

“Reverberations from the 2003 invasion of Iraq may last for decades. But an inexorable spread of Sunni-Shiite conflict is only the worst case, and frankly it is not very likely.”

The Shiite “Threat” Revisited

AUGUSTUS RICHARD NORTON

In the early 1980s, when the shock of the revolution in Iran was still reverberating in North American and European capitals, there was a worry that Iran’s revolution would spread like a cancer in the Persian Gulf. The shah of Iran, top-

RELIGION AND STATE

Third in a series

pled in January 1979, had been viewed as a surrogate and bulwark of American security in the Gulf. After the shah’s fall, concerned

US officials would unfold maps showing swaths of green ink marking the countries threatened by Iran. Special note was taken of places where local Shiite communities—presumed allies of Iran—were located. In fact, the fears proved misplaced. While Iran was able to make inroads in Lebanon, especially thanks to the Israeli invasion of 1982, each of the other Gulf governments survived intact.

Now, a quarter century later, the old maps are unfolding once again, and talk of a “Shiite crescent” has resumed. Jordan’s King Abdullah, whose kingdom is now host to 700,000 Iraqi refugees, was the first to sound the call in December 2004, but the tune has been picked up by other Arab leaders, the Western press, and some in the Bush administration. Just as before, however, there is much exaggeration in the warnings. None of the Gulf governments is at real risk of being toppled by a Shiite uprising.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has worked strenuously to construct an alliance of “moderate” Sunni Muslim Arab states, particularly Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, to counter the “Shiite threat.” These governments are motivated by a combination of justified apprehension about the consequences of the disastrous Iraq War, and

by opportunism. Aside from the questionable moderation of the governments in Cairo, Amman, and Riyadh, which neither promote free political life in their own societies nor fully embrace US goals in the region, the wisdom of playing the sectarian card is dubious because it deepens anti-American sentiments among both Shiites and Sunnis.

Sunni Muslims are well aware that the Baghdad government, which enjoys massive support from the Americans, has been implicated in death squad activities and ethnic cleansing operations targeting Sunni Iraqis. Meanwhile, people across the Middle East—in Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and certainly in Iraq—see the United States trying to play both sides of the sectarian divide and become only more suspicious of Washington’s motives.

“I THOUGHT THEY WERE ALL MUSLIMS”

The basic problem facing the United States stems from its invasion of Iraq. By crushing the regime led by Saddam Hussein, the Americans gave a huge geopolitical gift to Iran, which is now the most powerful opponent of US hegemony in the Gulf. As American forces struggle to bring order to Iraq, the keenest concern is that the community they have empowered, the Iraqi Shiites, will spurn US influence and ally with Iran. This fear was expressed candidly in late October by US Ambassador Ryan Crocker in Baghdad. He was voicing concern about the strength of Moktada al-Sadr, whose *Jaysh al-Mahdi* (army of the divinely guided one) is growing in power and support, particularly among the large Shiite underclass. Sadr has been a fierce opponent of the US occupation, and now challenges other Shiite groups in Iraq that are more favorably disposed to cooperating with the Americans.

Ambassador Crocker worried aloud about “Hezbollah-ization.” He was referring to the Shiite

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Islamists' building of social networks through self-help groups, businesses, service agencies, and community offices, just as Hezbollah ("party of God") had done in Lebanon. Indeed, most of the successful Islamist groups in today's Middle East have built networks of interlinked units that not only help their constituents but also reflect values such as empowerment, self-help, and resistance to oppression. In addition, like Lebanon's Hezbollah, Sadr's Mahdi Army has benefited from Iran's largesse.

It is no exaggeration to say that US leaders were completely surprised by some of the challenges that have emerged from the Iraq War. In a remarkable encounter in January 2003, two months before the Anglo-American invasion, members of the Iraqi opposition were meeting in the Oval Office with President George W. Bush. Kanan Makiya, an Iraqi-American academic, began speaking about Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, but Bush interrupted him, puzzled: "I thought they were all Muslims."

Bush would not make the same mistake today. Nonetheless, considerable confusion about the two major sects of Islam persists. Senior US Homeland Security officials, for instance, have been documented identifying Al Qaeda as a Shiite group; it is in fact dogmatically anti-Shiite. In Capitol Hill hearings, congressmen are on record using "Palestinian" as a synonym for Shiite, though there are almost no Palestinian Shiites.

