

## A new sectarian threat in the Middle East?

**Joost Hiltermann**

Joost Hiltermann is deputy programme director for the Middle East and North Africa at the International Crisis Group.

### **Abstract**

*A Shiite resurgence in Iraq has generated a region-wide Sunni backlash, raising fears of an emerging sectarian rift that is colouring and aggravating local conflicts. After discussing the schism's origins, manifestations and implications, the author concludes that the primary battle in the region is not between Sunnis and Shiites but between the United States and Iran. A US–Iranian rapprochement would do much to reduce sectarian tensions, while the most effective long-term response to sectarianism itself will likely come from systemic restraints that exist in the form of countervailing loyalties that prevent any single allegiance, such as religious adherence, from becoming paramount.*

: : : : :

### **A growing sectarian rift?**

Much has been made of new and dangerous Sunni–Shiite divisions in the Middle East, a virulent political resurgence of this ancient schism in Islam. It threatens to undermine an atrophying state system that was built on feeble national identities and has been dangerously weakened by the illegitimacy of prolonged autocratic rule. The Shiite ascendance in post-invasion Iraq is seen as having emboldened Shiite populations throughout the region in a Shiite “revival” that feeds on centuries of discrimination and suppression of culture and religious rituals. This has generated a Sunni backlash and is prompting fears of instability in Arab lands (for example Shiite majorities ruling Iraq and seeking power in Bahrain) and actual separatism in the case of the Shiite population of Saudi Arabia’s oil-rich Eastern Province.

While undoubtedly there has been an upsurge in rhetoric about such a rift, and while there have been acts of horrendous sectarian violence in Iraq, recent developments do not suggest an unbridgeable gulf. The rise of Shia Islam as a predominant identity in Iraq and in other countries where Shiites constitute a major portion of the population may be real, but it is moderated constantly and profoundly by rival sources of identity and loyalty. Nation, ethnicity, tribe, clan and family all remain identity markers at least as powerful as religious affiliation. In situations characterized by chaos and uncertainty (as in today's Iraq), where the state has lost a position once dominant in all aspects of society, people's identity has become just as fragmented as the sources of power and violence themselves, and religion is only one of several entities competing for people's allegiance.

Instead, the more significant conflict in the Middle East is between a "Shiite" power professing to be something else – Iran – on one side, and the United States and its disparate band of friends (both Israel and "Sunni" Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan) on the other. An intense rivalry between the United States and Iran for predominance is reshaping alliances and defining, or redefining, conflicts both old and new. Witness the lurch towards civil war in Lebanon, the Hamas "self-coup" in Gaza and the violent battle for power in Iraq.

Portraying this struggle between a global and a regional superpower in sectarian terms serves the interests of political actors hoping to outpace more scrupulous competitors, as well as those of autocratic regimes seeking to win popularity contests in lieu of free elections, and thereby perpetuate themselves in power. Thus political tactics are fuelling the current sectarian rhetoric, which, if not stemmed, could become a self-fulfilling prophecy and create political divisions where previously only social, cultural and religious differences existed.

This means that sectarian-driven outrages (the targeted killing of Shiites and Yazidis in Iraq, for example) and inflammatory rhetoric (employed by the late commander of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, a host of Salafi clerics and even regional leaders) should be publicly condemned for the bigotry they represent and the danger they pose. More importantly, a lessening of tensions between the United States and Iran would remove one of the *raisons d'être* for sectarian rhetoric and thereby help dampen a dangerous trend. Yet while an improvement in US–Iranian relations is urgently needed, the most effective long-term solution to a growing sectarian rift in the Middle East most likely lies in an environment that engenders countervailing loyalties and prevents any single one, such as religious adherence, from becoming paramount.

## Antecedents

The past three years have seen an alarming rise in sectarian violence in Iraq, matched by a growing sectarian discourse. Some Sunnis can be heard referring to Shiites as *rawafedh* ("rejectionists", i.e. people who reject the claims of those who trace the prophet's lineage through Omar and claim descent from Ali), while some Shiites have called Sunnis *Umawiyin* (*Umayyads*, or descendants of the dynasty that

consolidated power over the Islamic world following Ali's murder), or Wahhabis or *takfiris*.<sup>1</sup> Sunni insurgent groups such as Al Qaeda in Iraq are killing Shiites (and others they deem apostates),<sup>2</sup> while Shiite militias are murdering Sunnis. Both often take the name appearing on the victim's identity card as proof of that person's religious affiliation.<sup>3</sup> Just as disturbing, escalating sectarianism in Iraq has found echoes in the wider region, opening a fault line that had hitherto remained largely submerged.<sup>4</sup>

What are the sources of this new sectarianism? If Saudi Arabia is the place where "the Message [of Islam] began" in the seventh century, Iraq was the scene of the events that tore the new religion apart shortly after its birth and triggered subsequent conflicts between the two major branches that later emerged. Descendants of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima and her husband Ali claim that he and their sons were wrongfully deprived of the prophet's mantle in favour of a rival dynasty, the Umayyads, founded by Mu'awiya, who replaced Ali as the fourth caliph. Ali and later his son Hussein were killed in what today is Iraq. Since that time, the leitmotifs of Shia Islam have been exclusion, injustice and martyrdom, and in Iraq's history these have always had a powerful resonance.

