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Shi'i Separatism in Iraq
Internet Reverie or Real Constitutional Challenge?

Reidar Visser

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Abstract

This paper deals with non-conformist ideas among Iraqi Shi'is about the territorial integrity of the modern state of Iraq.

Two findings are presented. First, new Internet communications technology has enabled radical Shi'is outside the main clerical, intellectual and political establishments to propagate visions of an independent Shi'i state for the areas south of Baghdad, a scheme that runs counter to a robust and long-standing anti-separatist tradition among wider sections of the Shi'i community. Secondly, by choosing the Internet as their primary modus operandi, the Shi'i separatists also expose their relative weakness vis-à-vis other and less radical trends in Iraqi Shi'i society.

In the Iraqi political process there is a need for a more realistic approach to what is seen as the "menace" of "Shi'i separatism". The evidence from the Internet suggests that, as of August 2005, advocates of outright secession are still peripheral to the Shi'i community as a whole, and that there are fairly good prospects for the Shi'is staying committed to the framework of a unified Iraq – albeit a decentralised and probably federalised one. At the same time, there are notable areas of rhetorical convergence between the Internet separatists and two more material (and to some extent mutually incompatible) political projects currently afoot in the Shi'i community – a one-year old bid to establish a federal (non-sectarian) entity limited to the southernmost parts of the Shi'i areas (Basra–Nasiriyya–'Amara), and a more recent scheme to create a larger and specifically Shi'i canton covering all Shi'i territory south of Baghdad. Should the constitutional process fail to reconcile these projects with each other and with other competing Shi'i and broader Iraqi currents, the scenario of spillover effects from the more radical separatist project cannot be excluded. Especially pertinent in this regard are recent constitutional proposals to eliminate the ceiling on the number of existing provinces allowed to amalgamate into federal entities – a move that would facilitate territorial expressions of sectarianism in Iraqi politics instead of checking them.

About the author

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Introduction[1]

Until recently, the idea of establishing a separate Shi'i state in the Shi'i core areas of Iraq south of Baghdad attracted more attention from outsiders than from the Iraqi Shi'is themselves. Throughout the twentieth century, any challenge to the territorial unity of Iraq was considered taboo among Iraqi Shi'is both at home and in exile – an attitude that persisted well beyond the 2003 Iraq War. Even in more recent proposals for a federal entity that would embrace the southernmost Shi'i areas around Basra, there is explicit adherence to the principle of a territorially unified Iraq.

This paper shows how the Internet has facilitated the articulation of alternative Shi'i views that challenge the orthodox view of Iraq's current territorial make-up as something sacrosanct. In a setting where a strong tradition of Iraqi nationalism and a hierarchical conservative Shi'i clergy long have counteracted any non-conformist initiatives among Shi'i intellectuals, the Internet today offers avenues where freewheeling ideas about the Iraq state and the Shi'is can find expression. By using this new means of communication, young Shi'is have successfully circumvented the barriers and censorship associated with traditional media (be it from peers or self-imposed), and have been able to inject radical proposals into the debate over post-war Iraqi politics, launching unconventional schemes for a separate Shi'i homeland in an area described as their historical "core territory". The new schemes are accompanied by fresh interpretations of the history of the Shi'i community and its ethnic origins, and by reassessments of Iraqi history more generally and of the other major ethno-religious groups in the country.

Separatist ideas of this kind are an affront to traditional Shi'i political discourse, where commitment to the idea of a unitary state has long been the norm. And the cyberspace separatists clearly remain a tiny faction within the Shi'i community as a whole, with obvious difficulties in finding receptive audiences for their untrammelled Internet penmanship. But the World Wide Web does provide them with unprecedented possibilities for disseminating renegade points of view – ideas that would otherwise have ricocheted off the sturdy walls of communitarian traditionalism, with scant impact beyond local face-to-face communities. In this way, computer technology opens up for potential political synergies that were inconceivable in the pre-Internet age. At the same time, the Internet allows for an appreciation of the relatively marginal position of the separatist current as of today, and for a more realistic and sober approach to the spectre of "Shi'i separatism". In analyses of Iraqi politics, the scenario of the Shi'is parting ways with areas north of Baghdad has become a contentious factor, but one on which there is an urgent need for more empiricism: if preliminary findings from the Internet are correlated with information about Shi'i trends in practical politics, the prospect of the Shi'is holding on to the vision of a single state still seems an eminently credible scenario – that is, as long as their various demands for reform of the Iraqi system of government can be squared with each other and are taken seriously by key non-Shi'i players.

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[1] All Internet hyperlinks quoted were operational as of 1 August 2005 unless specifically noted otherwise.

The anti-separatist tradition among Iraq's Shi'is

The only substantial separatist project south of Baghdad in the twentieth century had little to do with the Shi'is of the area. In the 1920s, the commercial elite of Basra launched a scheme to create a separate mercantile republic under British protection in a small enclave proximate to the Gulf coastline – with the area's lush date gardens envisioned as the future economic basis for what could become a Singapore-like trading entrepôt on a stretch of territory vital to the British Empire. The project, which ultimately failed, was led by merchants and landowners mainly of Sunni and non-Muslim origins. Only a few Shi'is from Basra's affluent Persian minority were involved, whereas the large Arab Shi'i majority in the region was sidelined by the political elites behind the separatist bid.[2]

By way of contrast, most Shi'i leaders who in 1921 found themselves in a new political entity named the Kingdom of Iraq conformed to the territorial framework of that state with remarkable speed and pliancy. Their various revolts during the twentieth century were all directed against the regimes in power in Baghdad rather than against the territorial composition of the Iraq state as such – a phenomenon detectable in Shi'i rhetoric all the way from the 1920 anti-British uprising to the post–Gulf War uprising in 1991. Many Shi'is remained loyal to the paradigm of a unitary state even when proposals for decentralisation through a federative state model were launched at the time of the 2003 Iraq War, although increased sectarian violence from 2004 onwards led some Shi'i political parties to question the wisdom of this approach.[3] Still, even the most radical Shi'i rethinking of Iraq's territorial configuration sparked off by the post-2003 spate of terror attacks and suicide bombings – a scheme to create a separate federal region in the extreme south of Iraq, roughly in the Basra–Nasiriyya–'Amara triangle – was launched within the framework of a territorially unified Iraq. Although the scheme for a "Region of the South" was radical inasmuch as it demanded local control of a portion of oil revenues, there was no abandonment of the overall Iraq framework and explicit rejection of any plans for partition.[4]

At least three key factors have been instrumental in sustaining this anti-separatist tradition among the Shi'is of Iraq. The first is the longevity of the geographical concept of "Iraq" among the Shi'is. While it is true that the finishing touches on the precise territorial structuring of the modern state of Iraq were done by British hands after the First World War, what is often overlooked is the omnipresence in Shi'i literature from before 1914 about some kind of "Iraq" region – usually an entity more modestly sized than the contemporary state but an "Iraq" nonetheless.[5] After the 1920s this

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[2] This separatist movement and its repercussions are covered in Reidar Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2005).

[3] On changing Shi'i attitudes to a federal state model for Iraq, see 'Adil Ra'uf, *Al-'amal al-islami fi al-'iraq bayna al-marja'iyya wa-al-hizbiyya: qira'a naqdiyya li-masirat nisf qarn 1950–2000* [Islamic endeavours in Iraq between religious leadership and party politics: a critical reading of the experiences of a half-century, 1950–2000] (Damascus: Al-Markaz al-'Iraqi li-al-I'lam wa-al-Dirasat, 2000), pp. 327–329; and Reidar Visser, "Shi'i Perspectives on a Federal Iraq: Territory, Community and Ideology in Conceptions of a New Polity", in Daniel Heradstveit & Helge Hveem (eds.), *Oil in the Gulf: Obstacles to Democracy and Development* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004). An overview of post-war developments among Shi'i Islamist parties in Iraq is provided by Juan Cole in "The United States and Shi'ite Religious Factions in Postwar Iraq", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 57 no. 4 (2003).

[4] This is a contrast to the Kurds, who have been deliberately flirting with the idea of secession.

