

BOOKS IN  
REVIEW

## INSIDE IRAQ'S CONFESSIONAL POLITICS

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***The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace.* By Ali A. Allawi. Yale University Press, 2007. xxiv + 518 pp.**

After the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, a steady stream of books appeared analyzing the situation in Iraq before and after the U.S. invasion. In this, the first book by a former member of the new Iraqi government, Ali A. Allawi provides a detailed account of Iraq's history since the 1990 Gulf War and of Iraqi society and politics after Operation Iraqi Freedom. Allawi was Iraq's first postwar civilian minister of defense and later minister of finance under Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari. He was elected to the Transitional National Assembly in 2005 as a member of the (Shia) United Iraqi Alliance and now serves as an advisor to current premier Nuri al-Maliki. Allawi's various positions in the Iraqi government, as well as his prewar role in Shia-exile Iraqi politics, give him a unique perspective on the Iraqi political landscape and, in particular, on Iraqi Shi'ism. Unlike others who have written insider accounts and memoirs, Allawi never tries to psychoanalyze the key players. Instead he writes in a dispassionate and at times even distant prose—writing about himself in the third person, for example—that evokes an earlier style of Arabic autobiographical writing.

His book critically addresses nearly everything from the rise of the Iraqi opposition to L. Paul Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to the present-day Maliki government. While Allawi's critique of U.S. policy in Iraq and of Iraqi politics is not new, his account of political Islam in Iraq is. One of Allawi's overarching themes is the commanding sociopolitical role played in Iraq by Islam—be it the Twelver

Shi'ism of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Muqtada al-Sadr or the jihadi salafism of al-Qaeda's late leader, the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. This story of religion, indeed the very Islamization of Iraqi society, prior to and after the U.S. invasion, is the focus of this review. With the failure of competing political ideologies (Arab nationalism, for example), political Islam—however defined in Iraq's confessional context—has become the dominant form of political organization and democratic participation not just in Iraq, but in the Muslim world.

How did Sunni and Shia sectarianism—and in many cases Iraqi tribalism, which Saddam Hussein revived as a matter of state policy—become the dominant issue in Iraqi politics today? (The issue of Kurdish nationalism will not be directly addressed in this review.) And what are the implications for democracy in Iraq? To answer these and other questions, Allawi draws on the work of Iraqi sociologist Ali al-Wardi (d. 1995), who analyzed Iraqi society in terms of a flux between the urban center and the tribal-nomadic periphery, while noting that modernity in the Iraqi context functioned merely as a veneer for tribalism and sectarianism. According to Allawi, the failure—after the 1980–88 war with Iran, the First Gulf War, and the decimation of Iraq's urban middle class under the UN sanctions regime and Saddam's perversion of it—of Saddam's Ba'athist Iraq, despite its trappings of a modern (police) state, caused a turn back to tribalism and sectarianism as older and arguably stabler ways of organizing society.

This basic social realignment spawned Shia populist movements and spread salafist forms of Islam, such as Wahhabism, among Iraq's Sunni Arabs. Saddam's brutal crushing of the traditionally disenfranchised Shias' 1991 post-Gulf War uprising (begun in response to U.S. encouragement)—using the helicopters and tanks permitted to him as well as propaganda that declared “[There will be] no Shia after today!”—filled mass graves with Shia corpses. According to Allawi, this laid the foundation for the 1990s movement of Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, the father of Muqtada al-Sadr. With the death in 1992 of Grand Ayatollah Abdul-Qasim al-Khoei, Sistani's predecessor and teacher, Mohammed al-Sadr extended his activist-religious authority (*marja' iya*) over the Shia of al-Thawra—a large and poverty-stricken suburb of Baghdad now known as Sadr City—as well as the Shia tribes of southern Iraq, which he won over with his novel approach to reconciling Islamic legal rulings with tribal custom and practice (published in his book *The Jurisprudence of the Tribes*).

