The re-Islamization of the Iraqi polity after Saddam Hussein

By

Dr Beverley Milton-Edwards

School of Politics and International Studies
Queens University
Belfast
BT7 1PA

Email: b.milton-edwards@qub.ac.uk
Abstract

The incipient re-Islamization that has emerged in Iraq, since the downfall of the regime of Saddam Hussein and Allied occupation in April 2003, has been portrayed as playing a part in gripping the country in a spiral of lawlessness and anarchy. Despite the presence of over 150,000 Allied forces and the training of thousands of local Iraqi police and security forces post-war Iraq is still apparently dominated by the armed Muslim insurgents who are tearing the country apart.

In the first part of this paper I will outline the manifestation of re-Islamization of the Iraq and examine its importance not merely to the internal political dynamic of the country but the wider American objective of the war on terrorism and the discourses that surround it.

Finally I examine the dimensions of Islamist interpretation, support and objective to the current re-Islamization as part of a wider explanation of Muslim polity against perceived western authority over the political, economic and cultural landscape of contemporary Islamism and its resurgence in Iraq.
Introduction

‘…this new world faces a new threat: of disorder and chaos born either of brutal states like Iraq, armed with weapons of mass destruction; or of extreme terrorist groups. Both hate our way of life, our freedom, our democracy.’ British Prime Minister Tony Blair, March 20th 2003.

Political Islam is a facet of faith based action Muslim societies that is currently understood as a hazard. Though it has not been successfully repressed by the regimes where it has arisen, Islamist movements have largely failed to seize the power of the state\(^1\). Many modern Muslim societies have had difficulty coming to terms with the radical dimension of this phenomenon\(^2\). Political Islam is a dynamic force, however, that is largely perceived as having a negative impact on societies in transition or change. Political Islam is seen as a threat to the status quo in authoritarian regimes, occupied societies, secular democratic societies and weak states across the globe. As an activist political force it presents an alternative to power-holders in the state. Moreover Islamization is a process that can occur from the ground up in a pre-transition stage of resistance. Some state elites have exploited Islamization in the battle for status but such cases have been limited in success. Post-Saddam is has become apparent that re-Islamization or simply Islamization of the Iraqi polity has become something of a hydra-headed phenomenon over which there is no hegemony by any one figure, party or Muslim grouping. Old Muslim alliances – particularly among the Shi’i have been revived, new Muslim movements among all elements of the Muslim
population have also emerged to reinsert Islam into governance, political life, social organisation, and the reconstruction effort post-war. Muslim resurgence is manifest as a result of a Western effort to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein. With the toppling of the regime and wholesale de-Baathification the nationalist edifice of Iraq has crumbled leaving many in the polity uncertain about where their communal, ethnic, religious and political loyalties lie. They have, naturally enough, turned to the mosque and other Muslim associated organisations.

In the case of Iraq a multi-ethnic and repressed society with a collapsed an authoritarian state Islamization has been inevitable. Religion has become a new force of ideology for resistance against a foreign presence and for empowerment after suppression. Islam is once again being promoted as an all-encompassing aspect of life. There is now an effort to secure the identity of the society – including the state – on the basis of faith. The current worries over Iraq’s political future highlight the concerns frequently voiced about the function of faith – or more particularly Islam - in the political system of modern nation states. Moreover one must questions the mechanisms of secularism associated with the Ba’thist state for their transparent vulnerability post-Saddam to a continual campaign to re-assert Islam not just in faith and customs but in the political life of Iraqi society.