[5] See Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State*, pp. 48–49 and also pp. 102–103, and, on the controversy about the historical roots of "Iraq" as an identity category more generally, Hala Fattah, "The Question of the 'Artificiality' of Iraq as a Nation-State", in Shams C. Inati (ed.), *Iraq: Its History, People, and Politics* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003).

combined with the centralising efforts of a new generation of civil servants and bureaucrats in the new state ruled by Faysal I to make for a second important centripetal driver: Iraqi nationalism. Propagated through the educational apparatus and the media (Iraq soon became one of the most prolific intellectual scenes in the Middle East), the idea of a centralised unitary state with Baghdad as its undisputed capital spread to the broad masses of Shi'is well ahead of the 1958 collapse of the monarchy and the subsequent onset of a more violent era in Iraqi politics. And finally, certain features of Shi'ism itself have facilitated Shi'i acceptance of the vision of territorial contiguity from the Gulf to the Kurdish mountains. In the first place, many Shi'i clerics remain sceptical to association with any temporal state structures whatsoever in what they consider a power vacuum caused by the absence of the Twelfth Imam (believed to have receded into a state of occultation in AD 874) – an attitude that has favoured established state models because it discourages political involvement in general.[6] And also the second and more politicised current among Iraqi Shi'is which became widespread in the time of Ayatollah Khomeini has to a large extent maintained an Iraqi specificity – its several intellectual links to Iranian circles notwithstanding. The extent to which Iraqi nationalism has exercised an influence on Shi'i Islamists has been evident for instance in the way many have objected to any tendencies of Iranian meddling in "Iraqi Shi'i affairs", as well as in the near-perfect respect for Iraq's territorial integrity observed by Shi'i opposition groups in exile in Iran during the war between the two neighbours in the 1980s – a period of exceptional domestic political pressures where any separatist (or Iranian irredentist) urges could be expected to be pushed to a maximum.[7] Instead, a distinctive Iraqi Shi'i Islamist tradition has developed where the idea of coexistence with Sunnis in a unified single state has achieved axiomatic status, with separatist ideas of a breakaway state remaining outside mainstream Shi'i political thought.

The Committee for the Independence of the Shi'is of Iraq (CISI) website

Around June 2004 there appeared on the Internet a website with the rebellious name Lajnat Istiqlal Shi'at al-'Iraq, which in English translates as the Committee for the Independence of the Shi'is of Iraq (hereafter CISI). The site operated from a server belonging to a polytechnic in the Finnish city of Turku/Åbo, and at first existed only as a subdirectory to the personal homepage of an Iraqi from the Middle Euphrates area who studied at the school. (In early 2005 the website relocated to a separate domain and at the same time most of the articles from 2004 quoted below were removed, but this apparently had to do with space problems rather than any change of

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[6] This aspect is outlined in Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 189–199.

[7] If anything, the main competitor to Iraqi nationalism among Shi'is has been pan-Islamic universalism more generally rather than any wish for closer bilateral integration with Iran, a prospect many devoted Iraqi Shi'i Islamists still scoff at and contemptuously dismiss as a scheme for making Iraq an "Iranian garden" (*hadiqa iraniyya*). Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), is instructive with regard to the Iraqi Shi'is' assertion of an "Arab" as opposed to a "Persian" identity; on the forging of exiled opposition groups with specifically Iraqi orientations during the 1980s, see Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London: Saqi, 2003) pp. 236–238, and p. 267 on Iraqi Islamist attitudes to the idea of union with Iran.

editorial policy – a few representative articles from the first incarnation of the site were also re-published.)[8]

Beyond the unorthodox choice of name for the website, the contents of the materials published by CISI are remarkable for several reasons. First, here is an astonishing succession of provocative article headlines. The public is invited to read about such seditious topics as "Dialogue on Shi'i Independence", "Yes to Separatism, O Shi'is of Iraq!" and "When Will the Declaration of the Democratic Shi'i Republic of Southern Iraq Take Place?"[9] One article promises to elaborate on the "characteristics of the system of government" in the "state of the Shi'is of Iraq".[10] There are calls for "demonstrations" in support of Shi'i independence (portrayed as a suitable emulation of Kurdish pro-separation activists)[11] and one writer even depicts Shi'i independence as the best alternative to a plot described as the "Arab League conspiracy".[12]

Highly inflammatory matter hides behind these headlines, as can be seen in the justifications offered for the radical separatist agenda. Certain writers concentrate on pragmatic and utilitarian arguments in support of separation, the line of reasoning being that the Sunnis have burned all bridges and are prepared to destroy Iraq in pursuit of their political objectives (they are variously portrayed as the "Taliban of Falluja", promoters of "Arab chauvinism", exponents of "Umayyad hatred" and even "Salafi-Ba'thists")[13] – so why should the Shi'is stoically uphold nationalist ideals any longer?[14] The initial contributions from the summer of 2004 also contain many refer-

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[8] Two CISI declarations of aims were issued, both titled "Da'wa li-tashkil lajnat istiqlal shi'at al-'iraq" [Call for the formation of the Committee for the Independence of the Shi'is of Iraq] (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHI3AT2/September/firstcall.htm and www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHI3AT2/September/secondcall), accessed on 16 December 2004, removed in early 2005. The new CISI site is at http://www.shi3at.com/.

[9] Talib al-Shatri, "Hiwar fi al-istiqlal al-shi'i" (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHE3AT/alshatri1.htm); Haqqi Isma'il, "Na'm li-al-istiqlal ya shia'at al-'iraq", (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHE3AT/ismail1.htm); Karam al-Khazraji, "Mata yatimmu i'lan jumhuriyyat janub al-'iraq al-shi'iyya al-dimuqratiyya?", 3 October 2004, (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHI3AT2/October/Karam1.htm). All links now defunct, last accessed on 16 December 2004.

[10] Muhammad Hasan al-Musawi, "Ma'alim al-nizam al-siyasi li-dawlat shi'at al-'iraq", (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHE3AT/almusawi2.htm), accessed on 16 December 2004, now defunct.

[11] As'ad Rashid, "Tazahura kurdiyya li-al-infisal … wa-al-matlub 'tazahura shi'iyya' li-al-istiqlal" [Kurdish demonstration in favour of separation … what is called for is a "Shi'i demonstration" for independence] (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHI3AT2/October/rashid1.htm), accessed on 16 December 2004, now defunct.

[12] Hasan al-Zamili, "Aqwa silah bi-yadd al-shi'a al-yawm i'lan istiqlalihim qabla tanfidh mu'amarat al-jami'a al-'arabiyya" [The most powerful weapon in the hands of the Shi'is today is a declaration of their independence before the conspiracy of the Arab League is implemented] (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHI3AT2/december/zamili1.htm), accessed on 16 December 2004, now defunct.

[13] Even the morphology comes with an insurrectionary touch in this case: literally given as *salafiba'thi*, this is a compound construction which in itself is unorthodox in Arabic. Taken from As'ad Rashid, "Shi'at al-'iraq / la mafarr! Al-hukm al-dhati wa-al-istiqlal wa-imma al-dhabh wa-al-tathir al-ta'ifi" [Shi'is of Iraq, there is no escape! Self-rule and independence or else bloodshed and sectarian cleansing] (http://www.shi3at.com/SHI3AT2/june/as3ad29.htm). Another term frequently used derogatively is *qawmji*, derived from the Arabic word for "[pan-Arab] nationalist" and with an added (originally Turkish) slang ending.

