

Emerging forces in and around Iraq

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As the political fallout of the US invasion of Iraq gathers momentum not only within Iraq but also in the Middle East/Gulf region, one may well see a totally new power configuration in that region over the next few years, through the push for democracy. Equally important, this configuration may run counter to what the US is seeking to impose on the region, since it will involve the resurgence of a new politico-religious interplay within the Muslim states located there. Ironically, what the US has been diligently trying to prevent - an Iranian-type revolution bringing to power a dedicated religious force - may come into play because of the US Middle East policy, including the invasion of Iraq.

So what will the probable power configuration be?

To begin with, the US invasion of Iraq has, ironically, undermined the secular forces within the states of the region - especially where they happened to be in power. Despite resort to Islamic symbolism in the latter part of his rule, Saddam's regime was premised on a secular creed which denied the majority Shias political power. Now, as one is witnessing, having been rid of Saddam's oppression, the Shias of Iraq have come to the fore. Attempts by the US to impose its own version of Shia leaders on the Iraqis have not worked so far and there seems little hope for this to work in the future. The murder of Abdel Majid al-Khoei, almost on arrival from England into Iraq, shows the botched US plan to impose a "secular" Shia leader (he had called for separation of state and mosque) onto the Iraqi populace.

Of course there are rival leadership groups within the Iraqi Shias, but with the return of Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim from Iran into Iraq there is a coalescing of the mainstream Shias under him. Interestingly, on arrival in Iraq he moderated his views on what he envisioned for the country - declaring that he did not wish to copy Iran's revolution. Unlike the secular Iraqi exiles propagated by the US, like Chalabi, Al-Hakim made an immediate connect with the Iraqi people who turned out in a massive show of force to welcome his return to Iraq. For the future it is clear that he will be the major force for the US to reckon with - even though the US had tried to tentatively court him because of his opposition to Saddam.

It seems clear that whatever the future shape of an Iraqi government, if democracy is the criteria, the Shias of Iraq will be a dominant force and the new Iraqi state will, at a minimum level, have an Islamic colouring. Nor would this be divisive for Iraq since the Shias would prefer to see a united Iraqi state with them as the major political force rather than seeking a split country with only the southern part under their political control. Of course, it may well suit US interests to effectively split Iraq into three segments under a veneer of unity so as to undermine the natural rise of the Iraqi majority under an all-encompassing democracy.

Beyond Iraq, the US has been sounding warning signals to neighbouring Syria - another Muslim state under a secular regime. US efforts to weaken the Ba'ath regime in Syria also threatens the survival of secularism in that state. Of course, for the US the aim is to undermine states that give substantive support to the Palestinians. Along with Iraq and Iran, the Syrian regime has been a strong support base for the Palestinians.

The Syrian ruling party cannot afford to entertain any theocratic notions since the party represents the minority Alawi sect. Despite their minority status, the Alawis predominate within the Establishment. Although the Shias in Syria comprise only 17 % of the population, their prestige rose after the revolution in Iran and Syria's alliance with Iran during the latter's war with Iraq. Also, the Hizbollah factor has accentuated the Iran-Syria link. The Shias in Syria also look to Najaf, apart from Iran, for spiritual succour. Then there is also the Sunni majority within which the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al Muslimin) comprising an amalgam of religious organisations challenged the power of the state which culminated in the insurrection at Aleppo in 1980 and in Hamah in February 1982. The government responded with force, killing between 10,000 - 25,000 civilians. However, in 1985, the government declared an amnesty for the Muslim Brotherhood members and released many of them from prison. Post-the Hamah uprising, the extremist Sunni groups have been dissipated and do not present a threat to the Ba'ath regime but any weakening of the regime will undermine the secular state structures.

Moving on to the Gulf region, the Saudi Ruling family is also threatened with instability after the US withdrawal of forces as well as the general cooling of US-Saudi relations. The re-location of these forces in a neighbouring Gulf state may also create tensions amongst these states, leading to further destabilisation of the prevailing status quo in that region.



