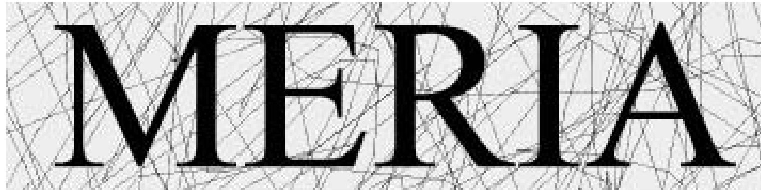

A HARSH READJUSTMENT: THE SUNNIS AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS IN CONTEMPORARY IRAQ

Ronen Zeidel*

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This article is the first in-depth analysis of the situation of the Sunni Arabs in Iraq after April 2003. Beginning with the Sunni predicament before 2003, it goes on to show how the threat to Sunni identity contributed to the construction of a distinctive identity after 2003. Although Sunni Arab cohesion is challenged by the debate over the political process and internal strife, the article delineates the Sunni Arab vision for a future Iraq.

Having been the main protagonists of the long process of constructing an Iraqi identity and forging an Iraqi state, the Arab Sunni minority was understandably dissatisfied with the demise of the Ba'th regime in April 2003. Not only was its leadership outlawed and its main sources of income (the army and the security services) disbanded and later reorganized on different lines on the instigation of a foreign invader, but it had to confront a total reshuffle of roles in the negotiations over power-sharing and the national dialogue. All of this required a rearrangement within the Sunni community, involving the emergence of a new leadership and a definition of Sunni communitarian identity. It also required the recognition and the often painful acceptance of the new imposed reality in order to minimize Sunni losses and to amplify the influence of this minority. This has been a process of harsh readjustment for which not all Sunnis have been prepared, causing an often violent conflict among them.

With the deterioration of the situation into a de facto civil war in February 2006, the Sunni-Shi'a debate over the political process and the future of Iraq seems overshadowed by the language of self defense and intercommunitarian violence. This article will trace the origins of the Sunni predicament, starting with a pre- and post-April 2003 outline of their status in Iraq, followed by an analysis of Sunni society and the perplexities of the communitarian debate, the special problems affecting the Sunnis of Iraq, and Sunni stances toward basic issues such as federalism. The article will conclude with a summary of the Sunni views on the future of Iraq.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OUTLINE

For over 400 years Sunni Arabs enjoyed hegemony in the territories that constitute present day Iraq. In nineteenth century Ottoman Iraq, when a major part of the population turned Shi'a, the Sunnis remained loyal to their employers, the Sunni Ottoman government. Unwilling to create a further stir, when the British came to power they preserved Sunni hegemony and crowned a non-Iraqi Sunni king. This pattern was maintained throughout the twentieth century, regardless of the form of government in independent Iraq. During that period, the Sunnis strengthened their hold due to their dominance in the officer corps of the army as well as other state institutions such as political parties, the security services, and the Ministry of Education. At times, it seemed that the significant questions, such as Iraqi identity,

were discussed only within the inner circles of the Sunni Arab elite, whereas the other major groups (the Shi'a and the Kurds) were not even consulted.

However, the Arab Sunnis were aware of being a ruling minority. As such, they were sensitive to the fact that they could lose their hegemony. Therefore, through their control of politics (and political discourse), they imposed upon the legal and education systems a prohibition on communitarian discourse and activities, known as *Ta'ifiyya*. It is commonly assumed that this was a code name to confront Shi'a activities or consciousness. Indeed, Shi'a were the main victims of those policies, and important Shi'a practices, such as the processions in Ashuraa, were either outlawed or strictly controlled. Yet this prohibition also applied to the Sunnis. Communitarian discourse of any kind was perceived as a danger to Sunni hegemony. As an alternative, the Sunni elite fabricated a supra-communitarian secular ideology, taught in schools all over the country and transmitted by the media: namely, Iraqi or Arab nationalism. Later in the article, the present outcomes of this prohibition on the Sunnis will be elaborated. Presently, it is important to understand that the alternative discourse was very successful, and generations of Iraqis were educated in this light. Thus, Sunni dominance was not only political but also cultural and even psychological.

Consequently, the communitarian discourse lost much of its importance between 1932 and the 1990s. When the major issues in Iraqi politics were either national or socioeconomic, the fact that government was at the hands of a minority was effectively concealed. In the eyes of the Iraqi public, it was downgraded. Political activists attached little importance to their communitarian affiliation. This was not only because it was politically taboo, but they really believed it was not important. No Iraqi census, for example, examined the number of Shi'a in the country. True, under the Ba'th there were rules against Ta'ifiyya, such as the prohibition on using the regional surname, but the imposition of the rules was rather lenient, as there was hardly any need to use them.

