

## Regional Implications of Shi'a Revival in Iraq

Since regime change disenfranchised the Sunni minority leadership that had ruled Iraq since the country's independence in 1932 and empowered the Shi'a majority, the Shi'a-Sunni competition for power has emerged as the single greatest determinant of peace and stability in post-Saddam Iraq. Iraq's sectarian pains are all the more complex because reverberations of Shi'a empowerment will inevitably extend beyond Iraq's borders, involving the broader region from Lebanon to Pakistan. The change in the sectarian balance of power is likely to have a far more immediate and powerful impact on politics in the greater Middle East than any potential example of a moderate and progressive government in Baghdad. The change in the sectarian balance of power will shape public perception of U.S. policies in Iraq as well as the long-standing balance of power between the Shi'a and Sunnis that sets the foundation of politics from Lebanon to Pakistan. U.S. interests in the greater Middle East are now closely tied to the risks and opportunities that will emanate from the Shi'a revival in Iraq.

The competition for power between the Shi'a and Sunnis is neither a new development nor one limited to Iraq. In fact, it has shaped alliances and determined how various actors have defined and pursued their interests in the region for the past three decades. Often overlooked in political analyses of greater Middle Eastern politics, this competition is key to grasping how current developments in Iraq will shape this region in years to come. Sectarianism during this time period has also been closely tied to the development of militant Islamist ideology and activism among Sunnis. Sunni identity is part and parcel of the ideology and politics of jihadi groups associated with Al Qaeda; the Taliban; militant Wahhabis, a puritanical sectarian movement

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that emerged in the eighteenth century in modern Saudi Arabia; and the various branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist organization that appeared in Egypt in the 1920s and is associated with the rise of political Islam, especially in the Arab world. Anti-Shi'a violence is not just a strategic ploy used by Al Qaeda operatives, such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, to create instability in Iraq and undermine Washington's plans for that country's future; it is a constituent part of the ideology of Sunni militancy.

**Since 1991, Sunni militancy has been the ideological force animating Islamic activism.**

The anti-Shi'a violence that plagues Iraq today was first born in South Asia and Afghanistan in the 1990s by militant groups with ties to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. In the past nine months, bombings in Baghdad, Iskandariya, Karbala, Najaf, and other Shi'a strongholds in Iraq have claimed many lives. In early March 2004, some 143 worshippers were killed at the site of the holiest Shi'a shrine in Baghdad and Karbala, during the celebration of Ashura, the holiest day on the

Shi'a calendar. These attacks closely resemble acts in Mashad, Karachi, Quetta, and Mazar-i Sharif since the early 1990s. The current sectarian threat in Iraq is therefore more the product of a deeply rooted rivalry in the region than the direct result of recent developments in Iraq. In other words, the Shi'a revival and the decline in Sunni power in Iraq has not created Sunni militancy; it has invigorated and emboldened it. The ascendance of Sunni militancy is at the forefront of anti-Americanism in Iraq today and, as such, is likely to spread anti-Americanism in tandem with sectarian tensions throughout the greater Middle East region. On the day of the early March Ashura bombings, a Kuwaiti Wahhabi cleric condemned the Shi'a rite on his web site as "the biggest display of idolatry" and accused the Shi'a of forming an "evil axis linking Washington, Tel Aviv, and the Shi'a holy city of Najaf" to grab Persian Gulf oil and disenfranchise Sunnis.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond Iraq, U.S. interests and objectives in the greater Middle East are ineluctably tied to the ebbs and flows of Shi'a-Sunni struggles for power. Policymaking must reflect this reality, both by responding to the threat posed by the broader Sunni reaction to Shi'a revival in Iraq and by exploiting the opportunities that the growing Shi'a power in the region presents. Unless policymakers recognize the importance of the sectarian dimension of regional politics and understand how changes in Iraq impact the broader region, U.S. policy will miss the mark. Sectarian tensions can produce unpalatable futures for U.S. relations with the region, confounding goals of peace, stability, and progressive change for the countries and people of the greater Middle East.

## The Regional Shi'a Legacy

The Shi'a number around 130 million people globally, some 10 percent of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims. The overwhelming majority of Shi'a (approximately 120 million) live in the area between Lebanon and Pakistan, where they constitute the majority population in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan; the single-largest community in Lebanon; and sizeable minorities in various Gulf emirates, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan (as well as in neighboring countries such as India and Tajikistan and in East Africa).<sup>2</sup> In the arc stretching from Pakistan to Lebanon, the number of Shi'a matches that of Sunnis; in the Gulf region, the Shi'a clearly predominate.

Still, sheer numbers have not guaranteed the region's Shi'a a commensurate political voice. Outside of Iran, Sunnism has long been the face of the greater Middle East, particularly in defining the Arab political culture. From the marshes of southern Iraq to the ghettos of Karachi, the Shi'a have been the underdogs—oppressed and marginalized by Sunni ruling regimes and majority communities. The Iranian revolution of 1979 initially mobilized the Shi'a identity and emboldened the Shi'a masses to follow the Iranian lead, flexing their muscles and asserting their rights elsewhere in the region.<sup>3</sup> The Iranian revolution not only showed the Shi'a a path to power but also provided powerful financial, moral, and organizational support in the Shi'a struggles for rights and representation.

