry Iraqi soldiers turning on the regime and convincing many of the residents who lived there to join them (Pollack, 2002).

The revolt was spontaneous. Tripp (2001) suggests that in each town local leadership councils were created, with some leaders associated with the underground Shiite political organizations. In the towns seized by the rebels, revenge was wrought on those whom the rebels regarded as agents of the regime.

Ritter (1999) offers that Saddam's counterattack began on March 6, 1991. The regime's Republican Guard's armored and infantry divisions and the Iraqi Army's mechanized division led the regime's forces in a bloody two-day offensive that crushed the rebels in tough street battles. Altogether, some 60,000 Shiites were killed during the suppression of the uprising (Pollack, 2002).

Meanwhile in Najaf, both Ayatollah al-Khoie and Ayatollah al-Sistani remained silent and chose not to offend Saddam with any statement criticizing his handling of the Shiite uprising. Saddam's security forces, however, briefly detained al-Sistani, but he was quickly released (Nakash, 1994).

The eighth and final significant Shiite revolt took place in 2004 against the interim Iraqi government of Ayad Allawie and the U.S. forces in Iraq. Fisk (2004) examines that the problem started when Paul Bremer, the civil administrator of the U.S. occupation of Iraq and the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), shut down a newspaper owned by Muqtada al-Sadr, the nephew of the Ayatollah al-Sadr who was executed by Saddam in 1980. Bremer charged that the newspaper was inciting violence.

The incident triggered a Shiite uprising led by Muqtada al-Sadr and his militia, known as the Mahdi Army. Escobar (2004) offers that the Shiite city of Kufa became the first Shiite city to spin out of control. Within short time, other Shiite cities joined the fray and a constant stream of Muqtada's followers came from the "Al-Sadr City" in Baghdad.

While the fighting was going on between Muqtada's Mahdi militia and U.S. Marines, other Shiite groups remained on the side of Allawie's government and the U.S. occupation forces. Examples of these groups were the al-Dawah Party and SAIRI (ECSSR, 2005).

As for Ayatollah al-Sistani, he chose to leave Iraq to London for medical treatments while the fighting was taking place. He hastily returned only when U.S. forces were getting ready to storm the Shrine of Ali in Najaf in order to root-out Muqtada and his supporters. Storming the Shiites' holy site was going to have disastrous consequences not only for al-Sistani but also for the entire pacifist leadership in Shiite Iraq. As such, al-Sistani canceled his medical treatment in London and returned to Najaf to broker a cease-fire between Muqtada and U.S. forces. With the cease-fire, the Shiites' eighth revolt came to an end (Raphaeli, 2004).

With only eight significant revolts in a long history that stretches from 632-2005, it is clear that the Shiite movement is not a continuous state of revolution. The bulk of Shiite history is identified with pacifism. This pacifism has characterized the historic Shiite religious and political leadership and continues to do so.

Assessing the Shiite revolts in history, it is clear that these revolts were not directed against privilege alone. Although the Shiites struggle for better economic lots was the generator of past resentments, many of their bitterness

were caused by non-economic, existential reasons, such as identity, actualization, and status (Halm, 2003). When the Shiites were not revolting, which characterized the longest periods in their history, they were pacifists in their collaboration with the established orders on the ground (Zubaida, 2005).

Accordingly, the notion that Shiism is a continuous revolutionary movement against oppression, authority, and privilege is not entirely correct. Understanding this will enable policymakers to better prepare their strategies toward viewing Iraq as a mosaic of competing and intertwining forces that propose simplicity but thwart complex and unsettling dynamics.

THE SHIITE POLITICAL MOVEMENT IS A UNITARY RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

The notion that the Shiites follow one religious doctrine, one Grand Ayatollah, and that their political organizations are religious-based and representative of all Shiites is not entirely correct. The Shiites are divided into many sects and have numerous religious doctrines, have many religious leaders and Grand Ayatollahs, and their political organizations do not represent the interest of all Shiites whether religiously linked or not. Let us explore how these contradictions come to play.

The Shiites believe that the Prophet Muhammad had designated Ali to be his successor as Imam, exercising both spiritual and temporal leadership (Halm, 2003). Pinault (1993) asserts that such an Imam has knowledge and religious sense, spiritual guidance (wilayat), and the ability to interpret the inner mysteries of the Islamic holy book, the Koran, and the Islamic Law, the Sharia. There are, however, various groups in Shiism that differ on this concept of the imamate (religious-political leader) and offer that there is no one theological doctrine to unite all Shiite groups together.