Despite this traumatic beginning, Sunnis and Shiites have largely lived together in peace, in part because most Shiites have accepted Sunni rule in anticipation of the return of the twelfth, "hidden" imam, the Mahdi (essentially the Shiite Messiah). In turn, Sunni rulers have tolerated them. If unrest occurred, it was often because political actors used religious fervour to stir up support for their cause.<sup>5</sup> Perceptions mattered, and endured. Thus the rivalry between the Safavid and Ottoman empires was often cast in sectarian terms.

- 1 Wahhabis are followers of Muhammad Ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, a Saudi preacher in the mid-eighteenth century. *Takfiris* are Muslims who declare other Muslims to be unbelievers. Some of the Salafi jihadis, for example, have declared Shiites to be infidels.
- 2 Witness the car-bomb attacks on two Yazidi villages in August 2007, in which hundreds of people were killed. Yazidis are predominantly Kurds who adhere to a pre-Islamic religion that detractors, such as Al Qaeda in Iraq, refer to as devil-worship.
- 3 These observations are based on research conducted in Iraq by, separately, the Brookings Institution and the International Crisis Group. See Ashraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner, *Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq*, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, October 2006, available at [http://brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/20061018\\_DisplacementinIraq\\_Khalidi-Tanner.pdf](http://brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/20061018_DisplacementinIraq_Khalidi-Tanner.pdf) (last visited 22 September 2007); and International Crisis Group, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, Brussels, February 2006, available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org> (last visited 22 September 2007). Many Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq are secular, but this distinction has faded in the new, polarized climate, just as the secular political middle has evaporated. The fact of pervasive Sunni-Shiite intermarriage, especially among the secular elites, has similarly lost its relevance as sectarian-difference-based conflicts now course through whole communities, neighbourhoods and even families. These events are causing problems for persons whose names are now considered to represent one or another branch of Islam. To cite a simple example, persons named Ali (in Iraq) are assumed to be Shiites, while persons named Omar are assumed to be Sunnis – this though there are many Sunni Alis and many Shiite Omars.
- 4 Some of the arguments in this paper derive their inspiration from an article by Adnan Abu Odeh, a former senior advisor to King Hussein and King Abdullah II of Jordan: "Don't make too much of Iran", *Globe and Mail*, 24 July 2006.
- 5 See International Crisis Group, *Understanding Islamism*, Brussels, March 2005, pp. 19–24, available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org> (last visited 22 September 2007). Quoted in Faiza Saleh Ambah, "In legacy of a revered martyr, Saudi Shiites find sustenance", *Washington Post*, 31 January 2007. This seems to be the exception; in most cases Shiites have acquiesced in Sunni rule, oppressive or not.

To understand the most recent example of unrest, we should look at the Islamic revolution in Iran in the late 1970s and the Shiite resurgence it helped promote. The demise of the Shah's hated regime empowered Shiite communities throughout the region, although the new regime's declared aim of exporting the Islamic revolution failed as Iraq dampened Iran's Islamist fervour in eight years of unremitting slaughter. Contrary to commonly expressed fears, the Shiite communities in the fragile Gulf states – while encouraged to press their own claims for fair representation within their respective countries – never embraced the Khomeini brand of politicized Shia Islam that advocated the *wilayet al-faqih*, the rule of the jurispudent.

However, the Iranian clerics' success in gaining power in a country as wealthy and important as Iran provided a model and an inspiration for Islamists worldwide, both Shiite and Sunni. It injected new vigour, for example, into the (Sunni) Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, the Shiite resurgence provoked a backlash among Sunnis, giving rise to radical forms of Sunni Islam (often groups split off from the Brotherhood), especially a strengthening of Salafism that saw itself as the direct adversary of Shia Islam. Its adherents found a proving ground in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan and emerged emboldened, with an agenda of violent jihad aimed at repressive regimes at home. At the time, Saudi Arabia heavily invested in the Sunni revival, funding study centres, distributing literature and constructing mosques throughout the Muslim world.<sup>6</sup> The violent return of the "Afghan Arabs" it had encouraged to fight against the Soviets was an unintended consequence of this effort, a dangerous and embarrassing form of "blowback".

At first there was no direct conflict between the two strands of radical Islam. This was so because Iran had no significant Sunni population,<sup>7</sup> its Islamic revolution was effectively contained by Iraq and the Arab states, and the sectarianism represented by the revolution was made less significant, in Arab eyes, by the ethnic-national conflict that underlay the war between Persian Iran and Arab Iraq.<sup>8</sup> The main enemy, in other words, was not the Shiite hordes but the *Persian* hordes threatening Iraq's Arab lands in a border dispute between neighbours, even if the young Iranian soldiers' "human wave" attacks were

6 The Saudis promoted their state religion, Wahhabism, for political purposes in order to counter the Islamic revolution in Iran. That this peculiarly Saudi brand of Islam was a powerful mobilizing factor should be no surprise, given its own political, rather than religious, origins. See, for example, Faiza Saleh Ambah, "Saudi writer recasts Kingdom's history", *Washington Post*, 4 February 2007, citing the writings of Saudi scholar Khaled al-Dakhil. Rather than saving the region "from declining faith, polytheism and widespread idolatry ... [Muhammad Ibn Abd-al-] Wahhab's goal was to create a strong State to make up for the disintegrating tribal system", finding in Muhammad bin Saud, the founder of the Saudi dynasty, a "willing sponsor". The rise of the new ideology was accompanied by ostracism (*takfir* or "excommunication") of all those who broke away from or refused to join the new Saudi state.