However, it was under the Ba'th that things began to change. Already in the 1970s and 1980s prohibitions began to breed a counter-reaction from the Shi'a, which in turn triggered the Sunnis. However, it was in the 1990s that the Ta'ifi mindset was fully and violently exposed. The intifada of March 1991 quickly turned into a confessional Shi'a protest. Its extremely violent demise was carried out by Sunni units of the army and the security services, motivated by fear of losing hegemony in the country. This dramatic event, in which the regime was nearly toppled without any external help, signaled the beginning of a decade in which Ta'ifiyya was simmering very close to the ground.[1]

In addition, the increasingly unpopular Ba'th regime contributed to the rise of Ta'ifiyya in the 1990s. Its concentration in the hands of a handful of corrupt Tikritis from Saddam's family and tribe, together with the impact of economic sanctions on the Iraqi middle class, created, for the first time, a breach between the Sunni regime and a considerable part of the Sunni population. The inauguration of *al-Hamla al-Imaniyya*, the Faith Campaign, in the mid-1990s was another significant factor. In an ill-organized attempt to encourage an inter-confessional version of Islam, the state built many new mosques (in Shi'a and Sunni areas), multiplied religious lessons at schools, distributed Korans, and introduced Islamic discourse. Yet at that time the regime was too weak to oversee the implementation of the campaign. The consequences were counterproductive: Instead of bridging the gap between Sunnis and Shi'a, the Faith Campaign only deepened it. Whereas charismatic Shi'a religious leaders, like Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr----who was assassinated by the regime in 1999----spread a Shi'a message, imams in Sunni areas propagated a fundamentalist (and even Wahhabi) Sunni doctrine, gaining many adherents.

Understanding the background of the 1990s is extremely important for our matter, as many of the contemporary Sunni leaders started their political careers at that period, in opposition to Saddam's regime. Consequently, the

dangerous potential of a communitarian clash is not the byproduct of the destruction of the Askariyya mosque in February 2006 or of April 2003----the latter were only the detonators----but rather of events and government policy in the 1990s.[2]

APRIL 2003 AND BEYOND

During the short war of March-April 2003, Saddam Hussein could not count on the Sunni Arab population to save his regime. In fact, as one of his last speeches shows, he was quite dissatisfied with their lack of support. No doubt, many Sunnis were unwilling to fight for his regime. Surprisingly, even now the restoration of the Ba'th regime is not a rallying call for the great majority of Sunnis and is only heard mainly around Saddam's hometown, Tikrit.[3] In addition, Saddam's trial fails to attract major attention from the Sunnis. This shows that the Sunnis are not fighting for Saddam or the Ba'thist cause; they are fighting for themselves.

However, the fall of the Ba'th regime was a major blow for the Sunnis. Not only did they lose their hegemony and their 1991 nightmares materialized, but they were also absolutely unready to face the new reality. Unlike other groups in Iraqi society, such as the Shi'a and Kurds, their self-perception as a community was failing. Having been associated with the regime for so long, in addition to their anti-Ta'ifi attitudes, their Sunni identity was diminished. This did have some practical implications: Unlike the Kurds and the Shi'a, they had no social and political institutions to fill the vacuum (with the exception of the Sunni waqf and some state sponsored academic institutions). There were very few political parties in the exiled opposition with a major Sunni representation, and those that did exist were small and their politicians detached from Iraqi reality. In fact, they had no leadership. The Sunni community, having lost a hegemony that was centuries old, and lacking institutions, leadership, and even identity, had to start from scratch. Marvelously, in a very short time and under difficult circumstances, they managed to do so.

One of the main issues was the participation in the political process and the formation of the "New Iraq." In the first interim government, established in September 2003, there were only five Sunnis out of 25 ministers.[4] The second interim government included the same number of Sunni ministers, but in it they received a significant portfolio: the Ministry of Interior. Moreover, the president, a symbolic post at that time, was Sunni.[5] This shows that there was an attempt to lure Sunnis into participation in government, thus enhancing its legitimacy. However, those Sunnis who were nominated as ministers----mainly those who returned after a long exile----were hardly representative of the Sunni community, still apprehensive toward the process.

In the meantime, other elements began to assert themselves, claiming to represent the Sunnis. These were operating outside of the political system and very often challenged its legitimacy. Some formed the backbone of the Iraqi resistance, while others, such as the Forum of Religious Scholars (*Hayyat Ulama al-Muslimin*),[6] were indirectly involved with the resistance. The members of these organizations were almost entirely native Iraqis with strong links to the population. As such, they were more representative than the appointed ministers. Some were the end product of the Faith Campaign of the 1990s, with credentials opposing the former regime adding to their glory. In towns like Falluja, Ramadi, and Samaraa, they were considered local heroes.