For example, the Shiite sect of the “Twelve Imams” believe in the concept of the imamate as 12 generational leaders who are the direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad. Each contemporary leader must then be related to one of these 12 Imams in order for him to be accepted. The 12 Imams start with the Prophet’s cousin, Ali, his two sons, Hassan and Hussein, and then nine generations of male descendants of Hussein (Newman, 2000). These 12 Imams hold the same religious honor by their followers, with Ali regarded as the First Imam, and Mahdi, who is believed to have ascended into

a supernatural state to return to earth on Judgment Day, as the Twelfth Imam (Momen, 1985).

Mahdi is believed to have been only five years old when the Imamate descended upon him in 874 at the death of his father. Newman (2000) examines that because Mahdi's followers feared he might be assassinated, the Twelfth Imam was hidden from public view and was seen only by a few of his closest deputies. The Sunnis claim that Mahdi never existed or that he died while still a child. The Shiite sect of the Twelve Imams believes that Mahdi never died, but disappeared from earth in 939.

Nakash (1994) suggests that since 939, the greater occultation of the Twelfth Imam has been in force and it is to last until God commands the Twelfth Imam to manifest himself on earth along with the return of Christ. Momen (1985) explains that during the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, Mahdi is spiritually present. Some Shiites believe that he is materially present as well, and he is besought to reappear in various invocations and prayers. His name is mentioned in wedding invitations, and his birthday is one of the most jubilant religious observances. Because of the great influence of Mahdi's name, Muqtada al-Sadr chose this name for his militia, attracting both followers and religious purpose.

Theologically, however, the Shiite sect of the Twelve Imams follow the teachings of their Sixth Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq, who devised their *fiqeh* (religious thinking) in the ninth century. The Shiite religious institutions in Iraq and Iran follow the interpretations of Islamic Law as devised by the Sixth Imam. Therefore, often this sect is also known as the "Jafaries," after Jafar al-Sadiq (Newman, 2000).

Although most Iraqi, Iranian, and Lebanese Shiites are members of the Twelve Imams' sect, not all Shiites are constituents of this sect. Pinault (1993) states that some sects in Shiism follow other doctrines that accept Ali as the principal Imam but without necessarily accepting the generational leadership of his descendants. Examples of these sects are the Zaydis in Yemen, the Ishmaelites in Egypt and Syria, the Druze in Lebanon, Syria, and Israel, and the Alawites in Syria, Turkey, and Albania. Collectively, however, the origin of these sects is more political than religious, constituting existential purpose than domination or control.

Hourani (2000) explains that the Zaydis follow the same line of succession of the imamate as that of the Twelve Imams' sect, beginning with Ali as the First Imam, followed by his son, Hassan, as the Second Imam, Ali's second son, Hussein, and the Third Imam, and then Hussein's son, Zayn al-Abidin, as the Fourth Imam, but divert afterward. The sect of the Twelve Imams acknowledge Zayn al-Abidin's youngest son, al-Baqir, as the Fifth Imam, and continue with the imamates with al-Baqir's son and grandsons. The Zaydis, on the other hand, acknowledge Zayn al-Abidin's oldest son, Zayd, as the Fifth and Last Imam. Accordingly, the Zaydis can be called the sect of the Five Imams.

The Ishmaelites differ from both sects of the Twelve Imams and the Zaydis. They too accept Ali, Hassan, Hussein, and Zayn al-Abidin as the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Imams respectively. They also agree with the sect of the Twelve Imams in recognizing al-Baqir as the Fifth Imam and his son, Jafar al-Sadiq as the Sixth Imam. But, they differ afterward. Instead of accepting al-Sadiq's oldest son, al-Kazim, as the Seventh Imam, the Ishmaelites recognize al-Sadiq's youngest son, Ishmael, as the Seventh Imam (Hamdani, 2005).

The Ishmaelites were successful in establishing the powerful Fatimids Dynasty in Egypt that governed Egypt from 909-1171 (Hamdani, 2005). They, however, diminished in size and influence. Currently, they live as minorities in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon, and their number is very small.

