Our New Religious Politics

Tracking the Religion Gap  •  American Protestants in Decline
Sunni Clergy in Iraq  •  What the Bleep?  •  And more...
The emergence of a powerful Sunni Arab insurgency in north central Iraq may have shocked the Bush administration, but it has been the involvement of Sunni religious leaders in the insurgency that has taken many long-time observers of Iraqi politics by surprise. In contrast to Shi'ite mullahs and ayatollahs, whose political aspirations were a familiar feature of Iraqi politics, Sunni Arab clerics had always tended to be apolitical and subordinate to the state. Shortly after the American invasion, however, a strong Sunni political presence began to emerge. On April 23, 2003, both the New York Times and the Boston Globe reported on the re-establishment of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), an organization that was originally formed in 1969 but banned the following year by the country's military rulers.

"We stand for human rights, for helping people, for rebuilding our country," an IIP member told the Globe's Elizabeth Neuffer. The party cooperated with U.S.-led governing bodies until last November's siege of Fallujah, when it announced it was pulling out of the provisional Iraqi government and boycotting elections in protest.

Meanwhile, during the first, abortive siege of Fallujah last spring, the international media began reporting on the activities of a group of Sunni Arab clergy calling themselves the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS). The initial story was that insurgents had released a dozen hostages in apparent response to an edict from the AMS condemning hostage-taking.

In a May 10 report in U.S. News and World Report, correspondent Bay Fang, noting that the AMS had been founded a year earlier, quoted spokesman Muhammad Bashir al-Fayydi to the effect that the organization was just a "religious advisory group," not a political party. It had undertaken to serve as the voice of the political opposition because most Iraqi groups had joined the Iraqi Governing Council that had been organized by the United States' Coalition Provisional Authority. "We have always said, if politicians do come out, when security is more stable, we are happy to go back to the mosques," al-Fayydi said.

Over the summer, the AMS appeared to become ever more strongly involved in the insurgents. On September 26, the Pittsburgh Post Gazette published a piece by Borouz Daragahi that began: "For Sheikh Muhammad Ali Mohanmad Ghereeri, a Sunni Muslim cleric, the question is no longer whether to tell his fellow Iraqis to fight the Americans, but how to wage war properly. Identified as member of the AMS, Ghereeri declared that the 'holy warriors should have a clerical leader with them to advise them on all points, such as how to properly treat the Americans they capture.'

Meanwhile, during the period when Fallujah was under insurgent control, the leader of the city's governing body of clerics, tribal leaders, and former Baathists (known as the Majlis Shura li-1-Mujahideen, or Advisory Jihadist Council) was another Sunni cleric, 55-year-old Abdullah Jalabi. "We still have our strength, our force and ammunition, and the battle is long, very long," Jalabi said to the Washington Post's Anthony Shadid after the November assault on the city. "And we will turn Iraq into one big Fallujah." As these stories indicate, Western journalists have over the past year regularly noted the political involvement of Sunni clerics. What has been missing is any concerted effort to determine who these clerics are and to explain their rise to political prominence following the destruction of Saddam Hussein's regime. Doing so requires a glance at the history of religion and politics in the modern Iraqi state.

Shiite clergy actively opposed the British invasion of Iraq during World War I and were also active in the June-October 1920 revolt against British colonial rule. This activity, which marked the beginning of ongoing Shiite efforts to gain political power in Iraq, is evidence of the extent to which Shiites, historically lacking power and suspicious of state authority, had institutionalized communal leadership in their clerical elite. By contrast, Sunni Arabs maintained their traditional privileged position in national political and economic life after the Iraqi state's formation in 1921. Members of the Sunni clergy became state employees. Not surprisingly, most of them—under both the Hashemite monarchy, which ruled Iraq from 1921 to 1958, and subsequent republican regimes—did not actively involve themselves in politics, either ideologically or in terms of political organization.

They were content to enjoy the largesse of a state that, except during the brief rule of Abul Karim Qasim (1958-1963), was dominated by Sunni Arabs. In return, they helped legitimate the state, especially in the Sunni Arab areas of Iraq. Under Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, which tried to prohibit all mixing
of religion and politics, the only expres-
sion of politics through a religious idiom
came from elements of the Shiite clergy —
and at their peril. In the late 1970s and
early 1980s, the al-Dawa (Islamic Party) 
practiced in the late 1980s, was 
hardly repressed. In April of 1980, Sad
dam executed Musa Bayqir al-
Sadiri, a leading Shiite intellectual and reli-
gious authority whose followers had founded a new Islamic political party. 
In the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. U.S.
A. economic sanctions helped spur a
Tunis towards religion" in the Sunni Arab
community. The sanctions — which
caused great suffering among all sectors
of Iraqi society aside from privileged
parts of the Ba’athist elite — were especial-
ly difficult for members of the urban mid-
dle class, who were often forced to sell
their possessions to survive. To offset
these political and social discontent, 
Sadikin’s regime encouraged the reli-
gious turn.

In fact, Sadikin’s “Islamization” of
Iraqi society began even before the Gulf
War, when the slogan “God is Great”
(Ala-sta’la Allahu) was added to the Iraqi flag.