[14] One exposition of such views is given by As'ad Rashid, "Al-akrad yatmahuna 'hissat al-asad' wa-al-sunna daminu al-mustaqbal … wa-al-shi'a la-khiyar lahum illa kiyanahum al-khass" [The Kurds are eyeing the lion's share, the Sunnis have "guaranteed" the future … And for the Shi'is there is no option left but a separate state entity] (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHE3AT/rashid2.htm), accessed on 16 December 2004, now defunct. Some of these contributions are also coloured by the controversy about the United Nations envoy to Iraq at the time, Lakhdar Brahimi, and his alleged anti-Shi'i bias.

ences to the increased sectarian violence seen in Iraq during the preceding spring, and the murder of Basra politician 'Izz al-Din Salim is singled out as a particularly raw sectarian attack on the Shi'is as a collective group that might legitimise a complete revision of the political options open to the community. One question recurs: why should the Shi'is adhere to the ideal of a unified nation when the country has already become de facto divided through a mayhem of political violence? The blame for this situation is placed squarely with the Sunnis, with the underlying implication that the ideal of Iraqi unity may in itself be commendable, but that post-war developments have damaged it beyond repair:

> Contemplations of a Shi'i state hold the Sunnis responsible for dividing Iraq. The Sunnis have persisted in the same kind of behaviour and have failed to recognise their historical errors, including their alliance with the pan-Arab nationalists (*qawmiyyin*) and their suppression of the local–territorial [i.e. "Iraqi"] nationalist (*al-watani*) in favour of the sectarian (*al-madhabi*). They have pursued Machiavellian tricks in order to win political control – first by allying themselves with the occupier at the time of "the first state" [i.e. the British-sponsored monarchy, 1921–1958], later by adopting two-tongued discourse as regards the US occupation of Iraq, branding those who interact with the occupiers as traitors in case they are not Sunnis but claiming heroic and legendary nationalist status for Sunnis who themselves have dealings with the occupiers. Finally, they have tried to ignite infighting among the Iraqis as well as [internal] Shi'i-Shi'i conflict.[15]

Some articles detail pessimistic scenarios of how preservation of the one-state model would mean continued Sunni domination in new Islamised apparel:

> The division of Iraq into three statelets dates back to the aftermath of the annexation of Kuwait and the subsequent imposition of two no-fly-zones – the Shi'is did not object, the Kurds welcomed them, and the Sunnis remained silent. As for today, Kurdistan already possesses the shape and the institutions of an independent state, whereas the Sunnis intend to set up an Islamic caliphate state with its centre in al-Anbar, and then to subjugate the rest of the regions to their rule with the exception of Kurdistan.[16]

But whilst these passages are directed against specific variants of Sunni minority rule (secular Ba'thist, religious "Salafi" or "Wahhabi"), others convey a more fundamental distrust of Sunnism and a complete lack of confidence in Sunni ability to adopt more conciliatory policies:

> The Arabs have accepted the realities of the situation in Lebanon, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain and Tunisia, as well as in Darfur and Kurdistan, but they will fight with gritted teeth against a well-developed, rich, strong and independent Shi'i state because the cultural foundation for the Arab state is a Sunni foundation; in a Shi'i individual they see nothing but a rejectionist [of the Sunni caliphate,

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[15] Translated from Talib al-Shatri, "Ru'ya hawla al-dawla al-shi'iyya" [Opinion on the Shi'i state] (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHE3AT/alshatri5.htm), accessed on 16 December 2004, now defunct.
[16] Translated from Talib al-Shatri, "Al-shi'a wa-al-dawla al-mustaqilla … Ishkaliyat al-mustalah" [The Shi'is and the independent state: complexities of the concept] (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHE3AT/alshatri2.htm), accessed on 16 December 2004, now defunct.

rafidi] whose murder is more justified than the killing of an unbeliever. If the Shi'i majority in Bahrain had been in a position to run the Bahraini state they would have been accused of threatening Arab unity.[17]

Other writers elaborate such ideas about unbridgeable sectarian antagonisms, in various ways making the case for recognition of the Shi'is as a candidate for separate nationhood. Jawad al-Sa'idi employs historical analogy, referring to the existence of Shi'i breakaway states in medieval times (Hamdanid rule in areas of present-day northern Syria and Fatimid rule in Egypt are given as examples) and enquiring why the concept of a separate Shi'i state tailored on the basis of a "Lesser Iraq" template should be branded as harmful and offensive.[18] Several contributors buttress their reasoning by summoning up images of an Iraq with historical tension between the uncultivated "desert" with its (Sunni) "Wahhabi" Bedouins, and the "settled" civilised and riverine cultures (associated with the Shi'is by many writers – actually in disregard of the nomadic origins of many recently converted Shi'i tribes).[19] And Muhammad Hasan al-Musawi takes the historical dimension full circle: anthropological studies, he asserts, prove that the current Shi'i population of Iraq are the "natural extension" of the great (pre-Islamic) Babylonian and Sumerian[20] civilisations; he then proceeds to discuss "self-determination" for the Shi'is and their status as a potential member of the United Nations.[21] A similar theme is pursued by Basim al-'Awwadi, who maintains that the Shi'is form a separate "nation" (*jins*, a word with heavy connotations of discrete divisions also used for "species" and "biological gender"), and goes on to put the sufferings of the Shi'is during decades of Ba'th rule in comparative perspective by drawing attention to "the Christians" of East Timor. That group, he observes, has achieved international recognition as a separate nation – should not the Shi'is, who have endured hardship ten times worse, entertain similar ambitions?[22] Some of these ideas are nothing less than a complete overturning of the traditional Shi'i position on the question of ethnicity: eager to shrug off any accusations of collusion with Iran, Shi'i intellectuals have historically been at pains to surpass the ruling (Sunni-dominated) regimes in Baghdad in terms of stressing their own "Arabness", with angry strictures on any hint of separate ethnic origins.[23]

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[17] Translated from al-Shatri, "Ru'ya …"

[18] Jawad al-Sa'id, "Al-dawla al-shi'iyya al-mustaqilla durura mulihha" [An independent Shi'i state is an urgent necessity] (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHE3AT/jwad1.htm), accessed on 16 December 2004, now defunct.

[19] See for instance the description of Ramadi in As'ad Rashid, " 'Al-muqawama al-ahwaziyya' wa-'al-muqawama al-'iraqiyya' wajhan li-'umla wahida [The "resistance of Ahwaz" and the "Iraqi resistance": two faces of the same coin] (http://www.shi3at.com/SHI3AT2/june/as3ad22.htm).

[20] The Ba'thist political elites strove hard to monopolise Iraq's pre-Islamic past and to put it into a framework suitable to their own vision of Iraqi specificity within a larger secular and pan-Arab order. But some texts by Iraqi academics that dwell on non-Arab influences in ancient Mesopotamian history were in fact published by the regime as late as in the 1980s without much censorial intervention; see the discussion in Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) pp. 223–224.

[21] Muhammad Hasan al-Musawi, "Ma'alim al-nizam al-siyasi … "

[22] Basim al-'Awwadi, "Al-'iraq al-shi'i huwa al-'iraq al-tarikhi wa-hatimat al-istiqlal" [Shi'i Iraq is the "historical Iraq" and the determinant for independence] (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHE3AT/awadi1.htm), accessed on 16 December 2004, now defunct.

[23] Thankfully so, some might perhaps wish to add, although certain Shi'i writings about their own Arabness – at times rather uncritically paraphrased by Western analysts determined to avoid the old fallacy of equating Shi'ism with Iran – verge on sheer racism. They are also at odds with centuries-long traditions of peaceful Arab–Persian coexistence on the popular level in shared border zones – areas that became effectively bisected only when centralising state powers emerged in Baghdad and Te-

What territory is supposed to be "liberated"? On this, most contributors converge. The maximalist demand is the area of Iraq bounded by Samarra' (on the Tigris north of Baghdad) and the Gulf (Fao and Umm Qasr, Iraq's deep-water port, are the usual symbolic points of reference for the southern frontier).[24] Samarra', where the Twelfth Imam disappeared, is considered one of the four holy cities of the Shi'is of Iraq, but Shi'is today are in the minority north of Baghdad. And so some writers stake out a more modest dominion that would involve a Shi'i state stretching from Baghdad (some even propose subdividing the capital city with a Shi'i zone with its nucleus in Karkh on the west bank of the Tigris, and a Sunni centre based on Rasafa on the opposite side of the river) and south to the head of the Gulf. To many writers this is simply the territory where Shi'is are concentrated. Others, however, expand on the theme, drawing up lines in history that lend to the "Shi'i areas" a centuries-long specificity. This land, argues Basim al-'Awwadi,[25] is "the historical Iraq" (al-'iraq al-tarikhi), where the "revolution" against the British in 1920 was allegedly concentrated (competing sources emphasise Sunni participation in areas north of Baghdad as well as Shi'i abstentions in the extreme south),[26] and this is where Shi'ism was founded – long before Baghdad had even been built and many centuries ahead of the emergence of the "modern state of Iraq", which in this perspective is reduced to a soulless contrasting category. Yet another writer heretically dismisses the modern Iraqi state as the creation of the Sykes–Picot agreement between Britain and France dating back only to the First World War[27] (constructivist interpretations kindred to this one are popular with Western historians but traditionally have been anathema to Iraqi nationalists), whereas Talib al-Shatri explicitly juxtaposes the idea of a smaller Shi'i Iraq to the cliché Iraqi nationalist slogan of "national unity from Zakho [on the Turkish border] to Fao [the southern tip of Iraq at the Gulf]".[28] On a few occasions, the proponents of this alternative conception of Iraq even go as far as to introduce new nomenclature, for instance by employing appellations like "al-Sawad" (the name of the classical Islamic province that roughly corresponded to the parts of modern-day Iraq lying south of Samarra').[29] But one thing these subversive writers cannot quite seem to liberate themselves from is the concept of Iraq as such. The solution chosen with a redefinition as "the historical Iraq" only serves to emphasise how deeply ingrained this geographical concept has become at all levels of Shi'i political discourse.