The Druze recognize Ali as the First Imam, and follow a line of succession that does not copy the same line of succession as that of the other Shiite sects (Cleveland, 2000). During each generation of successive leadership known as a "Druze Principality," most Druze follow a prince whom they believe to be the direct descendant of Ali. This prince is considered both a religious and political leader, commanding the respect and adherence of his community. For example, in Lebanon today, the Druze recognize Waleed Joumblat, the head of Lebanon's Socialist Progressive Party, as their political and religious prince (Wikipedia, 2005a).

As for the Alawites, Provence (2005) explains that they are named after Ali, Prophet Muhammad's cousin. They have been designated as outside the bounds of Islam by the Muslim mainstream for their worshipful-type love of Ali. The Alawites study the writings of Jafar al-Sadiq and their

sect has many similarities to the Ishmaelites, but regard Ali as the purpose of life and the divine knowledge of the prophet Mohammed (Newman, 2000).

The Alawites do not accept converts or the publication of their texts, which is passed down from scholar to scholar. The vast majority of them know very little about their theology, which is guarded by a small class of male initiates (Zubaida, 2005).

The Alawite sect was established in the 10th century during the Hamdanid Dynasty of Aleppo, but its members were driven out when the dynasty fell in 1004 (Wikipedia, 2005). In 1097, the Crusaders initially attacked them but later allied with them against the Ishmaelites. In 1120 the Alawites were defeated by the Ishmaelites and the Kurds (Izady, 1992).

From 1260 onwards, the Alawites were victimized by the Mamluks. When the Ottomans took control of Syria in 1516, they killed over 90,000 Alawites. Afterwards, the Alawites were regarded as outcasts and the Ottomans sent Turks to settle their lands (Batatu, 1999).

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Syria came under French mandate. The French gave autonomy to the Alawites and other minority groups and accepted them into their colonial troops. In 1939 a portion of northwest Syria, the Sanjak of Alexandretta that contained a large number of Alawites, was given to Turkey by the French, greatly angering the Alawite community. Zaki al-Arsuzi, the young Alawite leader from Antioch in Alexandretta who led the resistance to the annexation of his province to the Turks, became a founder of the Baath Party in 1947 along with Michel Aflaq (Provence, 2005).

Today, the Alawites exist as minority in Syria, Turkey, and Albania. Politically, however, they are members of a powerful religious sect in Syria and compose the ruling elite in the Syrian government. The introduction of the state school system into the Alawite region during the last 50 years has transformed the religious identity of Alawite. Although they know they are different from Sunnis, they do not know exactly how (Wikipedia, 2005).

Therefore, Shiism is composed of many sects and is not bound by one theological doctrine. As for the notion that all Shiites follow the edicts of one

Grand Ayatollah, Cole (2004) explains that many Shiites of the Twelve Imams' sect consider the city of Najaf in Iraq and its theological institution as the religious and political leadership for Shiism. The Grand ayatollah in Najaf, whoever he may be at a given time, is to be revered as a religious authority and his edicts to be followed.

This is, however, is not always the case. After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Najaf lost its supremacy to Qom in Iran as the latter became the religious leadership center for many Shiites of the Twelve Imams' sect (Newman, 2000). Today, there is a tug war between Najaf and Qom on which city and which Grand Ayatollah to be followed by the Shiites (ECSSR, 2005). The Zaydis, Ishmaelites, Druze, and Alawite, however, do not follow the edicts issued by either Najaf or Qom (Batatu, 1999).

Even among the Shiites of the Twelve Imams' sect, the Grand Ayatollah of either Najaf or Qom is not always an authority nor his edicts are automatically followed. For example, when Ayatollah Khomeini issued his decree from Qom asking the Iraqi Shiites to topple the Baath government and replace it with an Islamic regime, not all Iraqi Shiites followed his decree. Many Shiites in Iraq remained within the Iraqi Army and continued fighting against Iran during the Iran-Iraq War (Hiro, 2002).

Also, when the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani of Najaf asked the Iraqi Shiites in 2004 to support the new interim Iraqi government of Ayad Allawie and refrain from engaging U.S. troops, not all Iraqi Shiites followed his decree. Many sided with Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi militia, engaged in enraged battles with U.S. and Iraqi interim government forces (Wikipedia, 2005a).

As for the notion that Having Shiites in high governmental positions will assure fair treatments of ordinary Shiites, many of Saddam's lieutenants were Shiites, such as Naem Haddad and Sadoon Hammadie (Hiro, 2001). Their high-ranking positions within the Baath Party's government, however, did not make life easier for ordinary Shiites. The same is true today with the Shiite-led government of Ibrahim al-Jafari and its failure to make life easier for ordinary Shiites (ECSSR, 2005).