After the war, Sadikin instituted “Islamic punishments” as part of Iraqi criminal
law, including amputations for robbery
and a ban on the sale of alcohol. He also
devoted large amounts of money to building
huge mosques in Baghdad (e.g. the
“Mother of All Battles” Mosque), as well
as to repairing a multitude of mosques and
shrines in the Shiite shrines cities of al-
Najaf and Karbala.

With the creation of a new Sunni
theological seminary called Saddam
University, the Ba’athist regime effective-
ly legitimized religious discourse on a
wide range of issues. But far from
increasing support for the Ba’athist regime, this encouraged Sunni Islamists to express
religious sentiments that related
to the public sphere, not merely to
the more private domains of mosque
and family. Even though they avoided overt
discussion of political issues, the potential
for political action on their part was noted
by Pakistani journalist Syed Saleem
Shahzaad in a prescient article entitled “A
Third Force Awaits U.S. in Iraq” in the
March 1, 2003 Asia Times Online.

After the American invasion in April
2003, the Sunni Arab community found itself
in the new and uncomfortable posi-
tion of no longer possessing privileged
political access to the state, whether by
way of the government bureaucracy, the
armed forces, the police, or the intelli-
gen services. Stigmatized by associa-
tion with the ousted regime, it felt it had lit-
tle to look forward to in the new Iraq.

This was especially true of the lower
middle classes in the rural towns of the
“Sunni Triangle” north and west of
Baghdad, whose populace had looked to
government largesse to offset an econom-
ic decline that began even before the area’s
traditional trade relations with the Levant were disrupted by the collapse of the
Ottoman Empire in 1918. The poli-
cies of the Coalition Provisional
Authority (CPA) that the United States
established to administer post-Saddam
Iraq, and the composition of the Iraqi
Interim Governing Council (IGC), did
little to reassure their fears.

Not wanting to alienate the majority
Shiites or the pro-American Kurds in the
north, the CPA made little effort to assure
Sunni Arabs that they would have a sig-
ficant political role in the new Iraq.
Those who were appointed to the IGC,
such as the highly respected lawyer,
Adnan Pachachi, were largely expanded
and not part of the Sunni Arab main-
stream.

As post-Ba’athist politics began to
shape, the ideological options avail-
able to the Sunni Arab community were
limited. Ba’athism — secular and Arab
nationalism in orientation — was now thor-
oughly discredited, even though many
time Ba’athists remained visible throughout
the Sunni Triangle. Although the Iraqi
Communist Party, which had always
included Sunni Arabs, was able to reor-
ganize quickly after Saddam’s collapse,
communism as such held little appeal,
and in any event was associated in the
minds of many Sunni Arabs with Shias,
Kurds, and other minority groups. As for
Western liberalism, it was identified with
the United States and its expatriate allies
such as Ahmad Chalabi, and thus also
viewed with suspicion.

As a result, the postwar power vacu-
um favored the emergence of Islamist
organizations that had remained under-
ground during Ba’athist rule. This was
especially true in light of the success of
the Maliki Army led by the 30-year-old
Shia cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr (nephew of
Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and son of
another popular cleric, Muhammad
Sadik al-Sadr) in challenging United
States authority in Iraq.

The most important of the Sunni
Arab Islamist organizations to emerge
either after the defeat of Saddam was the
Iraqi Islamic Party (HIP), which had been
half a century earlier as the Iraqi
branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. A
moderate Sunni Islamic party created in
Egypt in 1958, the Brotherhood was the
most prestigious of the Arab world’s first
Islamist organizations and was able to
establish branches throughout the Arab
world, especially after its participation in
the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. However, it
never acquired significant power in Iraq’s
Sunni community.

The head of the IIP is Muhsin Ab-
Hamid, a Kurd born in 1937 in Kirkuk
and a widely published author on matters
relating to the Qur’an. Ab Hamid
completed his doctorate in 1972 at Caire
University, where he no doubt came
to contact with Egypt’s Islamist movement,
which grew in strength after Gamal
Nasser’s death in September 1970.

Given a place on the Iraqi
Governing Council (IGC) by the CPA,
the IIP was in fact the only organization
seen as legitimately representing the
Sunni Arab community. Yet its role was
considered more as window dressing than
anything else, and it maintained very
ambivalent feelings towards the
American occupation. Following the U.S.
invasion of Fallujah in November, it with-
drew from participation in the Interim
Iraqi Government.

Less ambivalent in its opposition to
the occupation has been the Association
of Muslim Scholars (AMS). Its leader is
the 67-year-old cleric Shaykh Ahmad al-Khubaysi. After Sadrists' kill, Al-Khubaysi returned from a five-year exile in Dubai, supposedly with financial support from Arab governments, and perhaps even initially from the United States, all in the interest of creating a religious counterweight to Shiite political power—according to reports in the London Daily Telegraph, The Washington Post, and the London-based Arabic newspaper Al-Ikhbar.

