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Sunni-Shi'i Differences in Iraq

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A civil war may be underway in Iraq – only time will tell – and already some are mistakenly seeking the roots of civil violence in “ancient hatreds.” Historically, and in spite of their doctrinal differences, peaceful coexistence between the Shi'i and Sunni communities of Iraq has been the norm. The current situation is the product of recent history.

The Shi'a (the singular is Shi'i or in its Anglicized form Shi'ite) are some ten to fifteen percent of all Muslims worldwide. They are the majority in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon, and form important minorities in Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen. Their forebears believed that, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Muslim community and polity he founded should be led by a member of his family. Their candidate, Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law and his closest male relation, was passed over in favor of others. Nevertheless the Shi'a regarded Ali and his descendants as the true Imams or leaders, and followed their opinions in matters of faith. The majority of Muslims, eventually known as Sunni Muslims, accepted the leaders who actually wielded power. Thus with a few exceptions Sunni Islam was the version of the faith upheld by most Muslim rulers.

The Sunni religious establishment usually could count on state patronage and in turn they upheld the legitimacy of the state. The Shi'a, who usually lacked state support, invested great authority in their Imams. After the disappearance of the twelfth Imam in the late ninth century the majority of the Shi'a invested this authority in the top Shi'i clergy themselves. The modernizing reforms begun two centuries ago in the Ottoman Empire thus tended to reduce the influence of state-dependent Sunni clerics, providing an opening in the twentieth century for lay-led Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Less dependent on the state, even in majority Shi'i Iran, the Shi'i clergy have played a more prominent role as social and political leaders in modern Iran, Lebanon and Iraq.

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In creating the modern state of Iraq, the British ignored its Shi'i majority, installing a non-Iraqi and Sunni monarch who created a largely Sunni-dominated government. Successive military regimes since the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958 were also Sunni-dominated, though that in itself did not stir Shi'i religious activism and opposition so much as the broader challenge of secularism, both as a process of change and an instrument of state policy. As urbanization advanced and education spread, Iraq's Communist Party attracted younger Shi'a. The rival, but equally secular, Ba'th Party also sought Shi'i recruits. In addition to these challenges, Shi'i clerical opposition was aroused by a new family law in 1959 that expanded women's rights. The Da'wa Party, founded two years earlier by Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, sought to develop a modernist version of Islam and to apply it in creating an Islamic state. Unlike Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who believed that

the clerics themselves should rule, al-Sadr envisioned a parliamentary government guided by Islamic principles as articulated by the clergy.

The Ba'thist regime of Muhammad Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Husayn that took power in 1968 destroyed the Communist Party. Though seeking to recruit individual Shi'a into party ranks it looked upon the Shi'i religious leadership with suspicion, which turned to outright hostility with the Iranian revolution and the rise of Khomeini in 1979. Saddam became president later that year and invaded Iran soon afterward. As many as 200,000 Shi'a of supposed Iranian origin were deported. Al-Sadr and his sister Bint al-Huda, also a prominent scholar, were murdered by the regime in 1980. Da'wa party members were driven underground or into exile in Iran. Other exiles in Iran formed the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), led by Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, who adopted Khomeini's views on

clerical rule. A third Shi'i movement arose among rural migrants living in the poor neighborhoods of eastern Baghdad and elsewhere. Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, cousin of the martyred leader of al-Da'wa, organized this movement. He too asserted the Khomeinist view of the necessity of clerical rule. He and two sons were killed by the regime in 1999, leaving his youngest son Muqtada (Moktada) al-Sadr, who now heads the movement and its Mahdi Army.

In addition to these politically activist leaders with their organizationally modern movements – all have militias – other religious Shi'a followed the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani of Najaf, a cleric more in the traditional mold. Pragmatically quietist during the Ba'thist repression, he emerged as an influential figure in post-invasion Iraq, offering guidance in social and political matters but opposing Iranian style clerical rule.

Throughout the post-invasion insurgency Sunni-Shi'i sectarian violence has been growing. The Feb. 22 bombing of the Golden Mosque of Samarra, site of the tombs of the tenth and eleventh Imams, touched off a new round of violence. If Iraq is not yet in a sectarian civil war, it is not for lack of provocation. With the exception of the Mahdi Army, however, the Shi'a have shown restraint so far: it is they who will benefit the most from stability and electoral democracy. That may still be possible, for modern Iraqi Shi'i movements arose not against Sunni Islam but in response to secularization and their marginalization and repression at the hands of the previous regime.

For further reading:
Juan Cole's blog "Informed Comment"
<http://www.juancole.com/>
Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (2d ed., 2004)
Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (2d ed., 2002)