THE HEIRS OF ALI

In all, there are thought to be about 1.3 billion Muslims in the world, and as many as 15 percent of them are members of some branch of Shiism. There are three major Shiite sects, but they all share a special regard for the House of the Prophet Muhammad and the belief that the Prophet's spiritual guidance was transmitted by divine ordination through his descendents, especially through his son-in-law and cousin Ali. (The Sunnis believed caliphs did not need to be descended from the Prophet.) For Shiite Muslims, the holy day Ashura commemorates the martyrdom of one Imam Hussein—the grandson of the Prophet and son of Ali—whose demise in the seventh century, near the city of Karbala in modern-day Iraq, has become a lodestone of modern identity for Shiites, much as the crucifixion of Jesus is central to Christian identity.

The two smaller Shiite sects are the Ismailis, found in small numbers in Syria and Iran, and the Zaydis, who account for a quarter of Yemen's population of 22 million. In the thirteenth century the Ismailis were known as the "Assassins," but today they are respected, prosperous, and deeply involved in education and ecumenical aesthetic pursuits. Their leader is known as the Aga Khan; they number only a couple of million adherents worldwide. (The Druze, an offshoot of the Ismailis, number less than a million and are found in Israel, Syria, and Lebanon. The Alawites, who rule Syria and comprise 11 percent of its population, are often considered to be a Shiite faction as well.) The Zaydis, who ruled Yemen until 1962, embrace a firm moral code in this life but they reject the mystical religious beliefs usually associated with Shiism.

Almost all Shiites believe in the eventual return of an imam who will lead the community up to the day of judgment. The largest Shiite sect, the Twelvers, traces the descendents of Muhammad to the Twelfth Imam, who disappeared when he went into occulta-

tion more than a millennium ago. In the absence of the Hidden Imam, these believers seek guidance from respected and specially educated clerics,

such as Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah of Lebanon, or Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Najaf, Iraq—by far the world's most influential Shiite cleric. In contrast, religious authority in the majority Sunni sect is much more diffuse.

While Iraq and Iran may come quickly to mind when the topic of Shiism is introduced, Shiites are found in significant numbers in six other Middle Eastern countries, as well as outside the region. By far, the largest concentration of Shiites is in Iran, where they comprise 90 percent of the country's 70 million inhabitants; followed by Iraq, where 60 percent of the population of 27 million are Shiites. There are about 1.3 million in Lebanon. Not counting guest workers, about 2 million Shiite citizens are distributed among Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Except for Bahrain, where they account for 70 percent of the half-million citizens (another 250,000 expatriate workers live on the island), in the other Gulf states the Shiites represent only a small fraction of the total population (ranging from 5 to 8 percent in Saudi Arabia to 25 percent in Kuwait). In fact, some of the largest popula-

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tions of Shiites are found outside the Gulf and the Middle East. There are locally significant populations in Indonesia, perhaps 6 million in Azerbaijan, approximately 10 million in India, and at least 30 million in Pakistan.

THE FLUIDITY OF IDENTITY

Popular authors such as the historian Bernard Lewis promote the view that sectarian identity is a permanent, historically rooted quality that lies at the heart of Middle Eastern politics. Lewis has also popularized the view that a longing for the lost glory of the past lies at the heart of Muslim hostility to the West and to the United States in particular. These can be very self-satisfying perspectives for Western readers because they offer a simple formula for understanding Middle East politics, and they absolve external powers from responsibility for political problems in the region.

A mere century or so ago, sectarian affiliation was neither a particularly important marker of faith nor an important basis for political action.

In recent decades, before the present fever of sectarianism infected the region, there were actually several initiatives toward *taqarub* (approchement)

between Sunnis and Shiites. While these ecumenical impulses were not successful, they hint that assuming an unbridgeable gulf between the sects is a contemporary prejudice.

Although the differentiation of the Shiite and Sunni sects dates to the earliest days of Islam, the political salience of sectarian identity has varied dramatically over the course of history, not to mention in recent decades. For instance, in Iraq and Lebanon well into the 1960s, Shiite Muslims were politically mobilized very successfully by the Communist party. Arab Sunnis and Shiites alike were widely attracted to the ideology of Nasserism in the 1950s and 1960s. In Bahrain, where the sparks of Sunni-Shiite tension have ignited several recent clashes, the Shiites were fervent admirers of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser just a few decades ago.

By the 1970s in the Arab world, heretofore dominant secular-nationalist ideologies began to be energetically challenged by Sunni Islamist groups, which offered both a critique of the secular state and a call for activism informed by a renewal of piety. In some instances, these groups were overtly

hostile to Shiism. Yet it was the self-styled "Islamic Revolution" in predominantly Shiite Iran that offered the most profound critique of the secular state in the Middle East.

If Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his co-revolutionaries were disappointed by the Sunnis' reluctance to embrace their revolution and its idiosyncratic religio-political structure, the exemplar of a state informed by Islam was still powerful. In Egypt, a few Sunnis were so inspired by the revolution that they converted to Shiism, but their very small numbers underline the limited appeal of Iran's model to Sunnis. The most enthusiastic Sunni embrace of the "Islamic Revolution" came in Lebanon, where Iran founded Hezbollah in the early 1980s, taking advantage of the opportunity created by Israel's 1982 invasion and the long Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, which ended only in 2000.

There were a few half-hearted attempts to imitate the Iranian example. In Bahrain, an amateurish coup was thwarted in 1981. In the same period, Kuwait suffered several acts of terrorism emanating from its Shiite community. Bursts of militancy erupted

among minority Shiites

in Saudi Arabia's Eastern province, but these did not last long. Since then, particularly in the past decade, the Saudi government has taken some steps to lift controls on the public practice of Shiism and has afforded the Shiite community modest levels of representation at the national level. Considering that the dominant Saudi religious group is the puritan Wahhabis, who consider Shiism to be anathema, it was a milestone when Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah received Sadr, the Iraqi Shiite cleric, near the holy city of Mecca.

In Iraq, the Baathist regime turned the screws of repression on Shiites and, in 1980, opportunistically launched what would be an eight-year war to contain the Iranian revolution (with clear support from the United States as well as Sunni-dominated countries, including Saudi Arabia and Kuwait). When that war finally ended in 1988 it was Iran that tasted defeat. Iraq's immense Shiite population, which comprised much of the rank and file in the army, had proved deaf to Iran's clarion.

Nonetheless, hints of the sectarian passions that would later brutally affect Iraqi politics were visible in the spring of 1991. Heeding President George H.

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W. Bush's call for an uprising to topple Hussein, whose army had just been expelled from Kuwait, many of Iraq's Shiite Muslims joined an intifada against the regime. Iraq's army unleashed a furious and pitiless response.

Iraqi Shiites begged at the Kuwait border for sanctuary, where the US military stood watch. American soldiers might as well have been spectators in Rome's Coliseum. The supplicants were rebuffed and turned back to their wretched fates. No state in the region lifted a finger to help the victims, except Iran, and Iran did nothing to stanch the bloodshed. An estimated 100,000 Iraqi Shiites were killed. Incredibly, this horrendous moment made so little impression on American war planners in 2003 that the invading US forces did not anticipate the lingering suspicion and contempt that often greeted them among the Iraqi Shiites.

Academic experts in some cases only added to the public's ignorance by pandering to or promoting stereotypes. Johns Hopkins University's Fouad Ajami, who was then testifying before Congress on Islamic radicalism, offered the now famous aphorism: "The Sunnis are homicidal and the Shiites are suicidal." Suicide, he said, "is definitely a Shiite phenomenon because of the ethic of martyrdom and martyrology which is exalted in the Shiite experience and which knows no equivalent in Sunni life." As quotidian examples from Palestine and Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and a handful of other locales demonstrate, Ajami's insight does not stand up to the evidence. Sunni Muslims have proved adept at transforming themselves into human bombs at great cost to innocent victims, not least on September 11, 2001.

Religious sect, just as any other form of ascriptive identity, such as race or ethnicity, may be used to rationalize a horrifying variety of outrages against those who are different. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the late and savage leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, certainly understood the divisive potential of sectarian affinity. In 2004 he wrote: "If we succeed in dragging [the Shiites] into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger." Before he died at US hands, Zarqawi ordered numerous suicide attacks against Shiite targets, thereby helping to push Iraq's Sunnis and Shiites into a civil war.

THE CASE OF LEBANON

Lebanon already has fought a civil war along sectarian lines, a war that lasted 15 years, ending only in 1990. Today that country is locked in a

tense stalemate that Lebanese fear might end with the eruption of a new civil war. Sectarian passions are inflamed for several reasons: the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005; the 34-day war with Israel in 2006 that brought ruin to Lebanon's economy and destruction to many parts of the country; and the manipulations and encouragement of numerous outside players, including the United States, a variety of European states, Iran, Syria, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and some other Middle Eastern nations. Lebanon has also been cursed with a weak central government and a set of self-interested sectarian leaders who often treat the state as a feeding trough.