In 1994, Saddam launched “the faith campaign,” adopting Islamic (mainly Sunni) symbols in an attempt to buttress his regime's legitimacy. This gave Mohammed al-Sadr (whose anti-Americanism, stirred by the 1991 uprising, was useful to the regime) some room in which to implement his program to neutralize the influence of the state, mobilize the Shia masses, and reform or control the seminaries (*hawzas*) of Najaf

and Karbala. Sadr's activism stood in sharp contrast to Ayatollah al-Sistani's passivism and quietism, and proved to be much more popular with the people. Thus in the second half of the 1990s, Mohammed al-Sadr effectively built a parallel Shia state, with its own Islamic court system, mosques, and social services. Ultimately posing too great a threat to Saddam's regime, however, Mohammed al-Sadr and two of his sons were assassinated by the Ba'athists in 1999.

Despite the loss of its leader and the regime's crackdowns, Sadr's movement and the socioreligious networks that it generated survived up to the 2003 U.S.-led destruction of Saddam's regime. It was then that Muqtada al-Sadr assumed his father's mantle, obtaining the necessary loyalty of Mohammed al-Sadr's followers to challenge the U.S. occupation by establishing a parallel state replete with its own court system and governing council, just as his father had done. He also challenged the authority of other Shia leaders—including the son of Ayatollah al-Khoei (Abdul Majid, killed by Sadrists in April 2003) and particularly Sistani and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the head of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council. This story, ably told by Allawi, is at the heart of intra-Shia religiopolitics today.

Allawi does not recount as thoroughly the history of Iraq's Sunni Arabs (particularly in the 1990s), perhaps due to a lack of sources and access. For the Sunni Arabs who had ruled Iraq since its formation in 1921, however, the fall of Ba'ath rule symbolized disempowerment and impending subjugation by their religious foes—Iraq's historic underclass, the Shia. The fear of the Shia dominating the state is as timeless as Islam itself, and Saddam used that concern to consolidate his power among Sunni Arabs and to crush the 1991 Shia uprising. This same fear allowed Zarqawi and jihadi salafism, with its anti-Shia Wahhabi doctrine of *takfir* (denouncing other Muslims as infidels), to make common cause with many of Iraq's Sunni Arabs.

The euphoria with which the Sunni insurgency began, however, was short-lived. Two pivotal events helped prompt a "pragmatic turn" in Iraqi Sunni politics. First were the 30 January 2005 elections, in which the Shia, with the endorsement of Sistani but not of Muqtada al-Sadr, voted overwhelmingly to send members of the United Iraqi Alliance to the Transitional National Assembly. The massive Shia turnout—amply covered via Arab satellite television—seems to have convinced Iraq's Sunni Arabs that Shia predominance was real, and that the insurgency, while "honorable" (and many continued to support it), would not suffice to guarantee their political rights as a minority in the new Iraq. Some Sunnis were coming to realize that they would have to fight for their rights with ballots, not bullets.

This political pragmatism, which had been the hallmark of the Sunni Arab community before Saddam's rule, led to the formation in time for the December 2005 parliamentary elections of a Sunni Arab coalition

known as the Iraqi Accord Front. Modeled after the Shia United Iraqi Alliance, the Front seeks to defend the rights of Sunni Arabs through the political process. Leading these efforts is Tariq al-Hashimi, who is currently one of Iraq's two vice-presidents and the secretary general of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP). Founded in 1960, the IIP's origins lie in the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood movement, which, like its Egyptian and Jordanian counterparts, has come to stress participation in the national democratic political process, however much that process may be stacked against them. It is this Muslim Brotherhood political program and embrace of democracy that largely defines Hashimi's approach to Sunni Arab politics, and al-Qaeda (the ideological standard-bearer for violent rejectionism) has been very critical of it.