7 Iran has several Sunni Muslim groups, including Arabs, Baluchis and, especially, Kurds. The latter's conflict with the central state, however, has been dominated by national, not religious, concerns.

8 Needless to say, we have to be very careful with such categories. We should not neglect the multinational character of Iran and Iraq, both of which have significant Turkic and Kurdish communities, in addition to other, smaller, minorities. Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, for example, is not a "Persian" but an Azeri.

spurred by a Shiite Islamic zeal and by veneration for Khomeini as the supreme Shiite leader. In turn, Iraq's majority Shiite population fought willingly, even valiantly, against Shiite Iran, expressing loyalty first and foremost to Arabism, less so to a brutal but secular regime whose trademark violent streak was not discriminatory repression but equal-opportunity killing of political opponents. (Among those opponents were Shiite Islamist parties, such as Da'wa, which found inspiration in the Iranian revolution, whose leadership the regime decapitated and whose membership it decimated.)

But throughout the Iran–Iraq war one could hear echoes of the sectarianization of the old Safavid–Ottoman struggle, as the leadership of each country used religious references to characterize themselves, their enemies and their battles, unflinchingly casting these in sectarian terms. One group of victims of this practice were Fayli Kurds, deported by Saddam Hussein's regime to Iran on the grounds that, supposedly, they were basically Persians. It was no coincidence, however, that Fayli Kurds are also Shiites.<sup>9</sup>

The question of whether Iraq's Baath regime was inherently sectarian or merely prone to pursuing sectarian policies is a matter of debate.<sup>10</sup> The fact is that its oppressive nature triggered an opposition that, aside from the Kurds, had a distinctive religious colouration. The rise of the Islamic Da'wa party, for example, was facilitated by both the regime's oppressiveness and its secularism.<sup>11</sup> The Islamic revolution in Iran then turned Da'wa into a potent internal threat to the Iraqi regime, which explains the fierce repression it faced in the late 1970s and 1980s.<sup>12</sup>

Repression spawned resistance, but only when the opportunity presented itself. That opportunity came in early 1991 when Iraqi forces, having foolishly invaded Kuwait, were expelled by an international coalition and forced to withdraw in disarray. Sensing weakness, a popular rebellion took shape with the aim of removing the regime's presence in the south – and hopefully in Baghdad as well. This revolt assumed a pronouncedly Shiite character when elements of the Badr corps, the militia arm of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), crossed the border from Iran and tried to take command. SCIRI and Badr were Iranian creations, and when they entered the fray, the Iraqi regime was able to cast the rebels as Shiite Islamists intent on establishing a Khomeini-style

9 Fayli Kurds were not the only Iraqi Shiites to be deported to Iran, both during the Iran–Iraq war and before it. The practice affected any Iraqi Shiites who were listed in Iraq's population register as "of Persian origin" (*taba'iya Faresiya*), as opposed to "of Ottoman origin" (*taba'iya Othmaniya*). This designation stemmed from Ottoman times, when citizens who sought to evade extended military service used a Persian ancestor to claim they were not Ottoman subjects. The modern Iraqi state inherited this system in the early 1920s. Post-1958 republican regimes used it as the basis for deportation policies designed to serve political agendas. See Ali Babakhan, "The deportation of Shi'is during the Iran–Iraq war: causes and consequences", in Faleh Abdul-Jabar (ed.), *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq*, Saqi Books, London, 2002, pp. 183–210.

10 For a brief discussion, see International Crisis Group, above note 3, pp. 6–8.

11 The Da'wa party was founded in the late 1950s, before the Baath came to power, in opposition to the popularity of secular parties, such as the Baath and, more importantly, the Iraqi Communist Party.

12 See Abdul-Halim al-Ruhaimi, "The Da'wa Islamic Party: Origins, Actors and Ideology", in Abdul-Jabar, above note 9, pp. 149–61.

theocracy in Iraq. The wave of repression that followed targeted the rebels and those among the population who had aided them (a very elastic concept). But the revolt's dominant Shiite character lent the regime's reprisals anti-Shiite overtones, whoever its targets were. In the event, tens of thousands were killed. To the Shiite Islamist parties that have ruled Iraq since the 2005 elections, and to many other Shiites as well, the 1991 massacres were carried out against Shiites by a Sunni regime (whatever its actual make-up).<sup>13</sup>

His internal credibility in tatters and his repressive apparatus dangerously weakened, Saddam Hussein survived the "sanctions decade" of the 1990s by creating new bases of support. He launched a "faith campaign" (*hamlet imaniya*) to establish his credentials as a man of religion. In the process, he encouraged the Islamization of his largely secular society, an effort that received generous financial support from Saudi Arabia (which was as spooked by the Shiite rebellion as was Saddam's regime itself). Even some Najaf-based Shiite clerics were given slightly freer rein as a way of reducing the influence of Qom, Iran's main Shiite theological centre.<sup>14</sup> For the same purpose (shoring up his internal support), Saddam Hussein reinvigorated the moribund tribal system by paying large sums of money to tribal personalities, whatever their rank, who swore loyalty to him and thus became leaders of their tribe. He also made appointments from the Sunni tribal milieu, especially from his own region of birth, to key positions in the security apparatus.