Whereas throughout the 1960s and 1970s the Shi'a had championed secular nationalist causes and looked to Pan-Arabism or leftist ideologies to bridge the sectarian divide and include them in the political mainstream,<sup>4</sup> in the 1980s many joined the ranks of distinctly Shi'a political movements. Groups such as Amal in Lebanon, al-Da'waa al-Islamiya (the Islamic Call) in Iraq, Hizb-i Wahdat (Party of Unity) in Afghanistan, and Tahrir-i Jafaria (Shi'a Movement) in Pakistan received financial and political support from Tehran to push for specifically Shi'a agendas. For example, with Tehran's blessing, Pakistani Shi'a rejected their government's much-publicized Islamic laws of 1979 as "Sunni" and were able to gain exemption from the laws, which led many more Pakistanis to declare themselves Shi'a.<sup>5</sup> Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini actively supported Pakistani Shi'a demands, openly threatening Pakistan's Gen. Zia ul-Haq that, if his military regime "mistreated [the Shi'a, Khomeini] would deal with Zia as he had dealt with the Shah."<sup>6</sup> In India, after continued disturbances between the Shi'a and Sunnis in Lucknow beginning in the late 1980s, the Shi'a community sided with the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in provincial and national elections in the 1990s, breaking with the larger Muslim community to protect its own specific interests.

Iran's sectarian posturing was not limited to mobilizing Shi'a minorities. Khomeini issued a ruling (*fatwa*) declaring the ruling Alawi sect in Syria, which is an offshoot of Shi'ism and viewed by the majority of Sunnis and the Shi'a as not Islamic, to be within the pale of Islam. The fatwa gave the regime of Alawi Hafiz al-Asad, whose base of power rested in Syria's minority Alawi community, legitimacy at a time when it was under pressure by the Muslim Brotherhood. More significantly, Tehran refused to support the Muslim Brotherhood when Asad's regime brutally suppressed the group's uprising in the city of Hama in 1982. The Tehran-Damascus axis was part of Iran's Shi'a expansionist agenda. It provided Iran with a counterbalance to the regional Sunni Arab alliance that supported Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War. Syria supported Iran in the war diplomatically as well as by applying military pressure on Baghdad, maintaining large numbers of troops along its border with Iraq. The alliance also enabled Iran to establish Hizballah in Lebanon, supporting the organization throughout the 1980s and 1990s to confront the U.S. presence in Lebanon and entrench Iranian influence among Lebanese Shi'a.

Despite these early gains, the Iranian revolution only briefly threatened Sunni dominance in the region. It did more to cast Shi'ism as a revolutionary anti-Western force at the center of the resurgent politics of Islam than as the vehicle for the empowerment of Shi'a communities. Revolutionary Iran failed to alter the balance of power between the Shi'a and Sunnis across the region and ultimately gave up trying to do so. By the end of the 1980s, with the exception of Hizballah in Lebanon, all other Iranian-backed Shi'a political drives for power in the Gulf, Afghanistan, and Pakistan had come to naught, while Iran's military drive to unseat Saddam Hussein's regime had ended in defeat. Sunni domination of the region had survived the challenge of the Iranian revolution.

## **The Sunni Backlash**

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The rise of Sunni consciousness and its sectarian posturing after the Iranian revolution was central to containing Khomeini's threat in the greater Middle East and beyond. Sunni identity served as the bulwark against the Islamist challenge that was then associated with Shi'a Iran and imbued ruling regimes with religious legitimacy. Since the 1980s, governments from Nigeria to Indonesia and Malaysia have relied on Sunni identity to draw a clear wedge between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, equating the former with "true" Islam—and their governments as its defenders—and branding the latter as obscurantist extremism. They dismissed Khomeini as Shi'a rather than an Islamic leader, and characterized their own Islamic opponents as Shi'a to re-

duce their appeal. In 1998 the government of Gen. Sani Abacha in Nigeria accused the Muslim Brotherhood leader, Shaykh Ibrahim al-Zak Zaki, of being a Shi'a before his trial for antigovernment activism. In Malaysia, the government has routinely arrested Islamic activists under the pretext that they are Shi'a, thus avoiding the appearance to its domestic audience of clamping down on Islamic activism while appearing to be protecting Sunnism from "nefarious anti-Sunni" activities.

In India and Pakistan, Sunni *ulama* (clerical leaders) took Khomeini head on, branding his vitriol against the House of Saud in the 1980s as *fitna* (illegitimate rebellion and sowing of disunity) against the Muslim community.<sup>7</sup> Khomeini's challenge to the Saudi regime was depicted as a Shi'a rebellion against Sunni authority, evoking the legacy of Shi'a rebellions against the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates in early Islamic history that had ensured Sunni domination of centers of religious and political power in the Muslim world. This mobilized much support for King Fahd ibn Abdulaziz's arrogation of the religiously and historically significant title of Protector of Holy Sites, Mecca and Medina (which are located in Saudi Arabia). As such, the Saudis became the defenders of Sunnism and the symbol of its resistance to Shi'a "usurpers." Saudi Arabia was motivated by the desire both to control its own Shi'a minority and to thwart Khomeini's challenge to the Islamic legitimacy of the kingdom. The Shi'a-Sunni struggles for the soul of Islam that had punctuated Islamic history since the advent of the faith were thus reenacted in the late twentieth century, with the Saudi monarchy assuming the role once played by Sunni caliphs ruling from Damascus and Baghdad.

