

Shi'ism in Iraq

Don't Mess With Iraq's Moral Authority and Historic Legacy!

by Hussein Askary

It is a very, very sensitive thing to attempt to deal with sectarian issues within religion. I, as an Iraqi who does not identify himself with any sect other than Islam and its universal principles, endeavored to write this limited and short description of the historical background of the actors on the Iraqi battle field, in order to give readers and observers a sense of the people involved in the events of Iraq today. My aim is not to give a lecture in history, because this short piece is far from any thorough review. Its aim is to forewarn those who could act to change the policies of the United States, and other nations, of the consequences of their failure to act now.

One very important statement has to be made right from the outset. There is no conflict today between Shi'a and Sunnis, either in Iraq or in any other place in the Muslim world, except for where the British wish to have one, such as in Pakistan. The Iraqis are united today around one goal, which is to free the nation from the Anglo-American occupation and rebuild the nation. Almost all Shi'a and Sunni religious scholars have agreed that the old disputes, which go back more than 1,300 years in the history of Islam, and are mentioned in this report, cannot be resolved on the basis of who was right and who was wrong. They are all Muslims, and the differences are on certain rituals and secondary issues, not the fundamentals.

Power-corrupted, power-hungry individuals and groups often forget on what planet they exist and within the history of which species they act. Utopians who believe that might makes right always lose, but quite often at a very high price for mankind. What happened in Iraq in late August, with the peaceful resolution—although it might not last, as long as Cheney and Bush are in power—of the siege of the holy city of Najaf, was a reminder of that fact. By the intervention of one man, a frail, 74-year-old religious scholar, Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, who had just interrupted his recuperation after heart surgery in London, an end was put to fighting between the world's single superpower and its puppet local government on the one hand, and those who resist them among the militia of radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. This is not, as some would speculate, a case of a development of a theocracy.

Al-Sistani and most religious leaders in Iraq have the position that, in the absence of a legitimate government, it is their responsibility to care for the interests of the people of Iraq and their territory. The religious institutions have become a lawful resort for the Iraqi people after the interchangeably stupid or evil Anglo-American occupation demolished all the institutions pertaining to a modern nation-state.



Ayatollah al-Sistani

As Muriel Mirak-Weissbach put it in a previous article in *EIR* (Sept. 3), "Moral authority is greater than military might." But where does al-Sistani's authority come from? The man has no political mandate, and is not even an Iraqi by birth. As his name suggests, he is from Sistan province in Iran. So was Sheikh Mohammed Taqi al-Shirazi, born in Shiraz in Iran, who led the Iraqi revolution against the British Empire in 1920. Being born in a different land did not make them less patriotic to Iraq. On the other hand, their identity was tied to Islam first and foremost. They are not politicians, but they have a moral responsibility toward the people they live among. What is common between the two men is that they both were Shi'ite religious authorities, or *Marji'a* (in the singular). They resided in Shi'ite holy cities in Iraq, Karbala and Najaf.

What Is Shi'ism?

Shi'ism or *Tashayu'*, which is one of two main schools within the Islamic faith, is shared mainly by people in Iran and Iraq. The religious seminaries are spread in cities in both countries, such as Najaf, Karbala, Kadhimiya in Iraq, and Qum and Mashhad in Iran. Students and scholars have moved freely between the two countries since the middle of the 16th Century, when the Safawid Dynasty in Iran "converted" to Shi'ism, breaking with the Sunni Ottoman dynasty in Turkey, which considered itself the bearer of the banner of Islam and

leader of all Muslims on Earth. That conflict, like the Venice-manipulated Crusades, was a geopolitical conflict, not a religious one. This one too, smells of a Venetian intrigue.

Shi'ism or *Tashayu'* means, approximately: support, loyalty, or following. Shi'a means "party" or group of supporters. It is a historic reference to the supporters of Imam Ali bin Abi-Talib, in the dispute over the succession of leadership after the death of Prophet Mohammed in 632 A.D. According to the Shi'ite version, Mohammed had instructed the faithful that Ali, the prophet's cousin and life-long companion, should become the leader of Muslims after him. They support this with statements from Mohammed himself. Another group had the opinion, that on the day of the death of Mohammed, there should be a process of "consultation and deliberation" (*Shura*) among the elite to choose one among them to the position of *Khalifa* (successor). This faction developed historically as the Sunni branch of Islam. Sunni means a follower of the tradition of the Prophet (*Sunnat-ul Rasul*): That means the emulation of the Prophet and the strict interpretation of the instructions listed in the holy book, the Koran. The Shi'a view is that Ali is to Mohammed, what Aaron was to Moses, or, more precisely, what St. Peter was to Jesus Christ. The Shi'a argue that since Imam Ali lived with the Prophet and received his education in Islam directly from him, he had more knowledge of the religion and its social, political, military, and spiritual aspects, and therefore should be the Prophet's natural successor. Mohammed, at the age of 40, had "adopted" the orphan Ali, who was six at the time.

