

الاسلام في العصر الحديث



ISLAM

in the Contemporary World

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ISLAM IN IRAQ'S PUBLIC LIFE

Daniel Pipes

The Iran-Iraq war, coming as it did on the heels of the Iranian revolution, caused many people to wonder whether the Shiite religious revival inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini had anything to do with the conflict. It is fairly clear now from reports on the war that its causes lie in a dispute over the very valuable Shatt al-Arab waterway, not in any religious difference. But not to be discounted are the historic Shiite-Sunni and Arab-Kurd rivalries that will figure prominently in the political future of Iraq, if not in the current war. Dr. Pipes describes the nature of these rivalries, their impact on Iraq's history and their possible influence on the future of this nation.

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Iraq is perhaps the most fragile nation in the Middle East; its peoples show few of the characteristics requisite for developing a single nationality. Instead, they are divided into a multitude of distinct communities, all but a few of which are defined along religious lines. In the six decades since Iraq emerged as a political entity in 1920, these divisions have prevented the country from attaining a unified or integrated public life. Like many new states, Iraq faces the acute problem of forging disparate groups into a nation; unlike most other countries with this problem, however (such as many in Africa), Iraq's divisions are primarily religious rather than ethnic, tribal, linguistic or regional — although these too play a role. Thus, this essay stresses the place of Islam in Iraqi national development during the 20th century.

Islam in Iraqi public life today reflects age old patterns of Middle East religion. Monotheism, the unique quality of Middle East spiritual life, centers on the concept of a single jealous God. He

demands exclusive adherence and worship in a specified way. The major religions of Western Eurasia — Judaism, Christianity, Islam — and innumerable minor ones share this basis. Over the millennia, more and more religions, sects and subsects appeared, each with its own rituals and customs, each one prepared to fight others who differed. Most wars had a religious justification and few aspects of life did not have reference to God's commands. Faith gained a major significance in defining political communities among monotheistic peoples.

No where is this clearer than in the homeland of monotheism, the Middle East. Still today, in the age of nationalism (with its territorial, not spiritual concerns), this region divides profoundly by religion. Lebanon represents the quintessence of this tendency: it contains some eighteen communities and virtually all politics in the country is conducted along communal lines. In other parts of the Fertile Crescent, in Israel, Syria and Iraq, religion has a nearly comparable importance.

Iraq's population in 1980 has been estimated at about twelve million persons. Arabic speakers constitute some 80% of the population and Kurds the rest, except for about 100,000 Turkmans speaking a Turkic dialect. Although Iraq is always portrayed as an Arab state, it contains a compact and powerful minority speaking a different language. (Kurdish, an Indo-European tongue closely related to Persian, is utterly different from Arabic.)

The religious map of Iraq is yet more fragmented. Muslims make up all but 5% of the population. Non-Muslims, about whom little will be said here (because they play so small a role in the public life of Iraq) number about 600,000, most of them Christians. Virtually all Christians belong to Eastern rites or uniate churches, including 250,000 Chaldeans, 100,000 Syrian Catholics and smaller numbers of Syrian Jacobites, Nestorians, and Armenians. Yazidis, a quasi-Muslim people probably of Kurdish extraction (often known as "devil-worshippers") living at the far north of the country, number about 40,000. Sabaens, another religious group with mixed religious practice, in this case predominantly Christian, live in southern Iraq and number as many as 30,000. Jews are restricted to Baghdad; heirs to 2,500 years of tradition in Iraq, they are old and emaciated, numbering only a few hundred, soon to become extinct.

Iraqi Muslims, 95% of the population, divide into three large groups: Shi'i Arab, Sunni Arab and Sunni Kurd. Roughly speaking, each predominates in a third of the country. Taking Baghdad as the central point, Shi'i Arabs live to the south, Sunni Arabs to the northwest, and

Kurds to the northeast.

Shi'is constitute slightly more than half of Iraq's population. They inhabit the alluvial plains and marshes of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Sunni Arabs live in the upper reaches of these rivers and in the deserts; they make up about one-fifth of the Iraqi population. Kurds, also about one-fifth of the population live in the mountainous regions where most of Iraq's oil lies. Other Kurds, perhaps numbering eight million persons, live in Iran, Turkey, Syria and the Soviet Union. Numerous attempts at Kurdish independence have failed in all these countries, partly because few Kurds have modern skills, living in remote and isolated regions as most of them do, and partly because they took up nationalism too late, after the Middle East had already been divided into modern countries.

