Iraq - Twelver (Ithna'ashari) Shi’as

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Profile

Twelver (Ithna'ashari) Shi’as form about 60-65 per cent of the population, but under the Ba'athists they were consistently denied power as a community. Yet it is a mistake to consider the Shi’as simply as alienated from the state or from the ruling Sunni community. On the contrary, the Shi’as wanted to play the full role within the state. Thus their aim was quite different from the Kurds who sought autonomy. At the end of the day, the Shi’as are also Arabs and the ‘war’ between them and Sunnis is more due to the history of both communities and the privileges Sunnis enjoyed at the expense of the Shi’as during the Saddam Hussein era that have exacerbated those tensions.

Historical context

Shi’as only became a majority in the twentieth century, almost fortuitously. Although the birth of Shi’ism is associated with Najaf and Karbala, these two cities were of minor importance until Persian Shi’a clerics sought refuge there during the Afghan occupation of Persia, 1722-1763. With Wahhabi attacks (see Saudi Arabia), these clerics consciously sought the conversion of the nominally Sunni nomadic tribes to Shi’ism. The growing economic importance of the two cities, the subsequent diversion of the Euphrates via the Hindiya canal, and Ottoman tribal policy all made agricultural settlement around the two cities attractive to many nomadic tribes. With settlement, tribes underwent structural change, chiefs depending increasingly on a new class of sayyids, men claiming descent from the Prophet, who acted as arbitrators and religious foci for tribal groups. By the beginning of the 20th century virtually all settled tribes of central and southern Iraq had embraced Shi’ism. Culturally, their faith differed from that in Iran, since it retained a strong Arab dimension.
By the turn of the twentieth century the Shi'a clergy had emerged as a coherent political leadership, which raised volunteer forces to help resist the infidel (British) invasion of south Iraq and, once under British occupation, also organized the only widespread rebellion against it in 1920. In both cases this leadership acted in solidarity with Sunnis, not against them. It even welcomed the idea of a Hashemite (Sunni) ruler in 1919.

It was precisely the Shi'a leadership's ability to mobilize the masses that worried successive Sunni administrations in Baghdad. Both the British and the Hashemites deliberately sought to detach the Shi'a religious leadership from politics, encouraging landlords and tribal chiefs as a form of alternative leadership. Najaf and Karbala were deliberately neglected.

Following the 1958 revolution, other factors came into play. The new ruler, Qasim, upheld Iraqi as opposed to Arab nationalism. This suited some Shi'a, for the Shi'a were a slight majority in Iraq but barely 10 per cent of the Arab world. In addition, pan-Arab nationalism offended many of the more religiously observant Shi'a on account of its secularism. Pan-Arab nationalism also tended to feel Sunni in character to Shi'a, just as it tended to feel Islamic to Arab Christians.

Arab and Iraqi nationalism, however, both carried a strong whiff of secularism. In 1957 several clergy of Najaf founded a clandestine party, to become known as al-Da'wa al-Islamiya (The Call), primarily to warn Muslims of the growing secularist danger. From 1968 a clash was inevitable between a regime that identified with the secular left and an organization established to advance the Shi'a.

It was also inevitable that the Ba'ath should renew the efforts of previous regimes to neutralize any Shi'a religious intrusions into state politics. In 1974 the regime executed five leading clerics as a warning. At the Islamic festival of Ashura in 1977, major protests at government interference took place in Najaf and Karbala, and eight Shi'a leaders were executed and hundreds imprisoned as another warning.

Throughout the 1970s the government also expelled those 'of Iranian origin'. In the first census after 1918 the population had been required to state either Ottoman or Iranian origin. Fifty years later the Ba'ath traced approximately 200,000 Kurdish (Faili) and Arab Shi'a descendants and expelled them to Iran.

