The Revenge of the Shia

Every increase in the violence between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Iraq raises the threat of a wider sectarian upheaval that could vault Iran to dominance in the Middle East.

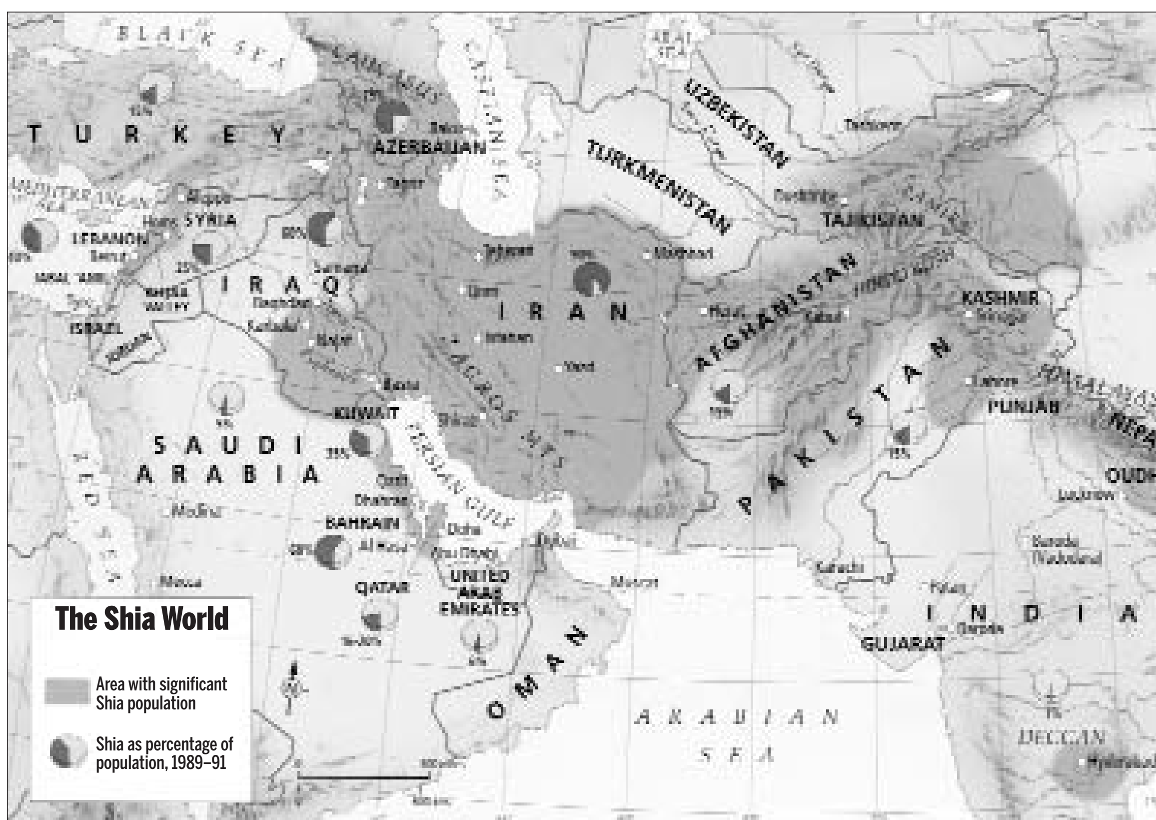
BY MARTIN WALKER

In December 2004, as the United Nations Security Council began to grapple with the challenge of Iran's nuclear ambitions and as Iraq started its slow topple into civil war, one of the closest and most trusted American allies in the Middle East began to warn publicly of the emergence of a "Shia crescent" in the region. Jordan's King Abdullah, a Sunni who claims direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad, sounded the alarm that a vast swath of the region, stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean and from the oil-rich Caspian Sea to the even richer Persian Gulf, was coming under the sway of the Shia branch of Islam. More ominously, he implied that this looming Shia empire would take its direction from Tehran. President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt echoed this warning last year when he said, during an interview on al-Arabiya television, "Most of the Shias are loyal to Iran, and not to the countries they are living in."

Abdullah and Mubarak, two of the most prominent Sunni leaders, have, along with senior Saudi officials, evoked the specter of a new Middle East divided along sectarian lines. It would set the long-downtrodden Shia against their traditional Sunni masters, rulers, and landlords. If the first battlefield was Iraq, the two leaders suggested, the next would be the oil-endowed regions of the Persian Gulf, southern Iraq, and Azerbaijan, where Shia happen to live. In this scenario, the ayatollahs of Shiite Iran could then secure control of the Iraqi, Saudi, and Caspian oil and gas fields by placing them under the protection of their own nuclear arsenal, thus establishing the first Islamic state to achieve great-power status since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918.