In Pakistan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, where emboldened Shi'a communities threatened Sunni regimes, the response was both swifter and more violent. Rulers ranging from Zia in Pakistan to Saddam in Iraq not only emphasized the Sunni identity of their countries and regimes as a bulwark against Khomeini's appeal but also sanctioned the use of sectarian violence to put local Shi'a communities back in their place. To this effect, Saddam in 1980 began purges of government agencies, the military, and the Ba'th party, which combined with executions, assassinations, and mass killings that in 1991 alone took the lives of some 30,000 subdued Iraqi Shi'a.<sup>8</sup>

In Pakistan, the cycle of bombings and assassinations that resulted from Sunni-Shi'a clashes throughout the 1980s and the 1990s scarred both communities.<sup>9</sup> Some 900 incidents of street clashes and sectarian riots since 1989 have claimed more than 2,000 lives. Over five days in northwest Paki-

**Iraq will be the first Arab country to become openly Shi'a.**

stan in 1996, sectarian combatants used mortars, rocket launchers, and anti-aircraft missiles, killing about 200 people. Between January and May 1997,<sup>10</sup> Sunni militant groups assassinated 75 Shi'a community leaders in an attempt to remove the Shi'a systematically from positions of authority.<sup>11</sup> Until September 11, 2001, the Pakistani military actively supported Sunni militancy as a part of its regional policy in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Support for the militants continued after the attacks, only more circumspectly as Pakistan's military tried to protect its position in southern Afghanistan and Kashmir just as it sought to placate the international demand for ending jihadi activism. Azam Tariq, the leader of Sipah-i Sahabah Pakistan (Pakistan's Army of Companions of the Prophet), one of the most violent anti-Shi'a sectarian forces in the country with ties to the Taliban and Al Qaeda, was President Gen. Pervez Musharraf's most prominent Islamist ally until Tariq was assassinated in 2003.

Shi'a attempts to attain greater power in South Asia eventually failed. Sectarian forces tied to the Pakistani military and equipped with fatwas from Wahhabi ulama in Saudi Arabia and their allies in Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan engaged in systematic bombing of Shi'a mosques and assassination of Shi'a community leaders, government officials, and religious figures, especially in Pakistan throughout the 1990s. In the latest incident in March 2004, 43 Shi'a were killed in Quetta while commemorating Ashura on the same day as 143 Shi'a died in Baghdad and Karbala. The Taliban, whose ideas were shaped in seminaries that received funding from Saudi Arabia, reflected Wahhabi views; and trained Pakistani Sunni militants followed a similar policy in Afghanistan, massacring the Shi'a in Mazar-i Sharif in 1997 and in Bamiyan in 1998 and forcing thousands of others to migrate to Iran and Pakistan. After the Taliban captured Mazar-i Sharif in 1997, they declared that the Shi'a were not Muslims and not welcome. They gave the Shi'a the options of converting to Sunnism; emigrating to Iran; or, as was the fate of some 2,000, death.<sup>12</sup>

## **Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism**

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The Sunni assault on Shi'ism is directly supported by Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism, and the network of terror that Wahhabism has spawned, especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Wahhabism is a puritanical school of Sunnism that upholds a strident and narrow interpretation of Islam, viewing all those who do not subscribe to its views, and especially the Shi'a, as infidels. Since the 1970s, when Saudi Arabia benefited from the rise in the price of oil, Wahhabi religious leaders have exported their views of Islam by supporting various Islamic organizations and activities across the Muslim

world. Their influence became particularly prominent in South Asia as Saudi funding supported the Afghan resistance to Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, which produced the infrastructure for the network of Sunni militants that has been active in Taliban, Al Qaeda, and Pakistani jihadi groups.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam, whose madrasas have been the training ground for Al Qaeda, Taliban, and the rank and file of militant organizations in Pakistan and Kashmir, has become the main vehicle to disseminate anti-Shi'a Wahhabi views. Militantly anti-Shi'a sectarian militias in Pakistan such as the Sipah-i Sahabah and Lashkar-i Jhangvi (Jhangvi's Army) hail from Deobandi madrasas and maintain close ties with the Taliban and terrorist organizations such as Jaish-i Muhammad (Army of Muhammad) and Harakat ul-Mujahedin (Movement of Mujahedin) that are active in Kashmir and are responsible for acts of terror such as the murder of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. Sipah and Lashkar members trained in Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. Lashkar's founder, Riaz Basra, boasted of having been a close companion of Osama Bin Laden.<sup>13</sup> Ahmad Ramzi Yusuf, the mastermind behind the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, is alleged to have carried out the bombing of one of Shi'ism's holist shrines in Mashad, Iran, in 1994.<sup>14</sup>