In the beginning of 2005, the Sunnis seemed very unlikely to join the political process. Yet that year brought a significant change. It started with the first general elections for parliament, which was supposed to nominate members for a draft committee for a permanent constitution. The Sunni resistance movements and their supporters called for a boycott of the elections. This call was heeded by more moderate Sunni politicians, already integrated into the political process. The Sunni boycott went ahead.[7] The results, with a

parliament in which Shi'a and Kurds were highly overrepresented, did great harm to the Sunni cause. For the first time in the history of Iraq, the two major protagonists in the national dialogue over the power-share and the future identity of the country were the Shi'a and the Kurds. The boycott was a failure of the "imported" Sunni leadership to actually lead the community. It was therefore one of the main reasons for its disappearance from the political scene.

Nevertheless, the Sunni community could not remain out of the political process entirely. Many Sunnis realized that the future of Iraq was at stake and that merely supporting the resistance was not constructive. The growing terror, perpetrated mainly by Sunnis, deterred them. They decided to join the political process by insisting on taking part in the committee to draft the constitution. At first, the Shi'a and the Kurds were not willing to allow Sunni participation, relying on the election outcome. However, due to Sunni insistence and Shi'a and Kurdish magnanimity (as well as some covert American pressure), the Sunnis were allowed in as members and "observers." From inside and outside of the committee's walls, the Sunnis took an active part in the debate over the draft. Eventually, most of their claims were rejected due to numerical inferiority.[8] When the draft was approved by a great majority in a plebiscite in October 2005, most Sunnis voted against it, claiming that it was "engineered by the Americans." However, the first-time massive participation of the Sunnis in the vote attested to their willingness to be part of the political process.[9]

Yet the battle was not over. A general parliamentary election in December 2005 elected a new "permanent" parliament from which a "permanent" government would emerge. For the Sunnis, it was the first opportunity to measure their weight in the electorate. It was also an opportunity to gain more influence in the parliament in which the constitution was debated. They expected a great deal from their first participation, by which they greatly enhanced the legitimacy of the political process. However, their expectations were met with a meager vote: Sunni parties won only 55 out of 275 seats in parliament, reflecting their numerical inferiority in the population at large.[10]

Nonetheless, a new generation of Sunni politicians capably managed to turn the electoral failure into a political success. After their first outcry against falsifications fell on deaf ears, Sunni politicians entered into talks with the Shi'a and the Kurds for the formation of the government. After haggling over portfolios, the Sunnis received some new ministries and maintained the defense ministry. They also maintained the post of speaker of parliament.[11] Thus, through political bickering, the Sunnis were able to amplify their political power. The end of 2005 saw the emergence of a new group of Sunni political leaders, replacing the "imported" leadership.

With the massive participation of the Sunnis in December 2005, it seemed that the political process was moving rapidly forward. However, then, in February 2006, the country moved to the verge of a civil war. A group of Sunni terrorists, from the al-Qa'ida organization, blew up the Shi'a's holy Askariyya mosque in predominantly Sunni Samaraa, setting off a chain of violent retaliations from both sides. Before February 2006, Sunni-Shi'a coexistence had withstood many hazards. Even the assassination of the Shi'a political leader Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim in front of the Ali mosque in Najaf or the death of over a thousand Shi'a pilgrims on the A'imma Bridge in Baghdad did not trigger such a chain of events. The immediate background for the February clash was the election, with its Ta'ifi tones (which were later echoed in the Ashuraa celebrations), and the political stalemate that followed. The terrorists, eager to stop the political process by all means----and in al-Qa'ida's case, to drive the country to civil war----were only the detonators of the bomb.

The Sunni and Shi'a leadership were unable to stem the tide of violence. All they were able to do was frequent condemnations of the growing violence and declarations of reconciliation.[12] For the ordinary Iraqi,

whatever crucial issues were at stake, politics became detached from everyday reality. From a distance of some months after the February events, it seems that Iraq has sunk into a bloody routine of daily killings, whereas its politicians are immersed in endless parliamentary debates over the constitution and power-sharing.[13]

THE COMPOSITION OF THE SUNNI COMMUNITY

The Sunni Arab community in Iraq is not a homogeneous block. It is divided along social (according to class, regional origin, and the like), political, and ideological lines. The Sunnis constitute a numerical minority in Iraq, but a very considerable one, not only for their former political dominance. It is often forgotten that the Sunnis formed a major part in many social spheres, in addition to politics, the army, and the security services. Sunnis were, and still are, overrepresented in Iraqi culture. Some of the country's best novelists, poets, and entertainers are Sunnis. They fill the lines of the local intelligentsia. In fact, the old social aristocracy was made up almost entirely of Sunnis, and some of its descendants (Adnan Pachachi, for example) have now returned to Iraq and are involved in politics. More significantly, Sunnis were the backbone of the Iraqi middle and upper middle classes, which were very dependent on state employment. These are educated and mainly urban people.