Regarding the false premise that only religiously-linked Shiite political organizations are true advocates of Shiite interest in Iraq, Simmons (1994) states that many secular Iraqi political organizations had faithfully defended

the interest of the Shiites in Iraq and continue to do so, regardless of these organizations secularism. An example of these secular organizations is the Iraqi Communist Party, a veteran political organization that did not shy from defending the interest of the Shiite masses since its establishment in 1934.

The assertion that all Sunnis deprive the Shiites from having access to influential positions in the Iraqi government is also not entirely correct. It is not that “all” Sunnis deny the Shiites opportunities for equitable representation in governance, but the “types” of Sunnis in governance. If a Sunni government in Iraq is oppressing the Shiites, it is at the same time oppressing the Iraqi populous as well, including ordinary Sunnis (Dodge, 2003). If we observe the history of the country, for example, we are able to recognize that when a Sunni government during a historical period was oppressing the Shiites, it was oppressing many ordinary Sunnis at the same time. Only small groups of Sunnis were benefiting from these types of undemocratic government. However, when a government is treating all Sunnis fairly, it is by its nature treating all Shiites fairly (Davis, 2005).

For example, Simmons (1994) offers that in 1055 during the rule of Malek Shah, the Sunni Seljuk ruler of the Abbasid Empire, Iraq and Iran enjoyed a cultural and scientific renaissance that involved both Sunnis and Shiites. An astronomical observatory was established in which the famous Shiite poet and scientist, Omar Khayyam, did most of his experimentation for a new calendar. And, Abu Hameed al-Ghazali, one of the greatest Islamic theologians, and other eminent scholars were brought to the Seljuk capital at Baghdad from the Shiite Iran and were encouraged and supported in their work.

Therefore, the problem of depriving the Shiites from equal access to governance in Iraq is not hindered by the sectarianism or the “Sunnism” of this governance. Rather, the deprivation of the Shiites from an equal access to governance is caused by the types of tyrannical governments in Iraq that contribute to both Shiite and Sunni oppression at the same time. The Baath regime was an example of this government.

Constructing governance on a mere religious or sectarian identity base is not an automatic recipe for fair and just government. The late Shah of Iran and his government, for example, were Shiites. Yet, This government was one of the most corrupt and tyrannical governments in modern history, causing

pain and sufferings to millions of oppressed Shiites in Iran. The same is true with Allawie and Jafari's governments in today's Iraq. Not only the miserable social and economic conditions of the Shiite masses in Iraq did not improve, but also they became worse with the increased escalation of daily violence, insecurity, and chaos.

These are important lessons for U.S. policy strategists in assessing the situation in Iraq. It is important not to base any political solution to Iraq's historical problems on the understanding of what lays on the surface, but to comprehend the complexity of the situation and design an approach that is respectful of the underlying dynamics that move beyond the obvious.

It is not Sunnism or Shiism that is the cause of the conflicts in Iraq. Rather, the cause of the problem is the absence of equal access to governance. Therefore, the U.S. solution to the Shiites' long oppression in Iraq is not going to be solved by simply depriving the Sunnis from opportunities to take part in post-Saddam Iraq. In doing so, the U.S. will be tilting the scale of oppression from one segment of the Iraqi society to another and creating new obstacles to its policy of nation-building in Iraq. The Sunnis had nothing to do with Shiite oppression, and those who oppressed the Shiites in the past had oppressed the Sunnis as well. Building a successful and democratic Iraq comes from the equal contributions of all Iraqis, Sunnis and Shiites alike.

As a nation-builder, it is important for the United States to understand the complexity of the issues that it is confronting in Iraq and depart from the simplistic approaches of looking into the surface. Our world is not a simple black and white universe but a complex network of interrelated and intertwined relations. In our policy approach toward Iraq, we need to abort the mentality of observing the Iraqi political dynamics from the simplistic prism of black and white (Shiite and Sunnis), or regard Iraqis within segmented political blocks based on sectarianism or ethnicity. We need to find solutions that treat the roots of the problem, instead of becoming part of the problem itself.