Sunni militants in South Asia are products of the same training grounds in Afghanistan as Al Qaeda's Arab foot soldiers. Organizational as well as ideological ties spawned from the Wahhabi core bind the sectarian forces with the Sunni Arab terrorists. Anti-Shi'a sectarianism is an important dimension of the Taliban's and Al Qaeda's political objective, one that their war on the West has largely overshadowed. Pakistani Sunni, Taliban, and Al Qaeda combatants fought together in military campaigns in Afghanistan, most notably in the capture of Mazar-i Sharif and Bamiyan in 1997, which involved the wide-scale massacre of the Shi'a. Pakistani Sipah-i Sahabah fighters did most of the killing, nearly precipitating a war with Iran when they captured the Iranian consulate and killed 11 Iranian diplomats.<sup>15</sup> Sectarian Sunni fighters in Iraq will draw on the ideological and organizational resources of the broader network of Sunni militancy that developed over the past decade and has been ensconced in society and politics in the greater Middle East, impacting sectarian relations where those resources originate, in Afghanistan and South Asia.

**Militant Sunni forces are growing in prominence as the expression of Sunni frustration.**

Wahhabism emerged in the Arabian Peninsula in the eighteenth century and is today the dominant faith in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf littoral emirates. Its opprobrium for Shi'ism is as old as the school itself. Wahhabi armies invaded southern Iraq and desecrated the Shi'a holy shrine of Karbala in 1801. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, Wahhabi ulama issued fatwas declaring the Shi'a as *rafidis* (those who reject the truth of Islam), or infidels. Muslim Brotherhood activists in the Arab world and Deobandi ulama in India and Pakistan who are close to Wahhabi groups in Saudi Arabia have reiterated these opinions, justifying violence against the Shi'a. The Taliban

too echoed the same opinions, characterizing their massacre of the Shi'a in Mazar-i Sharif in 1997 as the "revenge of Truth."<sup>16</sup>

Wahhabi opposition to Shi'ism converged with Saudi Arabia's regional policy of containing Iran starting in 1980. For the next two decades, Riyadh and its Sunni clients characterized Khomeini's challenge to the House of Saud as a Shi'a assault on Sunnism. In this sectarian confrontation, Sunni loyalties rested with Riyadh.

Hence, entrenching anti-Shi'a sentiments and

reinforcing Sunni identity in the region became imperative for the kingdom. Riyadh supported Saddam's regime all the way up to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Even after the liberation of Kuwait, Riyadh was instrumental in convincing Washington to back away from its promises of support to the 1991 Shi'a uprising against Saddam's regime in southern Iraq and in persuading Washington to defend Sunni domination in Baghdad. In Lebanon, Saudi Arabia helped restore the Sunni position to the center, through the government of Rafiq Hariri, and has been strongly defending the Sunni establishment in Beirut ever since.

Elsewhere, Saudi Arabia pursued its strategy of containing Shi'ism by working closely with Wahhabi ulama to build a network of seminaries, mosques, educational institutions, preachers, activists, writers, journalists, and academics that would articulate and emphasize Sunni identity, push that identity throughout the greater Middle East in the direction of Wahhabism and militancy, draw a clear wedge between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, and eliminate Iran's ideological influence. As one observer remarked of the pattern of funding for militant Sunni madrasas in Pakistan in the 1980s, "If you look at where the most madrasas were constructed, you will realize that they form a wall blocking Iran off from Pakistan."<sup>17</sup>

Saudi Arabia's aim here is to stretch that Sunni wall from Pakistan north through Afghanistan and into Central Asia. Similarly, in Azerbaijan, Saudi

**Sunni militancy and Wahhabi activism pose the greatest danger to U.S. interests.**



funding of mosques and religious organizations and programs is strengthening Sunni consciousness in a society wherein sectarian identities were largely absent in the past and are now on the rise. The Saudi regime's support for Islamic activism throughout the 1980s and 1990s had distinctly Sunni sectarian overtones. The spread of radical Islam in Central Asia and the Caucasus in the 1990s did not come through Iran but through the Saudi policy of containing Iran; it was not so much an Islamic project as it was a Sunni one. As such, Sunni militancy across the region is not likely to remain impervious to change in the sectarian balance in Iraq.

Riyadh's investment in Sunni militancy did not raise much concern in the West in the 1980s and the 1990s, for during this period Iran and its brand of Shi'a militancy were viewed as the most dangerous face of Islam and the main threat to Western interests. The hostage crisis in Iran in 1979, the bombing of U.S. Marines and French military barracks in Lebanon in 1983, the taking of U.S. and European hostages in that country throughout the 1980s, and Iran's support for anti-Western causes and terrorism throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s focused Western attention on Iran and Shi'a militancy. The Shi'a were then associated with anti-Americanism, revolution, terrorism, hostage taking, and suicide bombing. The Shi'a political fervor that emanated from Tehran and the kind of violence that it perpetrated was seen as an extension of the faith's millenarian beliefs and celebration of martyrdom.