The Shi'ites subsequently attached mystical attributes to Imam Ali and his posterity, the most controversial among them being that of "infallibility," and the belief that they should, in a hereditary manner, assume leadership of the Muslim nation. The Shi'a list 12 Imams in the lineage of Ali and his wife Fatima, the daughter of Mohammed, who were the "natural successors" of Mohammed. Almost of all of them were killed, "martyred," or persecuted by rivals who took power by force. This created a great and deep historical grievance among the Shi'ites, who, at different intervals, were forced to practice their faith secretly to avoid prosecution at the hands of other Muslim leaders.

The last of the 12 Imams was Mohammed bin al-Hasan al-Mahdi "the Awaited." Reportedly, al-Mahdi vanished from his house in Samarra, in what is now Iraq, as he was being pursued by the guards of the Abbasid ruler al-Mutadhid (869-870 A.D.). Al-Mahdi, according to various Shi'ite traditions, will return to the world to lead a fight side by side with the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, "to fill the Earth with justice and equality, after it has been filled with injustice and cruelty."

After the Prophet Mohammed's death, three Khalifas were chosen by the elite leadership in Medina and Mecca, bypassing Ali. During their reign, the Islamic state expanded throughout the Arabian peninsula; north to Syria, the Holy

Land, and Egypt; west to North Africa; and east to the Indus and Oxus rivers.

The Split Within Islam

By the time Ali became the fourth Khalifa in 656, the Islamic state was split. The Muslim governor of Syria, Muawiya bin Abi-Sufian, was a rival to Ali on the question of leadership. Muawiya was a scion of the Umayyads, financier oligarchs and slave-owners who fought against Mohammed, but when overwhelmed, joined Islam to protect their wealth. Wars and intrigues were launched. Ali moved the capital of the Islamic state from Medina (in today's Saudi Arabia) to Kufa, in Iraq. Ali was assassinated during prayer in January 661, and was buried on a hill near Kufa. A city was built up around his mausoleum. That city is Najaf today. Muawiya declared himself the sole leader of the Muslims. Ali's first son was forced to accept this takeover, in order not to split the nation; he was later poisoned.

When Muawiya died and the throne was passed down to his son Yazid, Ali's second son, Hussein, refused to recognize this power transfer. He moved to Iraq with the idea of retaking the leadership role of his father, with the support of the Iraqis. On his way to Kufa, Hussein's camp was put under siege by a huge army sent by Yazid. Their demand was that Hussein should return to Medina and recognize Yazid's leadership. Hussein refused and decided to fight, even though he had only a handful of soldiers and supporters, many of them of his own household, against an army of many thousands. He and many of his family members were slaughtered, and the women were taken as prisoners. The heroic martyrdom of Imam Hussein is remembered every year by Shi'ites around the world. For them it has become a symbol and a message of the selfless fight for truth. In European terms, his martyrdom can only be compared to that of Jeanne D'Arc. Imam Hussein and his family members were buried at the spot around which today's holy city of Karbala was later built.

Hence the significance of these two cities, Najaf and Karbala, for Shi'ites around the world. These very cities were turned into bloody battlegrounds in a major way twice in history: once by Saddam Hussein during the 1991 uprising, and recently by the Cheney-Bush U.S. Administration.

The two cities and the shrines within them have become the academic centers for Shi'a scholars. There are several Shi'a *maraji'a* (authorities) in Iraq. Al-Sistani is the highest in rank informally. Other important *maraji'a* are Mohammed Said al-Hakim, Mohammed Taqi al-Modarresi, Hadi al-Modarresi, Sayid Ali al-Shirazi, and Mohammed Kadhim al-Hairi (based in Qum, Iran, the spiritual leader of Moqtada al-Sadr). There are also a number of prominent Shi'a *maraji'a* in Iran (the largest country with a Shi'a majority) and Lebanon. There are Muslims embracing the Shi'ite branch of Islam who live as minorities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), Pakistan, India, Lebanon, and as an under-privileged majority in Bahrain.

The ‘Source of Emulation’

A very significant factor in the Shi’ite religious-social structure is that each individual follower of the sect should adopt a *living marji’a*, one among the prominent scholars who are still alive, and have him as a “source of emulation” in daily religious practices and other social issues. The individual thus builds a connection to the tradition, the 12 Imams of the household of the Prophet, and the Prophet himself, through a living individual. People are free to choose the authority they follow, but this means that the word of the “source of emulation” becomes law.