Islam's two sectarian branches, Shi'ism and Kharijism, both developed in Iraq in the later 7th century A.D., just decades after the inception of Islam itself. The sects emerged from conflicts over the leadership of the Muslim community: those who later came to be known as Sunnis supported as caliph Mu'awiya b. Abi Sufyan, a distant relative of the Prophet Muhammad; Shi'is advocated 'Ali b. Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad; and Kharijis, who began as extreme supporters of 'Ali, became disillusioned with him and turned into radical egalitarians.

Three political principles lay behind these movements: while Shi'is insisted on purity of lineage and Kharijis on purity of faith, Sunnis compromised and included elements of both in their selection of a leader. Over the centuries, Sunnism proved more flexible and resilient than the alternatives. Kharijism nearly died out (the Ibadi branch alone remains extant and it is found almost only in Oman) and Shi'ism was reduced to minority status in all but a handful of Muslim regions. Most Shi'is today live either in Iran or Iraq; and though Iran's are far more numerous, Iraq remains central to Shi'i religious and cultural life due to the holy shrines there (most especially those in Karbala and Najaf) and the schools nearby.

Shi'i Islam subsequently split into a great many subsects; by far the most populous of them is the Twelver (Arabic: Ithna'ashari) branch, Shi'is who believe that twelve imams followed Muhammad until the last of them disappeared in 965 A.D. For centuries thereafter, Twelver Shi'is were among the most quiescent and inward-looking Muslims, those who generally most avoided contact with the state. This attitude changed in 1500 when the Safavids, espousing Twelver Shi'ism, conquered Iran and imposed Twelver doctrines on the

country. Safavid power raised many questions for Twelvers concerning their relations to the state: can lay rule by a Twelver be legitimate, what authority should the religious men have in politics, how does one deal with an unjust king? These questions have not been answered — as the Khomeini revolution and its aftermath in Iran demonstrate.

Twelvers in Iraq watched the Safavids with interest and concern but they hardly ever acted with similar purpose. Instead, just fourteen years after the Safavids came to power, they fell under control of the Ottoman empire. For four centuries, until World War I, Iraq remained under Ottoman dominion; at times this meant real subjection to Istanbul, at others considerable ~~real~~ local autonomy.

Early in the Ottoman period, Sunni Arabs, neither as numerous as the Shi'is nor as martial as the Kurds, emerged as the leading actors in the public life of Iraq. Iraq was a further outpost of the Ottoman Empire; to control it and to help fight off the Safavids, the Sunni Turks relied on the Iraqi people closest to them geographically, those least influenced by Iran, and those sharing their sect, the Sunni Arabs. Persistent efforts by the Iranians to tear Iraq from Ottoman control made this local source of support crucially important. Relative to the other Muslim groups of Iraq, Sunni Arabs flourished under Ottoman rule, acquiring a solid grip on the government and the army. Once organized, they had both the means and the ambition to run the region; and this they have been doing, virtually without interruption, ever since.

Besides Ottoman favor, two other factors contributed to Sunni predominance. First, they are urbanites; except for Basra in the far south, Sunni Arabs predominate in every major Iraqi city. As city-dwellers, they were well placed to gain skills and contacts useful for politics. They knew foreign languages and became literate, amassed wealth, and gained prestigious positions. Shi'is, though far more numerous, could not compete with Sunnis in skills or in gaining favor with the Ottomans. The same thing held true later, under British control; Sunni Arabs went off to European schools and acquired modern skills much more commonly than did the Shi'is or Kurds. Second, the bonds that Sunni Arabs share with Shi'is and Kurds may contribute to their mediating status: like Shi'is, they speak Arabic; like Kurds, they are Sunnis. By linking the other two Muslim groups, Sunni Arabs gain ties to both which have translated into political power.

Sunni Arab control of Iraq persisted beyond the Ottoman period until the present time. After the collapse of Ottoman power in World

War I, the British imposed a mandate on Iraq. When they met violent Iraqi resistance, the British authorities installed a king, Faisal I, in 1921. Full independence followed in 1932. The monarchy was never very secure but it lasted until Faisal II was bloodily overthrown in 1958. For ten years, unstable republican governments frequently replaced each other; then, in 1968 the more steady rule of Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Husain began.

Despite these changes in the political structure — mandate, kingdom, republics — Sunni Arabs remain in charge. Coming as it does in a country deeply split by religious and ethnic loyalties, this dominance has profound implications for all aspects of public life in Iraq. It has always been a fertile source of instability and envy; this remains true today.