A glance at the map suggests that this scenario is at least plausible. Although they are a minority of some 150 million in a region of almost 400 million and the larger Islamic community of 1.3 billion, the Shia dominate the region to the east of the Suez Canal. They are a strong majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Yemen, and Bahrain. The Shia now form the largest single Islamic community in Lebanon and cluster along the Persian Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia. There are substantial Shia minorities in Kuwait (35 percent), Qatar (15–20 percent), the United Arab Emirates (six

Martin Walker, editor emeritus of United Press International and a senior scholar at the Wilson Center, is the author of several nonfiction and fiction books, including *The Caves of Périgord* (2002).



Source: http://www.morainevalley.edu/ctl/MiddleEast/photoGallery.htm

percent), Pakistan (15 percent), and Afghanistan (15 percent). Since the Alawites, who provide the current ruling dynasty of Syria, are an offshoot of the Shia sect, Jordan's King Abdullah is only slightly stretching the truth to talk of a Shia crescent running from Tehran through Baghdad to Beirut. From his vantage point in Amman, Abdullah's little kingdom appears encircled, and as he looks eastward, he sees Shia majorities all the way to Pakistan. Watching from Riyadh, the Saudi monarchy may feel secure in the numerical dominance of Sunnis in the kingdom, but its restive Shia subjects are concentrated in the parts of the country where the oil fields lie.

For the first time in centuries, the Shia of the Arab world can taste the prospect of power, while the Sunni are experiencing the bitterness of being overthrown. The Shia of Iraq, long suppressed by the Sunni elite, who cooperated with the Ottoman and British empires, are now in a position to use their numerical majority to dominate the country's politics. The Shia triumph in Iraq is constrained only by the Sunni resistance, which is fast approaching the dimensions of a full-scale civil war. At the same time, the fierce response of the predominantly Shia Hezbollah of Lebanon to the Israeli attacks of July 2006 has combined with the Shia's numbers (slightly over 40 percent of Lebanon's population of four million) and their presence in the government to give them a dominant voice in that Mediterranean state and frontline status in the Arab confrontation with Israel.

Nowhere has the Shia resurgence aroused more opposition than among Sunnis in Iraq, much of it deliberately incited by Al Qaeda's late leader in that country, the Jordanian-born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Perhaps best known in the West for his participation in the videotaped beheadings of Western hostages,

Zarqawi set a strategic goal of making Iraq ungovernable by unleashing a wave of sectarian killings designed to foment civil war between Sunni and Shia. One early captured message that he tried to smuggle out to Al Qaeda's leaders, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, suggested that such a course was his only hope of success, that he had to provoke the Sunnis by dragging the Shia "into the arena of sectarian war." In one of his first attacks, in August 2003, he sent his father-in-law on a suicide mission to the sacred Shia site of the Imam Ali mosque. Nearly a hundred worshipers died, including Zarqawi's target, Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim, widely seen as a moderate and unifying presence.

In a four-hour anti-Shia sermon, released on the Internet a week before his death in a U.S. bombing raid in June but apparently recorded two months earlier, Zarqawi ran through a list of Shia "betrayals" and cited a number of venomously anti-Shia tracts written by scholars in the fundamentalist Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam. He declared that there would be no "total victory" over the Jews and Christians without a "total annihilation" of the Shia, whom he called the secret agents of Islam's enemies. "If you can't find any Christians or Jews to kill, vent your wrath against the next available Shia," Zarqawi said. He claimed that his fellow terrorists, the Hezbollah in Lebanon, were only pretending to oppose Israel, while in reality their mission was to protect Israel's northern border. Zarqawi concluded with a formal declaration of war on the Iraqi Shia leader Moqtada al-Sadr and his "bastards." (Large parts of this bizarre and possibly unhinged outburst focused on defending the chastity of the Prophet's wife Ayesha against Shia slurs, on discussing whether the Ayatollah Khomeini was a pedophile, and on assailing "wicked" Shia clerics who purportedly defended unusual sexual positions.)