The official end of occupation and the holding of the first free elections in Iraq for more than forty years present opportunities as well as obstacles in the quest to re-Islamize the Iraqi polity post-Saddam. The opportunities lie in the immediate re-organization of the body politic in Iraq along the lines of faith (as well as tribe and ethnicity). This may also be an obstacle if sectarian division
emerges to fracture or immobilize the work of agreeing a future political system and constitutional structure. The promotion and emergence of sectarian division in Iraq post-Saddam has occurred as a result of strategies by a number of parties including Sunni insurgents as well as the US military.³ Further opportunity lies in the reassertion of Muslim identity in Iraq that is indigenous rather than framed through the agenda of other state powers or Islamist elements. One obstacle remains the perception of ‘occupation’ that is reinforced by the continued presence of Western troops in the country. This is turn is cited in explanation of the emergence an insurgent movement in which Islamists have featured so heavily. The insurgency in Iraq is a violent rebellion not only against the state (its figures and its institutions) but the forces of foreign ‘occupation’ (the Western military). The insurgency is multi-faceted, has sectarian features, and a religious dimension. The insurgency has played its part in depleting the military energies of the foreign troop presence in Iraq, it has altered its strategies in respect of communal relations and has encouraged a barracks-based military positioning through the country. The insurgency hinders normalization and reconstruction efforts bringing chaos, disruption and violence to the transitional phase and thus also extends it. There are elements of the insurgency that are also geographically specific. The insurgency is, however, one feature of the re-Islamization of Iraq that is a countervailing force both for and against democratic outcomes post-Saddam. The issue here is whether this new event is part of a transitory but violent shift to a multi-ethnic, multi-religious democratic Iraq or the dawn of a prolonged era of instability, chaos and conflict.
There is a clear risk that if anarchy prevails and re-Islamization of Iraq continues that majority Islamist elements will get pulled into a broader confrontation with those who do not support US policies, ethics, and actions. This is a grave threat to those who harbour democratic ambitions for Iraq and the wider Middle East region. Because the war on Iraq was ultimately waged in the name of stopping terrorism and destroying weapons of mass destruction unilateral and externally effected regime change did not appear to have democratic principles very highly on the agenda. Before the war it was never the plan of Iraqi Islamists to rise in rebellion against those who had ‘liberated’ them from the authoritarian shackles of Ba’thist Iraq. Foreign elements such as the radical \textit{salafi jihadi’s} including al-Qaeda hoped, however, to exploit the western presence in Iraq to rally other Muslims to their banner. They were limited in number and organisation. Before the war in 2003 \textit{Sunni} and \textit{Shi’a} elements had either promised to provide tactical military support to Western forces (this was the case with the Kurdish peshmerga in the north) or remain neutral enough to prevent western forces from getting sidetracked. Post-war the re-Islamization of the Iraqi polity has led to the emergence of radical anti-democratic forces that threaten not only allied ambitions but those of other Iraqi Islamists as well. Before examining re-Islamization post-Saddam it is important to understand the history of Muslim polity in Iraq, particularly in the twentieth century when the country was artificially created by colonial powers and later ruled by an authoritarian dictator in the national of socialist Arab Ba’thism.
The Muslim Polity of Iraq

Although Iraq is a multi-ethnic state and host to many religious minority groups including Christians and Jews, the majority of its citizens are Muslim. Under the Ba'thist regime of Saddam Hussein faith was only ever a factor in legitimating or cloaking the ambitions of the dictator. Iraq – despite the religious importance of the country to Shi’as and its proximity to highly religious states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia became known as one of the most inhospitable to political Islam in the Middle East. Saddam Hussein understood all too well the potent mobilising force within Islam in Iraq, moving for example, to extinguish the Shi’a Dawa movement stirred by Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr. Moreover Saddam’s long war against the revolutionary regime of theocratic Iran and supported by conservative Gulf States and the governments of the West throughout the 1980s also meant that thousands of Muslim clerics and activists were deported or killed by the Ba’thist regime. The failed Shi’a uprising of 1991 and the repressive response of the regime also meant that any demonstration of unofficial Muslim polity or opposition was brutally suppressed.