The division along lines of regional origins divides the community into urbanites, mainly from Baghdad and Mosul; Sunnis from peripheral towns such as Tikrit, Samaraa, and al-Dur; tribal areas like the Anbar province in western Iraq, Sharqat south of Mosul, the Jazira Desert west of Mosul, and Hawija (near Kirkuk); and Sunnis inhabiting the mixed rural areas south of Baghdad and Diyala province east of the capital. Sunnis from those regions may live under different social organizations and have different attitudes to national politics. Thus, for example, one of the very few Sunni areas that participated in the January 2005 elections was the Shammar tribal area, because the president of Iraq was of their ruling family. It was in the mixed areas that the scenes of some of the cruelest massacres took place.

Leadership in the Sunni community consists of people from different social groups. Among both the supporters and the opponents of the political process, one can find secular politicians (including former members of the Ba'th Party), religious politicians, members of the old Baghdadi aristocracy (such as Adnan Pachachi and Nasir al-Chadirchi), *ulama* (religious scholars), and tribal shaykhs. The latter were targets of an American policy intending to use them as agents against members of the resistance. So far this policy has met with partial success. The tribal shaykhs, especially in the Anbar province, are generally unwilling to cooperate with the Americans and explain their lack of support by the atmosphere of fear. Indeed, some were murdered for their collaboration.[14] Yet the Americans should realize that the tribal world had undergone a process of disintegration in the last decades, causing many shaykhs to lose their influence on their tribes. Real power rests with the shaykhs of the smaller factions of tribal confederations, such as the Dulaim of Anbar. Most of the latter actively support the resistance.[15]

Two Sunni politicians deserve closer attention as representatives of the new Sunni leadership emerging as a consequence of the political process. Salih al-Mutlaq is the head of the National Dialogue Party (Hizb al-Hiwar al-Watani), with 11 seats in parliament. Born in a tribal village near Falluja in 1947, Mutlaq, a secular politician, was a member of the Ba'th Party until 1977. Since then, he has stayed in Iraq, developing a successful academic career first as an agronomist and later as a businessman. His rivals claim that he maintained good relations with Saddam and his family. Mutlaq has a doctorate from Aberdeen University. His English is fluent. A frequent guest on talk shows and television interviews, he uses the media to further his party and Sunni interests.[16] Mahmud al-Mashhadani, the current speaker of parliament, was a military doctor under

Saddam. During the 1990s, he was active in an underground Islamic movement and was arrested. Like many other Sunni politicians, he also stayed in Iraq throughout the Ba'th period, which adds to his popularity.[17] Before the decision to become involved in national politics, these people were totally unknown to outside observers of Iraqi affairs.

Sunnis are also divided along political and ideological lines. Most Sunnis are non-political: they do not support a party with a defined doctrine. Others support supra-confessional parties, proclaiming Iraqi unity, such as Ayad Alawi's National List or other smaller parties. Those with a political tilt either stay away from the political process or support the Iraqi Islamic Party, with its confessional and religious contents. Despite some nostalgic undertones, very few Sunnis still support the milder versions of the Ba'th Party still in vogue. Ideologically, the Sunnis are divided between those who genuinely believe in the need to construct a democratic new Iraq, those who do not believe that this is possible under occupation, the Islamists who strive for a more Islamic Iraq, and the very few Jihadists who see Iraq as the center of global Jihad and in the meantime work to drive Iraq into a confessional civil war. Obviously, daily reality in Iraq is a more important concern for the ordinary Sunni than politics and ideology.