By 2003 the roots of sectarian conflict lay bare in Iraq, but it took the return of the Islamist parties that had been driven into exile (especially Da'wa and SCIRI) and the arrival of new ones (such as Al Qaeda in Iraq) to bring a latent conflict out into the open and to turn it into a cycle of bloodletting. In this, US administrators – ignorant of Iraq's history, its movements, institutions and personalities – proved unwitting accomplices.

## The Iraq invasion as catalyst

Overthrowing the regime allowed the cauldron to boil over. US failure to restore law and order in the critical first weeks following the regime's ouster, or thereafter, allowed Iraq to become a political and criminal free-for-all in which non-state actors possessing significant means of violence gained the upper hand. These included insurgent groups (which initially comprised members of both Sunni and Shiite communities, many of whom were secular), militias linked to the Shiite Islamist and Kurdish parties, and criminal gangs.

13 The victims included Sunnis as well as Shiites, just as the perpetrators included Shiites in addition to Sunnis. One of the regime's key henchmen, responsible for the bloodbath in the south in 1991–2, was Muhammad Hamza al-Zubaida, a Shiite, who died in US custody in 2005 before he could be put on trial for his crimes.

14 Hence the rise of Muhammad Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr, the father of Muqtada Sadr, who was killed, along with two other sons, in 1999 after several years of relative freedom.

The militias had a head start, but the sparse distribution of US forces throughout the country allowed the entrance of foreign jihadis whose primary objective was to give the US a black eye by disrupting its efforts to establish a democracy in a country ravaged by misrule and sanctions. Politically, groups returning from exile gained the upper hand in a shattered polity whose citizens, many of them secular, were dazed, confused, inexperienced and in most cases unprepared to organize themselves.<sup>15</sup> These were the two Kurdish parties (the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and SCIRI and Da'wa. But Da'wa had splintered in exile, while the regime had killed off most of its members inside Iraq.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, in the absence of real politics, certainly in the early months, mosques began playing an inordinate role in mobilizing whole communities and providing services.<sup>17</sup> To the extent that politics existed, it was ethno-sectarian in character in that religious identities were played up, Sunni *and* Shiite (even if, at this point, they were not yet contrasted with opposing identities, for example Sunni *vs.* Shiite).

The Coalition Provisional Authority – the US administration during the first year of occupation – reinforced this tendency by using crude categories of communal identification – Arab/Kurd, Sunni/Shiite – that fitted Iraqis uneasily at best, and by organizing politics along ethno-sectarian lines. The first institutional example of this was the Interim Governing Council, established in July 2003. Based on Lebanon's *muhāsasa* system, the proportional apportionment of positions by the presumed size of the community concerned, it was composed of Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds, with a Turkoman and Christian thrown in, to represent the Iraqi mosaic.<sup>18</sup> The governments that followed (the Allawi government in June 2004, the Jaafari government in May 2005 and the Maliki government in June 2006) could not escape this ethno-sectarian logic once it had been set in motion, aggravated by the predominance of parties that were either ethnicity-based (PUK and KDP) or had sectarian agendas (the Shiite Islamist parties and, later, the Sunni Islamist parties as well<sup>19</sup>). The political, and later physical, evaporation of the largely secular middle class did nothing to improve matters.<sup>20</sup>

15 The notable exception was, and until today is, the Sadr movement, the only group outside the Kurdish region that has a genuine popular base, and the only group that has posed a real threat to SCIRI and Da'wa's sway.

16 Technically speaking, the KDP and PUK did not return from exile: They had ruled the Kurdish region since late 1991. But during that period they had no access to the rest of Iraq and eagerly participated in exile politics.

17 Churches played the same role in the very small Christian communities.

18 The Interim Governing Council had two main strikes against it: it became an institutional model for sectarian politics and state-building, and its so-called representative politicians were predominantly Iraqis who, having returned from exile, had no significant roots in Iraqi society.

19 In 2005 a Sunni Islamist coalition emerged, the Iraqi Consensus Front (often mistranslated as "Accordance" or "Accord" Front in the media), which won forty-four seats in the December parliamentary elections that year. One of its key components is the Iraqi Islamic Party, the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, like SCIRI and Da'wa in exile until 2003.

20 This stratum was the main absentee in the two elections in 2005, either not voting or voting for the main Shiite list. When sectarian violence in Baghdad escalated from 2005 on, many of its members fled to Syria or Jordan.