In the 1920s when Iraq was established although the Shi’as were a demographic majority they took second place to a Sunni elite who benefited from privileges designated to them by the Ottoman rulers. The British state-makers perpetuated the Sunni ruling elite as a strategic indigenous buttress for a Sunni imposed Hashemite monarch. It has been recognized that exclusion from structures of governance was also about the clerical led organisation of the Shi’a polity. The Shi’a clergy were spiritual leaders and their autonomy from the state was and remains important. In this respect it is
important to acknowledge that the political pressures applied today on Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani are unprecedented. There were, however, some Shi‘a clerics who demanded an Islamic polity in Iraq and they pressed their supporters across the line from the spiritual and the political in local revolts and uprising that gripped Iraq in the early 1920s. This politicization of the polity and its subsequent demands for self-determination within the structures of an imposed state had a self-consciously Islamic dimension. Shi‘a clerics, such as Mirza Mohammed Taqi Shirazi and his son Mohammed Rida Shirazi, rallied their supporters on the platform of Islam and the self-defence of Muslim lands from foreign occupation. ‘From their seat in the shrine cities, the mujtahids [clerics] regarded the [British] occupation of Muslim Iraq by Christian infidels as a sign of the collapse of Islamic civilization.’ Religious events became a conduit for political protest with the Muslim polity encouraged to regard the arena of governance through the lens of Islam as a political framework. The state was targeted, not because of its constitutional nature, - the outcome of the 1919 plebiscite was evidence of overwhelming support for democratic constitutionalism - but at foreign design, command and control of a state that made its majority Muslim citizens obligated to British power. ‘Whether by accident or design, the regime introduced after the 1920 rising took little account of the fact that the Shi‘a accounted for more than half the population of the country …’ It is my contention that the British failed to consider the Islamist dimension of revolt and its import. Elections did not deceive Iraqis into thinking they benefited from true sovereignty or independence. The continuing presence of British troops and ‘advisors’ in Iraq, until the coup of 1958, Iraqis were a constant reminder to Iraqis of where
power really lay. The electoral process in Iraq in 2005 is subject to similar pressures. Since the January poll a sense of foreboding has emerged in policymaking circles. Interim President Allawi was reported to be manoeuvring to secure his position amid claims that US authorities in Iraq want to keep him in power amid concerns that a popularly elected government dominated by Iraq’s cleric and Iranian influenced factions would be unacceptable.

Re-Islamization

The idea that the Allied war on Iraq might lead to perceptions of foreign occupation of Muslim lands with all its implications for the resurrection of state power, legitimacy and authority, were, I would contend, largely absent from the calculations in the Pentagon and the MoD in London. War planners had firmly believed that they would be greeted and treated as ‘liberators’ not ‘occupiers.’ There was a widespread belief that ordinary Iraqis would accept that the act of unilateral war on Iraq and its citizens would herald the wholesale import of a western-inspired democratic project built around only western values that in turn would serve as a blueprint for the rest of the Middle East. US politicians, however, could be forgiven for failing to understand the signals on the import of Islam in terms of the new state structure, democracy and governance.

For before the war in April 2003 the American government had assiduously cultivated the Iraqi national opposition movement in exile and these included powerful religious representatives from both Kurdish and Iraqi Sunni and Shi’a communities, as well as other religious groups, in Iraq. The INC – led by secularist Shi’a Ahmad Chalabi had persuaded the neo-Cons of the Bush
administration that once Saddam Hussein was deposed the transition to power – America’s way – would not be a difficult task. Chalabi claimed that, ‘religious difference is not the issue here ... We are all of us united in our opposition ... and determined to bring about a better brighter future for Iraq.’ But in reality one wouldn’t expect an American supported secular power-seeker to admit that Islam did matter. Others in the loose opposition faction addressed the issue of revived constitutional governance in Iraq founded on secular values for its multi-ethnic and multi-religious citizenry. They were afraid, however, that democracy imposed through the barrel of a gun would not necessarily work. As the famous Iraqi exile Kanan Makiya contended ‘At the moment I think it is most important to convince the US administration not to do this [democracy reconstruction] by way of a military occupation.’