There are slight differences in details among the different prominent scholars, but the basics are the same. They have to consult with each other in a time of crisis, or if a new issue comes up, which is not stated in the tradition—for example, stem cell research. An interesting aspect in Shi’ism is the application of *Ijtihad* (reasoning) to matters that are completely new. If the Koran or the Prophet has not touched this issue, the scholar has to use his reasoning capabilities and the existing general principles of Islam to determine the matter. However, this *Ijtihad* is not a Shi’ite monopoly. Since the rapid development of modern civilization has brought with it very complicated issues, all sects of Islam are obliged to resort to reasoning to be able to deal with new developments.

The *maraji’a* also acquire significant financial power, through voluntary taxes and charitable donations given by their followers. This contribution is a voluntary tax called *Khums* (fifth), meaning one fifth of the individual’s annual profit.

The *living* relationship between the individual, and the history and legacy of Shi’ism through the “source of emulation” is the basis for the immense authority enjoyed by those scholars. Since there is an informal agreement among almost all the Shi’ite *maraji’a* that al-Sistani is most qualified to be the *primus inter pares*, his word has to be respected by the others. That enabled al-Sistani to exert his authority over all others, including Moqtada al-Sadr.

Al-Sistani’s Authority

The difference between al-Sistani, and al-Sadr and his mentor Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri, is that al-Sistani belongs to what has been increasingly described as the “silent” *marji’ya*. Its difference with the “voiced” one of al-Sadr, is that al-Sistani’s does not involve itself in political affairs of society, except in extreme cases. In the absence of a legitimate government or political authority, the scholar regards himself as the guardian of the interests of the nation and its survival. That is an essential difference between Iran’s current system of *Vilayeti Faqih* (The State of Scholar), which is partially a theocracy, and al-Sistani’s school. Therefore the fears that al-Sistani’s growing authority could lead to a theocracy in Iraq too are baseless. There are certain religious forces in Iraq that desire a theocratic state, but that is not the common view.

Al-Sadr, on the other side, is the last of the al-Sadr family.

The al-Sadr family is also a family of religious scholars and thinkers with a long history. The al-Sadr have been victims of especially Saddam Hussein’s regime. Muqtada’s father and brother were killed by Iraqi intelligence in 1999. So were his uncle Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr and his aunt. The al-Sadr’s belong to what they call “Al-Marji’ya Al-Mujahidah” or the Voiced Marji’ya, which means that it is politically active. Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr was killed in 1980, one year after the Islamic revolution, led by Khomeini, took over Iran. Al-Sadr played a certain role in the ideological development of the Islamic Republic. He is actually the shadow author of the Iranian constitution. He also proposed a new Islamic economic and banking system called “The Non-usurious Bank in Islam”. Al-Sadr is revered by all different Shi’ite scholars as one of the most brilliant modern Islamic scholars. He has written several books on philosophy and economy. However, he was not a mere scholar. He started the Islamic Daawa movement which opposed both the communist and the Iraqi Baathist parties. It ended up in exile in Iran after Saddam’s regime killed thousands of its leaders and followers. The militant vision, and the rage produced by the injustice inflicted upon al-Sadr’s family, are driving forces for Muqtada and his followers.

Al-Sistani is not likely to issue a *fatwa* (religious edict) for *jihad* (holy war) against the U.S.-British occupation, although he has the authority to do so. However, if the folly of the occupiers and their puppet regime in Baghdad persists, and elections in January are not held, al-Sistani would most likely make hints about the legitimacy of military resistance against the occupiers. He has refrained so far, as his predecessor Sheikh Mohammed Taqi al-Shirazi did in 1919. But when the British reneged on their promises, the latter made his famous declaration: “It is a duty of all Iraqis to call for their rights. While they do that, they should make sure that security and peace are preserved. But, they can resort to defensive force, if the British refuse to comply with their demands.” Although this was not a call for *jihad*, it was interpreted by nationalist Iraqi forces as permission to launch armed resistance, and the 1920 Revolution against the British became a fact (see *EIR*, Nov. 14, 2003). Al-Shirazi restrained himself for a long time, but when the suffering of the Iraqi people was no longer tolerable, he had to take an offensive position.

This is the situation today. Many modern scholars are the sons or grandsons of those who fought in the 1920 Revolution. Its details are vivid in their minds. This does not mean that only the Shi’a in Iraq would revolt; as was the case in 1920, all Iraqis—Sunni, Shi’a, and Kurds—joined forces against the British. There are also the Shi’ites in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Lebanon, the U.A.E., Pakistan, and India, who would not sit on the fence of a burning Iraq with their arms crossed.

An end to the power of the Bush-Cheney neo-conservatives should come soon. Otherwise, not only Iraq, but all Southwest Asia will be set aflame.