The 2006 war started when Hezbollah's paramilitary wing provoked Israel by capturing two Israeli soldiers from Israeli territory, thereby breaking the "rules of the game" that defined the security system in southern Lebanon. The United States encouraged and supported Israel's summer war to disable if not destroy Iran-supported Hezbollah. Israel failed and Hezbollah emerged from the war more or less intact, but surrounded by ruins in southern Lebanon and in the Beirut suburbs where many Shiite supporters of Hezbollah live. The US-backed government in Beirut is now in a fierce test of wills with an opposition that includes not only Shiites, but also many Christians and a number of other Lebanese supporting Hezbollah.

While the wider Arab world celebrated Hezbollah's "victory" in the war, closer to home many questioned the party's motives and the war's consequences, which included an estimated \$4 billion to \$5 billion in reconstruction costs and a heavy toll in lives and personal property.

Politically, the war divided Lebanon in two. One Lebanon is a coalition of mainly Sunnis, Druze, and Christians who came together after Hariri's assassination. This group, demanding the truth about Hariri's killers and a withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, mobilized as many as a million protesters in downtown Beirut. After winning the parliamentary elections in May 2005, this coalition was in power during the 2006 war. It accuses Hezbollah of instigating the disastrous war with Israel, and of being an agent of Syria and Iran.

The second Lebanon is also a coalition, consisting mostly of the southern Lebanese Shiite community and large elements of the Christian community—especially the followers of the magnetic Maronite Christian politician and former

general Michel Aoun. The “Aounists” and Shiites share a profound sense of victimization in the face of what they see as a corrupt and unresponsive political system.

The slow pace of government payments to those who lost their homes thanks to Israel’s relentless bombing is widely viewed as an example of official ineffectiveness, much in contrast to Hezbollah’s speedy distribution of \$12,000 payments to each family made homeless by the war. The opposition alliance has proved remarkably durable. Most basically, it is trying to expand its share of power at the expense of the traditional Christian elite and the Sunni Muslims. Indeed, it is the threat of a decline in Sunni prerogatives and power in Lebanon that has prompted Saudi Arabia to become a key backer of the government.

In Western circles, Hezbollah and the Aounists are perceived as trying to protect Syria by stifling efforts to authorize an international tribunal to try those accused of responsibility for the killing of Hariri and his associates. (The Syrian regime is widely suspected of having directed the assassination.) There is some truth in the charge, since a weakening of Syria would no doubt weaken its friends in Lebanon.

BACK FROM THE BRINK

The fall of 2006 was marked by an escalation of tension and demands, including an ultimatum by Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah on October 31 demanding that the government either agree to a national unity government or face widespread demonstrations and other forms of organized pressure such as blockades on the route to the national airport. In conjunction with these demands, all five Shiite members of the government resigned in November. The opposition then noted that, under a 1989 agreement, every major sect must be represented in government. President Emile Lahoud asserted that the government was no longer legitimate (vis-à-vis the question of an international tribune, notably).

To block a vote on the tribunal, Speaker Nabih Berri refused to convene parliament. But in an end-run around the opposition, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora requested action by the United Nations Security Council to mandate an international tribunal. While Siniora’s request was of doubtful

legality, given Lahoud’s refusal to agree to it, the tribunal was approved by the Security Council in May 2007. The tribunal now is a sword of Damocles that swings over the heads of the opposition.

Meanwhile, seven prominent figures have been assassinated since 2005. All of the victims are opponents of Syrian influence in Lebanon; the most recent was killed in a car bombing in September 2007. The result is a climate of fear among pro-government politicians. The political stakes were raised on December 1, 2006, when opposition supporters erected 1,000 tents in Beirut’s Riyadh al-Sulh and Martyr’s Square, literally at the feet of the government, and announced that they would not budge until the government succumbed. Massive numbers of people assembled on the first day of the demonstration, immobilizing the commercial heart of Beirut.

As tensions continued to rise, fighting erupted in January 2007 between Sunni gunmen and Shiite protesters. Four people were killed. But Hezbollah at this point stepped back from the brink. Appearing on television, Nasrallah declared that “anyone using a firearm against a Lebanese brother is working for Israel.” The situation calmed. It helped that the Lebanese army during this period performed with both neutrality and firmness. Since early 2007 neither side has budged much politically from its position.

While the stalemate has been enormously costly to Lebanon’s economy, and while the continuing risk of a new civil war is obvious, the demonstrations are now restrained and usually peaceful. Initially tens of thousands of opposition supporters occupied the tents, but today the tents often stand empty, quiet canvas testaments to the frozen political situation. In all, 10 deaths may be attributed to the demonstrations, which have been under way for a year.