Source: Bennett 2004

It is questionable whether the Americans were able to construct a vision of a democratic Iraq that left space for political Islam. Certainly there were elements within the Iraqi opposition who were articulating a faith-based vision
for Iraq post-Saddam. Islamists such as those within the Supreme Council for the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (SCIRI) were making a clear demand for Muslim leadership in Iraq and opposed any manifestation of foreign/non-Muslim dominion over the country. As their leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim asserted in December 2003, "Islam is the model of inspiration … We must reject foreign intervention or rule … We must maintain the values, lessons and true principles in the holy message …" Here was evidence of a determination to ensure that the Iraqi polity, post-Saddam, would be shaped and guided by Islamic principles of law, governance, culture and other values pertaining to the polity. This was a thinly-veiled call for the re-Islamization of Iraq that fell on deaf ears in Western circles but received a warm reception among populist as well as elite factions within Islamism.

From war …

The dawn of a populist element to Islamism is not a new occurrence. Populist Islam is a facet of the modern political era that has altered the balance of power in international relations. Populist Islam is more commonly understood and portrayed as radical Islam. The nature of this dynamic can be explained in two ways. Firstly political Islam became a manifestation of the wider geopolitical and strategic battles of the Cold War. This is illustrated specifically in the example of Afghanistan, but also in discussion and discourses of the Cold War as they affected a variety of Muslim countries and movements. Furthermore, after the Cold War political, Islam was branded a new threat in global politics – often replacing the old Communist menace – in its own right and as an important feature of the ethnicization of conflict in civil wars and other territorial and self-determination disputes.
Populist Islam has materialized as a vibrant force in this modern maelstrom of international politics and developing distinct internal identities and differences. Contrary to assertion the populist manifestation has been myriad in terms of its expression of faith-led Islamization of society including forms of state and governance. Populist thinking has included discourse on democracy as well as its outright rejection. In Iraq, by the mid to late 1990s, it was apparent that within the populist and radical spectrum more than one element was at work. These elements would be significant in shaping the internal political arena post-Saddam. Moreover, American responses to this emerging force would be shaped by conditions internal to their own national interests and in particular the war on terrorism. In this respect a path dependency had emerged. A ‘changed’ Iraq necessitated de-Baathification not only of the political system but a political culture without, however, necessarily scrapping the secular, progressive, liberal dimensions of that culture. How to ensure that the baby was not thrown out with the Ba’ath water! Hence the challenge was to find an enabling mechanism for that vision and ways to translate it so that the majority of Iraqis were receptive. For it should be recognised that in Iraq the advocates of democracy were faced with a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and tribal society where there is no uniform alignment of the political vision. In this respect cognisance of Balkan-like or Lebanon-like pressures on the democratic impulse should have been taken into consideration. These pressures were stifled under the powerful centralising tendencies of Saddam but erupted in the post-Saddam context.
Elements of populist Islam

The first element of this trend was Shi’a in origin and Iranian influenced. It originated in the historic empathy and relations between these neighbours and flourished among the Iraqi exiles whom ended up in Iran in the wake of the exodus of scholars, clerics and others following the bloody punishments exacted by Saddam Hussein’s regime following the Shi’a uprisings of 1991. The second element lies within Iraq’s traditional Sunni clerical elite and populist preachers – many of whom had been paid employees or religious functionaries of Saddam Hussein’s state. Before the war on Iraq these clerics were often ordered by the state to legitimate dimensions of the Saddamist regime through the sermons delivered at the mosque on Friday’s and other holy days. The third element draws inspiration from the wahabbi inspired factions that had emerged from the Afghan war in the early 1990s to form a new, radical, armed and ideologically fanatical diaspora. Saudi wahabbi clerics such as Sheikh Ali Bin Khudayr al-Khuyayr and Sheikh Nasir bin Hamad al-Fahd – both of whom were disciples of Sheikh Hamoud al-Shuaybi – were leading personalities in this trend. Such figures are believed, along with others such as Yusuf al-Ayyri, to have sanctioned to the new wahabbi jihadi factions that began to emerge and wage insurgent attacks in Iraq in the late spring of 2003. This element was not indigenous to Iraq but its near neighbours in Saudi Arabia and Jordan was host to such elements.