PROBLEMS FACING THE SUNNI COMMUNITY

While not unique to the Sunni community, personal security has recently become the most urgent problem for ordinary Sunnis. This is particularly true in mixed (Sunni-Shi'a or Sunni-Kurdish) areas like Baghdad, Diyala province, Basra, Kirkuk, and the area south of Baghdad. Sunnis and Shi'a are killed solely for their confessional affiliations. Typical Sunni or Shi'a names, once only used by external observers to assess ones confessional affiliation, are now constantly used by "death squads" in their murderous arrays, to the point where changing names has become common among Sunnis today. In stark contrast to the past, confessional identity is now mentioned in the national identity card, facilitating identification and further endangering the Sunnis. Having confessional identity in the new ID card is a clear revelation that Ta'ifiyya, by Shi'a instigation, has become official policy.[18]

Furthermore, Sunnis feel more vulnerable, because, having lost political dominance, they were left with the status of a persecuted minority, worried about retributions and revenge. This is even more accentuated in mixed areas like Basra, Nasiriyya, Amara, and Dujail, where Sunnis are a small minority, whose power in the past had been amplified through links to the Ba'th regime.

Other problems are unique to the Sunnis, figuring high on every platform of Sunni parties or politicians. Sunnis suffer more from the policy of de-Ba'thification. In some Sunni areas, like Tikrit, it is claimed that around 70 percent of the workforce is banned from employment for their former membership in the Ba'th Party or their work in the security services.[19] The committee in charge had to introduce several alleviations to limit the numbers of those banned, but people still have to face its bureaucracy. Those who were members of the party, and Sunni politicians speaking on their behalf, claim that under the former regime they had no other choice. The Shi'a parties strongly oppose a cancellation of the blacklist. De-Ba'thification is also a matter of concern for some Shi'a. However, Sunni mistrust of the government makes them feel that the Shi'a can find their way through mediation or connections with other Shi'a, whereas they do not have that possibility.

A major error committed by the Americans shortly after the occupation was the abolition of the Iraqi army. This mainly affected the Sunnis, who formed the large majority of the officer ranks and the professional soldiers. Many officers were driven to the resistance by not being able to provide income for their families. With the cancellation of that enactment and the reestablishment (and reorganization) of the army, the Sunnis faced another problem as more and more Shi'a and Kurdish officers were taken, replacing Sunni

ones. Despite maintaining the Ministry of Defense, the Sunnis clearly lost their monopoly on the army. Moreover, the importance of the army has been overshadowed by the Shi'a-dominated Ministry of Interior, often accused of persecuting Sunnis. Discrimination at work is also an issue of major concern to the Sunnis. Formerly, many middle class Sunnis were state employees, manning most of the government ministries. Presently, with Shi'as comprising the majority of ministers, and with ministers expected to provide employment to their confessional kin, many Sunnis (including senior workers) are fired. In some technocratic ministries----the most notorious example being the oil ministry----this policy greatly damaged its efficiency. This is a further contribution to Sunni impoverishment.

One of the main bones of contention is the Ministry of Interior with its powerful arms. This ministry has been dominated by the Shi'a since April 2005. The current minister was a member of the Shi'a religious opposition group the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and integrated many of the combatants in its armed militia to the newly established security forces. Under the guise of combating terrorism, these state agents also used their power to persecute innocent Sunni men. Acts such as the incarceration of Sunnis in secret detention centers and torturing them were carried out by those forces, apparently motivated by denominational hatred.[20] In recent months, there have been a growing number of Sunni testimonies claiming that the perpetrators of atrocities and revenge killings were wearing uniforms of the Ministry. Of course this greatly worries the Sunnis, who tried unsuccessfully to control the Ministry after the December 2005 elections.

Ultimately, the American military presence harasses the Sunnis more than all the other communities. While the Americans try to keep their units out of Iraqi cities, Sunni towns----notably Falluja, Ramadi, and Haditha----are under direct American military occupation. This is a source of daily inconveniences. Occasionally, allegations of massacres are published in the world media. However, the humiliation of living under a foreign occupation forms part of the daily itinerary of many Sunnis.[21]

THE NON-CONFESSIONAL FAÇADE

Paradoxically, the Sunni heritage of avoiding the Ta'ifi discourse is still maintained by all sides in Iraq today. While the perpetrators of atrocities choose Shi'a or Sunni targets----mosques, *Husayniyyas* (Shi'a places of worship), and neighborhoods----or emphasize the affiliation of their victims by other means, the prevalent ideology camouflages Ta'ifi reality by using non-confessional discourse. Even the radical Shi'a and Sunni militias, that is, those behind the violence, readily adopt the non-confessional discourse, with the sole exception of the openly anti-Shi'a al-Qa'ida.[22] In the official media, largely controlled by the Shi'a, the perpetrators of terrorist attacks or confessional killings are always just "terrorists" (*irhabiyyun*) and not Sunni or Shi'a members of militias. Al-Qa'ida is singled out because of its notoriety and the large number of non-Iraqis in its ranks, but the fact of its being a Sunni organization is never mentioned.