By comparison, Sunni Islamic activists appeared less threatening. The West viewed them as socially and politically conservative but lacking in religious doctrines that matched the Shi'a penchant for militancy. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the West was thus more tolerant of Sunni activism in general as well as the movement's spread into Afghanistan under the Taliban and across Central Asia.

After Khomeini's death in 1988, Shi'a militancy ceased to be the ideological force that animated Islamic activism. Instead, Sunni militancy assumed that role following the 1991 Gulf War that brought the United States into direct conflict with an Arab country and established a U.S. military presence in the region, particularly in Saudi Arabia in close proximity to Muslim holy sites Mecca and Medina. Determined to suppress the threat to Western interests apparently posed by the spread of Shi'ism following the Iranian revolution, the West was slow to recognize the change in the Islamic tide as well as the growing power of the Sunni militant network that, al-

**Shi'a revolutionary activism, on the other hand, is essentially a spent force.**

though initially established to contain Shi'a activism, had begun to turn its antipathy toward the West.

Although it took the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the prolific use of suicide bombing by Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Israel to alert the West to the threat posed by Sunni militancy, it has in fact been on the rise throughout the region for the past two decades, at least partially if not primarily as a response to the Shi'a activism that followed the Iranian revolution. At that time, Sunni militancy emerged to maintain the balance of power in favor of Sunnis in the region, but Saddam's fall has now radically changed that balance. The occupation of Iraq went hand in hand with a Shi'a cultural revival in that country. The celebration of *Arbaeen* (the commemoration of the 40th day after martyrdom of the Shi'a Imam Husayn [d. 680]) in Karbala in May 2003 by some two million Shi'a early on attested to the fact that Iraq was now a Shi'a country. The growing prominence of the Shi'a in Iraq, visible in the composition of the Iraqi Governing Council and later confirmed by the veto power that Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has attained over its proceedings, has only further underscored this sea change.

### **The Challenge of a Shi'a Iraq**

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Ever since the United States removed Saddam from power, the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani has consistently pressed the United States to embrace an electoral process that will ensure the Shi'a control of Iraq for the first time since the Sunni Ottoman Empire seized Baghdad in 1533. Although Iraq's Shi'a do not speak with one voice, Shi'a politics, culture, and religious values, more than those of Iraq's Sunni and Kurdish populations, will shape Iraq's future.

Iraq will be the first Arab country to become openly Shi'a. Of all Arab countries, Iraq is one of the most important—a claimant to the mantle of Arab leadership and the seat of the Abbasid Empire (750–1258), which established and embodied Sunni supremacy and brutally suppressed the Shi'a (many of whose main figures were killed by the Abbasids in and around Baghdad and are now buried in the shrines of Iraq). To pass from Sunni to Shi'a domination under the aegis of the United States has immense symbolic significance.

After the fall of the Abbasids, the land that constitutes modern Iraq changed hands among various invaders and Muslim imperial contenders and was for a while a province of the Persian Safavid Empire. In 1533, Ottoman armies defeated the Safavids to capture Baghdad and restore Sunni rule over the area. The Ottoman conquest was a markedly sectarian affair in that the Sunni Ottomans and Shi'a Safavids each claimed to represent the world of Islam.<sup>18</sup> Religious persecution therefore followed military victory. The Ot-

toman victory ushered in a lengthy period of political domination by Sunnis that continued all the way through the Sharifian monarchy (1921–1958) and the Arab nationalist and Ba'athist periods that followed. Sunni domination in this era too reflected the longer history of suppression of Shi'ism, curtailing its cultural expression and denying its followers political power and, in turn, rejecting Shi'ism's religious legitimacy.

The domination of Shi'a politics in Iraq today by the ulama means that Shi'a revival in the country will inevitably change the country's culture and the place of religion in it, which will then profoundly impact relations between the Shi'a and Sunnis within Iraq as well as in the region as a whole.<sup>19</sup> For instance, Shi'a law and theology are likely to define the extent to which Islam will play a role in Iraq's politics, potentially compelling Sunnis to live by Shi'a law. The implementation of Shi'a Islamic laws regarding family, taxes, inheritance, or commerce will be welcomed by the Shi'a and not by Sunnis, underscoring rather than erasing sectarian identities.

Based on the current distribution of power within Iraq's Governing Council as well as in the Shi'a community, there is speculation that an ayatollah may be the country's future president. Currently, the main contender is Ayatollah Abdulaziz al-Hakim, the head of one of the main Shi'a political organizations, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).<sup>20</sup> The prospect of an ayatollah ruling Iraq raises the specter of a Shi'a Islamic Republic in Iraq similar to the one in Iran; more importantly, however, are the implications of such an outcome for sectarian conflict. For the Sunnis of Iraq and those in its neighboring Arab countries, SCIRI and its al-Badr Brigade—a force of some 10,000 that was trained by Iran's Revolutionary Guards to fight the Saddam regime—look too much like Lebanese Shi'a militias, Amal and Hizballah, and prospects of their assumption of power evoke images of Lebanon's grueling civil war. The recent show of force by the more militant Army of the Mahdi militia of Muqtada al-Sadr has only reinforced these concerns. The car bomb that assassinated Iraqi Shi'a leader Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim and took the lives of another 125 Shi'a outside one of Shi'ism's holiest shrines in late August 2003, and the bombings in Karbala and Baghdad on March 2004, marked not only blows to Iraq's stability and security but also the opening salvos in a revived sectarian conflict with broader regional implications. The impact of these events will not be erased easily by the tactical alliance between the Shi'a and Sunnis in opposing U.S. occupation. The sectarian divide may be bridged to combat the United States, but it is likely to resurface after the occupation.