Said to be linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, Al Khubaysi has been highly critical of the American administration in Iraq, and has not been shy about expressing his views in his newspaper, Al-Sadrist. In the June 9, 2004 edition, Al-Khubaysi was quoted as saying: "Iraq is infected with several dangerous ailments, first of which is the occupation that wants to steal our land, our culture, and our existence. The occupation also wants to steal our honor, as you heard from the shameful about what happened in its jails." He is known, as well, for his popular talks shows and lectures on several Iraqi Arab-oriented television stations.

Foes of a political party known as the United National Movement, he pledged in August of 2005 to work with the ICG but did not, and remained critical of it and the occupation generally.

Last September, the interim Iraqi government banned Al-Khubaysi from returning to Iraq reportedly because of his ties to Sunni militants. It was claimed that he gave $50 million to Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr to fund the latter's militant activities in 2003—a charge both al-Khubaysi and al-Sadr denied.

Despite the reports of foreign support, the AMS has emphasized its opposition to foreigners who have entered Iraq to fight American forces, alongside its strong rejection of the U.S. occupation. Indeed, the organization is far from monolithic.

It has condemned suicide bombings, kidnappings, and beheadings by Iraqi militants, and as the Sunni Arab insurgency increased in intensity it became increasingly vocal about the loss of Iraqi lives. At the same time, however, some AMS members have issued statements supporting the violent actions of insurgents against American and ICG forces.

For example, the group's deputy spokesman, Abd al-Sattar Abd al-Jabbar, condoned the killing of 12 Nepalese hostages in August by saying that anyone who works with the occupation should be considered part of the occupation. Asked by Al-Jazeera television to comment on the standoff between multinational forces and militants loyal to Shiite cleric Mucadda al-Sadr, Abd al-Jabbar responded by saying that U.S. troops and the Iraqi government did not want a solution, but rather wanted "to destroy Iraq."

Hostile as it is towards the United States, the AMS may represent a force for positive change in the current Iraqi political equation. It has enabled Sunni Arabs to acquire a sense of political empowerment by giving them a vehicle through which they can express their discontent. At the same time, it has helped offset sectarianism by calling for cooperation between the Sunni and Shiites Arab communities.

Then there are the more radical political organizations—often referred to as jihadi or Wahhabi—that profess a religious ideology within the Sunni Arab community. These include Jaysh Ansar al-Sunnah (The Army of the Followers of the Sunnah), which claimed responsibility for the deadly bombing of a U.S. army base in Mosul December 21, as well as al-Jaysh al-Islami (the Islamic Army), al-Jaysh al-Siri (the Secret Army), Musawarat al-Akhoon al-Ansawi (the Black Banners Organization), Kata ib Aba Bakr as-Sidqi (the Abu Bakr as-Sidqi Brigades), and Usama al-Nahrawi (the Lions of the Two Rivers), and Luqat al-Fallujah (the Fallujah Brigades). It is not clear how much support, if any, these organizations have within the Sunni Arab community. Indeed, the Iraq Prospect Organization, a pro-democracy group, argued in a November 19, 2004 report that the Sunni insurgency was almost entirely run by ex-Baathists rather than jihadi, as had been thought by many. Abb Al-Sueir is the leader of Sunni Arab support for foreign fighters belonging to the al-Tawheed wa-Jihad (Unity and Holy War) organization of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, which has received so much attention from the Bush administration and the news media. Even as the numbers and influence of foreign fighters remain uncertain, there have been tensions between them and tribal and urban notables in cities like Fallujah where the foreigners have set up bases of operations.

In Fallujah, the3urselling of political power by insurgents, such as via the establishment of a Mujahideen Advisory Council and renaming the city the "Amirate of Fallujah," created consternation among the city's populace and notables, who often found their business continued on page 24...
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combat. It was Falwell and company who began the process of turning white evangelicals into a solid Republican voting bloc. In 2004 the GOP fully embraced the idea that churches and synagogues of all sorts were where to go for votes.

The party's success with religious voters as a whole was brought about this past year by the discovery, via campaign ads, that the more observant voters are the more likely it is that they will vote Republican, and that the less observant they are the more likely it is that they will vote Democratic. Although journalistic shorthand has tended to use what is only

a religion gap to caricature Republicans as pro-religion and Democrats as anti-religion, little attention has been paid to the two parties will divide their appeal on these religious lines for the foreseeable future.

Here have been religious crusades in American politics before. The prohibition of alcohol was one, and the abolition of slavery another. But neither was tied to one political party, and in each it was generally acknowledged that both sides prayed, as Lincoln said, "to the same God." Even if they prayed for different things.

The civil rights movement, the most successful religious crusade of recent times, traded heavily in the inclusive civil religious rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Congress passed for its success on the votes of northern Republicans as well as Democrats.

Today, in a culture war based on such issues as abortion, stem cell research, embryonic stem-cell research, human cloning, and euthanasia (to use the list of "non-negotiable" items in a widely distributed Catholic voter's guide), the religious politics has begun to look suspiciously like what Toucqueville wanted his countrymen to shun. There is the Party of Separation and the Party of Faith-based—or, as a GI in Baghdad told NPR in explaining her vote for Bush: "He's a Christian Republican and I'm a Christian Republican."

How odd it is that George W. Bush should be the instrument for bringing French-style political religion to these shores.