Unlike Shi'a politicians, strongly associated with the upsurge of confessionalism, Sunnis prefer its downplaying. Not a single political party representing the Sunnis uses the word "Sunni" or "Sunna" in its name. Likewise, with the sole exception of Ansar al-Sunna, a small radical fundamentalist militia, no resistance movement has done so. Instead, they use supra-confessional rhetoric (either patriotic or religious) to camouflage the Ta'ifi reality.

This ambivalence serves the Sunnis. Some of them are still uncomfortable with their definition in confessional terms, attaching more importance to other identities, such as Iraqi, Arab, or Muslim. Their confessional identity still lacks real content, contrary to the Shi'a identity with its long history of persecution, prohibitions, and repression. The recent feeling of victimhood has started to fill this identity with some content, albeit negative

and insufficient. Moreover, Ta'ifi politics and its consequences oblige them to acknowledge their status as a numerical minority. When faced with that fact, Sunni politicians usually insist on not being treated as a numerical minority but as equal partners.[23] The only problem with that position is that while it is beneficial in political negotiations, depending on Shi'a magnanimity, it is not advantageous in general elections.

Still, the existence of a non-confessional façade is more important than it may seem at a first glance. This façade is the last barrier against a total break of order. Sadly, it is almost the last remnant of a will to live together under one overwhelming identity. In the shadow of increasing violence, one wonders whether it can persist.

THE SUNNIS AND FEDERALISM

Meanwhile, the most burning political debate, clearly dividing Iraq along ethnic and confessional lines, is over federalism. This principle is now enshrined in the permanent constitution, yet at present, parliament still discusses its contents and future implementation while at the same time tackling its consequences for a united Iraq.

The first call for federalism came from the Sunni governor of the Sunni province Anbar. This was in 2004, when the province, considered the cradle of the resistance, severed its relations with the capital. This call reflects the heterogeneity of Sunni opinion and may have echoed an aspiration of the tribal element in the province for more autonomy. However, at that time it seemed to be a lonely call. Yet once uttered, support for federalism came from unexpected quarters. Whereas the Kurds have always been fervent supporters of federalism, substantial Shi'a support was a novelty, reaching the Arab fabric of the population. At that point, the great majority of Sunnis felt that the future of a united Iraq was menaced. The Arab Sunnis became the main opponents of federalism or "The Project of Regions" (*Mashru al-Aqalim*), as its implementation is now called.

Arab Sunnis have little to gain from a federalist state. The northern Kurdish provinces and the southern Shi'a ones have huge oil fields and control almost all of Iraq's oil production. The southern provinces control the only outlet to the Persian Gulf. In contrast, the Arab Sunni provinces, encompassing the center of Iraq, have none of this. The distribution of populations is another major problem: many regions are actually mixed, and it is not clear who would administer them under a federal system. The prime example of a mixed area is Baghdad, a megalopolis in which there is no clear majority of Sunnis or Shi'a.

External observers often emphasize these communitarian views in their analyses of the federal debate in Iraq. Yet in a discussion of Sunni views on federalism, more emphasis should be given to issues concerning identity. Kurdish and Shi'a federalism are meant to preserve and fortify a solid ethnic and confessional identity, formulated in confrontation with Iraqi identity. This is the secret of their validity. For many Sunnis, this same Iraqi identity is the only one they cherish. They ponder what the identity of the Sunni federal region would be. Who would govern it? What sort of connection would it have with the mother Iraqi state, or what remains of it? This brings us back to Ta'ifiyya. Having silenced Ta'ifi discourse (including their own) for so long, Sunnis feel uneasy in an Iraq that adopts Ta'ifiyya along confessional lines.

Another identity-related issue that is dear to the Arab Sunnis is Iraq's relations with the Arab world.[24] This affirms the country's Arab affinity with the rest of the Sunni Arab world. For the Iraqi Sunnis, the Arab world is a source of moral, political, and cultural support. It provides them with the feeling of being a part of a greater whole and not a persecuted minority in their country. Since the 1990s, Arab countries have been the preferential exile of Arab Sunnis, while Kurds and Shi'a tended to prefer Western countries. Iraq's membership in the Arab League has become a matter of importance to the Sunnis, not because of the benefits they may derive from

it, but more as the preservation of a symbolic attachment to the Arab world. When the secretary of the Arab league, Amru Musa, offered his mediation in late 2005, Iraqi Sunni leaders, including some of the more radicals, were willing to cooperate.[25] Ironically, these leaders quite often appeal to Arab politicians and diplomats to negotiate on their behalf with other non-Sunni Iraqi politicians. Hoshyar Zebari, Iraq's representative in the Arab League from 2004 is its Kurdish minister of foreign affairs, and its relations with most of the Arab world are strained. Additionally, with the closure of the offices of al-Jazeera and later al-Arabiyya channels in the country----the former by a governmental decree for its alleged support of the resistance--there is an increasing fear of seclusion among Iraqi Sunnis.