IRAQI SHIITES REPRESENT THE POOR MASSES OF IRAQ

Although majority of Iraqi Shiites are economically deprived, there are many Shiites who are wealthy and had benefited from opportunities that enhanced their economic lots throughout the years. Cole (2004) explains that

one of the wealthy Shiite families in Iraq is that of the Chalabi, a merchant family that was part of the monarchic regime during the 1930-1950s and then fled Iraq after the revolution of 1958. One of this family's members, Ahmed Chalabi, had returned to Iraq after the 2003 War, groomed by the Pentagon to be the new leader of Iraq (dodge, 2003). Allegations of him being a spy for Iran, however, weakened his prospects for political power, although momentarily. Currently, Chalabi is the Deputy Prime Minister in Jafari's government and the Acting Oil Minister (IND, 2005).

The wealthy Shiite merchants, such as the Chalabis, became prominent in Iraq after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Between 1948 and 1952, approximately 120,000 Iraqi Jews immigrated to Israel, creating an instance of abrupt population shifts in Iraqi society (Batatu, 1978). This massive Iraqi Jewish exodus was replaced by Shiite merchants and traders, many of whom were descendants of Iranian immigrants that settled in southern Iraq (Marr, 2004).

On July 14, 1958, a group of Iraqi Army officers, led by Brigadier General Abdul al-Kareem Qasim, overthrew the monarchy and established the Republic of Iraq (Davis, 2005). The wealthy Shiite families who were associated with the monarchic regime left the country. The economically deprived Shiite peasants, however, welcomed the event because Qasim's government initiated a land reform program that was intended to benefit them (Jabar, 2003).

The land reform program, however, resulted in the continued impoverishment of the Shiite rural masses, which caused large migrations from rural to urban areas. Batatu (1978) explains that these large migrations reduced the number of peasants in rural areas. Most of the migrants settled in Baghdad's slum sections, creating further social, economic, and political problems for the new Republic.

Kelidar (1979) offers that the slums in Iraqi cities, especially in the capital city of Baghdad, became a special target of Qasim's government. Efforts were made to improve the housing and living conditions of the slum dwellers. Between 1961 and 1963, for example, many of these slums were eliminated in Baghdad and their inhabitants moved to two large housing projects on the edge of the capital. Today, this area is called "Sadr City," after the late Ayatollah al-Sadr.

After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the wealthy Shiite families returned to Iraq to assume leadership positions in post-Saddam Iraq. The poor Shiites, however, continued with their miserable political and economic conditions.

It was those poor Shiites who fueled the violent uprisings against U.S. forces in 2004 (Escobar, 2004). These types of uprisings are the new dawn of class warfare that uses Shiism as an identity in a struggle for better economic opportunities (ECSSR, 2005). So, while rich Shiites, such as Chalabi, Allawie, and Jafari, are benefiting from the U.S. occupation of Iraq by securing for themselves the means to protect their interest, the economically deprived Shiites see the occupation failing to address their needs. Politically, the perception of the poor Shiites is often translated into violence.

For U.S. policy strategists to succeed in their nation-building project in Iraq, they need to win the support of millions of poor Shiites and direct attention toward reflecting the interest of the oppressed classes in Iraq, instead of concentrating on supporting the types of Allawie, Chalabi, and Jafari. Without winning the support of the oppressed and defending their interest, the U.S. will be creating a new autocratic class of rich Shiites in Iraq that will replace the old Sunni-dominating class of the previous Iraqi regimes, and tip the organ of oppression from one segment to another.

CONCLUSION: LEARNING FROM HISTORY

The Sunni-Shiite conflict in Islam is not caused by religious differences. Rather, it is caused by economic reasons and political measures that oppressed most Shiites and many Sunnis for the benefit of the few.

The history of Sunni-Shiite conflict is the history of economic struggle that is illustrated politically as a schism between two religious sects. Myths are added to this drift, giving rise to misunderstandings that serve neither the case of fairness for the Shiites or the issue of social justice for all Iraqis.

During the years, some Sunni tribes gained administrative experience that allowed them monopolize the political power in Iraq. These tribes were also able to take advantage of economic and educational opportunities while the Shiites, frozen out of the political process, remained politically powerless and economically destitute.

As the power of tribal Iraq waned throughout the years, central Iraq benefited from the rise of a centralized governmental apparatus, a rapidly increasing bureaucracy, and augmented educational opportunities. The transformation of the urban-tribal balance resulted in a massive Shiite rural-to-urban migrations. The disruption of the older social structure and the rise of new class relations based on economics fueled Shiite dissatisfaction.