If the CISI rhetoric is brimful of radicalism, it is equally laden with a sense of subjugation and marginalisation within the community that the writers seek to represent. They repeatedly bemoan "the Shi'i leadership", both "religious" and "political", of

hran in the twentieth century. For the more orthodox, pro-Arab position articulated by a writer who does indeed favour substantial decentralisation, see 'Ali Al Shaffaf, "Dirasa tarikhiyya (murtajala) hawla asl al-'arab" [(Improvised) historical study on the origins of the Arabs], 26 December 2004 (http://www.iraqsawad.net/a4044.htm).

[24] Haqqi Isma'il, "Muqawamat al-dawla al-shi'iyya fi al-'iraq" [Struggles for a Shi'i state in Iraq] (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHE3AT/ismail2.htm), accessed on 16 December 2004, now defunct.

[25] Al-'Awwadi, "Al-'iraq al-shi'i …"

[26] See for instance Philip Willard Ireland, *'Iraq: A Study in Political Development* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), pp. 270–271.

[27] Muhammad Sa'id al-Khatib, "Al-sayyid husayn hadi al-sadr wa-iqlim-al-janub" [Sayyid Husayn al-Sadr and the Region of the South] (http://www.shi3at.com/SHI3AT2/march/khatib1.htm).

[28] Al-Shatri, "Hiwar fi al-istiqlal …"

[29] On the other hand, the use of such terms as, the "Land of the Two Great Rivers" (bilad al-rafidayn), an Arabic equivalent of "Mesopotamia", reflects more standard synonym usage without such obvious connotations of dissidence – incidentally, this term is frequently employed by al-Qa'ida in Iraq, whose sympathisers in Saudi Arabia achieve a far more dramatic effect in their areas of operation by consistently referring to "the Arabian Peninsula" instead of the name of the monarchy.

which they clearly do not see themselves as members.[30] They despair of the lack of Shi'i political initiative in the direction they personally favour: whereas the Kurds actually have demonstrations in support of independence, CISI writers can only write about such mass events in terms of wishful thinking. And they vent their frustration about the lack of interest in the project of a Shi'i (breakaway) state when it comes to the intellectuals of Najaf, the centre of learning for Iraqi Shi'is, seeing this lacuna (*da'f fiqh al-dawla 'anda madrasat najaf*, literally "the weakness of comprehension and jurisprudence as regards 'the state' in the Najaf school of thought") as a chief factor preventing the realisation of their political ambitions.[31] Indeed, the writers frankly admit that the first contributions to a corpus of separatist Shi'i writings appeared only "a few months ago",[32] and they sideline a good deal of the Shi'i establishment as they vent their anger:

> What is clear is that the Shi'i political leaders, political and religious alike, remain timid when it comes to raising their voices for the Shi'is and asking for their rights, and that they do not have enough courage to introduce a strong Shi'i project (which would build for the Shi'is their own entity (*kiyan*) and defend their existence) or to take the initiative in what is referred to as "the new Iraq". This abandonment of Shi'i rights was perfectly clear from the signing of the Transitional (in secret: the Permanent) Administrative Law and until the formation of the new "Ba'thist" [i.e. meaning the 'Allawi!] government. Moreover, these leaders are patting the culture of "spurious national unity", the "unity of the Iraqi territory", and false "religious unity" and "there are no differences between Shi'is and Sunnis" – all of which is idle talk.[33]

The identities of the authors represented on the site underscore the image of a subaltern, bottom–up political project. In addition to the first web host, an Iraqi emigrant based in Finland, four of the most frequent contributors are also Iraqis in exile – two in the United Kingdom, one in Sweden and one in Finland. Others claim to be writing from Iraq but prefer to use what appear to be noms de guerre instead of their own names. Symptomatically, the genesis of the CISI network itself seems to have been partially Internet-driven, for it is possible to trace scattered pro-separation postings on a Syrian opposition website back to as early as February 2004, when a London-based intellectual responded to a pioneering article on the subject written by Talib al-Shatri.[34] Both men went on to figure prominently as CISI contributors. Still, it is not a

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[30] One example is the anonymous article by "independent Islamist", "Al-mukhabarat al-'iraqiyya tunaffidhu mukhattatan rahiban tahtu ri'ayat al-marja'iyya al-sunniyya 'hay'at 'ulama' al-mukhtatifin'" [The Iraqi intelligence services carry out a dreadful scheme under the auspices of the Sunni religious leadership, "the association of the scholars of the hostage-takers" (a *jeu de mots* that makes fun of the board's official designation, the Association of Muslim Scholars, *hay'at 'ulama' al-muslimin*, by substituting "hostage-takers" for "Muslims".)] (www.dc.turkuamk.fi/Users/ ... /SHE3AT/mustaqil5.htm), accessed on 16 December 2004, now defunct.

[31] Al-Shatri, "Hiwar fi al-istiqlal …"

[32] Al-Shatri, "Ru'ya …"

[33] Translated from al-Sa'id, "Al-dawla al-shi'iyya …"

[34] Basim al-'Awwadi, "Muqawamat al-'iraq al-shi'i al-mustaqill min samarra' ila al-faw" [The struggles for an independent Shi'i Iraq from Samarra' to Fao], 24 February 2004 (http://www.syriamirror.net/modules/news/print.php?storyid=798). See also Talib al-Shatri, "Li-kay la nazala nahruthu fi al-hawr" [In order that we shall not remain tilling in the marshlands], 7 February 2004 (http://www.syriamirror.net/modules/news/article.php?storyid=641) and "Al-akrad yastaqilluna wa-al-sunna yatasallatuna wa-al-shi'a yatahamaquna"[The Kurds liberate themselves, the Sunnis take

completely underground project: some CISI participants have appeared on Arabic sat-ellite-television talk shows (albeit in less controversial contexts or with less radical agendas); at least one is understood to have links to more mainstream Shiʻi political parties in Iraq; yet another writes under his full name from Baghdad, where he says he works in the Internet and telecom sector.

Reflecting its fringe character, the website can offer only fragmented, ad hoc ideas about the principles intended to underpin the projected new Shiʻi state. Some con-tributors speak of a "secular, non-religious system" (*nizam 'almani la-dini*), others refer to a "humanistic" state (*dawlat al-insan*), and all readily make general references to the oil resources seen to belong to the "Shiʻi state" and expected to constitute its future keystone.[35] On the other hand, there is conspicuous (but, given the secularist tendencies, quite unsurprising) silence with respect to the main model for establishing a Shiʻi state that is indeed available – Khomeini's ideas about the rule of the jurispru-dent (*wilayat al-faqih*) – and it is quite typical of the website that almost the entire leading Shiʻi clergy and their scholarship are ignored, with the writers quoting Francis Fukuyama rather than Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim or Kazim al-Haʼiri (from the more quietist Iraq-based clergy, fewer titles on "the state" and its politics are obtainable at all), and referring to Italy's Lega Nord instead of separatist precedents within the Muslim world. And so whilst the CISI website represents a bold challenge to the es-tablished religious leadership – a move that in itself has interesting parallels to the ways in which Sunni activists earlier and more successfully have challenged their own (much less stratified) clerical establishment – the sense of marginality of the separatist project continues to pervade the writings presented. The notion of isolation holds true in the greater regional and international context as well: the idea of outside sponsor-ship is shunned by many, and some writers are fiercely anti-American or anti-Iranian, or indeed both at the same time.[36]

Separatist agitation on other websites

The strategy chosen by the CISI – that of establishing exclusive web space wholly devoted to a particular strain of political thought – offers maximum editorial control but also demands considerable efforts in establishing the necessary infrastructure. Other solutions are less exacting but at the same time more risky, as shown by Shiʻi separatist postings to other websites with different agendas.

