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The Role of Religion in Iraqi Politics

By [David Smock](#)
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The dynamic interaction emerging between religion and politics in Iraq is mystifying for some outside observers and alarming for others. Iraq seems to be experiencing a religious revival and religious leaders, particularly Shiite leaders, exert increasing political influence. The role of religion in governance has become particularly salient now that the process of writing a new Iraqi constitution is underway.

These and other questions were addressed in a December 17, 2003 U. S. Institute of Peace workshop entitled [Religious Politics in Iraq, Part II](#), which built on an [earlier workshop](#) on this topic. The presenters at this workshop were [Faleh Jabar](#), senior fellow at the Institute and author of *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* and editor of *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq*; [Amatzia Baram](#), senior fellow at the Institute working on state-mosque relations in Iraq, professor of Middle Eastern history at the University of Haifa, and author of works on Iraq's religious political parties; and Ahmed al-Rahim who teaches Arabic at Harvard University and has been working in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein. The workshop was moderated by David Smock, director of the Institute's [Religion and Peacemaking Initiative](#).

The views summarized below reflect the discussion at the meeting; they do not represent formal positions taken by the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

A Religious Revival in the Making

Contrary to common understanding, the religious revival in Iraq started more than a decade ago. It was in part facilitated as a political survival strategy of Saddam Hussein who initiated a "faith campaign" in 1993. The government printed and distributed five million copies of the Quran, built large and expensive mosques (principally Sunni), and in 1994 Sharia was introduced into the Iraqi penal code. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein has enabled this revival to gain new momentum, particularly among the Shia, but there is an upsurge in religiosity in all parts of Iraq.

The Shia community has four or five highly regarded ayatollahs and they need to be taken very seriously, particularly by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the Governing Council. The most important of these is Grand Ayatollah Ali Muhammad Sistani. Sistani does not advocate an Islamic republic or Iranian-style clerical rule. But he does believe that the religious leadership should be closely consulted on critical political issues. The current stalemate over the process of elections and constitution writing has arisen largely because the CPA's latest plan came as a surprise to Sistani who then strongly opposed it.

The Shia Majority and the Iraqi Constitution

Sistani and other Shia leaders who oppose an Islamic republic nevertheless want a form of democratic government that gives full expression to the Shia demographic majority. Moreover, they want Islam to play a role in the new forms of governance. There is probably no way to avoid a clause in the Iraq

constitution stating that Islam is the state religion, which is part of constitutions throughout the Arab world and has been included in all previous Iraqi constitutions. This will leave open the question of just what this provision means in practice. Sistani will probably also propose that Sharia be one of the sources of Iraqi legislation. The much more problematic proposal, which the extremists will advocate, is that Sharia should be the sole source of legislation.

Muqtada Sadr is a more threatening Islamist. He is attempting to assert the predominance of his family tradition, based largely on the status of his late father, over that of other prominent Shia religious families. Muqtada is fighting for the clerical supremacy of the Al-Sadr family. As with other Shia movements, this effort at ascendancy is based largely on the family having created networks of charities and novices. Building on a theme developed by his father, Muqtada has exploited anti-American sentiment as a rallying cry. Overall, however, his rhetoric is inconsistent and confused. He is under the influence of his mentor, Ayatollah Kazim Ha'iri, a radical based in Iran.

Those like Muqtada Sadr who advocate clerical role will not win out in the political competition. Although Islamic values will need to be acknowledged in any new constitution, there is a reasonable chance that this constitution will recognize the separation of religion and state. The separation of religion and state is advocated by some liberal Shia clerics.

Religion Not the Sole Factor

The Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), led first by Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim who was recently assassinated and now by his younger brother, has adopted a pragmatic program of cooperation with the CPA and participates in the Governing Council. It declares its relationship to the CPA as being one of "peaceful resistance."

The majority of Shia think of their religion as a private matter that should not intrude into state affairs and governance. But this segment of the population has not been mobilized and is largely neglected by the CPA.

When political parties emerge, the Shia will divide themselves into multiple political movements. The Shia community is not a monolith, and in addition to differing attitudes toward religion and state, it is divided by families and regions, urban versus rural, and secular versus religious.

Religion will continue to be a major factor in Iraqi politics among all the communities but particularly among the Shia. As Sunnis find their way back into political discourse, Sunni religious voices will also be heard, ranging from the pragmatic Muslim Brotherhood to the ultra-radical Salafis, some of who are Wahhabis.

Although they have not been as assertive as the religious forces, secular Iraqis, particularly among the urban middle class, are numerous and as they become more vocal they will enhance moderate secularism.

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