

REFLECTIONS ON RELIGION AND POLITICS IN POST-BA'ATHIST IRAQ

ERIC DAVIS, Rutgers University

Much analysis of Iraqi politics since 2003 has focused on the relationship between religion and politics. Iraq has been viewed as yet another example of an Islamic resurgence in the Middle East that is characterized by violence towards non-Muslims, intolerance, and support for religiously based authoritarian rule. The dominance of Iraqi politics by the Mahdi Army (*Jaysh al-Mahdi*), the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC) and its Badr militia, the Association of Muslim Scholars, and radical groups linked to al-Qa'ida is viewed as proof that Iraq is succumbing to "Islamic fundamentalism." In this analysis, however, the concept "religion" remains largely unproblematic and under theorized. If Iraqi politics is in fact dominated by "religion," then clearly we need to understand what criteria are being used when this concept is applied. What exactly do we mean when applying the term "religion" to Iraqi politics?

It is possible to define the concept of religion in several different ways. The most obvious manner is to think of religion as a system of beliefs based in *piety and devotion*. To be able to claim membership in a religion, the believer must adhere to a set of principles that define his or her particular creed. Raising this issue immediately draws our attention to several considerations. First, piety does not necessarily predispose the believer to engage in politics. There is no requirement that the believer become a political actor as a criterion for membership in a religion. None of the "five pillars of Islam," for example, imply that the believer needs to think or behave in a political manner to be a true Muslim. While a particular religion may require the believer to defend that religion in the event of an external threat, politics *per se* is not a condition of membership in any faith. In short, to raise the issue of religion in a formal textual manner tells us little about its relationship to politics.

Second, we may think of the *politicization* of religion. There are many in-

stances in which religious thinkers and leaders have joined faith with political action. However, in this instance we need to distinguish between those who link politics and religion in an ecumenical manner, and those who construct this relationship in hostile terms, meaning in opposition to other religions and social groups. If we think of religious leaders such as St. Francis of Assisi, Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Imam Musa al-Sadr, and Yeshayahu Leibowitz, we realize that many religious leaders who have engaged in efforts at political change have emphasized an inclusive and ecumenical message and generally supported non-violence. From these examples, we find that, when religion intersects with politics, the outcome need not necessarily entail hostility to members of other faiths.

A second understanding of politicized religion brings us much closer to the understanding of the term employed by analysts of post-2003 Iraqi politics. Here religion becomes a weapon in the struggle among a wide variety of Iraqi political groups for power and domination. Applying the concept of religion in this context is highly problematic because religion is subordinated to politics. First, I would argue that, in what we might term "xenophobic" constructions of politicized religion, political goals actually assume primacy over religious doctrine. In other words, political goals are formulated first and then religious ideas and symbols are mobilized to enhance achieving these goals.

A good example of this process is the formation of the Ku Klux Klan in the American south following the Civil War. As is well known, the burning cross became the Klan's defining symbol. The Klan asserted that suppressing the efforts of former slaves to assert their political rights was God's will. According to the Klan, God wanted the United States to remain under white (male) control. Politics, not religion, defined the Klan's behavior. Put differently, the

Klan mobilized distorted understandings of Christianity to promote its political agenda. Its use of Christianity had little in common with understandings of core doctrine among the vast majority of orthodox Christians.

Politicization of religion in a xenophobic manner not only entails a deviation from orthodox interpretations of religion, but is usually characterized by a lack of knowledge on the part of those who formulate radical and intolerant agendas. In research I conducted on the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots in Egypt during the period between the 1950s and early 1970s, I was struck by the superficial knowledge of Islam among radical Islamists who were accused of engaging in violence. When questioned by a judge during their trials, invariably Islamists asserted that their action was required by Islam. When asked by the judge to provide textual justification for their actions, defendants were unable to do so.¹

Likewise, many scholars point to the superficial knowledge of Islam among radical Islamists in Iraq. For example, cleric and Mahdi Army leader Muqtada al-Sadr, is looked down upon by many clerics due to his lack of knowledge of Islamic doctrine. Indeed, al-Sadr, who spent much time playing video games, was disparagingly referred to as "Sayyid Atari" in his youth because he demonstrated little interest in the intricacies of Shi'i theology. This lack of knowledge stood in sharp contrast to the erudition of his highly respected father, Ayatallah Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, whom the Ba'athist regime assassinated in 1999. The late leader of al-Qa'ida in Iraq, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (Ahmad Fadil al-Nazal al-Khalayla), another exponent of a xenophobic and intolerant interpretation of Islam, had little education, came from a criminal background, and knew little Islamic doctrine.