**The Shi'a revival in Iraq may well lead to other regime changes in the region.**

## Regional Implications

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The Shi'a cultural revival in Iraq has broad implications not only for the future political development of Iraq but also for future sectarian developments in the greater Middle East, tipping the balance of power in favor of the Shi'a. The cultural and religious ties that bind Shi'a populations from Lebanon to Pakistan are once again of political significance; after two decades of suppression at the hands of Sunni regimes, the Shi'a are again demanding greater rights and their place in the political arena. In Saudi Arabia, Shi'a political activism, brutally suppressed since 1979, is on the rise; and organizations such as the Saudi Hizballah, the Tajammu' al-Ulama al-Hijaz (The Hijazi Ulama Group), and al-Haraka al-Islahiyah (the Reform Movement) are demanding political and religious rights for the Shi'a from the monarchy.<sup>21</sup>

Organizational and religious ties between Shi'a seminaries in Iran and in Iraq are only the most evident link in the network of ayatollahs and their representatives, organizations, and seminaries stretching from Lucknow, India, to Zanzibar, Tanzania, to Dearborn, Michigan. The opening of Iraq and gradual changes in Iran will strengthen the linkages centered in Qum and Najaf, as the winds of change in the region promised by the campaign in Iraq more tightly connect disparate Shi'a communities and their institutions. The triumphal trip of Iran's President Mohammad Khatami to Lebanon shortly after the fall of Baghdad was designed to underscore the importance of these ties, which also became evident with the presence of some 100,000 Iranian pilgrims in Karbala for the early March Ashura commemoration. Also a clear signal of the growing prominence of Shi'ism throughout the Middle East after regime change in Iraq was the convention of Saudi ulama that Crown Prince Abdullah called in the summer of 2003 to search for common ground between the Wahhabi and Shi'a religious leaders in the kingdom. In the coming years, less encumbered by the rigid boundaries of nationalisms, ideologies, and authoritarian regimes, Shi'ism is likely to have the opportunity—more than ever before in recent history—to once again become a regional force.

## Implications for U.S. Regional Interests

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In militant Sunni circles, the Shi'a revival in Iraq is proof of "sinister" U.S. intentions toward Islam after the events of September 11, 2001—the grand conspiracy to weaken and subjugate the faith. To these circles, Washington has snatched Iraq from the hands of "true" Islam and delivered it to Shi'a rafidis. Sectarian feelings constitute an important dimen-

sion, and one to which the United States has not paid adequate attention, of the reaction in the Arab world and beyond to the U.S. occupation of Iraq, especially among the burgeoning militant Sunni forces that are growing in prominence as the expression of Sunni frustration with the decline in Sunni power.

Moreover, sectarianism's anti-Shi'a and anti-U.S. rhetoric is central to perceptions of U.S. policy in the Muslim world, especially in Arab countries where the impact of the U.S. presence in Iraq is more clearly felt. The Middle East historian, Michael Scott Doran, writes that Wahhabi ulama in Saudi Arabia continue to issue fatwas or give sermons denouncing Shi'a beliefs and practices as heresy but now tie the opprobrium for Shi'ism to anti-Americanism. The Shi'a are portrayed as a "fifth column for the enemies of true Islam. ... The danger of the [Shi'a] heretics to the region ... is not less than the danger of the Jews and Christians."<sup>22</sup>

The war in Iraq has been viewed as proof of "the strength of the bond between America and the [Shi'a] heretics."<sup>23</sup> The language of Wahhabi ulama in Saudi Arabia echoes the anti-Shi'a vitriol of the Taliban in Afghanistan and militant Sunni forces in Pakistan, as do threats to annihilate the Shi'a minority in the Saudi kingdom.

The Shi'a revival in Iraq also jeopardizes U.S. interests in Saudi Arabian stability. As Riyadh can no longer claim to be sustaining Sunni dominance in the Middle East, it is witnessing a decline in its religious legitimacy within the kingdom as well as across the region. Instead, Al Qaeda and the Iraqi resistance are now making that claim. The Saudi monarchy cannot easily posture as defender of the Sunni prerogative to power in the region without directly supporting forces that resist the U.S. role in Iraq. The Shi'a revival in Iraq, as it alters the balance of power between Sunnis and the Shi'a and fuels demands for Shi'a rights at the same time as it fuels Sunni frustration and activism, more than any attainment of democracy and prosperity, may well lead to other regime changes in the region.

