



[\[ Back \]](#)

## [USIPeace Briefing](#)

### Religious Politics in Iraq

By [David Smock](#)  
May 27, 2003

Although Iraq is an overwhelmingly Muslim country, it is both religiously and ethnically diverse. More than 95 percent of the population is Muslim, but this total is divided between Shiites who constitute about 55-60 percent and Sunnis who represent 35-40 percent. And the Sunnis are divided among Arab, Kurdish, and Turkman ethnic groups. The very small Christian population, probably about three percent of the total, is divided among Chaldeans, Assyrians, and others.

Despite the fact that the majority of the country is Shiite, the Sunnis have for several generations dominated the country, sometimes co-opting Christian support. As a consequence, the Shiites have felt themselves seriously repressed. This led to a Shiite uprising in the south in 1991 following the Gulf War, which was brutally put down. The Hussein regime murdered many Shiite clerics and leaders. Shiite resentment and hostility have grown over the last decade.

Two key political questions arise as the new Iraq emerges. The first is whether the numerically dominant Shiite majority will be open to full political collaboration with the Sunni and Christian minorities, or whether Shiites will seek opportunities for dominance, a prospect feared by Sunnis and Christians. The second question concerns the strength and ideologies of Islamist political movements, particularly Shiite, that have asserted themselves in recent weeks. Some of these movements have been able to mobilize mass demonstrations, but the depth of their support is unclear. A related question is the nature of the ties between these Shiite Islamist movements and the Shiite Islamist regime in Iran.

On May 21, 2003, the U.S. Institute of Peace hosted a symposium on [religious politics in Iraq](#) to address these questions. The presenters were Graham Fuller, author of *The Future of Political Islam* and co-author of *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*; [Faleh Jabar](#), lecturer at London Metropolitan University, author of *The Shiite Movement in Iraq*, and editor of *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq*; Rend Rahim Francke, founding executive director of the Iraq Foundation and co-author of *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*; and Kenneth Katzman of the Congressional Research Service and author of *Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard*. The symposium 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.

#### Shiite Islamist Movements

It is clear that Islamist movements will play a major role in the future of Iraq's politics, particularly among the Shiites. But it would be a mistake to view Shiite society as a monolith. First, many Shiites are Shiites by background and ethnicity but are secular in orientation. Second, there are at least three forms of religiosity: the clerical class oriented toward Sharia (Islamic law) and jurisprudence; popular religiosity; and the Islamist movements. Relations are often tense among these three communities. Moreover, there are

rivalries and conflicts among the Shiite communities based in key cities like Najaf, Karabala, and Nassiriya. There are also several competing Shiite Islamist movements, including the various fragments of the Dawa party, the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and a movement led by the young Muqtada Sadr. The political agendas of the various movements range from advocacy of theocracy to assurance that Islam is respected by any future Iraq government and that clerics will have influence. Some observers see the possibility of armed conflict among these rival Islamist groups, since they all have armed wings. On the other hand, militating against conflict becoming violent are the many interlinkages, including family ties and mentor/student relationships, among the leaders of the various movements.

It is not clear how widespread support is among Iraq's Shiites for one or another of the Islamist movements. Some of the most prominent Shiite clerics, like Grand Ayatollah Ali Muhammad Sistani, have not endorsed any of the Islamist movements, believing that clerics should stand apart from and above politics.

Of the various Shiite Islamist movements, SCIRI seems to be the best organized, the best funded, and the most politically astute. At least one panelist predicted that SCIRI under the leadership of Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim will emerge as the predominant political force in the new Iraq. The considerable support SCIRI receives from Iran is a major reason for its strength. The most important plank in its political program will probably be opposition to foreign domination and occupation rather than clerical rule, and this opposition will focus on the U.S. presence in Iraq. The ascendance of Islamist movements, several panelists stressed, by no means necessarily implies Iranian-style clerical rule in Iraq.

Much attention has been focused on the young Muqtada al-Sadr, who has capitalized on the widespread respect accorded his father, Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, prior to his murder by the Baathist regime in 1999. While some of those who supported his father have transferred that loyalty to Muqtada, the consensus of the presenters is that the young al-Sadr is not likely to remain a significant political force. He has been able to mobilize street demonstrations, but the demonstrators do not seem to be strong supporters and could abandon him at any time. Muqtada al-Sadr does not seem highly ideological. He stands for Islamic militancy but sees clerics in an advisory role, not as Iraq's future political leaders.