The wahabbi inspired jihad and Salafi elements swiftly grew in Iraq. Their ideology of puritanical theology and militancy through violent action – packaged as jihad – attracted those in Iraq who were left emasculated in the resulting breakdown in law and order and chaos in their own society that
accompanied the Western occupation. It became quite clear that common
cause could be made in turning the global message of the jihad groups into a
local rebellion against a Western occupation of Iraq. Thousands of Arab
mujahideen elements had entered Iraq before, during and after the war.
European Intelligence sources had noted that ‘influx [wa]s not necessarily
evidence of coordination by Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups, since it
remains unclear if the men are under the control of any one leader or what, if
any, role they have had in the kind of deadly attacks.’ As the country slid
under Allied Occupation and the first suicide bombs against prominent targets
in Baghdad took place sources pointed to the Arab mujahideen operatives.
This element came to dominate the debate about the re-Islamization of the
Iraqi polity post-Saddam. Their motivation is centred on the ideology of a
global jihad to end Western domination in Muslim lands. It is localized
through their alliance with Iraqi Sunni elements and common cause of
antipathy against the military dimension of the Western presence in the
country. This introduces a new Islamist dimension to post-war politics in Iraq
– accelerating the re-Islamization of Iraqi society as a deeply political signifier
that is posited on a deep seated anti-Americanism and hostility to western
external elements. The re-rooting of Islam as a political force becomes
entwined in an extreme position. They give substance to the assertion that the
reinsertion of Islam into a Muslim polity post-war would be radical and violent
in nature. It ignores the changes among the other elements of Iraq’s Muslim
polity who view the post-Saddam era as a great opportunity.

The Shi’a Ascendancy
Violence against the Shi‘a religious leadership and the attacks on their followers stained the early days of post-Saddam Iraq. Nevertheless the leaders of the occupation believed that they could quickly marshal extensive Shi‘a support for the reconstruction and democracy agenda. The key figure in realizing this ambition is Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, the prime marja, of spiritual guide for the Shi‘a. As the most senior Shi‘a cleric in Iraq al-Sistani treads a fine line between spiritual and temporal concerns. Ayatollah al-Sistani acknowledged this in advertising his vision for the post-Saddam state as a Muslim polity with provision of a constitutional separation between faith and politics. This has not played well among all Shi‘a elements, some of whom demand the establishment of a theocratic model.

The Ayatollah has largely avoided an overt role in the political arena, only speaking out to demand elections in Iraq, and an exit of foreign occupation troops. Nevertheless his presence was felt in the emergence of the political coalition – the Iraqi National Alliance (INA) - forged between Shi‘a elements in Iraq in preparation for the January 30 2005 poll. In this way faith based politics has found expression in the post-Saddam electoral and parliamentary process ensuring that Islam is written into the new constitution. The INA brought together 3 distinct groupings under the Shi‘a umbrella including SCIRI led by Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, the al-Da‘wa Party, headed by Ibrahim al-Ja‘afari and the secular Iraqi National Congress, led by Ahmad Chalabi. Half the INA consisted of party members and half independents approved by al-Sistani’s aides. They jostled for votes in the poll alongside an alliance of 30 small Shi‘a parties who opposed the clerical composition of the INA. Moreover, the
interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi – also a Shi’a – chose to run on his own list. It was clear that Islam would have a key role in the poll. Many candidates called for the introduction of Shari’a law hoping to build on an earlier compromise of the temporary constitution which designated Islam as a source of law but not the sole source of law. This kind of Islamization was seen by candidates of formalising the informal processes of Islamization that had been taking place in city neighbourhoods such as Sadr city in Baghdad where post-Saddam new religious schools were opened and Muslim norms regarding the wearing of Muslim dress styles were increasingly prevalent.