At the same time, however, extremist Sunni groups, some inspired by Al Qaeda, have proliferated in Lebanon. These groups are generally hostile to Shiites. In May 2007, clashes broke out in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon. It took the lightly equipped Lebanese army four months to defeat the Sunni group, at the cost of more than 160 dead soldiers and the displacement of more than 34,000 civilians. The urgency of the crisis was further demonstrated in June, when six soldiers from Colombia and Spain

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serving in the UN mission were killed in the south, following calls by Al Qaeda's number two leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, for Muslims to confront the "Crusaders," meaning the international soldiers. The attacks led to quiet security contacts between UN officials and Hezbollah, prompting Zawahiri to pointedly criticize Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's rivals fear that its ultimate aim is to transform Lebanon into an Islamic state and that the party is only feigning attachment to Lebanon as a pluralist society. But Nasrallah and his colleagues have claimed frequently that the conditions for establishing a state based on Islamic rule will probably never exist in Lebanon, since such a state could only be established on the basis of broad consent, which is highly unlikely. Whatever dreams Hezbollah might entertain, the conclusion that there will never be widespread support for an Islamic state is a sound one.

A LESS FRACTIOUS FUTURE?

In his commendably lucid book, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Vali Nasr emphasizes—in my view overstates—enduring Sunni-Shiite tensions in history. But his argument largely turns on the importance of the mayhem in Iraq as a historical watershed. In the past, social and political conventions kept sectarian distrust and enmity hidden from view. With Iraqi society in chaos and the fate of the state uncertain, the veneers are stripped away, exposing the deep-grained realities. But even if this holds for Iraq, which some respected scholars doubt, it is deceptive to generalize from the Iraqi case. The invasion destroyed the already dry-rotted institutions of a dictatorship, imposed an incompetent occupation on Iraq, empowered a disenfranchised majority, and did so in country where civil society had been obliterated for years. Fortunately, this would be a hard case to replicate.

Even so, the invasion and its aftermath effectively lent validation to Al Qaeda's ideology, and have inspired some anti-Shiite Sunnis to open Al Qaeda "franchises" in places far removed from Iraq. There have been other dubious "accomplishments" as a result of the war. When Hussein was hanged at the end of 2006, he won posthumous fame as a Sunni hero. An Egyptian weekly published a commemorative edition that included a poster depicting the late dictator and captioned: "He lived heroically and died a man."

These developments have had variant impacts in societies where Sunnis and Shiites live side by

side. In prosperous Kuwait, the Shiites participate in government, and the Shiite community is defined by several distinct orientations, ranging from secularism and quietism to radicalism. Some Kuwaiti Shiites follow the late and moderate Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi; others support the Iranian regime; still others adhere to Arab religious authorities, such as Iraq's Sistani. While relations among the sects in Kuwait are generally good, the Salafis (Sunnis who favor a return to an earlier, "purer" form of Islam) are usually hostile to the Shiites. In March 2007, a Kuwaiti Sunni cleric named Uthman al-Khamis announced plans to launch "Tibah" (disclosure), a new satellite channel to warn Muslims of "the Shiite threat."

In Bahrain, where Shiites comprise 70 percent of the population but have suffered considerable discrimination by the government, Lebanon's Hezbollah is extremely popular. Bahrain, though tiny in population, is strategically important to the United States. The Fifth Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain and many US Navy vessels are replenished and repaired there. A growing number of Bahrainis are expressing opposition to the American role in their country, and one can expect this opposition to grow. In fact, Hezbollah's al-Manar satellite station is the most popular source of news in the monarchy. Bahrain is the poorest of the small Arab Gulf states, and many of its disadvantaged Shiites are a rapt audience for Nasrallah. In Manama, the capital, at least three stores sell a variety of Hezbollah literature, DVDs, tee shirts, and decorations. The Bahraini Shiites, moreover, boast a proud and long history of political and economic protests. The minority regime is firmly in place in Bahrain, but much will depend on how wisely it responds to inevitable calls for reform.

Throughout the Middle East, reverberations from the 2003 invasion of Iraq may last for decades. But an inexorable spread of Sunni-Shiite conflict is only the worst case, and frankly it is not very likely. One hopes imaginative political leaders will pursue enlightened and conciliatory policies. A spirit of conciliation is implied, for instance, in a recent observation by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia: "If sectarianism deepens and spreads, its destructive effect will reflect on everyone. It will foster division, polarization, and isolationism. Our region will drown in a conflict whose outcome cannot be foreseen." Equally important, if leaders in North America, Europe, and Asia are able to escape the conceptual prisons they have built for themselves, a less fractious future is possible. ■