Shiite Islamist parties were the primary beneficiaries of the new order. Coalescing into a single alliance (the United Iraqi Alliance – UIA), which received the blessings of the Shiites' foremost religious authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, they translated their superior numbers into an electoral victory in January 2005. This enabled the best-funded, best-equipped and most disciplined group, SCIRI, and its Badr militia to take over the Interior Ministry and its security forces. Soon these forces were in the forefront of retaliatory attacks against Sunnis, who stood accused of harbouring insurgent groups such as Al Qaeda in Iraq. The leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, had openly advocated attacking Shiites, whom he referred to in his speeches as *rawafedh*. Thus suicide-bomb attacks by Sunnis against Shiite crowds and mosques turned into a virulent new vendetta-based sectarian spiral in which militia death squads masquerading as police forces indiscriminately killed Sunnis in retaliation for equally indiscriminate insurgent attacks against Shiites.<sup>21</sup> As the death toll climbed, violence and intimidation forced Sunnis to leave predominantly Shiite neighbourhoods in Baghdad and vice versa. The Samarra shrine bombing in February 2006 played a pivotal role in this escalation by bringing anti-Sunni violence directly into the streets.<sup>22</sup>

SCIRI used its power both within the UIA and as the UIA (*vis-à-vis* Iraq's other parties) to press for a new Iraqi state structure that, once established, would be based on ethnic and sectarian divisions. Hijacking the constitution-drafting process in August 2005 along with the (equally powerful and disciplined) Kurdish list, it came to an important understanding with the Kurdish parties – a virtual deal in fact – whereby the Kurds would get Kirkuk governorate with its oil resources in exchange for the emergence of a Shiite-dominated federal super-region in the south (turning SCIRI leader Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim into “the Barzani of the south”, in the words of one Iraqi commentator).<sup>23</sup> Sunni Arabs would be left out, deprived of major resources. This informal agreement was translated into constitutional text and the constitution was approved in a popular referendum two months later.<sup>24</sup> SCIRI's notion of southern federalism has since come under

21 International Crisis Group, above note 3, pp. 14–21.

22 SCIRI-controlled Interior Ministry forces had been in the forefront of retaliatory attacks against Sunnis, operating mostly through death squads. From the shrine bombing on, violence played out openly in the streets, with followers of Muqtada Sadr in the vanguard. Here the Sadrist played brawn to SCIRI's brain.

23 As part of the deal, SCIRI reportedly agreed not to push for the nationwide application of Islamic law, sharia, leaving this instead to the regions to decide.

24 See International Crisis Group, *Unmaking Iraq: A Constitutional Process Gone Awry*, Brussels, September 2005, available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org> (last visited 22 September 2007). While the agreement between SCIRI and the Kurdish parties produced the constitution's language on federalism and Kirkuk, the text was sufficiently vague as to leave room for diverging interpretations. Moreover, to the extent that SCIRI is pursuing a Shiite super region, the constitution may not help. While establishing the principle of regional federalism, it prescribes a bottom-up system based on local referenda, the outcome of which could be quite different from that envisioned by SCIRI. The Kurds arguably did better with the wording on Kirkuk, which gave them the prospect of gaining the area by popular referendum, but here the outcome is made uncertain by massive opposition. For an analysis of the conflict over Kirkuk, see International Crisis Group, *Iraq and the Kurds: The Brewing Battle Over Kirkuk*, Brussels, July 2006, and *Iraq and the Kurds: Resolving the Kirkuk Crisis*, Brussels, April 2007, both available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org> (last visited 22 September 2007).



heavy fire for being a recipe for Iraq's dissolution. Nationalist Iraqis, many of whom are Shiites (including Moqtada al-Sadr's movement and the Fadhila party, which is strong in Basra), vigorously oppose the notion. But they failed to overcome the SCIRI-Kurdish alliance. In October 2006, a law that sets out the mechanism for creating federal regions was passed by a slim majority.<sup>25</sup> Some Western commentators saw in the evolving process a possible solution to the worsening crisis by proposing to partition the country into Kurdistan, a "Shiastan" and a "Sunnistan", claiming historical precedent, current realities and the wishes of the majority of the population. Being wrong on all three counts has not deterred them.<sup>26</sup>

Iraq's future looks more like the total chaos of a failed state than a neat ethno-sectarian division (although the Kurdish region will retain its integrity if the Kurdish leadership manages to negotiate the tricky boundary question, including in Kirkuk). This raises the question of why the United States facilitated the Shiites' rise to power (unless one subscribes to the conspiracy notion, prevalent among Iraqis, that it was the US intention all along to partition Iraq). The answer is that the United States did not mean to – as such. It intended to bring democracy to Iraq, and in the first instance this meant elections. If the logical result of free elections was the Shiites' rise to power, then this was either not recognized or not considered a problem. The Bush administration may have hoped to bring to power a secular regime by pushing forward, and funding, trusted Iraqis such as Ahmed Chalabi and Iyad Allawi. This gambit backfired over these two men's patent unpopularity among ordinary Iraqis, the rise of religious politics, and the United States' growing loss of influence as it made mistake after mistake trying to pacify and rebuild the country. The problem was that it was not the Shiites as such who won the elections but a coalition of Shiite Islamist parties. Regardless of whether Iraq's Shiite population supports any of these parties (beyond voting for them in an election), having gained power the Shiites are not about to let