Sunni Arab dominance implies the exclusion of Shi'is and Kurds from power. With limited roles in the central government and the army, absent from most of the cities, and economically disadvantaged, they have less power than either their numbers or official ideology would suggest. Recently, however, both Shi'is and Kurds have indicated that they will no longer accept Sunni Arab control. The Kurds have frequently revolted against the central government during the last generation; more recently, the Shi'is too have shown signs of restlessness, especially since 1978, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini emerged from political obscurity to spearhead the Iranian people against the shah's government.

The Iranian revolution had an electrifying effect on Iraqi Shi'is. Although Khomeini repeatedly stressed the universal import of his ideology for all Muslims and in the process de-emphasized his own Shi'i adherence, his message resonated most strongly among Shi'is. This was especially so in Iraq, where the sectarian split so permeates public life. Ayatollah Khomeini's fifteen year sojourn in southern Iraq at Najaf, the Shi'i sanctuary town, also amplified his impact in that area. He knows Iraqi Shi'is and their predicament first hand and has no trouble finding the right words to encourage or to incite them against the Ba'th regime. Also, Khomeini addresses himself largely to the poor and the politically oppressed, two qualities which accurately describe Iraq's Shi'is.

Despite Khomeini's massive appeal among them, Shi'is in Iraq are unlikely to replicate the Iranian revolution in any form. The Iranian situation had many unique qualities — not the least of which being the personal characters of its two central protagonists; but most important was the independence of the religious establishment there.

To an extent unparalleled in other Muslim countries, Iranian *mullahs* could resist the government because they had financial freedom. Religious leaders and mosques elsewhere are paid for out of taxes, money collected and controlled by the government; as a result, politicians exert great authority over the policies of religious leaders. For example, Anwar as-Sadat had no trouble winning religious sanction for his war against Israel in 1973 and four years later he easily got approval from the religious establishment for his moves toward peace (though non-official religious groups protested vehemently).

In contrast, Iranian *mullahs* have long enjoyed virtual autonomy from the government; they receive funds directly from individual believers. As the shah cracked down on dissent and opposition activity, only *mullahs* were left to organize resistance. As other associations faded, the mosque network emerged as the one structured form of opposition to the government. This was one important reason for the highly religious tone of the Iranian revolution.

There appears to be little basis for comparable Shi'i opposition in Iraq, where the religious establishment resembles Egypt's much more than Iran's. Shi'is lack organization and independence and pose no real threat to the Iraqi government. They can grumble and riot, perhaps even cause a government to fall, but they cannot mount a sustained opposition to challenge the state. This would change if the Shi'is ever organized effectively to resist the central government; but for the foreseeable future, they have no answer to the Ba'thist ideology propounded by the government.

Ba'thism, the official ideology of the state since 1968, is particularly well suited to the needs of Sunni Arabs in Iraq. Its stress on secular pan-Arabism has two virtues for them. First, secularism serves the needs of any rulers of Iraq by de-emphasizing sectarian differences within the country. Only when Iraqis devote less attention to religious bonds will they find room for strong allegiance to their state. Secularism also defuses the importance of Sunni Arab preponderance in the government of Iraq; if religion is irrelevant to politics, who cares that Iraqis of the Sunni persuasion are in charge?

Second, pan-Arabism serves Sunni interests in its claim that Iraq is part of great Arab nation stretching as far as Morocco. Pan-Arabist ideology disdains boundaries currently in effect between Arab states, calling them arbitrary and meaningless; it aims to unite the entire Arab world into a single nation far more powerful than its small parts. As nearly all Arabs outside Iraq are Sunnis, Arab nationalism implies

annexing Iraq to a much larger entity within which Sunnis vastly outnumber Shi'is. This clearly holds appeal to Iraq's Sunni Arab leaders, if not to the Shi'is and Kurds.

For these two reasons, Shi'i Arabs resist Ba'thist ideology. They wish to maintain the religious basis of their communal ties; they dislike the prospect of submergence into a vast sea of Sunni Arabs. Ba'thism implies the continued exclusion of Shi'is from political power in Iraq. (Ironically, in Syria it has the opposite purpose serving as the basis of 'Alawi Shi'i power over Sunni Arabs.) A more integrated government cannot be established until the principles of pan-Arabism have been muted or eliminated from the Iraqi state.