One example of this occurred in May and June 2005 when proponents of setting up some sort of independent Shiʻi entity had several articles published on the website of an organisation with less radical political aims – the Federalist Association for the Region of the South (*al-tajammuʻ al-fidirali li-iqlim al-janub*, henceforth FARS). FARS has as its stated objective to work for a federal region in the three southern governorates of Basra, Maysan and Dhi Qar, "in accordance with the Iraqi Transi-tional Administrative Law, and within the framework of a unified Iraq" – and as such

over control and the Shiʻis pretend they are stupid], 12 April 2004
(http://www.souria.com/club/sb_read.asp?id=31535).
[35] See for instance Muhammad Hasan al-Musawi, "Maʻalim al-nizam al-siyasi …" For a piece with more religious undertones by a CISI writer, see Talib al-Shatri's "Aʻajib al-shiʻa … ghadab li sabʻa wa-nisyan al-milayin" [Strangeness of the Shiʻis … fury for seven and forgetfulness for millions], 16 June 2004 (thenewiraq.com/i/news_item.asp?NewsID=1300), accessed on 13 July 2005.
[36] For an example of a causerie-style CISI view of the US role in southern Iraq, see Talib al-Shatri, "Al-jamus wa-al-bayzun" [The water buffalo and the bison], 22 August 2004
(http://www.kitabat.com/r24006.htm), accessed on 13 July 2005, now unavailable.

represents a far broader southern regionalist trend with roots in real politics that has emerged since 2004.[37] However, several of the pro-separation articles submitted to this website's discussion group clearly violate the legalistic and non-sectarian approach of the host site.

A piece by Abu Jihad al-'Iraqi illustrates this tendency.[38] The general tone of the article is highly sectarian, condemnatory and essentialist vis-à-vis the Sunnis:

> Without further embellishment, with no *retouche*, unaccompanied by philosophy or argument: surely the situation in Iraq will not stabilise except through the division of the country. The reason for this is well known. The Arab Sunni minority simply is unable to fully grasp the idea of power-sharing with others in the government of Iraq and the management of its natural wealth and resources – because the Sunnis are addicted to subjugating others, to stealing their riches and to underrating other people's rights and sacred things.

Apart from the decidedly separatist stance, this contribution also diverges from the mainstream pro-federal current with regard to geography: whereas the project of establishing a federal canton for the three southernmost governorates of Iraq is consistently marketed by FARS as a non-sectarian project (profiled towards Shi'is, Sunnis and non-Muslims of these three areas and with no particular attention to the vast majority of Iraqi Shi'is living north of the zone), Abu Jihad al-'Iraqi addresses "the Shi'is" more generally and outlines a Shi'i breakaway state that would extend all the way from Baghdad to the Gulf. The incongruity between the two visions is at its most delicate when it comes to the "wealth" and "resources" repeatedly alluded to in the posting, for it is common knowledge that the proven oil reserves of the extreme south by far surpass those of the other Shi'i areas further north – where also any material efforts to build a federal subunits were lagging behind as of mid-2005. Moreover, it exposes the tension between different concepts of the "Iraqi south". Westerners (and, increasingly, Iraqis in exile) often use the label "southern Iraq" for every inch of Iraqi territory downstream of the Baghdad–Falluja axis, for instance in expressions such as "the southern city of Najaf" (in fact, Najaf lies much closer to Baghdad than to the Gulf, but its description as "southern" has virtually acquired default status among many newswire services who on a daily basis reproduce this mental picture for a global audience). The population of the areas around Basra and its neighbouring governorates, on the other hand, often reserve the term "southerner" for themselves – a distinction that involves an idea of a "Deep South" but one that gets conflated when "the south" is used as shorthand for "Shi'i-inhabited areas" more generally.

On the other hand, creative synergies are also possible with this sort of Internet strategy, as seen in a contribution by a certain 'Abd al-Karim al-Sa'idi, identified as

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[37] A very useful source for the emergence of the project for a federal entity in the south is the Basra local newspaper *al-Manara*, see for instance issues for 10 April 2005 p. 2; 24 April 2005 p. 2; 28–29 June 2005 p. 4; 12–13 July 2005 p. 2. See also "Ahali al-basra fi istitla' ra'y …" [The people of Basra in opinion poll…], *al-Mada*, 16 October 2004. Some key features are summarised in Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State*, pp. 171–176.

[38] Abu Jihad al-'Iraqi, "Shi'at al-'iraq … al-istiqlal aw al-mawt" [Shi'is of Iraq … Independence or death], 29 June 2005 (http://www.southiraq.org/iraq/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=78). For a less radical but equally sectarian proposal for a specifically Shi'i federal canton, see Ibn al-Intifada, "Al-fidiraliyya al-shi'iyya haqq tabi'i yajibu an yusawwita 'alayhi al-sha'b", [A Shi'i federal entity is a natural right which the people should get to vote on], 10 June 2005 (http://www.southiraq.org/iraq/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=48). (In current Arabic usage, "federalism" is increasingly used as a singular noun to denote "a federal entity".)

an "Iraqi university teacher" but possibly writing under a pseudonym.[39] In this article the (separatist) geographical scope apparently harmonises with that of the (federalist) host site, for the author makes comparisons of scale between his projected statelet and existing Arab states like Libya and Lebanon, claiming that the "southern" area singled out for separation has a population roughly on par with the former and a geographical extension comparable to the latter – thus consistent with a small-scale amalgamation of the three southernmost governorates only (a purely sectarian state extending all the way northwards to Baghdad, on the other hand, would have made for more impressive statistics). This might be a better recipe for getting FARS browsers to read the full article, and indeed in the early parts of the article there are hints of sentimentality vis-à-vis Iraqi nationalism as a *beau idéal* – possibly a suitable umbrella for a cluster of small-scale statelets joined together in some sort of confederal arrangement? Thus, Sa'idi castigates Nasser, recounting that the Egyptian leader

> … wanted to annex Iraq to construct a "nuclear union" with its sister Egypt in order to create an entity that would frighten the enemies of the Arab nation, except that he ran into [literally, "choked on"] the keen nationalist 'Abd al-Karim Qasim, who refused to become an instrument to any [country] but Iraq and [also refused to serve as] gunpowder for non-Iraqi guns.

But what follows is again rather more radical than most other postings on the site. Beyond the common criticism of the disproportionate presence of individuals from the Upper Euphrates at the top level of the old regime (in a pun, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research is rendered as the Ministry of 'Ana Education and Rawa Research, referring to two towns in that area), there is a more general attack on "pan-Arab nationalists", their project of a "renaissance state" (*dawla nahdawiyya*) and even their alleged "Arab nationalist imperialism" (*isti'mar qawmi 'arabi*). The author then goes on to pick up a theme already seen in CISI writings, by referring to the ancient Sumerians as the mythic ancestors of the population of the south. It seems clear that this is an attempt at radicalising the existing federalist project for the south – a project which has thus far enjoyed much more widespread popular support than the hardliners who wish to sever all ties to regions north of Baghdad.