The Dawa party, one of the panelists noted, is too fragmented to constitute a serious current political force.

### **Sunni Islamists**

Religious politics among the Sunnis are much less clearly defined. The Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood has reemerged but its program and level of support are not yet clear. One presenter asserted that the Muslim Brotherhood could over time become a major factor in Iraqi politics. While this is primarily an Arab movement, there are also Islamist movements among the Sunni Kurds, one of which engaged in armed attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan in recent years.

Just as Iran takes considerable interest in Shiite Islamist movements, so there is evidence of Saudi efforts to promote Wahabism among Iraqi Sunnis. Reciprocally, the strengthening of both Sunni and Shiite Islamists in Iraq will have repercussions for regional geopolitical balance.

There is the possibility of collaboration between Shiite and Sunni Islamist movements, but it seems more likely that the Shiite movements will focus on a Shiite agenda with little interreligious collaboration. Thus the Islamist movements will generally not transcend ethnic and sectarian lines.

### **Role of Christians**

The ascendance of Islamist parties in Iraq will not necessarily entail a threat to the interests of Iraq's Christians, but many Christians are nervous about their future. One particular danger is that Islamist attacks on the supposed moral laxity of the West in the context of the American occupation might be directed at Iraq's Christians, who could be seen as the local surrogates for the western/Christian world.

## Role of Secular Parties and of Secularism

Secular politics is emerging very slowly, despite the preference that American officials have shown for placing secular Iraqis in leadership positions. The secular parties have no institutions comparable to mosques to mobilize either supporters or financial resources. But, according to several of the panelists, secular political leaders will assert themselves and support for secular parties will grow. The Kurds are particularly likely to support secular parties and the principal Kurdish parties are secular in orientation. The Kurds are unlikely to countenance an Islamist government in Baghdad, and this could seriously inhibit the ascendance of a strident Islamist party.

There is widespread misunderstanding of secularism in Iraq, particularly among Islamists, who are inclined to consider a secular state as one hostile to religion, rather than being religiously neutral. Education on this point is required. In the preparation of the Iraqi constitution, special attention needs to be given to how to balance religious and secular perspectives.

Multi-party democratic pluralism is the key to the containment of all forms of extremism in Iraq, both secular and religious.

## Iran's Influence

The panelists agreed on the close ties that exist between the various Islamist movements and Iran, particularly with SCIRI. The years spent by many Iraqi Shiite clerics in Iran in exile and Iran's supply of arms and money are very significant. But the panelists disagreed about how relations with Iran are likely to evolve over time as well as what Iran's program for Iraq might be. One panelist sees these ties as remaining very strong, to the point that a future Islamist government in Iraq might receive significant aid for a nuclear program from the Islamist government in Iran. But the other panelists were less concerned. One panelist said that Iran's principal interest is not in supporting the development of an Iranian style clerical state in Iraq, but rather the development of an Iraqi government that would not be a threat to Iran. Iran's particular desire is to avoid the establishment of American military bases in Iraq. Another panelist anticipated that Iraqi clerics will slowly separate themselves from Iran, with traditional Iran/Iraq religious rivalries reemerging.

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan, national institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent international conflicts, promote post-conflict stability and democratic transformations, and increase peacebuilding capacity, tools, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in peacebuilding efforts around the globe.

## Of Related Interest

- [Religious Politics in Iraq - Part II](#)  
Event, December 2003 (Summary, Video & Audio)
- [Iraq's Constitutional Process II: An Opportunity Lost](#)
- [Iran and Iraq: The Shia Connection, Soft Power, and the Nuclear Factor](#)
- [Islamist Politics in Iraq after Saddam Hussein](#)
- [Islam and Democracy](#)

This USIPeace Briefing was written by [David Smock](#), director of the Institute's [Religion and Peacemaking Initiative](#). The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan, national institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent international conflicts, promote post-conflict stability and democratic transformations, and increase peacebuilding capacity, tools, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute

does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in peacebuilding efforts around the globe.

[See our complete list of USIPeace Briefings.](#)

United States Institute of Peace - 1200 17th Street NW - Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 457-1700 (phone) - (202) 429-6063 (fax)