

# THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

*Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad*

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Politics & Government	95	108	Religion & Philosophy
Foreign Policy & Defense	96	109	Science, Technology & Environment
Economics, Labor & Business	101	113	Arts & Letters
Society	104	116	Other Nations
Press & Media	107		

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## *Imagining the Iraqi Future*

*A Survey of Recent Articles*

It would be nice if the United States and its coalition partners in Iraq could believe that subduing the last of Saddam Hussein's holdouts would guarantee a better future for the country, but everybody knows better. Observers looking down the road warn of significant new dangers ahead.

"In eliminating the Baath regime and eliminating constraints on Iraqi Islamism," writes Juan Cole, a professor of modern Middle Eastern and South Asian history at the University of Michigan, in *Boston Review* (Oct.–Nov. 2003), "the United States has unleashed a new political force in the Gulf: not the upsurge of civic organization and democratic sentiment fantasized by American neoconservatives, but the aspirations of Iraqi Shiites to build an Islamic republic."

Iraq's 14 million Shiites (who make up about 60 percent of the country's population) were "radicalized and brutalized" over the decades, Cole notes, first by "the Baath crack-down on Shiite political activity in the late 1970s and 1980s, [then by] the crushing of the 1991 uprising and subsequent persecution of and even genocide against Shiites in the South." (The United States encouraged the uprising against Saddam in the wake of the Gulf War, then held back when it happened, causing the Shiites to feel betrayed.)

Saddam's terror against them enhanced the appeal of the ideas of Iran's Ayatollah Ruholla

Khomeini, who advocated Islamic theocracy. Iraq's al-Da'wa Party, the Tehran-based Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and the Sadr movement, now led by youthful militant Muqtada al-Sadr, all favor an Islamic republic, and the latter two groups endorse the idea of clerical rule.

"The religious groups constitute only one section of the Shiite population, perhaps a third or more, but they are well organized and armed," Cole observes in another article, which appears in *The Middle East Journal* (Autumn 2003).

Iraq's Shiites occupy "a number of distinct social niches," according to Cole. More than two million live in the slums of East Baghdad, the former "Saddam City," now called "Sadr City," after Muqtada's father, who was assassinated in 1999 by Saddam's agents. Shiites also predominate in Iraq's second largest city, Basra, which has a population of 1.3 million. The Shiites there are said to be "more cosmopolitan and secular" than elsewhere, but hard-liners pressed even Christian women in Basra to wear the veil outdoors last summer.

Another 4.5 million people, mostly Shiites, many of them merchants and shopkeepers, live in medium-sized towns in the south, including the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala. "The clerics of Najaf in particular enjoy great prestige in Iraq and throughout the Shiite world," says Cole.

Finally, a large minority of Iraqi Shiites live in the countryside, where they practice a “folk Shiism at variance with the more scholastic and bookish Shiism of the seminary cities.”

U.S. policymakers had known of the great moral authority of Najaf’s senior Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, a quietist who generally stayed out of politics and rejected the idea of clerical rule. But the Americans, according to Cole, were “ignorant of the Sadr movement, the main indigenous Shiite force.” When the Baathist regime fell, “Shiite militias seemed suddenly to emerge and take control of many urban areas in the south of the country.” Made up mainly of impoverished urban youths, the Sadr movement is “highly puritanical and xenophobic.” Its leader, Muqtada, has taken “a rejectionist but nonviolent stance” toward the U.S. occupation.

**I**t’s unclear how powerful such leaders may become. Yitzhak Nakash, a professor of Middle Eastern history at Brandeis University, argues in *Foreign Affairs* (July–Aug. 2003) that they will be limited by the diversity among Iraqi Shiites, most of whom “probably have no desire to mimic the Islamic Republic of Iran.” Even if they did, there is the fact that Iraq itself, with its Sunnis, Kurds, Chaldeans, and Turkmen, has a social and political culture very different from Iran’s.

The Shiites “might like a united Iraq if they controlled it—which they could if those elections Mr. Bush keeps promising ever occur,” observes Leslie H. Gelb, a former *New York Times* columnist and president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, in a *Times* op-ed (Nov. 25, 2003). “But the Kurds and Sunnis are unlikely to accept Shiite control, no matter how democratically achieved.”

Making a unified Iraq out of the three distinct ethnic and sectarian communities “has been possible in the past only by the application of overwhelming and brutal force,” Gelb notes. The Sunnis—who make up 17 percent of the Iraqi population and are concentrated in central Iraq, which has little oil—have a much larger interest in a united Iraq than either the Kurds or the Shiites. They have been the dominant group in modern Iraq.

Gelb proposes breaking up Iraq and moving in stages toward “a three-state solution: Kurds in the north, Sunnis in the center, and Shiites in

the south.” Initially establishing the three areas as self-governing regions would allow the United States to focus its resources on the Kurds and Shiites, and to pull most of its forces out of the troubled “Sunni Triangle,” near Baghdad. “American officials could then wait for the troublesome and domineering Sunnis, without oil or oil revenues, to moderate their ambitions or suffer the consequences.”

Nakash doubts that the Shiites would embrace such a plan, which would likely cost them, among other things, Baghdad and two significant shrine cities. Historically, he points out, the Shiites have embraced Iraqi nationalism, while the minority Sunni Iraqis have pursued the Baath Party vision of pan-Arab unity. Partition would force the Shiites to give up “their dream of controlling a large and prosperous state, a dream nourished since their failed 1920 revolt against the British.” (Nakash adds that the real challenge to the United States in the Middle East arises from Wahhabi-style *Sunni* radicalism, which makes it urgent that the Americans build better relations with the rival Shiites in Iraq and elsewhere.)

**I**n any event, Washington has given no sign of adopting a partition strategy. The Bush administration in November drastically accelerated its timetable for transferring power to an Iraqi provisional government; the handoff is to be completed by this summer.

“There is no reason to think that turning things over to divided Iraqi politicians and inexperienced troops will lead to a better outcome,” argues George Packer, editor of *The Fight Is for Democracy* (2003), in *The New Yorker* (Nov. 24, 2003). “If the administration hastily adopts policies in order to claim success in Iraq, it will have returned to the wishful thinking that helped make the occupation a continuous crisis.”

How to tell if the U.S. intervention is truly a success? Drew Erdmann, who served under the Coalition Provisional Authority as acting minister of higher education in Iraq, offers Packer a simple test: “If in five or ten years [Iraqis] can look back on this period and believe that they’re better off, then things will be O.K. We’ll be able to move beyond this period to where things are normal between the United States and Iraq. In a way, success will be if the Iraqis don’t hate us.”