Despite such fields of possible convergence, the image of separatists on the sidelines is what characterises the FARS website. Traffic data published online show that only between 10 and 30 readers accessed the separatist articles during the first three months after their publication, the mutinous subject lines notwithstanding. More neutral-sounding pieces like "Study on Federalism"[40] achieved a readership four times this large. In fact, the only posting with any kind of obvious separatist content that was widely read was one whose headline specifically linked the idea of separation to the Marsh Arabs (who inhabit a limited area between Basra and 'Amara and who perhaps more than any other segment of the Shi'i community suffered severely under the Ba'th), again indicating that the project of establishing a large single state for all

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[39] 'Abd al-Karim al-Sa'id , "Al-istiqlal wa-laysa al-fidiraliyya ya sayyid harun!!" [Independence not federalism, Sayyid Harun!!], 31 May 2005
(http://www.southiraq.org/iraq/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=39).
[40] 'Ali al-Qutbi, "Bahth fi al-fidiraliyya", 25 May 2005
(http://www.southiraq.org/iraq/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=32).

Shi'is from the south to the Iraqi capital faces continued dissent – disinterest even – from the very constituencies targeted by the separatists.[41]

On other Iraq websites, a sprinkling of separatist initiatives has similarly failed to occasion much excitement. Articles that appeared on the CISI and FARS sites have been cross-posted to such electronic journals as alrafidayn.com, www.kitabat.com, www.sotaliraq.com and www.alhalem.net, but there is not much trace of follow-up activities, whether on the Internet or in practical politics, resulting from these efforts.[42] Recent scattered Arab nationalist condemnations of alleged Shi'i separatist tendencies still seem to be informed mostly by traditional stereotypes of their opponents (like the Shi'is as fifth columnists for Iran),[43] and only a few isolated writers make any reference to the specifics of the Internet Shi'i pro-separation radicals.[44] In sum, by the time the constitutional drafting process began to intensify in August 2005, Shi'i separatists remained peripheral to the Iraqi political process in most areas outside the home turf created by themselves on the World Wide Web.

There is, however, one field where Shi'i separatists and federalists on the Internet are pulling in the same direction – although on a subject not directly linked to the main question of political strategy. Ever since the 1960s, Arab nationalists of Sunni origins have employed varying smear tactics to taint the Shi'is and brand them as pro-Iranian collaborators. Prominent among these manoeuvres has been the use of the label *shu'ubiyya* – originally connotative of a political trend which during Abbasid times resisted the idea of Arab supremacy within the Islamic state, but in recent decades exploited by the Ba'th regime in a bizarre propaganda mix where ideas of "racial inferiority" resulting from alleged Persian and Indian connections have also been ingredients and where Shi'is (Marsh Arabs in particular) have been singled out for attack.[45] Another such tag is *shuruqi*, ostensibly derived from the same Arabic conso-

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[41] Wahhab Razzaq al-Hindawi, "Na'm li-jumhuriyyat al-ma'dan al-dimuqratiyya" [Yes to the democratic republic of the Marsh Arabs], 23 May 2005
(http://www.southiraq.org/iraq/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=30).

[42] See for instance Hasan al-Zamili, "Matlab al-mustad'afin istiqlal al-duwal [*sic* – the content of the article strongly suggests that it is the singular *dawla* which is intended] al-shi'iyya al-badil 'an tazwir al-intikhabat" [The demand of the oppressed is (an) independent Shi'i state(s) instead of forged elections], undated, circa December 2004, (http://www.alhalem.net/New13/talaabmostadafeen.htm).

[43] 'Adnan Husayn, "Dawlat janub al-'iraq ..!" [The state of Southern Iraq ..!], *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (2 July 2005). See also the more standard criticism against any subdivision of Iraq and the fear of ethnic domino effects" in Mahdi Qasim, "Yaqulu al-'iraq: 'hatta anta ya brutus' " [Iraq says, "*et tu Brute*"], 12 October 2004 (http://www.kitabat.com/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=892), accessed in July 2005, now unavailable.

[44] A few articles referred to the vision of a Shi'i state "from Samarra' to Basra/Fao/Umm Qasr" – a notion specific enough to suggest a certain minimum proliferation of the CISI message outside its core electorate; see for instance the untitled contribution by Abu Haydar al-Khaz'ali, 25 May 2004 (http://www.iraker.dk/maqalat9/112.htm). Another article showing how a writer discovered the CISI website and was subsequently moved to get in touch with its supporters is Muhammad Sa'id al-Khatib, "Shi'at al-'iraq: al-waqi' wa al-tumuh" [The Shi'is of Iraq: current situation and aspirations], undated, circa autumn 2004 (alhalem.net/New10/sheaaaliraq.htm). For a criticism that does pick up on some of the separatist rhetoric, see Wajdi Anwar Mirdan, "Zilzal al-'iraq al-qadim" [Iraq's upcoming earthquake], 29 June 2004 (http://www.kefaya.org/Translations/040629wamerdan.htm). See also 'Ali Thuwayni, "Fidiraliyyat al-janub … Hulm 'dawlat sharaqawa' am fakhkh irani?" [A federal entity for the south … The dream of a "state for the *sharaqawa*" (plural form of *shuruqi*, collective term associated with people from the 'Amara area) or an Iranian trap?] (posted as attachment to the main article at http://www.nasiriyeh.net/Maqalat4/wtahirjune6.htm).

[45] Davis, *Memories of State*, pp. 184–188; Ofra Bengio, *Saddam's Word: Political Discourse in Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 103–106; Isam al-Khafaji, "State Terror and the Degradation of Politics", in Fran Hazelton (ed.), *Iraq since the Gulf War: Prospects for Democracy* (London:

nantal root as the word for "east" and during the twentieth century associated with immigrants in Baghdad from (south-eastern) 'Amara in particular – with the added connotation of ancestry from lands "east" and therefore again with possible Persian connections. (The etymology here is controversial and other spelling variants like *shuruki* occur, but what is clear is that the interpretation deemed least complimentary has been exploited to a maximum by those wishing to denigrate rural southern new-comers to Baghdad society.) Traditionally, *shuruqi* was pejoratively assigned by Baghdadis to impoverished immigrants living in separate quarters outside the city centre, but today there is a growing tendency among Shi'is to turn this situation on its head and to use terms like *shuruqi* with a sense of pride.[46] Importantly, not only does the Internet seem to play a role in this, but supporters of separatism and federalism are increasingly speaking the same language on the subject – often in combination with frontal attacks on Arab nationalism and its perceived proxies like the Arab League ("who in the name of nationalism gives distant countries like Mauritania a say in Iraqi affairs") and pan-Arab media including television stations such as al-Jazeera and al-'Arabiyya.[47] Herein might lie the embryo for new and possibly even anti-Arab rhetoric with a potential for taking Shi'i political discourse into uncharted waters. In fact, the first signs of some kind of synthesis in this direction with practical consequences are already becoming evident: in June 2005, some participants in the pro-federal meetings in the south were beginning to use the term "the Sumerian region" – the sort of vocabulary that had already been popular among exiles on the Internet for some time.[48]

Another thinkable intersection between the two trends is of more religious but equally particularistic colouring. More and more, there are indications that the political leadership of some of the leading Shi'i Islamist parties, especially the Supreme

Zed Books, 1994): 29; Ferhad Ibrahim, *Konfessionalismus und Politik in der arabischen Welt: Die Schiiten im Irak* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1997), pp. 330–332.

[46] For one example see 'Ali al-Khafaji, "Inqilab al-mahrumin didda amrika wa-'umala'iha" [The revolt of the deprived against the United States and its agents], 10 August 2004 (http://www.sotaliraq.com/thenewiraq/article_2004_08_10_4218a7896.html). The writer's rather abrupt turn to a Shi'i particularistic take on Iraqi geography during the violent summer of 2004 is emblematic of the new separatist current: only months earlier, he had contributed an article where he claimed that "Syria's special role in Lebanon" could not in any sense be compared to that of Iran vis-à-vis Iraq, because Iraq, after all, was the "Land of Mesopotamia" (*ma bayna al-nahrayn*, or "the land between the two rivers"), a great political entity whose unique place in history was not encumbered by regional entanglements like those supposedly tying Lebanon to Syria. On the contrary, Iraq had been a recognisable historical entity for millennia, with a pedigree which crucially also included Assyria – a civilisation associated with the northern reaches of the contemporary state. See "Al-'iraq li-iran laysa ka-lubnan li-suriyya" [Iraq is not to Iran what Lebanon is to Syria], 21 June 2004 (http://www.alhalem.net/New5/iraqtoiran.htm). Another example involves reinterpretations of the controversial Zanj revolt (carried out by African slaves in the Basra area against their landlords and the Abbasids in the ninth century) – an episode which acquired a certain stigma in pro-regime historiography during the Ba'th era (see Davis, *Memories of State*, pp. 205–207), but one which is increasingly treated as a reservoir of symbolic power by southern regionalists; see for instance al-Shatri, "Li-kay la nazalla …"

[47] For one example of such criticism of "Arab chauvinism", see As'ad Rashid, "Fakhkh yunsabu li-shi'at al-iraq ismuhu 'hukumat al-wahda al-wataniyya' " [A snare set up for the Shi'is of Iraq, its name being "the government of national unity"], 12 April 2005, (http://www.shi3at.com/SHI3AT2/april/rashid11.htm).