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 inevitably excited Shi'a expectations – not of Iranian triumph over Iraq but of Islam over the forces of tyrannical secularism. The Da'wa party openly hailed the revolution. As the war of words between Iran and Iraq grew in early 1980, Saddam Hussein sent another warning to the Shi'a community to stay out of politics: he executed the Da'wa party leader, Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr. Baqir al-Sadr had been the only Arab among the eight senior clerics of Shi'a Islam. His execution was therefore also intended to undermine Najaf and Karbala as centres of Shi'a learning. Membership of Da'wa was made a capital offence, and suspects were executed or imprisoned. Yet, if anything demonstrated that the Shi'a community was first and foremost Arab, it was that it provided the majority of troops in the long and bloody war with Iran. It did not rebel.
Following Iraq’s defeat in Kuwait in 1991, the Shi’a of south Iraq rose with American encouragement, in the hope that the army was already so badly demoralized it would abandon Saddam Hussein. That they lacked organization and leadership was indicative of the way the regime had undermined and largely destroyed the traditional clerical leadership. Like the Kurds in the north, they were now defeated as Saddam Hussein's forces committed wholesale slaughter without regard to age or sex, and destroyed the shrines and libraries of Shi’iism in both Najaf and Karbala. This was not mindless violence. It was the deliberate destruction of Shi’a learning in Iraq, a logical conclusion to government policy since the 1920s. There had been 2,000 clerics and theological students in Najaf in 1958 (a paltry figure compared with the 180,000 in Iran on the eve of revolution in 1979), which had steadily diminished to only 800 by 1991. Most of the 800, many of them foreign students, now disappeared.

Shi’a resistance continued in the Marshes by Shi’a rebels, army deserters and the inhabitants, the Mada’in. The latter had always been held in low esteem by other Shi’as but now they became heroic martyrs in the struggle against a godless and anti-Shi’a regime. In order to defeat them Saddam dug a major canal to drain the marshes – in the words of the UN monitor; 'the environmental crime of the century'. Just as the provision of water to Najaf proved a major factor in the growth of Shi’ism in south Iraq some 150 years ago, the destruction of the Marshes alongside the destruction of Najaf's libraries intended to bring about an irreversible decline in Iraqi Shi’ism.

Current issues

With the March 2003 invasion of Iraq and toppling of the Hussein regime, the Shi’a Arab majority appeared content to await the post-Hussein transition that would cede them control of the country, and refrained from large-scale retaliation against Sunni Arab attacks until coming to power in the January 2005 elections. Following those elections, Shi’a militants associated with the Iranian-backed Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its Badr Organization, played a major role in the Interior Ministry and committed numerous indiscriminate attacks on Sunni civilians. In November 2005, US forces discovered an underground detention and torture facility run by the Shi’a-dominated Interior Ministry in Baghdad. Although such developments point to the Shi’a numerical majority becoming politically dominant and repressive of non-Shi’a minorities, many Shi’a remain under threat by Sunni and other militants.

This is particularly true of Shi’a living as localized minorities outside of the South – notably in Baghdad and other large cities of mixed sectarian and ethnic composition. Sunni Arab militants have targeted police stations and police recruits in retaliation for Shi’a Arab militia attacks, and to discourage cooperation with the government and international troops. Shi’a militias have been unwilling to disarm because they say their communities would then be endangered by the Sunni insurgency, but these in turn encourage Sunni Arab militancy. The 22 February 2006 bombing of a Shi’a shrine in Samarra set off a particularly fierce round of sectarian violence, the worst of which came in such mixed Sunni-Shi’a Arab areas of the country as Baghdad, Tel Afar and Diyala. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported in September
2006 that Shi’a Arabs were fleeing Sunni Arab-dominated central Iraqi governates of Anbar and Salah al Din, as well as the mixed governate of Baghdad for the majority Shi’a Arab southern governates. This paralleled Sunni migration in the opposite direction. IOM also reported high rates of movement by Shi’a and Sunni Arabs into segregated towns and neighbourhoods within the mixed governates of Baghdad and Diyala.

Factional fighting within the Shi’a community has contributed significantly to the general threat of violence to Shi’a civilians. This fighting increased in March 2008 when Iraqi Prime Minister al Maliki ordered the army to crack down on the Mahdi Army, a Shi’a militia led by Moqtada al Sadr in the southern city of Basra. In response, Sadr threatened to end the cease-fire he had declared in August 2007, and which had been widely credited for a larger lull in violence in Iraq.

The Shia-dominated government led by Nouri Al-Maliki also alienated many Sunnis, leading to large-scale protests and violent resistance. This discontent has propelled the rise of militant Sunni groups, especially the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which later shortened its name to the Islamic State (IS). Fuelled by gains made in neighbouring Syria, IS and allied groups have engaged in systematic campaigns of violence against Shia Muslims and religious minorities. Shi’a communities have been targeted by IS militants during its 2014 offense in northern Iraq, resulting in kidnappings, displacement, the destruction of homes and mosques, and hundreds of executions.