The Islamic revival, so celebrated in other Muslim countries during the late 1970's, hardly affected Iraq. The term "Islamic revival" refers most usefully to the increased tendency of Muslims to undertake political action in the name of Islam rather than some other ideology, say nationalism or socialism. Its manifestations in Iraq have been few and usually limited to expressions of Sunni-Shi'i differences. Shi'is caused civil disturbances several times during the 1970's but nothing major occurred until Ayatollah Khomeini came to power. Since then, they have rioted more frequently and with greater ferocity. The Ba'th regime, frightened by Khomeini's charismatic popularity, cracked down severely on the rioters, executed a leading Shi'i imam, and expelled many Iranian Shi'is back to their home country. In a mood of conciliation, Saddam Husain has also allowed pictures of himself praying in mosques to be distributed to the national press.

What role did Islam play in the outbreak of war between Iraq and Iran in September 1980? Many analysts interpreted this as part of an age-old conflict between Sunni and Shi'i, Arab and Persian, Semite and Aryan. Sectarian differences may have added to the general animosity between the two governments, but far more important was the fact that the Ba'thists espoused a diluted version of Islam while the Iranian revolutionaries were inspired by Islamic fervor.

The notion that Iraq went to war out of fear of Khomeini's influence over Iraqi Shi'is is not convincing. If Saddam Husain, President of Iraq, genuinely feared a Shi'i uprising, he would avoid engaging Iran in war and killing its Shi'i soldiers. Further, the war was launched from the south, the most thoroughly Shi'i region of Iraq. Nor would the Iraqi air force have bombed Iranian civilians if this were the key consideration. Even if the Iraqi invasion were intended to eliminate Khomeini's regime, the government that undertook it could not have been too very afraid of its Shi'i populace.

(Arab-Persian differences may also have played a role, but not one great enough to provoke a war. As for the Semite-Aryan explanation, the less said the better; these are specious terms not useful in any political analysis.)

More important than either religion or language was a mundane conflict over border details along the Shatt al-'Arab waterway, confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This dispute dates back only to the 1920's; it erupted in 1980 because the Iraqis perceived a unique opportunity at that time to regain river rights they had signed away, under duress, in 1975. In short, Islam played only a minor role in the outbreak of hostilities.

When non-Muslims threaten, Islam consolidates Muslim peoples by bringing Islamic bonds to the fore. The Afghan rebellion against a Soviet sponsored government demonstrates this, as do Muslim rebellions in the Philippines and Thailand against non-Muslim central governments. In Iran this sentiment had a leading role in galvanizing popular sentiment against the shah. Although a Muslim, the shah was characterized by Khomeini as an American puppet and this made him fair game.

But Islam plays a different role in Iraq. Here, as in few other countries (North Yemen; also Bahrain and Lebanon) where Sunnis and Shi'i are both numerous, Islam divides Muslims rather than binds them together. Other aspects of Islam have had limited importance in Iraq. The country has not spawned leading Islamic modernist thinkers nor has it witnessed major movements reasserting traditional Islamic ways of life; and its resistance to British rule between 1920 and 1932 did not depend on Islamic leaders or organizations. Islam has influenced national life in Iraq primarily through its role segmenting the country.

Each of Iraq's major Muslim groups looks outside the country for moral and material support. Shi'is, especially since the Khomeini revolution, look to Iran; Kurds dream of combining with their scattered brethren into a nation; and Sunni Arabs hope to blend Iraq into a pan-Arab nation. None of the three groups, not even the Sunni Arabs in control, accept Iraq's boundaries as presently drawn. In times of crisis, these differences are accentuated, as each community looks to its outside constituency.

Iraqi leaders will not succeed in establishing internal equilibrium until religious and ethnic divisions are reduced. Substituting Shi'i rule for that of Sunni Arabs will not help; that only will make the Sunni Arab population bitter. Either an impartial ideology must be

developed allowing participation in public life in proportion to communal numbers (as in Lebanon) or else without regard to religious and ethnic background (as in the industrial democracies).

Until that day, Islam adds to the divisions in Iraqi public life. Those divisions make it impossible for the government to rule by consensus — instead, they must rely on force. This means that the military must play a major role in politics; and since the army has long been a Sunni preserve, rule by force implies rule by Sunni Arabs. Iraq is a new country, young in years, even if ancient in history; its political discourse, institutions and social bonds are yet undeveloped. For Iraq to become stable religious ties must either be withdrawn from public life or allowed to balance each other; then political integration and participation will follow.

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