25 The most interesting work on southern federalism has been done by Reidar Visser. His writings are available from <http://historiae.org> (last visited 22 September 2007). Iraq's break-up is probably not SCIRI's objective but an unintended consequence of its attempt to retain power. Lacking significant popular support, it has used its powerful militia and backing from Iran as its sources of power. Gaining control over a southern super region and its vast oil resources would perpetuate that power and make it self-sustaining. To be fair, SCIRI has justified its push for a southern region as a defensive move against insurgent violence originating in the Sunni Arab community. It is unclear, however, how disowning Sunni Arabs would protect the Shiites from violence.

26 Western proponents of the partition option claim that Iraq is an artificial creation emerging from the Ottoman Empire; that the three Ottoman *vilayets* of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra are a natural basis for three regions today; that Iraqis, by choice or intimidation, have already consolidated themselves in their own regions; and that the majority of the Iraqi people have indicated that they cannot live with members of the other communities. In reality, the notion of Iraq has a long history, including during extended periods of the Ottoman Empire. The three Ottoman *vilayets*, which existed only during the empire's last thirty years, did not reflect ethnic or religious homogeneity. Even today, most of Iraq remains intermingled, despite sectarian "cleansing" campaigns; and in poll after poll a majority of Iraqis have indicated they prefer Iraq to remain unified, with many supporting an administrative federalism based on governorates. The main dissenters are the Kurds, who seek independence. The pro-partition advocates have not proposed a solution for Baghdad, nor have they explained how their solution meshes with the Iraqi constitution, which they claim to support.

themselves be cheated out of this historic opportunity to rule an Arab country, and they will tolerate the Islamist parties for now.

## Sectarian rhetoric and the Iran factor

To Iraq's Arab neighbours (Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Gulf states), the US strategy in Iraq was utterly bewildering. They could not comprehend why the Bush administration would do Iran the favour of allowing Shiites to take power in an Arab country. This explains the shrill tone of the warnings sounded by Arab leaders in the run-up to the first elections, in January 2005. King Abdullah II of Jordan warned, in an interview with the *Washington Post*, that Iran's growing influence in Iraq could be felt throughout the region and could lead to a "crescent" of dominant Shiite movements or governments stretching from Lebanon to the Gulf.<sup>27</sup> Unsurprisingly, his remarks provoked the Shiites' ire and he soon backtracked, stating that what he had meant was Shiites not as a religious but as a *political* community, backed by Iran.<sup>28</sup> This hardly appeased Shiites, because what the monarch was really saying, then, was that he considered Iraq's Shiite parties to be Iranian proxies. This perspective was confirmed by Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, who in April 2006 declared that "most of the Shiites" living in Arab countries "are loyal to Iran, and not the countries they are living in".<sup>29</sup> In other words, the Arab states saw Iran as advancing its interests through the region's Shiite communities.<sup>30</sup> These alarms had a slightly hysterical edge to them: the crescent included Syria, whose Alawite-led regime is not universally recognized as

27 Quoted in Robin Wright and Peter Baker, "Iraq, Jordan see threat to election from Iran", *Washington Post*, 8 December 2004.

28 *Jordan Times*, 6 January 2005. Jordan has been part of an effort to build an "Arab wall" against Iran's rising power, bringing together Saudi Arabia, Jordan and most of the Gulf states against Iran, Syria, Qatar, Hezbollah and Hamas. Syria's loyalty is contested, and it could prove to be a critical swing state (with a majority Sunni population ruled by a minority-Alawite regime). Casting Qatar, with its large US military base, as being allied with Iran has to do more with Qatar's disputes with Saudi Arabia than any cross-Gulf allegiance.

29 *USA Today*, 13 April 2006. The two leaders' statements were totally self-serving: "See", they appeared to be saying to their ally the United States, "this is what you get when you organize free elections in countries such as ours – Islamists in power and a growing regional role for Iran." Interestingly, these statements were also in tune with the anti-Shiism expounded by *takfiri* Sunnis, such as Al Qaeda in Iraq's Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi – an unholy alliance if ever there was one, at least from King Abdullah II's perspective, whose regime has been the target of Zarqawi's violent attacks, most notably in the 9 November 2005 hotel bombings.

30 The Iranian regime struck back with rhetoric of its own. Supreme leader Ali Khamenei: "Those who maliciously use *takfir* [read: Zarqawi] to declare large groups of Muslims to be unbelievers, those who insult the sanctities of various branches of Islam [read: the Samarra shrine bombers], those who betray and put a dagger in the back of the Lebanese youth [read: Hezbollah] who are a source of honour for the Muslim *umma*, those who speak of the fabricated threat of a Shiite crescent so as to please the Americans and the Zionists, those who incite fratricidal hostilities and lawlessness in Iraq to defeat its Islamic and popular government, and those who put pressure on the elected Hamas government in Palestine, whether intentionally or unintentionally, they will be regarded as culprits, detested by history and future generations, and looked upon as mercenaries of the brutal enemy." *Islamic Republic News Agency*, 29 December 2006.