[48] "Mu'tamar fi janub al-'iraq li-insha' 'iqlim sumir' " [Conference in southern Iraq to set up the Sumer Region], *al-Hayat*, 2 June 2005. For another example of synthesis of pro-federal and separatist ideas, see 'Ali Al Shaffaf, "Al-naft muqabila al-hukm" [Oil-for-rule (patterned on the "oil-for-food" concept)], 28 June 2005 (http://www.iraqsawad.net/a163.htm), where separatism is more of a threat that lurks in the background.

Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), are scrapping their traditional and long-held anti-sectarian and universalistic approach to federalism and – possibly under strains of the upsurge in anti-Shi'i terrorist attacks but conceivably perhaps also out of office-seeking ambition – have their eyes on all the Shi'i areas as a combined federal unit. This goes against the arrangements of the 2004 Transitional Administrative Law, but a scheme exactly on these lines began to appear in the shape of rumours in the summer of 2004 and became manifest at a July 2005 conference in Najaf (held under the auspices of organisations close to SCIRI) which formally declared the aim of establishing territorial contiguity in "all nine Shi'i provinces".[49] The theme was conspicuously absent from the statements of all the leading ulama assembled for the occasion (including those of Ayatollahs Fayyad, Najafi and others considered close to the leading Shi'i cleric, Ayatollah Sistani),[50] and many secular Shi'is are dead set against it, fearing Iran-like conditions.[51] But on the other hand, these more sectarian Shi'i politicians may find support for their new approach among the separatists in exile who participate in the Iraqi debate via their computers. Latterly, members of both camps have been fraternising for instance in denominating the Shi'i-dominated parts of Iraq by the classical Islamic term "al-Sawad" (also *sawad al-'iraq*), thus solidifying CISI's Internet attempts at creating a discrete vocabulary for a separate Shi'i political universe. And it is this new direction within Shi'i politics which has played a leading role in recent attempts at dismantling the "no boundless sectarianism" safety clause (52C) in the Transitional Administrative Law (whereby an upper limit of three is set for the number of existing governorates allowed to federate into a single entity, and on which the project for a small-scale federal region in the south has pinned its ambitions) – efforts that may augur the proliferation to the Mesopotamian plains of a Balkans-echoing, territory-conscious mindset which in Iraqi politics before 2004 primarily found expression among some politicians in the mountainous north.[52]

Conclusion: Implications for practical politics

The Internet has facilitated the articulation of unorthodox Iraqi Shi'i ideas about sectarian identity and the modern nation state. As test balloons, the separatist writings of

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[49] "Al-bayan al-khitami li-al-mu'tamar al-dusturi al-muwassa' li-al-hawza al-'ilmiyya fi al-najaf al-ashraf" [Concluding statement of the expanded constitutional conference of the religious institutions in Najaf], 8 July 2005.

[50] Having apparently secured a veto against any legislation that would "contradict Islam" in the new constitution, it seemed in August 2005 as if the leading quietist clergy were content to abstain from further micro-management of the Iraqi constitutional process, thereby avoiding embroilment in problematic issues like the question of federalism – where they had initially voiced scepticism. Were this tendency to prevail, it would leave the image of an "apolitical" clergy considerably more interventionist than what has been the norm for the top scholars of Najaf over the past century, but still far behind the proactive scholars who at the time of the constitutional revolution in Persia (1906) worked to institutionalise an "Islamic veto" in the new political system that was being projected at the time.

[51] Muhammad Mahbub, "Al-shi'a wa-al-dawla" [The Shi'is and the state], undated, mid-July 2005 (http://www.iraqsawad.net/a2641.htm).

[52] The same piece of legislation also singles out Kirkuk and Baghdad as areas excepted from the bargaining over new federal entities. A romantic interpretation might highlight these governorates as protected zones, quintessentially "Iraqi" nodal points in terms of their multi-ethnic complexity, Mostars and Sarajevos that still stand to be saved... But article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law goes far in recognising ethno-nationalist approaches to the post-Ba'th disposal of Iraqi territory, by formally enshrining the "disputed" status of entire areas like Kirkuk (instead of for instance dealing with the forced displacement crimes of the old regime at the level of individuals and families), and by pegging any political settlement to the holding of a census enumeration.

2004–2005 have radii of action that by far supersede the negligible earlier attempts by Iraqi Shiʻis at radically redefining the political-territorial set-up in the area they consider their own. With a readership that comprises Iraqis as far apart as Tokyo and Helsinki, the CISI website has succeeded in sustaining a community of like-minded intellectuals that stood little chance of being even conceived before the age of the Internet. It may well put discontented Shiʻis in a position to launch a more concerted attack on established positions than anything heretofore seen. The postings on the website also clearly demonstrate that there are no epistemological barriers to prevent intellectuals with a background from Shiʻi milieux from embarking on wholesale renegotiation of themes like the ethnic origin of the Shiʻis or the question of what constitutes their historical core territories.

At the same time, the Internet exposes the sharp limitations of the separatist trend among the Shiʻis. So far, the separatists have been more in evidence on the Internet than in real Iraqi politics, which makes it all the more important that their radical fanfares in cyberspace be realistically assessed. In 1927, British intelligence officers became engrossed in a factionalist Shiʻi group who briefly toyed with the idea of creating a sectarian state in Shiʻi areas south of Baghdad, only to find that this project (not to be confused with the more long-lasting urban, Sunni-led separatist movement in Basra in the 1920s)[53] evaporated only a year later, mainly as a result of anti-separatist pressures from within the community.[54] Western analysts prone to advocate separatism for the Shiʻis without ascertaining the actual wishes of that segment of the Iraqi community should take particular note of this kind of intra-communal marginality before they start generalising. As should Arab nationalists, who frequently claim that federalism in Iraq in any shape or form is merely a prelude to the partition of Iraq, and who have repeatedly accused the Shiʻis of involvement in surreptitious "separatist plots" – charges which consistently have been short on hard evidence. The virtue of the Internet in this case is that it can help to demystify the monster of Shiʻi separatism: by mid-2005 the Iraqi Shiʻi current in favour of complete separation from the Sunnis was highly fragmented and to a large extent still in exile, whereas the main Shiʻi political parties paid scant attention to the secessionist message propagated on the Internet and continued to work with various models for reconstituting Iraq as a decentralised or federal state.

This has implications for real-world politics and the ongoing debate over a new Iraqi constitution. The support among Shiʻis for Iraqi unity even in the context of a series of horrific and blatantly sectarian acts of terrorism against the community since 2004 is impressive. It suggests a robust willingness to maintain the current exterior outlook of the Iraqi state, provided certain shifts to its internal arrangements can be implemented. If the Shiʻis on their part could abandon some of their maximalist demands as regards an overall Islamic framework for the entire Iraqi state (and if they could also agree internally on a common approach to the contested concept of "decentralisation"),[55] it seems probable that a solution with federal components should be viable and also capable of keeping separatist initiatives in check.[56] Today, separatism is still only a last-resort alternative for the Shiʻis – and a rather suppressed one at that.

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[53] See n. 2 above.

[54] Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State*, pp. 121–125, 158–159.

[55] For different Shiʻi approaches to concepts such as federalism and decentralisation, see Kian Tajbakhsh, "Political decentralization and the creation of local government in Iran", *Social Research*, vol. 67, no. 2 (2000) and Visser, "Shiʻi Perspectives on a Federal Iraq".