The Wahhabi-inspired 22 February 2006 bombing of the Askari mosque in Samarra—the Shia shrine to the tenth and eleventh imams, where the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, is believed to have gone into occultation—also played a defining role in reshaping Sunni Arab politics vis-à-vis the Shia and the new Iraq. The destruction of this major shrine unleashed the fury of many Shia, which had long been held at bay on the advice of Sistani. His continued counsel of restraint at the time, however, made Sistani, who has never had a militia, seem powerless. The Shia response to the bombing was swift and sharp and came mainly from Sadr's Mahdi Army—now the self-styled “protector of the Shia”—as well as other militias (some operating out of the Interior Ministry). The reprisal killings of Sunnis and the beginning of the Shiification of Baghdad (the ethnic cleansing of the Sunnis from the capital, in other words) that followed laid bare the Sunni Arab minority's vulnerability and caused some to wonder whether they could survive in Baghdad.

As a consequence of these two events, many of Iraq's Sunni Arabs no longer see al-Qaeda's program for Iraq—namely, to use Iraq as a launch pad for global jihad—as politically realistic. Instead, many Sunni Arabs now view al-Qaeda's program as a kind of eschatological utopianism, divorced from current national reality. Al Qaeda has had to respond to this new reality, the main feature of which is the democratic political process—in other words, the government structures set in place by the U.S.-led invasion and defined by Iraq's confessional context.

Since Allawi's writing, there have been some shifts in al-Qaeda's jihadi-salafism. On 15 October 2006, the Mujahidin Consultative Council, al-Qaeda's umbrella organization, established the “Islamic State of Iraq,” which claims jurisdiction over Sunni Arab lands in Iraq. Al-Qaeda's use of the words “Iraq” and “state” as political concepts is unlike its previous appellations for Iraq, such as “the land of two tributaries,” which have always invoked historical geographic regions associated with the early Islamic conquests. The establishment of the “Islamic State of Iraq” thus represents a fundamental departure from al-Qaeda's longstanding rejection of nationalism and the modern concept of the nation-state as defined

by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, which, according to Osama bin Laden and his lieutenant Ayman al-Zawahiri, led to the dissolution of the Islamic polity (*umma*) and caliphate. In addition, Abu-Ayyub al-Masri, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq and an Egyptian, seems to have created a fictional Iraqi leader for the group, named Abu Omar al-Qurayshi al-Baghdadi, in order to put an Iraqi face on an organization led mainly by foreigners. Baghdadi's very name evoked not only Mohammed's supertribe, the Quraysh, but also Iraq's capital city.

Al-Qaeda's shift toward Iraqi nationalism and its implications for jihadi-salafist ideology illustrate how, at the national level, al-Qaeda cannot appeal solely to pan-Islamism and Sunni sectarianism for support. It must also appeal to nationalism, which appears to be rooted in modern Muslim and Arab identity. And the political success of Islamist parties in exploiting nationalism to win popular support and elections—the most recent examples being the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah in 2005 and Hamas in 2006—is a hard lesson that al-Qaeda is now learning in Iraq.

What implications does sectarianism hold for Iraq's democratic prospects? It appears that nationalism, albeit with a strongly Shia Islamic tone, will be the dominant force in Iraq for some time to come. We can expect to see more struggles both within the Shia camp and between the two sects over how to define Iraqi identity. In the best-case scenario, these battles will be fought at the ballot box. The Shia now dominate the political process by virtue of their numbers, but if the new Iraq is to work, they will have to find a way to forge an Iraqi political identity that protects the rights of Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and other minorities, even as it remains premised on Shia predominance. Are the Shia doomed to fail, as Saddam did, in their attempts to create an Iraqi identity that supersedes all others? As Allawi reminds us, it was this failure, along with the collapse of the state, that gave rise to today's sectarianism and tribalism.

The political burden, mainly because of demographics, now falls heavily on the Shia leadership, who must find their way through this new political terrain if Iraq is to succeed. The Sunni Arabs of Iraq, on the other hand, will have to accept their newfound status as a political and demographic minority and withstand the temptation of "honorable" but futile and destructive resistance. In the final analysis, Allawi's overall appraisal of Iraq's democratic future is pessimistic, mainly because there is no viable Iraqi state to fill the vacuum currently occupied by sectarianism. But one thing remains certain: Iraq's future lies with the Shia.

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