This dissatisfaction left a legacy of resentment by ordinary, poor Shiites against the emerging political establishment in Baghdad. Only few members of this political establishment saw the need to address the Shiites concern, a neglect that resulted in grave consequences for the interest of the political elite. Accordingly, the Iraqi-nation state became a center of gravity, setting up a political structure that shaped Iraqi politics based on preserving the economic and political power of the privileged.

One feature of this state was the absence of Shiite appointees to senior administrative positions. The old Sunni-dominated order that began with the Umayyad Dynasty and continued during the Abbasid and Ottoman periods was reinforced and the Shiites were excluded from the administrative levels of the state. Ultimately, the state suffered from a chronic legitimacy crisis that continued to 2003. The Sunni-Shiite conflict continues to frustrate attempts to mold Iraq into a homogenous political community.

The solution to this problem, however, is not through the strengthening of the historic Sunni-Shiite drift, or appointing token Shiites of the rich merchant families to high-ranking governmental positions. The solution, rather, comes from providing means for the creation of an equitable political and economic structure that is fair for all Iraqis.

This can be achieved through an environment of fostering positive relationships between all members of Iraqi the society, similar to the one constructed by the Seljuk government of Malek Shah in 1055. It was the positive environment created by the Seljuks that produced scholars such as Omar Khayyam and al-Ghazali with no regard to Shiism or Sunnism. This type of environment, however, does not emerge from myths and simplistic solutions but from participatory processes in governance that treat complex issues with transparency, fairness, and accountability.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 provided the pacifist and wealthy elements within the Shiite political movement in Iraq with the opportunity to take advantage of the new political situation on ground. By assuming a leadership position in manipulating the aspirations of the poor Shiites toward correcting centuries of injustice, the pacifists are able to tilt the balance of power toward their side.

In doing so, the pacifists are able not only diffuse the radical and revolutionary elements within the Iraqi Shiites, as they did with Muqtada al-Sadr's movement in 2004, but also use their alliances with the occupying power to secure the lion's share in the elections for a new Iraqi National Assembly, as they did in January 2005. The pacifists also succeeded in forming a new Iraqi government in April 2005, and preparing to write Iraq's new Constitution according to their own political agenda, without the participation of the Sunnis or the poor Shiites.

The pacifists are hopeful that by institutionalizing their political will in Iraq in the constitutional forms of legislative, executive, and judicial powers, they can shift the center of political and religious authority in Shiism once again toward Iraq from its current location in Iran. In doing so, the pacifists are banking on internal changes within the Iranian system of government to produce new Iranian types of pacifists within the leadership positions in Iranian government. With such a change in Iran, the pacifists in Iraq are hoping to unite all Shiites under their political agenda.

The pacifists in Iraq foresee the possibility of a shift in Iranian political structure toward pacifism as an end to the radical elements within the Shiite political movements in the entire region, such as the Hizbollah movement in Lebanon and Muqtada al-Sadr's movement in Iraq. By defusing Shiism from its radical elements, the pacifists are able to affirm their political power in the entire region and render as ineffective even the radical elements within Sunnism itself.

The Shiite pacifists in Iraq presented the success of their plan in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon as beneficial to the American security in the region. Not only the United States can find willing partners in them, but also can use these pacifists as strategic partnership in the construction of the new Middle East and ridding it from the radical Islamic elements that threaten U.S. security in the region.

The radical Shiite and Sunni elements in the region, however, will not sit idle and watch their role diminish with the rise of pacifist Shiites under U.S. umbrella. As the 2005 presidential elections in Iran had demonstrated with the winning of the hard-liners, radicalism will fight back to maintain its footstep in the political process. The coming years will witness some of the most brutal conflicts for religious, economic, and political powers between radical Islam (including both Sunni and Shiite elements) and the U.S. new allies in the region, the pacifist Shiites. The outcome will determine the direction of the political dynamics in the Middle East and will impact the U.S. policy toward the region.

The wisest strategy for the U.S. to take in Iraq or the Middle East is not through the reinforcement of the isolated affluent in the region but through reaching out to the impoverished and building networks of cooperation and mutual interest that will bring about a fairer Middle East. The region is not going to rid itself of radicalism by pacifying (whether Shiites or Sunnis) the claim to power, but by assuring equal access to a transparent government for all.

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