[56] During the first half of 2005, reports from the constitutional negotiations sometimes conveyed the impression that the traditional standard-bearers of secularism among the Iraqis, the Kurds, might be

The most precarious element in the "All-Iraq" coalition among the Shi'is is the population of the extreme south who demand greater local control over oil resources. Theirs are claims that clearly arise from a sense of continued marginalisation also in the supposedly more democratic and egalitarian post-war Iraq, as well as from frustration with a Shi'i leadership dominated by figures from areas further north. However, the solution proposed – allocation of a substantial share of the oil income to local authorities – has already caused controversy. This type of arrangement may work well in polities where oil accounts for a small portion of the total national economy (as in Canada), or where the state with the most resources also champions the process towards greater national unity (as in the case of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates). But in systems where more is at stake and where the existing state tradition is centralist, such a formula may turn out to be divisive – as has happened in Iraq, where there have been strong reactions from regions short on energy resources. There is little doubt that any attempt at projecting geological maps onto demographic ones could prove positively dangerous in such messy landscapes as those straddling the East Baghdad oil field – a giant reservoir that runs underneath Shi'i-dominated governorates south of Baghdad via Shi'i and Sunni suburbia of the capital until it reaches its northern nib in the subterranean depths of the largely Sunni province of Salah al-Din, covering an area where keeping the internal peace is difficult enough even without hydrocarbons forming part of the equation. Additionally, oil politics could aggravate internal strife among the Shi'is themselves, especially if a constitution without size limits on federal entities is adopted. Ultimately, this might set the stage for a showdown between two competing types of federalism – the "southern" one with its civic, non-ethnic framework, and the "Shi'i" variant with its privileged access to the contagious language of sectarianism and as such more reminiscent of political winds that shattered the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s.[57]

Should regional income quotas on natural resources prove unworkable, a transitional arrangement with some added carrots for the energy-rich regions might perhaps form an alternative. After all, in the Basra area the demand for local control of oil has so far been linked to a perception of disproportionate southern suffering during the years of the Ba'th; devices like a transitional fund to achieve greater socio-economic and developmental regional parity might rectify this without enshrining the oil issue as a permanent constitutional bone of contention with the potential for chronic instability in the future. In this way, it should be possible to enhance the position of the south within a five- to ten-year framework, and additional legislation could be passed to relocate energy-related ministries and state companies out of Baghdad to create further spin-offs for key areas like Kirkuk and the south. For instance, in the case of the

prepared to give in to Shi'i Islamists at the national level by technically acceding to certain demands for an overall Islamic framework, on the assumption that they would always be able to maintain de facto control in their areas of demographic dominance (or, as seen more recently, by pushing for a "self-determination" exit clause in the constitution). Other secular sections of the Iraqi population are far more vulnerable to Islamism imposed from above, with only the communists possessing a symbolic palisade that seems sturdy enough to form a credible rallying point for resistance. The rest of the secularist Iraqis could easily end up on the sidelines if constitutional innovation is sacrificed in order to keep the deadlines laid down in the post-war US–Iraqi agreements on political transition – deadlines which Washington quite crudely insisted on when work with the new Iraqi charter reached a critical phase in August 2005.

[57] Basra and the far south of Iraq have certain precedents for producing regionalist factions within the larger Iraqi Shi'i Islamist organisations, as witnessed for instance in the 1980s. See 'Adil Ra'uf, *Hizb al-da'wa al-islamiyya: al-masira wa-al-fikr al-haraki* [The Islamic Da'wa party: experiences and party doctrines] (Beirut: Markaz al-Dirasat al-Istratijiyya wa-al-Buhuth wa-al-Tawthiq, 1999) p. 42, and Jabar, *The Shiite Movement in Iraq*, pp. 257–258.
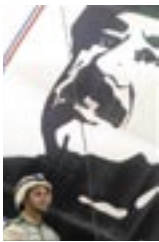
south, a new petroleum-related government complex located somewhere near Nasiri-yya would boost the economy of that city (whose nearby archaeological sites at Ur have long been neglected), and also help Basra (the region's chief port of entry) as well as 'Amara (the gateway to the marshes, with their great potential as a protected area for wildlife and a tourist attraction) – measures ideally suited to help keep at bay demands for secession of the kind now being floated on the Internet.

Despite the current weakness of the separatist trend among the Shi'is, developments in Shi'i political discourse over the next few months and years will be of critical importance to the fate of the Iraqi one-state project. Of particular significance is that the flames fanning both separatist chatter in cyberspace backwoods as well as manifest federalist initiatives on the ground in Iraq stem largely from a common source and from shared grievances, despite today's differences over political strategy. If the security situation in Iraq is allowed to deteriorate further or if wide internal rifts between Shi'i political elites from different parts of the country should develop, there may come additional Shi'i defections to the separatist camp. This is an alternative for which the community has no historical tradition and little in the way of ready-made political doctrine, but one that for the first time in Iraqi history is being kept alive due not least to new media and communications technology.

Notater | Papers | 2004 – 2005

Publikasjoner fra NUPI

Internasjonal politikk

kommer fire ganger i året og er det fremste tidsskriftet i Norden på sitt område. Når store begivenheter endrer det internasjonale landskapet, når skillene mellom nasjonal og internasjonal politikk viskes gradvis ut eller når norsk utenrikspolitikk endres, ønsker Internasjonal politikk å være helt i front med å utforske denne utviklingen. Tidsskriftet publiserer fagartikler, debatt og essays både fra Norge og nabolandene.

I 2004/05 har vi så langt brakt artikler om bl.a. USA – imperium eller hegemon?, Kyoto – et mislykket prosjekt?, Afrikanske konflikter, Westfalermyten, Ikkespredning, nordisk sikkerhetssamarbeid og konfliktløsning i Sudan samt et dobbeltnummer om Norge i 100 år etter unionsoppløsningen.

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Nordisk Øst·forum

kommer fire ganger i året og er det ledende skandinaviskspråklige tidsskriftet på sitt felt. Tidsskriftets ambisjon er å dekke politisk og samfunnsmessig utvikling i en region i stadig rask endring – Sentral- og Øst-Europa og det postsovjetiske området. Tidsskriftet publiserer fagartikler, essays og bokomtaler. Første nummer i 2005 er et temanummer om utviklingen i landene mellom et ekspanderende EU og Russland: Ukraina, Hviterussland og Moldova. Det innholder artikler av ledende nordiske eksperter på de tre landene og gi bakgrunn for blant annet den pågående krisen i Ukraina.

Fra og med nr 2 - 2005 vil Nordisk Østforum være fagfellevurdert. I dette nummeret ser vi bl.a. på Europarådets behandling av Tsjetsjenia-konflikten, skilsmissen mellom tsjekkere og slovaker, hviterussisk historieskrivning, FNs habitatagenda i en russisk kontekst og miljøreformer i Latvia.

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er artikkelserien som – i konsentrert og forenklet form – gir deg økt innsikt i internasjonale spørsmål. I mange sammenhenger har vi behov for kortfattet framstilling av konflikter og samarbeid, prosesser, utfordringer og utviklingstrekk i det internasjonale samfunnet. HHD fyller dette behovet med sitt lett tilgjengelige format – 4 A4-sider, med 24 numre per årgang, pedagogisk tilrettelagt, utheving av stikkord, margspørsmål, bilder, kart og grafer. HHD finner du også på Internett – nær 300 artikler fra tidligere årganger, men aldri inneværende årgang.

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Forum for Development Studies

har i mange år vært Norges ledende tidsskrift innenfor utviklingsforskning. I senere år har det mer systematisk henvendt seg til beslektede miljøer i Norden med sikte på å bli et Oslo-basert internasjonalt tidsskrift. Siktemålet er å forbedre kvaliteten på norsk og nordisk forskning på utvikling, nord–sør-forhold og bistand. Samtidig ønsker redaksjonen å formidle resultater fra forskningen og stimulere til debatt.

Forum kommer ut med to hefter i året (vår og høst) og utgis av Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt i samarbeid med Norsk Forening for Utviklingsforskning.

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