The Shia-Sunni schism, which emerged out of a dynastic struggle following the death of the Prophet in AD 632, has all the bitterness that centuries of theological and earthly conflict can create, but Zarqawi's attacks on the Shia were so extreme that the established Al Qaeda leaders tried to rein him in. Zawahiri chided him in a letter last year, swiftly published on the Internet, that asked, "Why were there attacks on ordinary Shia? . . . Can the mujahideen kill all the Shia in Iraq? Has any Islamic state in history ever tried that?" Zawahiri also warned that the hideous videotapes of beheadings should stop. "We can kill the captives by bullet," he urged. (Zarqawi's instruction to "kill all the Shia, everywhere" has been regarded as so extraordinary that some Shia refuse to believe that this taped sermon is genuine. General Mohammad Baqer Zolqadr, now Deputy Interior Minister for Security Affairs and one the most powerful men in Iran, claimed that he did not believe Zarqawi really existed, and that such extremists were Zionist agents sent to divide Muslims.)

It is now a fairly semantic question whether to define the bloody sectarian slaughter in Iraq, bringing 100 civilian deaths a day in July, as a civil war or something marginally less awful. But since the deliberate attack on the main Shia shrine in Samarra this past February, the sectarian killings have intensified, with Shia militia now said to be as ruthless and murderous as Zarqawi's followers. Along with the kidnappings and general lawlessness, the sabotage and economic disruption, the killing has overshadowed two apparently successful Iraqi elections, soured the American electorate, and undermined the Bush administration's attempt to turn Iraq into a showcase for its wider strategy of encouraging democracy in the Middle East. That policy was already suffering from the warnings given by America's traditional allies in Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia (the same leaders who were warning of the dangers of the Shia crescent) that the policy of democracy and elections was likely to benefit America's Islamist enemies rather than its friends.

The grisly scenario that lay behind the concerns of the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Saudi leaders is that a Sunni-Shia civil war in Iraq could erupt into a wider Sunni-Shia war across the Arab world, a larger and later version of the Iran-Iraq War that lasted for most of the 1980s and bled, exhausted, and impoverished both countries. The most callous practitioner of realpolitik might see this as preferable to a war between Islam and the West in some lethal rendition of Samuel Huntington's famous "clash of civilizations." Such a conflict certainly cannot be ruled out, but the consequences for the region and the world's oil supply, and

even the potential for global suicide if Iran obtains nuclear weapons (or if Pakistan joins the fray), are almost too hideous to contemplate.

There is, however, good reason to question the forebodings of Sunni leaders. After all, Shia solidarity did not prevent the Shia conscripts of southern Iraq from fighting stoutly against their Shia fellows on the other side in the Iran-Iraq War. And alongside the sectarian slaughter between Sunni and Shia in today's Iraq is being waged another vicious battle between the rival Shia militias of Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigade. In Saudi Arabia, despite the Wahhabi clerics and their claims of Shia heresy, the monarchy has chosen to conciliate its Shia minority, easing some of the restrictions it had placed upon them. The pan-Islamic solidarity toward Lebanon in recent months also suggests that the Shia and Sunni masses are more easily rallied against their common Israeli enemy than against one another. Nonetheless, a power struggle between the entrenched Sunni establishment and the rising and newly confident force of the long-underprivileged Shia is under way, and extremists on both sides seem determined to pursue it bloodily.

THE GRISLY SCENARIO is that a Sunni-Shia civil war in Iraq could erupt into a wider Sunni-Shia war across the Arab world.

When President Bush met his envoy, L. Paul Bremer, at the U.S. air base in Qatar in June 2003, less than two months after the fall of Baghdad, the difficulties of bringing the two sides together seemed foremost in his mind. According to Bremer's memoir, *My Year in Iraq* (2006), Bush asked if the American attempt to bring representative democracy to Iraq would succeed. "Will they be able to run a free country?" the president asked. "Some of the Sunni leaders in the region doubt it. They say, 'All Shia are liars.' What's your impression?"

"Well, I don't agree," Bremer replied. "I've already met a number of honest moderate Shia, and I'm confident we can deal with them."

Three years later, in June of this year, the same problem dominated conversation, as Bush invited to the White House one of the best-known Arab academics and intellectuals, Fouad Ajami, a professor at the School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University. Ajami tried to counsel the president that the Shia resurgence was a historical process that would prove difficult and probably could not be stopped. In a subsequent meeting at the Council on Foreign Relations, Ajami said, "The idea that the Shia will make their claim on political power in the affairs of the Arab world and that it will be peaceful is not really tenable. It will be a very, very contested political game. And we have to be willing to accept this. And we must not be scared off by what the Jordanians and the Egyptians and others are telling us. . . . We should not be frightened of radical Shiism; we should understand these things on their own terms. We should not jump when someone says to us 'radical Shiism,' for one interesting reason—right?—9/11. The 19 who came our way were not Shia. They were good Sunni boys, and we should remind the Arab regimes when they try to frighten us out of our skins that in fact we also have another menace, which is radical Sunnism."