Shiite, certainly not by itself, and has given no indication it is intent on participating in a cross-regional Shiite alliance. Yet Syria has had a long-standing interest-based strategic relationship with Iran. And so, to the extent that the principal threat was perceived to emanate from Iran, Syria too was part of it.<sup>31</sup>

Has the genie of sectarianism now been let out of the bottle? Is the Mashreq-spanning Shiite spectre becoming a reality? Such a conclusion would be premature. All evidence points to ethno-nationalism continuing to moderate and dilute sectarian passions – in Iraq as in the region as a whole. The UIA’s fracturing over the southern federalism debate shows this. Iran’s overweening and condescending attitude towards Iraqi Shiite parties, which these parties strongly resent as racist (anti-Arab) in origin, will similarly undermine any grand international Shiite alliance.<sup>32</sup> The term *rawafedh* may have broad purchase in Sunni quarters to designate the country’s Shiites, but a more common term used by both Sunnis and secular Shiites to designate the Shiite Islamist parties and their followers in particular is *Safawiyin* – descendants of Iran’s Safavid (Shiite) dynasty, in other words, Iranians.<sup>33</sup> Among ordinary Shiites in Iraq, there is even less sympathy toward Iran, including its system of government.

The same holds true for Iran’s role and for intra-Shiite relations elsewhere in the region. Witness the July 2006 war in Lebanon. If it can be said that Iran supported Hezbollah out of Shiite solidarity, it can also be said, with greater evidence, that there was a convergence of interests between Iran and Hezbollah in countering what they perceive as a US–Israeli plan to reshape the region. This is also why Iran supports Hamas, the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood and a patently Sunni movement. But while its solidarity with suffering Palestinians is warmly received by many in the occupied territories, Iran’s appeal as a regional power finds very little traction.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah went out of his way during the summer war to downplay his movement’s Shiite origins by emphasizing the Arab nationalist character of its fight against Israel: here was a national resistance movement holding out against a colonial and predatory occupying power. For example, Al-Manar, Hezbollah’s television station, played Nasserist songs that were popular in Egypt in the 1950s, with a

31 Another reason why Arab regimes resisted the notion of elections in Iraq was that they may have perceived a grand Iranian plan to undermine their regimes throughout the region by supporting Islamist movements that, in a free election, would likely come to power. Said one observer, “Ironically, Iran has been the main supporter of Arab democracy, for the best way to undermine the incumbent regimes is to promote popularly based Islamist movements such as Hizbullah in Lebanon, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas in Palestine, and the Shiite majority in Iraq.” Shlomo Ben-Ami, “Let’s consider reaching a grand bargain with Iran”, *Daily Star*, 17 September 2007.

32 Yet, if pushed onto the defensive, these same parties may run into Iran’s protective embrace.

33 And vice versa, many Shiites now refer to Sunnis simply as *irhabiyin* (terrorists), a political epithet.

34 Iran and its flamboyant president, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, are able to attract popular support in the Muslim street by espousing pro-Palestinian and anti-US–Israel causes that ordinary people fault their own repressive and pro-American regimes for failing to advocate. But this kind of emotive solidarity is superficial and does not translate into an embrace of Iranian policies. For a sampling of enthusiastic responses to Ahmedinejad’s antics, see Jeffrey Fleishman, “Ahmedinejad hailed in Middle East”, *Los Angeles Times*, 24 September 2007.

rousing response from ordinary Egyptians. If we look at how Sunni Islamists viewed Hezbollah, we find that the majority unflinchingly supported Hezbollah during the war and that only the fundamentalist Salafi *takfiris* criticized it for advancing Shiite and Iranian interests.<sup>35</sup>

The July war, though, and Iraq's descent into civil strife are both symptoms of a greater malaise in the Middle East that stems from the failure to solve festering problems, such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the illegitimacy of the Arab state system. This brings many dangers, of which a sectarian rift is only one. Chaos in Iraq has led to societal fragmentation, encouraging a siege mentality in communities that have little choice but to seek protection from a growing assortment of non-state actors – militias, insurgent groups, crime mafias – which are thus empowered. From this, many new loyalties and identities arise – at the expense of a national Iraqi one.

Hezbollah's victory (its ability to survive the onslaught of a far superior military force) has had the paradoxical effect of reining in the movement's freedom of manoeuvre. It enjoyed broad popularity in the Arab world at the time, when it successfully played the resistance card, but Hezbollah will not be able to play it so easily again, since this would bring on yet more destruction, possibly depriving the organization of whatever support it still enjoys in Lebanon, even among Shiites. The real winners may well be radical Sunni groups, part of the Al Qaeda franchise, who emerged emboldened from Israel's loss of its deterrent capability and who face none of Hezbollah's constraints.<sup>36</sup> Their main adversaries are Arab regimes whose moral bankruptcy as representatives of their people has long been evident. The July war underscored these states' fragility: after roundly criticizing Hezbollah for reckless adventurism in provoking Israel's disproportionate response, some regimes were soon forced under popular pressure to recant – the Arab street backed Hezbollah 100 per cent, somehow failing to see the Iranian hand that to these regimes was so obvious. While it may not be easy to overthrow these regimes, which are grounded in all-pervasive police states, they can hardly be strengthened by the twin challenges of Western military intervention and widespread popular disaffection.