SUNNI DEBATE OVER THE POLITICAL PROCESS

The great majority of the Sunnis are in favor of a national dialogue and a new power share. In November 2005, shortly before the general elections, the first meeting of almost all of the factions in the Iraqi crisis took place in Cairo. Some of the leaders who attended oppose the political process and openly proclaim their support of the resistance. They all listened to each other with very few disorders. However, subsequent conferences have not yet been held. With the turn of the tide after February 2006, national reconciliation seems more distant than ever before.

The Sunni debate over the political process involves two major subjects. One is the participation in party politics (that is, elections and the formulation of parliament, coalition, and cabinet) and the other is the American presence in Iraq. Of course, the two subjects are interrelated. As far as the political process is concerned, those who are in favor of participation insist that this is the only proper way toward establishing a new Iraq that would, eventually, proclaim its sovereignty and see off the Americans. The opponents of the political process claim that playing the game means legitimizing the American occupation. Thus, participation is detrimental to the people of Iraq. The only way to make the Americans leave is by violently resisting their presence. This is the privilege of the oppressed and is justified by international law. Nevertheless, even the opponents of the political process cannot ignore it and often find ways to express their views in parliament or in the new media. Staying out of the political arena enhances their moral standing, reminiscent of the Northern Islamic Movement vis-à-vis Arab members of parliament among Israeli Arabs. Equally important is the ability of the external actors to enforce their views by using violence and intimidation, as shown effectively during the January 2005 elections.

A foremost exponent of the latter position is Shaykh Harith al-Dari, head of the Muslim Scholars Forum (*Hayyat Ulama al-Muslimin*). In his speech at the Cairo conference he delineated his views. He did not mention the ongoing political process in Iraq and expressed his desire that Iraq return "to the arms of the Arab nation," implying that current Iraq was torn from that nation. In his opinion, occupation is the source of all the problems suffered by Iraq today, resistance to which is legitimate and shall vanish only when the occupation comes to an end. He makes a clear distinction between terror (*irhab*), not perpetrated by one party only, and resistance. Unlike the latter, terror, namely the intentional killing of innocent civilians, is illegitimate. Under terror he also includes actions of the forces of occupation and the government. He also referred to de-Ba'thification by saying that acts should be taken against all those who committed evil deeds under the former regime and "not only the members of one community."[26] This speech, delivered by a religious Sunni leader, reflects a strong tendency among the Sunnis to detach Ta'ifiyya from events and politics in contemporary Iraq. It was delivered at a time when most terrorist attacks were carried out by Sunnis targeting Shi'a civilians. Yet for Dari, numbers do not matter. By the same token, one should not defame only the Sunnis for

forming the great majority of Saddam's cronies. Even if most Sunnis are in favor of participation in the political process, as evidenced during the December 2005 elections, al-Dari's positions are widely accepted within the Sunni community.

At the end of the day, acceptance of the political process also implies acknowledgment of the great reshuffle in the political scene after April 2003, let alone a reshuffle triggered by a foreign invasion. This difficulty lies at the bottom of the very harsh process of Sunni readjustment to the new reality. The leaders of the Sunni community, in and out of the political process, strive to amplify the political power and influence of their community, and at the same time, conceal the fact of their numerical minority. The problem is that in a democracy "one man one vote" elections are an important part of the system. The Sunnis are well aware of their disadvantage in direct elections.

As of April 2003, the process of Sunni readjustment has been one of a gradual and partial acceptance of the political game. They had great expectations from the December elections. The campaign of the Sunni parties underlined supra-confessional ideas in the hope of attracting voters from across denominational lines. Yet they failed. The outcome forced them to confront the rising Ta'ifiyya and their numerical minority. They even did not fare well in the attempt to mobilize all Sunni votes. They quickly realized that elections were only part of the political process, while political negotiation was another. This was very fragile since it rested on a social basis of growing polarization along communitarian lines. Thus, it took a handful of Jihadists to turn the wheel over.