A third conceptualization of religion is that of *communal solidarity* in the face of external threats. Here it is illustrative to turn to Iraq's Shi'a after

2003 to explain this understanding of religion. Having been excluded from political power literally since the killing of the fourth Caliph, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, in 661 A.D., whose death inspired the Sunni-Shi'i split in Islam, Iraq's Shi'a population confronted a very difficult and unstable political situation after the collapse of Saddam Husayn's Ba'athist regime in April 2003. How were they to assert themselves politically? How were they to prevent the return of a regime that had excluded them from politics, deprecated their culture and persecuted them? Would they be able to rely on the United States to prevent a reversion to Ba'athist rule?

One of the consequences of Ba'athist rule between 1968 and 2003 was the complete destruction of virtually all secular organizations of civil society in Iraq. While many Iraqi Shi'a had joined secular political parties prior to Ba'athist rule, such as the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), the National Democratic Party, the Independence Party and others, no functioning secular movements remained when Saddam Husayn's regime fell. In this context, it was natural that Shi'is would rally around the Shi'i clergy in the form of the Hawza, the loose association of religious academies in and around the shrine city of al-Najaf in south-central Iraq.

Further, the tendency for Shi'a to rally around the Hawza and its leader, Grand Ayatallah 'Ali al-Sistani, reflected a continuation of a trend that began during the 1990s. Iraqi society experienced severe political, social, and economic degradation in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, the subsequent failed uprising (*Intifada*) of February–March 1991, and twelve years of United Nations sanctions. The resulting collapse of the economy and national education system, a monthly food rationing system that failed to provide adequate nutrition to Iraqi families, and extensive corruption and violent and immoral behavior within Saddam Husayn's inner circle, especially by his two sons, 'Uday and Qusay, forced Iraqis to turn inwards to religion as a means of shielding themselves from harshness and unpredictability of daily life. Religious institutions provided one of the few constants in their lives and hence assumed greater significance dur-

ing the period between 1991 and 2003.

If we consider yet another trend, we find that religious activism in both the Shi'i and Sunni Arab communities increased during the 1950s and after. Alarmed by the manner in which the ICP attracted Shi'i youth, and the perceived leftist leanings of the post-1958 Revolution regime of General 'Abd al-Karim Qasim (1958–63), a group of religiously minded Shi'i clerics and lay people formed the *Hizb al-Da'wa* (Islamic Call Party) sometime during the late 1950s or early 1960s to counter the increased strength of leftists and secular forces.² The formation of the Da'wa Party was accompanied by a "war of position" between the left and religious forces.³ The publication of works, such as Ayatallah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's *Falsafituna (Our Philosophy)* and *Iqtisaduna (Our Economics)*, were intended to demonstrate that Shi'ism could provide better answers to the people's spiritual and economic needs than could Marxism.⁴

Although Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and his sister, Bint al-Huda, were executed by the Ba'ath Party in April 1980, the Iranian Revolution inspired many Shi'i clerics to take up the banner of Ayatallah Ruhallah al-Khumayni and support his emphasis on the concept of the state of the Supreme Jurisprudent (*wilayat al-faqih*). One of the strongest advocates of this concept was Ayatallah Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, the nephew of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, whose activism led the Ba'athist regime to first attempt to co-opt him, and then led to his assassination when he refused to cooperate with the regime.⁵ Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's efforts reflected a split within the Shi'i clergy, between those who supported the so-called "quietist" tradition, such as that followed by 'Ali al-Sistani's predecessor, Grand Ayatallah Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i (1899–1992), who scrupulously tried to keep the Shi'i Marja'iyat from participating in politics, and those clerics who argued for immediate and organized action against the Ba'athist regime. The activism of the latter, I would argue, also gave greater credibility and legitimacy to religious institutions among Iraq's Shi'a during the 1990s that held over into the politics

of the post-2003 era.

