The Shi'is and the Future of Iraq

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Brief Analysis

The prospect of American military action in Iraq has raised concerns that dismantling the Ba'ath regime will weaken the state and spur the defection of its Shi'i majority under the influence of Iran. Yet, much of the pessimism surrounding this assessment obscures the historical role that the Shi'i community has played in supporting the Iraqi state, not to mention the vital interest it has in preserving the country's territorial integrity. If war in Iraq leads to a more representative government that is willing to address Shi'i political aspirations, the likely result would be stability and the establishment of a more moderate religious leadership quite different from that seen in Iran.

The Shi'i Stake in Iraq

With shrines throughout the country and religious centers at Najaf and Karbala, Iraq has long been a locus of Shi'i learning and history. Yet, Shi'is did not constitute the majority of Iraq's indigenous population until the beginning of the nineteenth century. As nomadic Arab tribes abandoned their itinerant lifestyle in favor of agriculture, a large number of them became Shi'is. They did not attain political power, however. Since the creation of modern Iraq in 1921, the country's Sunni minority has wielded disproportionate influence over the Shi'i majority (which constitutes some 65 percent of the population) and the Kurdish minority. Sunni dominance has been bolstered by both the preponderance of Sunni governments in the Arab world and by the West, which until recently viewed Saddam Husayn's regime as a bulwark against the influence of revolutionary Shi'a.

Although Iraqi Shi'is had long been politically marginalized, sectarian confrontation did not become salient until the 1970s, when conflict emerged between the Sunni-dominated Ba'ath Party and the Shi'i Islamic Dawa Party. Despite the apparent influence of Iran's Islamic Revolution, however, Iraqi Shi'is harbored no aspirations to replicate the political theology of the Islamic Republic. The vitality of the Dawa Party was the product of Shi'i frustration with the exclusivity of state politics rather than any desire to follow the Iranian model. The bulk of Dawa's supporters were inhabitants of Baghdad slums and university students who had become disillusioned with the Iraqi Communist Party's failure to bring about political change.

Differences between Iraqi and Iranian Shi'is increased during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and the Shi'i uprising that followed the Gulf War in 1991. In the former case, Iraqi Shi'is constituted the majority of the Iraqi infantry and fought against their Iranian co-religionists despite Saddam's systematic repression. In the latter case, Iraqi ayatollahs failed to exploit the Shi'i rebellion, offering little in the way of guidance, much less open advocacy for the formation of a separatist Islamic government. Historically, the vast majority of Iraqi Shi'is have rejected calls to implement a political system favoring the rule of the Islamic jurist (velayet y-faqih), instead choosing to reaffirm their commitment to Iraqi nationalism.

Iraqi Shi'is also have a vested interest in preserving the country's territorial integrity. If Iraq were divided into separate statelets following a war, the Shi'is would likely lose Baghdad (where they constitute nearly half the population), the shrine cities of Kazamin and Samara, and any share in the revenues from northern oil wells. Given that they already compose the core of the country's middle class and secular intelligentsia, the Shi'is would much

prefer to seek power within a unified postwar Iraq. Moreover, the states that would emerge from a divided Iraq would be too weak to influence regional affairs, whereas a united Iraq might allow Iraqi Shi'is to become a strong regional voice.

Possibilities for a Post-Saddam Iraq

The Iraqi nationalism long favored by the Shi'i majority would likely prevail over a revitalized pan-Arab ideology as the foundation for a post-Saddam Iraq. Building on the political thought of literary ideologues such as Ali al-Sharqi, the country could well develop a nationalist ideology grounded in both the Arab and tribal character of Iraqi society. The Iraqi military would be pivotal in this transition; once purged of its pro-Saddam elements, the army could be transformed into a symbol of national unity with a specific mission closely tied to the aims of the new state.

Under such conditions, the emergence of an influential Shi'i presence in the new Iraqi government would probably not cause internecine strife. Moreover, the Ba'ath would be unlikely to resurrect themselves as a vociferous political force. Although the United States would probably engage in some level of "de-Ba'athification," Washington would also strive to avoid alienating Iraqi Sunnis, primarily by maintaining the technocratic elements of the Ba'ath system and by mitigating any threat of Shi'i reprisals.

The most positive scenario would be the destruction of the Ba'ath regime and its replacement by a pluralistic state in which the Shi'i majority can gain access to power and the Kurds can enjoy a degree of autonomy. For its part, Washington should encourage Iraqis to adopt a representative system based on a written constitution, with parliamentary seats distributed proportionally among the country's ethnic and religious groups. In lieu of a single national leader, a triumvirate representing Iraq's major constituencies (e.g., a Shi'i president, a Sunni prime minister, and a Kurdish parliamentary Speaker) could share interim political power.

Toward an Arab Alternative

Should political conditions in post-Saddam Iraq allow for the revitalization of Iraqi Shi'i clerical training schools, a reinvigorated Iraqi Shi'a based in Najaf could rival Qom as a center of influence in the Shi'i world. Historically, Shi'a has been a somewhat laissez faire sect, emphasizing competitiveness rather than conformity in its ideology. The rise of an alternative power center in Iraq could therefore encourage the defection of dissident clerics in Iran. In fact, if Najaf were to produce moderate clerics who became well integrated with the new Iraqi state, the positive repercussions would likely be felt throughout the Middle East. A moderate Najaf would present an alternative to the ideology of Hizballah spiritual leader Shaykh Mohamed Hussein Fadlallah and other extremist elements. Similarly, Iraqi Shi'a could function as an important counterweight to the predominant radical force in the region, Sunni wahhabism, which is as vitriolic toward Shi'a as it is toward the United States.

Washington can and should help to create a post-Saddam Iraq in which Shi'is can prosper. Iraq has many resources that could facilitate this process and ease the political transition: oil reserves, a tradition of market economics, a talented bureaucracy, and a strong agricultural sector. Should the United States repeat its post-Gulf War failure to address Shi'i aspirations, opposition to U.S. efforts will grow.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Evan Langenhahn.

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