

# UNDERSTANDING THE BEHAVIOR OF SHI'A AND SUNNI MUSLIMS IN IRAQ IS COMPLICATED

by William O. Beeman

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*The American news media often shows the cause of conflict in Iraq as the result of tension between Shi'a and Sunni Muslim communities. This idea is far too simple to explain the fighting between the various communities in Iraq. Both communities—Shi'a and the Sunni—are divided into regional, political and historical sub-groups. Only by understanding how these individual groups view and interact with each other can the real source of the internal Iraqi conflict be seen.*

## Introduction: Mythologies about Iraqi Ethnicity

Many Americans have come to see ethnic conflict as largely self-explanatory, needing no further analysis. Ethnic groups co-existing in any given state are frequently seen as naturally adversarial. This is especially true in Iraq, where the conflict between various groups is frequently portrayed as natural or inevitable.

Iraq is an artificial nation created by the British at the end of World War I out of three former Ottoman Empire Provinces—Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. The nation was held together by the British Army under a British installed monarchy. The monarchs were non-Iraqi Arabian Kings—descendants of the Sharif (chief religious authority) of Mecca—until both the King and the British were overthrown in 1958.

The nation is a patchwork of ethnic groups. Arabs, Kurds, Assyrian (sometimes called Chaldean) Christians, Turkmen, and Iranians constitute the largest communities. Cross cutting these groups are a number of religious faith groups: Sunni and Shi'a Muslim, Christian, Druze, Mandeian (also known as Sabean or Sabian) and a former large Jewish community.

Combining ethnicity and religious affiliation, we see many dif-

ferent possible groups. In actual fact, however, the dominant groups in Iraq today are Sunni Kurds, Sunni Arabs and Shi'a Arabs, some of whom are of Iranian ancestry. The Kurds are not Arabs. They speak an Indo-European language related to Persian. Though most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, a minority of Kurds are Shi'a. This makes the Sunni/Shi'a split in the state particularly important as Iraq works out its differences in terms of power and authority.

In the U.S. Press these groups are often portrayed in simplistic, monolithic terms. In fact, there is considerable division within each of these communities. This division is one of the principal reasons that Iraqi leaders have had a difficult time forging a unified governmental system since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

## Shi'a and Sunni

Both Shi'a and Sunni communities have complicated compositions with sub-groups that have different histories and cultural makeup.

The Shi'a community has been present in Iraq since the earliest days of Islam. The earliest Shi'a believers were thus Arabs. The term Shi'a derives from the Arabic phrase: *shi'at Ali*—partisans of Ali. This reflects the belief in the community that the leadership of Islam should pass through



the bloodline of the Prophet Mohammad. Because the Prophet had no sons, the Shi'a believe that Ali, his son-in-law and cousin, should be considered his successor. The Sunni, by contrast, accept the leadership of Abu Bakr, Omar and 'Uthman as the first three "caliphs" of the faith. 'Ali is accepted by Sunnis as the fourth caliph, but after Ali's death, the communities diverge again. The Sunnis recognized the Umayyid line, based in Damascus, and the Shi'a the descendants of Ali.

After Ali's death, the conflict between the two communities resulted in the martyrdom of Ali's son, Hossein. He was killed by Umayyid forces at Kerbala near present-day Baghdad. The shrine of Hossein is in Kerbala. His father, Ali, is buried in Najaf, and his descendants—the Imams of Shi'ism—are buried in other sacred cities throughout present day Iraq (except for the seventh Imam, Reza, who is buried in Mashhad, Iran). All of these cities are pilgrimage sites for members of the Shi'a community.

Shi'ism spread throughout the Islamic world to many ethnic groups—other Arabs, Iranians (who are Indo-European, and not Arab), Turks, and Muslims in India. In the seventeenth century, the rulers of the Safavid Empire in Iran made Shi'ism the state religion. This is why today there are more Iranian Shi'a believers than from any other ethnic group.

Over the years many Iranians settled in the shrine cities of Iraq, and eventually spoke Arabic as their mother tongue. The shrine cities, particularly Najaf, have become centers of Shi'a learning as well as pilgrimage.

However, there has been an indigenous population of Sunni Arabs in the region of southern Iraq since the beginnings of Islam. They are

largely organized into tribal groups and occupy a large geographical area south and west of Baghdad.

The Ottoman Empire, founded by Turks from Central Asia in 1499, was thoroughly Sunni. The Ottomans ruled over present day Iraq, and generally repressed the Arabs living there. Originally these tribes were Sunni.