As a final comment, it should be noted that the Hawza, unlike secular organizations, was able to sustain itself under Ba'athist rule for a number of reasons. First, it enjoyed independent income flows in the form of religious donations (*al-khums*) from devout Shi'a inside Iraq, and from Shi'i pilgrims who visited the shrine cities of al-Najaf and Karbala' from neighboring Iran and abroad. Despite the continued threat that the Hawza presented as a possible alternative to Ba'athist rule, especially following the example set by the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79, Saddam Husayn was loathe to suppress it during the 1980s for fear that, during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), the morale of Iraqi troops, the majority of whom were Shi'is, would be adversely affected. During the 1990s, Saddam attempted to project a personal religiosity, for example, through substantial donations to refurbishing mosques in al-Najaf, Karbala', and elsewhere, as a means of offsetting the social and economic decay that worked to undermine support for his regime. Under these circumstances, an attempt to suppress the Hawza would have been counterproductive.

This analysis suggests that the outpouring of support for the Hawza and Shi'i political movements such as the Mahdi Army, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (which recently changed its name to the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council), and the *Hizb al-Fadila (Virtue Party)*, whose stronghold is located in the southern port city of Basra, reflected the respect many Shi'a felt for the efforts by clerics to oppose the Ba'ath during the 1990s and the fact that these movements were the only forces that could protect the Shi'i community once Saddam Husayn's regime fell in 2003.

However, by mid-2007 we began to see many Shi'a reacting against movements that defined themselves as Shi'i, especially the Mahdi Army and SIIC. First, the Mahdi Army has increasingly splintered over time resulting in Muqtada al-Sadr's loss of control over many units. Second, many Mahdi Army units have increasingly engaged in criminal activity. Since they are located in predominantly Shi'i areas, they have

turned on their own co-confessionals. Increasingly, Shi'is are asking how it is that an organization purportedly established to protect their interests now seizes their property and extorts money from them. Third, the SIIC has lost much support in its efforts to use the 2005 Iraqi constitution to establish a semi-autonomous Shi'i state in Iraq's nine southern provinces that would give it control over the region's huge oil wealth. The struggle in the Basra region between the SIIC, on the one hand, and the Mahdi Army and the Fadila Party, on the other, has led to great disenchantment among much of Iraq's Shi'a who increasingly support a government based on secular principles and the separation of politics and religion.⁶ Thus we see the balance of forces shifting back towards secular politics in much of Iraq's Shi'i community, especially among the more educated and middle classes.

Finally, we need to realize that, in Iraq, religion has become for many organizations a *subterfuge for engaging in criminal activity*. Already in 2006, the late Shaykh 'Usama al-Jad'an, head of the al-Karabila tribe from the Qa'im area in northwestern al-Anbar Province, and organizer of one of the first tribal alliances to oppose al-Qa'ida in Iraq, pointed to this phenomenon in a news conference. He announced that his forces had captured many so-called radical Islamists who were justifying their resistance to the United States occupation in the name of Islam, but who were actually engaged in wide scale theft, for example, of cargo trucks on highways in al-Anbar Province.⁷ After the United States and Iraqi forces expelled al-Qa'ida forces from the city of Ba'quba in Diyala Province, during the spring and summer of 2007, local residents spoke of how they had not only been subject to a harsh and repressive political and personal regime (for example, smoking was not allowed and women could not leave their houses unless they were veiled), but also how city notables had been abducted and ransomed back to their families and houses seized, all in the name of Islam. Both these examples indicate the extent to which crime has become an integral part of radical Islamist political praxis in Iraq, both