Ajami made a further point about the kind of social and political change the Shia resurgence could bring to the Arab and Islamic worlds, citing a Kuwaiti Shia friend who had suggested, "If you take Egypt out of the Arab world—and it's a kind of outlier country, historically, culturally, in every way—there is no Sunni majority in the Arab world. . . . The region becomes a group—a multiplicity of communities and sects, and the place of the Shia in that landscape truly changes. So the region is being redrawn."

King Abdullah of Jordan, Egypt's Mubarak, and the Saudi monarchy all have their own very good reasons to protect their current positions in the Arab world and to be alarmed at the changes the new Shia role could bring. The question is whether their anxi-

ety is shared by their own people or simply reflects concern that the empowerment of the Shia implies the empowerment of Iran to the detriment of the Sunni Arab establishment. There is no clear answer. The history of Sunni-Shia and Arab-Persian tensions points one way; but the rallying of Sunni public opinion behind the Shia resistance of southern Lebanon this past summer and the hailing of the Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah as the new Saladin, the new pan-Arab hero, point to a different future, in which Arab and Islamic solidarity against Israel will trump the traditional Sunni-Shia enmities. The only safe conclusion is that the political situation is too dynamic and the ethnic and sectarian politics of the region are moving too fast for any easy prediction.

Another regional specialist who is consulted by the Bush administration, Vali Nasr of the Council on Foreign Relations, has sketched out a scenario for an inter-Islamic clash of civilizations. Everything hinges on the ability of the United States and Iran to normalize relations and work together to manage Shia-Sunni tensions. "If Washington and Tehran are unable to find common ground—and the constitutional negotiations [in Iraq] fail—the consequences would be dire," Nasr warns. "At best, Iraq would go into convulsions; at worst, it would descend into full-fledged civil war. And if Iraq were to collapse, its fate would most likely be decided by a regional war. Iran, Turkey, and Iraq's Arab neighbors would likely enter the fray to protect their interests and scramble for the scraps of Iraq. The major front would be essentially the same as that during the Iran-Iraq War, only 200 miles farther to the west: It would follow the line, running through Baghdad, that separates the predominantly Shiite regions of Iraq from the predominantly Sunni ones."

But look at the issue from a perspective that considers the catalytic role that has been played by the two American interventions in Iraq, in the wars of President Bush the elder in 1991 and of his son 12 years later. From the point of view of the Kurds, the 1991 war became—after Saddam Hussein's postwar repression and the mass flight of refugees into Turkey—a kind of liberation, under the protection of the Anglo-American no-fly zone. The Kurds of northern Iraq enjoyed a regional autonomy that has been consolidated by the war of 2003. And for the Shia, despite the dreadful losses of Saddam Hussein's repression after 1991 and the deaths by sectarian strife in the last three years, the American interventions have brought about an unprecedented era of empowerment and liberation. This is unlikely to produce the kind of gratitude that would see statues of the two Bushes erected in Kurdish Suleimaniya or in the Shia city of Basra, but the effect of this double liberation on the politics of Iraq and of the region has been revolutionary. The balance of power between Sunni and Shia, and (because of the empowerment of Iran through the departure of its old enemy Saddam Hussein and of the Sunni-dominated Iraq that he represented) between Arab and Persian, has been fundamentally shifted.

This vast political change coincides with the dramatic socioeconomic and intellectual changes that are sweeping the Islamic world, triggered by some of the globe's highest birthrates, by the surging fluctuations in oil prices (and the resulting instability of state budgets, pensions, and employment), and by the impact of globalization, which has brought unprecedented numbers of non-Muslims to live and work in the region. To this must be added the groundswell of demands by Arab women and civil society, by the newly educated professional class, and by Arab democrats for human rights and a greater say in public life; the intense theological debates between advocates of the puritan and the more relaxed forms of Islam; and the incalculable impact of the outspoken and less censored new satellite television media.

In a sense, the Islamic world is undergoing almost simultaneously its Renaissance, its Reformation, and its Enlightenment, and the Shia are living their version of the civil rights movement, all while reeling from the impact of economic and media revolutions. Considered in this light, the emergence of Al Qaeda might be seen as a particularly virulent symptom of this tumultuous Arab transformation and as a response not just to the perceived sins of the West, but also, in the case of Zarqawi, as an extreme Sunni reaction to the Shia resurgence. Of all the tectonic shifts now jarring the Middle East, the rise of the long-subdued Shia promises to be the most potent, and potentially the most destructive. ■