The United States walks a thin line in dealing with the sectarian dimension of its occupation of Iraq and must be mindful that this issue extends far beyond Iraqi politics. Today, Sunni militancy and Wahhabi activism, not Shi'a revolutionary fervor, pose the greatest danger to U.S. interests. In places such as Azerbaijan, where there are both Shi'a and Sunnis, it is Sunni Islamism, not Shi'a, that mobilizes youth toward political activism. Today, Sunni militancy is an ascendant, violent, ideological force that is not only anti-Shi'a but also

**The U.S. cannot openly embrace the Shi'a revival without alienating many in the Arab world.**

virulently anti-American. From Bali to Baghdad, it is producing networks of activists that sustain the most dangerous forms of terrorism. Al Qaeda captures the ideological and political essence of Sunni militancy, but this movement extends far beyond Al Qaeda. Shi'a revolutionary activism, on the other hand, is essentially a spent force. Iran is currently a tired dictatorship teetering on the verge of collapse. The ideas emerging from modern-day Iran, similar to those that characterized the end of the Soviet era, do not support revolutionary fervor but rather demand liberal change.

**The Shi'a are more likely to react positively to democracy than the Sunnis.**

Sunni militancy has since inception been anti-American and has produced the most violent expressions of this position in the form of Al Qaeda. Today, as evidenced by the rhetoric of the Wahhabi ulama and militants such as al-Zarqawi, Sunni militancy is a two-pronged effort: to extricate U.S. influence from the greater Middle East and to restore Sunni dominance to it. These aims are interrelated for, just as the United States facilitated the empowerment of the Shi'a by dismantling the Sunni dictatorship in Iraq, only defeating the United States in Iraq can reverse the gains made by the Shi'a in that country and the region more broadly. In his letter al-Zarqawi referred to the Shi'a as "the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom." He added that, "We here [in Iraq] are entering a battle on two levels. One, evident and open, is with an attacking enemy and patent infidelity."<sup>24</sup> In his most recent audiotape, released amidst U.S. operations in Faluja and against Army of the Mahdi, al-Zarqawi reiterated his vitriol against Shi'ism with threats against U.S. forces.<sup>25</sup> The bombings in Karbala, Najaf, and other Shi'a holy sites make clear that Sunni militancy is designed both to combat the Shi'a revival and provoke a sectarian civil war in Iraq to confound U.S. plans for the country. It is for this reason that Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani parted with Muqtada al-Sadr's claim of Shi'a-Sunni unity in opposing the U.S. occupation to praise Army of the Mahdi's insurrection in southern Iraq as heroic and call the insurgents in Faluja terrorists.<sup>26</sup>

### **Policy Implications: Contending with Sectarianism**

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At face value, Shi'a populations in the Middle East and South Asia would appear to be the natural allies of the United States in the effort to contain Sunni militancy. Still, the United States cannot openly embrace the Shi'a revival without alienating many in the Arab world, especially those in the

more anti-Shi'a Wahhabi states of the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf such as Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, where the United States now has considerable strategic interests. Nor are the Shi'a ready to embrace the United States as their savior or ally. Powerful Shi'a forces in Iraq today, such as that of Muqtada al-Sadr, are aligning themselves against the United States. Washington's lack of relations with other important Shi'a forces in the region, such as the Islamic Republic in Iran and Hizballah in Lebanon, further complicates prospects for a U.S.-Shi'a nexus.

The sectarian struggle for power will not end in Iraq, and the United States cannot easily sidestep this ongoing conflict, given its long-standing alliance with Saudi Arabia and more recently its role in facilitating Shi'a empowerment in Iraq. Policymakers in Washington must take the sectarian struggle for power between the Shi'a and Sunnis seriously to avoid civil strife in Iraq and the rise of Sunni militancy as a new regional threat. Successful U.S. policy in Iraq and in the greater Middle East ultimately will have to be based on a strategy that incorporates the following elements:

- *Recognize that the Shi'a-Sunni balance of power is key to regional stability and U.S. regional interests.* The sectarian struggle for power will have the single greatest influence on the future of peace and stability from South Asia to the Levant—an area that ties Central Asia to the Caucasus to the Gulf, significantly impacting U.S. regional interests as well as U.S. efforts to promote democracy and economic growth. The changing balance of power between the Shi'a and Sunnis will be central to the political outcome not only in Iraq but also in Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, and Saudi Arabia. Developments in Iraq will likely only accentuate this trend in the coming years.

U.S. policy must go beyond the imperatives of the war on terrorism and the existing structure of alliances to reflect the Shi'a-Sunni dimension of regional politics. Accordingly, the United States must develop a broader policy framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of its relations with Iran and Lebanon to its interests in Iraq, the Gulf, and South Asia and harnesses the growing regional power of Shi'ism. Such a policy framework will bring coherence to U.S. policy toward Iraq and the greater Middle East and ensure regional stability at a time when the war in Iraq has disturbed the long-standing political balance in the region.