among Shi'i and Sunni movements.⁸

These developments in Iraq suggest comparisons with sociopolitical movements elsewhere. For example, the Hizballah Party in Lebanon has raised significant funds through criminal activity.⁹ In Italy, the *Mafia* and other criminal organizations in southern Italy, such as the Campania-based *Camorra*, and the Calabria-based *'Ndrangheta*, originally began as social service organizations given an absent central state. During the late nineteenth century, following a lengthy period of foreign rule under the Hapsburgs and Bourbons (1504–1860) during which few if any social services for the local populace, the Mafia, which modeled itself on Catholic confraternities and the military-religious Order of Malta, began as an organization that used criminal activities to help the poor. However, over time the Mafia was transformed into a purely criminal organization, all the while continuing to profess its commitment to religious traditions associated with the the Roman Catholic church.¹⁰

This essay suggests that greater attention needs to be given to the conceptualization of the term "religion" when discussing the relationship between religion and politics in post-Ba' thist Iraq. As I argued, the concept of religion assumes different meaning in a wide variety of social and political contexts. Religion may be understood as piety and devotion, as politicized religion (in both ecumenical and xenophobic/intolerant forms), as expressing communal solidarity, and as a subterfuge for crime. What this analysis also suggests is the need to question the often rigid dichotomy that is made between "religion" and "secular." It is indeed possible for a political actor to be highly religious, yet still act in a manner in which religion and politics are behaviorally separated.¹¹ The foregoing analysis likewise suggests the importance of situating any study of religion and politics in a historical context. The danger of divorcing the study of this relationship from a temporal context can lead to a static analysis that prevents us from understanding its ability to undergo change over time.

¹ See my "Ideology, Social Class and Islamic Radicalism in Modern Egypt," in *From Na-*

tionalism to Revolutionary Islam, edited by Said A. Arjomand (MacMillan Press, 1984), pp. 134–57; see also <http://fas-polisci.rutgers.edu/davis>.

² For an excellent discussion of the formation of the Da'wa Party, see Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, (Saqi Books, 2003), pp. 75–109.

³ For an elaboration of this term, see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, (International Publishers, 1971), pp. 238–39; see also my *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*, (University of California Press, 2005), p. 277.

⁴ Muhammad Baqir Sadr, *Falsafatuna*, (Dar al-Fikr, 1970); idem, *Iqtisaduna*, (Dar al-Ta'aruf, 1982).

⁵ For a discussion of Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's religious activism, see 'Adil Ra'uf, *Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr Marja'iyat al-Midan: Mashru'uhu li-l-Taghyir wa Waqa'ia al-Ightiyal [Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's Public Authority: His Program for Change and the Details of his Assassination]*, (al-Markaz al-'Iraqi lil-I'lam wa-al-Dirasat, 1999).

⁶ This theme pervaded virtually all interviews that I conducted with Iraqis in northern Iraq and Jordan during research there in October and November of 2007.

⁷ "Sunni Clans Take the Initiative of Launching a Campaign to Expel Zarqawi's Followers and Foreigners and Intruders," *al-Hayat*, January 26, 2006.

⁸ "Violent Struggles in Eastern Ba'quba Lead to the Death and Arrest of 80 al-Qa'ida Fighters," *al-Sabah*, July 23, 2007; "The Continuation of Operations to Clear Diyala (Province) — Its Inhabitants who Are Refugees Are Afraid to Return," *al-Mada'*, July 8, 2007.

⁹ For a discussion of these activities, see "Hezbollah in the U.S.: Fundraising or Worse?," <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5579252>.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the Mafia and other criminal organizations in southern Italy, see Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, (Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 136, 146–47; Filippo Sabetti, *Village Politics and the Mafia in Sicily*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

¹¹ This was exactly the argument that was made to me by the cleric, Imam al-Shaykh Husayn al-Mu'ayyid, the author of fifteen works on Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and leader of the newly formed political party, The Iraqi National Movement (*al-Tayyar al-Watani al-'Iraqi*), which calls for a complete separation of religion and politics. Interview, Amman, Jordan, November 6, 2007.