Hezbollah's aggressive internal stance vis-à-vis the Lebanese government and Hamas's "self-coup" in Gaza reversed some of the popular gains these Islamist parties made throughout the region. Hezbollah has proved with its push for Shiite power in Lebanon that, when all is said and done, it remains a sectarian party. Hamas, too, is sectarian, on top of being nationalist, and has been painfully reminded of this by choruses of "Shiites, Shiites" (this aimed at Sunnis!) sung at Fatah rallies. The (Shiite) "lynching" of (Sunni) Saddam Hussein, in particular, had the dramatic effect of opening the eyes of a public – momentarily dazzled by Hezbollah's nationalist victory – to the Shiite/Iranian impulse behind that victory.

35 Reuven Paz, "Hotwiring the apocalypse: jihadi Salafi attitude towards Hizballah and Iran", *PRISM*, Occasional Papers, Vol. 4 (4) (August 2006).

36 Witness the prolonged battle between Fatah al-Islam, a jihadi group ensconced in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in northern Lebanon, and the Lebanese armed forces in 2007.

## Conclusion: countervailing trends

The current reality is one of an as yet undecided battle between conflicting identities, and a public jerked around by regimes engaged in a life-or-death struggle with perceived enemies. Rather than a drift towards a new overarching identity – nationalism or religion – we are seeing a fragmentation of those very identities and a return to older, primordial ones: family, clan, tribe, ethnic group and local leaders living or dead (warlords, clerics, wise men, saints).

It is unclear what will emerge from this battle, but some trends should be noted:

- Iran is pushing to become the pre-eminent power in the Gulf. Its march may prove unstoppable. However, Iran's long-term success might ultimately be determined by how the regime chooses to profile the country: as Shiite, as Persian, or as something that goes beyond that, something more in tune with the mosaic-like quality of its own society – that is, that of a regional power which has transcended such divisive identities and rules over peoples using principles of fairness and equality. Iran's objective is to roll back US–Israeli influence more than it is to propel Hezbollah to power as its proxy ruler of Lebanon. It has a pragmatic interest in forging workable arrangements with its neighbours.
- Two of the key powers in the region, Iran (representing Shiites and Persians) and Saudi Arabia (representing Sunnis and Arabs) have initiated a dialogue that seeks to reduce mutual vilification by creating space for accommodation – in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and wherever else these powers find themselves confronting each other and their respective interests. In the end, whatever role is played by outside powers, regional solutions will have to arise, primarily from regional efforts at peace-building.
- The top layers of Iraq's secular middle class may well be living outside Iraq at the moment (both Sunnis and Shiites, although the former are probably in the majority), but that group could still have an important role to play. The silent majority of Iraqis, both inside and outside the country, abhor division, but as long as violence and chaos reign, they will continue to be drawn into communal identities. Ten or 20 years hence, they may face the challenging role of rebuilding Iraq in a non-sectarian fashion.
- Even in sectarian Iraq, there have been significant attempts to forge cross-community alliances and strengthen the notion of “Arab Shiites” (for example, the Sadrist movement, Fadhila and many UIA independents) as opposed to “Iranian Shiites” (SCIRI and Da'wa). Intra-Sunni and intra-Shiite strife will also dampen any Sunni–Shiite conflict.
- Socially, intermarriage between (middle-class) Sunnis and Shiites has been very popular. Although this pattern will be affected by sectarian strife in Iraq, it is unlikely to change the habits of Muslim families in mixed societies untouched by violence.

However encouraging some of these trends may be, to judge by recent developments we are looking at a hugely perilous time in the Middle East (and

therefore the world). The coming years may see Iraq's violent break-up, challenges to all post-Ottoman borders, regional warfare (a replay of the Iran–Iraq war but now directly between Iran, on the one hand, and Iraq's erstwhile patrons, the Arab states, on the other), repression of Shiite communities (in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain), US intervention in Iran, the Palestinians' continued submission to Israeli occupation, expropriation and settlement, and popular uprisings, catalysed by pin-prick, al-Qaeda-type attacks, against Arab regimes.

Whatever one thinks of the United States overthrowing the Iraqi regime and its subsequent disastrous nation-building effort, it is in the international community's interest to prevent even worse events occurring now that the situation is getting dangerously out of hand. All energies should be directed towards stabilizing Iraq by helping its many political actors to forge an overall compromise concerning the principal and intertwined issues of state structure, division of powers and oil-revenue sharing. Such a new national compact could lessen sectarian tensions and reduce violence. The United States should state its clear intention to effect a phased withdrawal from Iraq once the gaping vacuum created by its war has been filled by a durable new state structure. Simultaneously, the peace process in Israel–Palestine needs to be reinvigorated in all its aspects. And the United States and its allies should engage Syria and Iran on the full range of issues that divide them, including first and foremost Iran's nuclear programme. Anything that falls short of these steps could spell disaster.