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Saudi Arabia also has a 15 % Shia population, primarily in the northeast. In February 2003, while attending a conference in London, this writer heard from some Gulf-watchers that the US was aiding the exiled leadership of the Saudi Shias. The Saudi Shias have tended to have a tenuous relationship with the Ruling family, especially after the Iranian revolution. However, in 1993 (October), an agreement was reached between the Ruling family and the exiled Saudi Shia leadership and the latter agreed to stop resistance abroad in exchange for more liberties in Saudi Arabia with the Saudi Ruling family committing to seriously examining the issue of discrimination against the Shias within the state. But this agreement suffered as a result of the 1996 bomb attack against US soldiers stationed in Dhahran's Al-Khobar Towers, with the US blaming the Shias and the Shias complaining that none of the points of the agreement were being implemented. The Saudi government also resumed its constraints on the Shia religious leadership. In April 2000, members of the Ismaili sect clashed with police in Najran, near the Yemenese border, on a religious-freedom-related issue. And, even more unprecedented, on April 18, 2003, some Shia clergy issued a joint public statement welcoming the demise of the Saddam regime.

For Saudi Arabia's Ruling family, the post-Saddam scenario, therefore, presents some critical problems internally and within its immediate region. For instance, in neighbouring Yemen, the Shias form a large minority - comprising 36% of the population. And in another neighbour of Saudi Arabia's, Bahrain, the Shias comprise the majority - 65% of the population. Being a predominantly Shia entity with a Sunni Ruling family, post-the Iranian revolution the resentment of the majority Shias became more acute against the Bahraini Ruler. The state's response was punitive with the arrest not only of the religious activists but also some secular opposition figures - many of them being sent into exile. In 1994, the Shias began a political reform campaign that led to a strong government response of a crackdown. But in more recent times there has been recognition by the Ruling family of a need to compromise with the majority population and so, in 2000, the Bahraini Ruler, Shaikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, began a gradual programme of liberalisation and a referendum was held in February 2001 to approve the new National Charter. In November 2002, the King appointed Majid al-Alawi, a member of the Shia community, as Minister for Labour and Social Affairs. This was recognition of the growing power of the majority Shia population in this Arab kingdom.

In the other Sheikdoms of the Gulf also, the Shias comprise substantive minorities, with 30% in Kuwait, 40% in Lebanon, 16% in UAE and 12% in Qatar. In Oman an offshoot of the Shia sect, the Ibadi sect, comprises 75% of the population, including the Ruling family. That may make Oman a more steady US military ally as long as the ruling family and the US are linked together.

So, all in all, having adopted a pre-emptive interventionist policy in the Middle East, the US will unleash forces that will give a stronger theocratic flavour to the states of the region - and what the US needs to realise is that Iran will become a more powerful player even without direct intervention in these states. This is because the Shias look to Iran for spiritual support - even if it is symbolic. This does not mean that they look to Iran for political guidance also since nationalism is a strong component of the various religious groups, but the intermix of religion and politics, which will intensify as a result of US policies, will radicalise the region. And making pacts with groups earlier identified as terrorists, like the MKO, will not serve any purpose in terms of undermining the Shia linkages to Iran - just as US threats for regime change in Iran will not undermine Iran's spiritual linkages to the Shias of the region.

Ironically, at a spiritual level, the new Shia forces in Iraq, if given their rightful democratic space, may provide the only other spiritual support base outside of Iran - through Najaf. So a post-Saddam independent Iraq will also become a major player in the region, but this time there will be a theocratic tinge at least, to the power base within the country.

Therefore it is in the interests of the international community not only to learn to understand the rising tide of populist Islam - just as it is having to understand an aggressive unilateralist super power - but also to reject the myth of "Islamic terrorism" and accept the political nature of terrorism worldwide. The US may deconstruct political edifices with its military aggression, but it cannot reconstruct alternatives through force. The limitations to military power are being exposed in the Middle East region as new dynamics come into play.

The views expressed by the writer are her own