- *Avoid confrontation with Iraq's Shi'a and, most importantly, al-Sistani.* Al-Sistani's demand for direct elections risks further marginalizing Sunnis and compromising the future of secular government in Iraq. Nevertheless, alienating the Shi'a, especially their most prominent and moderate voice,

bears yet greater risk. As the most widely followed cleric, al-Sistani holds the key to stability in Shi'a communities in Iraq and elsewhere in the greater Middle East. To continue to have a moderating influence on the Shi'a, to keep al-Sadr and his anti-Americanism at bay, and to prevent the Shi'a from responding to provocations by Sunni militants, as happened in Quetta, Pakistan, after the Sunni militant attack on the Shi'a in early March 2004,<sup>27</sup> al-Sistani has to retain his political legitimacy. This means that al-Sistani must deliver on Shi'a demands for greater political power and not be seen as doing the bidding of the United States.

- *Recognize that Shi'a-dominated countries of Iran and Iraq are better positioned to achieve economic growth and democracy than their Sunni neighbors.* Iran and Iraq are more likely to achieve these objectives than neighboring Sunni countries (with the exception of Turkey). The dictatorship's hold in each has been broken, which has allowed for democratic possibilities in Iraq while civil society has moved past ideological politics in Iran. In both countries, Shi'ism no longer produces the kind of ideological politics that Sunnism continues to generate.

In Iraq, the Shi'a who have benefited from the fall of Saddam's regime and are likely to inherit the political order from the U.S. authority are more likely to react positively to democracy than the Sunnis whose politics are increasingly defined by their rejection of the U.S.-imposed order in Iraq. Moreover, the most thorough and lively debates about the place of Islam in the modern world including its relation to democracy and economic growth are taking place among Shi'a Muslims (with the exception of Turkey), not Sunnis. The Shi'a countries, whose politics are no longer dominated by authoritarian ideologies (Islamism in Iran and Arab nationalism in Iraq), are likely to emerge as the first to embrace democracy and integration into the world economy and also to play a key role in bringing about change in the Muslim world. For all the current fear of emerging Shi'a dominance in Iraq among U.S. policymakers, the reality that must be recognized is that this process will produce a convergence of interests between the United States and Shi'ism sooner than it will between the United States and Sunni countries. U.S. policymakers should look to expedite positive changes in the Shi'a countries as a part of the faith's greater regional prominence.

As Shi'ism grows in prominence in Iraq as well as across the greater Middle East, Sunni militancy spearheaded by Al Qaeda, Iraqi resistance, Hamas, and the rump of the Taliban is also on the rise. It has the potential to transform into an even greater force if the Wahhabi oppositional movement in Saudi Arabia succeeds in changing the political landscape of that country. Simultaneously at war with the United States and Shi'ism, Sunni militancy



will embroil the region in sectarian violence as it seeks to reject both the U.S. order and changes that the growing prominence of Shi'ism will entail.

The challenge of Sunni militancy coupled with the promise for change brought about by the reemergence of Shi'a political influence in the greater Middle East necessitates new U.S. thinking and policy toward Islam and the challenge of Islamic activism. This new U.S. perspective must take stock of the changing balance of power between the Shi'a and Sunnis in the greater Middle East as well as the evolving relationship among the United States, Wahhabism, and Shi'ism. For the past two decades, U.S. policy has largely been shaped by a desire to contain the challenge of Islamist politics to ruling secular regimes and, more recently, the goal of promoting pluralism and democracy. The current imperative of containing Sunni militancy, however, more than any other perceived imperative, should guide the United States in striking the right balance between its policies in Iraq and its larger interests in the region.

**U.S. regional interests are ineluctably tied to the Shi'a-Sunni struggles for power.**

## Notes

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4. Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1987).
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6. Former Pakistani foreign minister Agha Shahi, interview with author, Lahore, 1989.
7. See Muhammad Manzur Nu'mani, *Irani Inqilab: Imam Khumayni awr Shi'yyat* (Iranian Revolution: Imam Khomeini and Shi'ism) (Lahore: Imran Academy, nd).
8. Joyce N. Wiley, *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi'as* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1992).
9. S. V. R. Nasr, "The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan: The Changing Role of Islamism and the Ulama in Society and Politics," *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 1 (January 2000): 139–180.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 141–142.

11. *Economist*, May 10, 1997, p. 34.
12. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 62–64, 74; “Afghanistan: The Massacre in Mazar-i Sharif,” *Human Rights Watch Report* 10, no. 7 (November 1998).
13. Nasr, “Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan,” pp. 139–180.
14. Mary Ann Weaver, “Children of Jihad,” *New Yorker*, June 12, 1995, p. 46.
15. Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 74.
16. Some of these opinions have been available to the public in English at the Saudi Embassy in Washington, D.C.
17. *Herald* (Karachi), September 1992, p. 34.
18. On the history of Shi’ism in Iraq, see Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
19. On the current state of Shi’a politics in Iraq, see Yitzhak Nakash, “The Shi’ites and the Future of Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 4 (July/August 2003): 17–26; Juan Cole, “The United States and Shi’ite Religious Factions in Post-Ba’thist Iraq,” *Middle East Journal* 57, no. 4 (Autumn 2003): 543–566.
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23. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
24. Available at [www.cpa-iraq.org/transcripts/20040212\\_full.html](http://www.cpa-iraq.org/transcripts/20040212_full.html) (accessed April 21, 2004).
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