CONCLUSION

Though not made of one stock and disagreeing on basic issues, it can be safely assumed that most Iraqi Sunnis, and possibly others in Iraq, agree on some principles for the future of their country. They would like a safe and peaceful Iraq in its current boundaries, contrary to separatist tendencies among the Kurds. Internally, their Iraq would preferably be run along centralist lines, contrary to the prevailing federalism of the Shi'a and Kurds. It would be predominantly Arab, with strong links to the surrounding Arab world. Arabness and Iraqi identity should serve as a bridge between Shi'a and Sunnis and as a counter to Ta'ifiyya. For many Iraqi Sunnis, this new Iraq should be more Islamic in character. Ultimately, their Iraq should regain its full sovereignty and be free of American presence and influence.

In conclusion, the Sunnis are quite right in attributing most of the current problems in Iraq to the rise of Ta'ifiyya, which they took so much pain to curtail when they were in power. They are not the only ones to blame the American invasion for the current problems: Muqtada al-Sadr, a charismatic Shi'a leader of growing significance, uses the same accusations. However, they failed to accept the new reality in Iraq. Their leaders hesitated too long before joining the political process. A considerable number of them are still outside of the process. Ultimately, they failed to curb the extremists.

Nevertheless, the Sunnis may hold the key to the preservation of a united Iraq. They were the dominant force in the shaping of Iraqi national identity, albeit in a deficient way. Of the three main population groups, they are the most enthusiastic in using it as a rallying force. Like other Iraqis, they are looking toward the future: Very few Sunnis wish for a return to the Ba'thist past. Therefore, they should be an essential part of a national dialogue toward a redefinition of that identity. On the other hand, if the Sunnis start using the communitarian discourse more blatantly, Iraq will sink deeper into a dark abyss.

**Dr. Ronen Zeidel is a long time observant of Iraqi affairs. He teaches Iraqi history in the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies and in the Rothberg School of International Students, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, as well as in the Department of History of the Middle East, University of Haifa.*

NOTES

[1] For more information on the intifada, see: Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising and the Arab World*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1994), pp.57-105.
[2] On the impact of the "Faith Campaign" sharpening communitarian feelings, see: Amatzia Baram, "Who are the Insurgents? Sunni Arab Rebels in Iraq," *Special Report 134* (April 2005), USIP, Washington; David Baran, *Vivre la tyrannie et lui survivre: l'Irak en transition* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2004), pp.370-99.
[3] See photograph in *Haaretz,* September 25, 2006.
[4] See: http://www.puk.org, September 3, 2003.
[5] *Al-Jazeera,* June 2, 2004.
[6] The leader of the Forum, Shaykh Harith al-Dari, is both a religious scholar and a shaykh of the Zawba tribe from the environs of Falluja. His great grandfather, Shaykh Dari al-Mahmud, was a great hero of the struggle against the British in the 1920s.
[7] *Al-Jazeera,* January 12, 2005.
[8] *Al-Itihad*, June 15, 2005; *Haaretz*, July 6, 2005; July 21, 2005; August 28, 2005; October 26, 2005.
[9] *Haaretz,* October 16, 2005; October 26, 2005.
[10] *Haaretz,* January 22, 2006.
[11] *Haaretz,* January 6, 2006; January 22, 2006; *al-Iraqiya*, May 18, 2006.
[12] *Al-Sharqiya Television,* February 25, 2006.
[13] See, for example, a daily news bulletin of *al-Sharqiya* television channel: After a languid enumeration of the daily harvest of violent events, there was a report on a parliamentary debate on "federalism." *Al-Sharqiya,* October 10, 2006.
[14] *Haaretz,* May 31, 2006.
[15] See Patrick Graham, "Beyond Fallujah: A Year with the Iraqi Resistance," *Harper's Magazine,* Vol. 308, No.1849 (June 2004), pp.37-48.
[16] An interview with al-Mutlaq, *al-Iraqiya Television,* May 21, 2006.
[17] *Haaretz,* April 23, 2006.
[18] *Haaretz,* October 11, 2006.
[19] *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 2, 2005.
[20] *Haaretz*, November 17, 2005.
[21] Baran, *Vivre la Tyrannie*, pp.285-89; *Haaretz*, May 31, 2006.
[22] An example of blatant Sunni Ta'ifi language was given by the radical group Ansar al-Sunna, taking responsibility for a terrorist attack: "We will let the Pagan Shi'a and Kurds know that we will attack them everywhere…"*Haaretz*, June 15, 2005.
[23] *Al-Iraqiya,* April 30, 2005.
[24] The final draft of the constitution includes the following passage: "Iraq is part of the Islamic world and its Arab peoples are part of the Arab nation," whereas the Sunnis wanted a clear mention that Iraq "is part of the Arab world." *Haaretz,* August 29, 2005.
[25] *Al-Sharqiya,* November 19, 2005.
[26] Ibid.