At some point in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the indigenous Arabs in the southern Basra Province began to convert in large numbers to Shi'ism. The reasons are somewhat obscure, but as historian Juan Cole writes:

"In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many tribespeople of the south converted to the Shi'ite branch of Islam, under the influence of missionaries sent out from the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala . . . This tribal conversion movement appears to have been a protest of the weak, a way of using religion to resist the power of the Sunni Ottoman bureaucracy. Over time, it created a Shi'ite majority in what was to become Iraq (Cole 2003:544-45. See also Nakash 2003:312)."

Many of the tribal and rural converts to Shi'ism are not particularly fervent in their beliefs, and they are definitely different in their political and social orientation from the urbanized Shi'a in the shrine cities.

### **Shi'a Diversity**

There are important divisions among the Iraqi Shi'a that have been hard for Americans—especially American politicians and military leaders—to understand. Some of the main divisions are:

#### **1. Non-Religious Shi'a**

These are Shi'a community members who worked closely with member of the Bush administration in the invasion of Iraq. (Council on Foreign Relations 2003). This group



*Iman Ali Shrine in Najaf. Photo courtesy William Beeman.*



is highly educated and feels they should be leading the nation, but they have limited public support.

## 2. Religious Shi'a

Shi'a Muslims choose a religious leader, called an *Ayatollah*, which means "reflection of God," to be their personal spiritual leader. There are very few of these men in the Shi'a world, and they are very learned. The principal Shi'a leader in Iraq today is Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

## 3. Revolutionary religious forces

These individuals are anxious to establish Shi'a rule throughout Iraq, and are willing to confront Sunni Muslims, Kurds and other more moderate Shi'a to achieve their aims. The principal figure is Muqtada al-Sadr, virtually the last remaining member of an historically prominent clerical family whose leaders have largely been assassinated. This group is politically active, not tied to religious leaders, and difficult to control.

## 4. Rural Shi'a

These are people living in rural villages. These were the former Sunnis mentioned above who converted to Shi'a Islam in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. They are not active politically and are not especially religious.

## Sunni Diversity

The Sunni community is equally divided. Some of the divisions are:

### 1. The Kurds

The Kurds in the North, who are, as mentioned above, not Arabs, are now almost independent from the rest of Iraq, and have little or no interest in the other Sunni communities. As mentioned above, some are even Shi'a, and they are not particularly religious. They will resist fiercely being ruled by any faction of the Arab population.

### 2. The Takritis

These are the Sunni Arabs who had ruled Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and who came from the town of Takrit, Saddam's birthplace, and other Western areas of the coun-



*Kurdish merchants in the city of Dahuk, Iraq. Photo courtesy William Beeman.*

try, such as Anbar Province. They believe they have the right to rule the country. They were in power from 1979 until Saddam Hussein was deposed. They live in poor areas of the country where there is no oil. They fought against the United States after Saddam Hussein was removed from power because they felt that Americans wanted Shi'a Muslims to rule Iraq.

### 3. Non-Religious Sunnis

This group mostly lives in Baghdad and other large cities. These were the old rulers of the country from 1920 to 1958. The British felt comfortable with them, and saw that they were installed in government posts. They largely occupy the few non-Shi'a offices in the new Iraqi government. Many were active in the non-religious Ba'ath political party, which encompassed Christians as well as Muslims.

### 4. Tribal Groups

There are still dozens of active Sunni tribes in Iraq, headed by hereditary sheikhs and living in rural areas. Accommodating these groups was seen by the British as the key factor in ruling Iraq. Some British administrators reportedly knew every tribe and every Sheikh by name.

## Internal Differences

When we look at these “religious” groups and their interests, it is easy to see that the basis for the motivations of their actions is not uniform. Some groups are motivated by personal family history. Others are motivated by the idea that they should continue to rule because they were in power in the past. Still others are motivated by religion.

Politicians frequently believe that members of a group will all behave in the same way. Many Middle Eastern people do not like this belief. They call this attitude “Orientalist.” They are right to feel that this view is too simple. The U.S. military in Iraq has had great difficulty in dealing with both Shi’a and Sunni communities largely because they have not looked closely at the different sub-communities within each group. It is important to understand that there is a lot of difference in behavior within Shi’a and Sunni groups.

An anthropological approach is very helpful in making clear why people have the attitudes and behaviors they do, based on the nature of their community and their past histories. Anthropologists examine individual communities in nations like Iraq with care, using ethnographic techniques that make the actions of these different communities and sub-communities more understandable.

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