



America's Shi'ite dilemma: whose Iraq is it?

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Publisher's Highlight: "Between accepting an Islamic Iraq at peace with itself or a secular Iraq facing sectarian civil war, which would you choose? "

When America went to war to liberate Iraq from the cruel hand of Saddam Hussein, its professed goal was a secular Iraq in which democratic principles such as the rule of law, separation of church (or mosque) and state, and civilian control of the military prevailed. The Coalition Provisional Authority tried to enshrine these concepts permanently in the Transitional Administrative Law, or TAL. A considerable amount of political support went to self-professed secular-speaking exiles, even though the factions and their leaders were always described as Sunni or Shi'ite, Arab or Kurd. When the old regime was cast aside, these factions demanded their "fair" share of power which, they agreed, should fall, democratically speaking, to the 60+ percent of the population that was Shi'ite Arab, 20 percent to the Kurds (who are mostly Sunni but outspokenly secular in outlook), and 20 percent to the Sunni Arabs, with the various Turkmen and Christian elements getting token representation.

Since the war's end, avowedly Islamist groups have emerged with different and mostly anti-secular perspectives. Some joined the US-appointed Governing Council and interim government led by Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, a secular Shi'ite Arab. Having cooperated with the US in opposing Saddam, Iraq's more virulent Shi'ite Islamists and their primary benefactor, Iran, believed they were entitled to represent the Shi'ite community, as if it were one community with one vision and voice. Other disgruntled Shi'ites morphed into violent anti-American, anti-foreign, and anti-secular factions, and threatened to destroy the social fabric of Iraq. A third element receded into a political void, happy that the Americans had removed Saddam but unsure of the future, frightened of the violence, and preferring the traditional apolitical approach identified with Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and the hawsa (clerical leaders) of Najaf.

Washington has struggled to sort out the component parts of Iraq's Shi'ite world. Some in the Bush administration, with little knowledge of the intricacies and history of Iraqi politics, have tried to threaten and cajole Shi'ite leaders into collaboration. US policy appears to have flowed from their assumption that Iraq's Shi'ites will vote solidly Shi'ite and, being led by an Iranian-born cleric, will demand an Islamic government similar to that in the Islamic Republic and eagerly accommodate to Iran's needs and wishes.

The picture, of course, is much more complicated. After all, this is Iraq. There is no singular Shi'ite vision. Iraq's Shi'ites are Arab, Muslim and Iraqi nationalists, and most probably prefer a government that is both secular and Islamic. Even those who are not religious in lifestyle would have difficulty opposing sharia as part of constitutional law. Four visions, not one, run through the Iraqi Shi'ite world:

- The Supreme Council for the Liberation of Iraq and the Dawa party: Both spent long years in Iranian exile, and

joined with Kurdish and Arab nationalist factions in the 1990s in accepting American aid to topple Saddam. Members have served in post-Saddam governments chosen by the US. Their leaders reluctantly accept secular rule, demand sharia law, and have long-term ambitions to see Iraq as a religiously-guided state similar to Iran.

- The Jihadist Shi'ite fringe: Muqtada al-Sadr began expanding control of a radical movement created by his father, the martyred Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, in the slums of Baghdad and in southern Iraq. His Mahdi army demanded total withdrawal of US forces, creation of a caliph-type state, and imposition of strict Islamic law, which he allegedly enforced during his takeover of Najaf and Kufah. After weeks of negotiating and fighting, the Allawi government was able to marginalize Muqtada, but only after Ayatollah Sistani interceded.
- The relative moderates: Sistani, who represents the apolitical (but not non-political) and traditional voice of Shi'ite Iraq, believes Islam must have a role in defining and shaping Iraq but opposes a role for clerics in government. He demands fair, transparent elections and a constitution written by Iraqis that incorporates the principle of majority rule but not a minority (read non-Shi'ite) right to veto the will of the majority. Once grateful for the protection afforded Najaf and his retinue by US forces during the war, he opposes American efforts to shape the democracy debate and impose a constitution not written by Iraqis.
- Secular exiles with an eye on the clerics: Iraq's post-Saddam politics are dominated by the power struggle between Iraqi National Congress head Ahmad Chalabi, once the popular choice in Washington to lead the new Iraq, and Iyad Allawi, prime minister and head of the Iraqi National Accord who received CIA support in exile. Both talk about democracy and human rights but seem to acknowledge that Iraq is a dangerous place where power must be taken, and not given. Chalabi's efforts to acquire a popular support base have failed. Once an avowed secularist, he now looks to the Shi'ite world and Iran to back him. Allawi is pro-American and preaches democratic values but he, too, looks to Shi'ite clerical backing as he tries to replace terrorist-based insurgencies--Shi'ite and Sunni--with an inclusive politics based on negotiation, co-optation, and reconstruction reward.

American policymakers will face some difficult choices in the months ahead. Washington will have to distinguish between Shi'ites who worked with the US and want religious-based governance, Shi'ites who reject all things American yet prefer a non-clerical government, and Shi'ites--religious and secular--who are growing increasingly resentful of the US and may see Iraq's survival dependent on an unorthodox, possibly authoritarian style of democracy. The election scheduled for January will not resolve these issues and in fact, will probably complicate them.

There is no way to determine the "correct" outcome in Iraq. Will democratic institutions and practices bring to power anti-American, anti-secular, anti-democratic forces? Probably, and it may be a conclusion we will have to adjust to and live with. If it comes to a choice between accepting an Islamic Iraq at peace with itself or a secular Iraq facing the prospect of sectarian civil war, which would you choose?

Bitterlemons-international.org is an internet forum for an array of world perspectives on the Middle East and its specific concerns. It aspires to engender greater understanding about the Middle East region and open a new common space for world thinkers and political leaders to present their viewpoints and initiatives on the region. Editors Ghassan Khatib and Yossi Alpher can be reached at ghassan@bitterlemons-international.org and yossi@bitterlemons-international.org, respectively.

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