Al-Sistani and his supporters may be at variance with the young guard represented by Muqtada al-Sadr because he believed that elections will bring a US withdrawal from Iraq. It is this belief that motivated al-Sistani to issue a fatwa ordering Iraq’s Shi’a to vote in the elections. Al-Sadr's prophecy for Iraq, however, signals his conviction that the future Iraqi state should be unambiguously Islamic rather than an accommodation of power with other ethnic, sectarian and secular forces which he believes al-Sistani supports. In this respect al-Sadr’s rebellions and his supporters cannot be ignored for they symbolise ideas of Islamization that enjoy support in urban centres such as Baghdad and Najaf.

Iran, although publicly disdaining a role for itself in Shi’a dynamics in Iraq, has wielded significant influence over the debate about the Islamization of Iraq post-Saddam. By the late summer of 2004 it was an openly acknowledged fact that the Iranian Republican Guard had established a significant presence for itself in Shi’a cities like Basra. Here they have been providing civilian
assistance and organization in moves to re-establish Muslim norms in society. Iran is also still intent on stimulating a breakaway of the Shi‘a South into autonomous region. In this policy they have common cause with Kurds. Prediction of growing calls for autonomy in south is spearheaded by National Mille movement.\textsuperscript{14} While it may be true that Iraqi Shi‘a leaders differ in their discourse on Iraqi democracy, it is clear that they do not want a democracy based on an Iranian model -- with the principle of Vilayat-a-Fiqih.\textsuperscript{15} Rather, al-Sistani envisages a Shi‘a-led democracy that is moderately Islamist and guided by Shari‘a in which clerics do not play a dominant role. Al-Sistani advocates a form of "separation of powers," though not in the traditional western sense. In Sistani’s view, the clerics would stay aloof from the day-to-day transactions of a government, but would intervene periodically to give direction on broad moral questions. Najaf’s clerics have not been impressed by the system of Vilayat-a-Fiqih in Iran, because they see it as having resulted in inertia caused by the endless struggle between a clerical executive and a popularly elected legislature. Iran believes that the US will pursue its interests of a secular, westernized, global capitalist government in Iraq ruthlessly. Al-Sistani strongly believed that elections would deliver a popular democratic Islamist victory in Iraq that American could not argue with. The electors of Iraq much praised by the US have now delivered an electoral outcome that is not to their liking. A year earlier, when the interim constitution was being drafted by the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) under the supervision of Paul Bremer, the chief administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the issue of Islam and the state proved contentious. When IGC President Muhsin Abdul Hamid proposed making the Shari‘a "the primary basis" of law in the interim
constitution, Bremer threatened to veto the document. In the end, IGC members compromised by describing the Shari’a as "a main source" of Iraqi legislation. Nevertheless with respect to issues of personal status, civil code was replaced along religious law to become the arbiter of issues which directly affected women’s rights.

Following the general elections in January 2005, Shiite religious leaders demanded the introduction of shari’a law in Iraq. A spokesman declared, ‘All of the ulema [clergy] and marja [religious leaders], and the majority of the Iraqi people want the National Assembly to make Islam the [sole] source of legislation in the permanent constitution and to reject any law that is contrary to Islam.’ Ayatollah al-Sistani supported the statement and was joined by other leading religious figures such as Hussein Shahristani, a leader of the UIA.

The Sunni element

It appears that the primary feature of Sunni Islamization is insurgency. In the past the Sunnis of Iraq enjoyed a degree of influence that did not necessarily accord with their demographic strength. The collapse of the Hussein regime was a threat to Sunni hegemony over the apparatus of the Iraqi state. Sunni representation in the Interim Governing Council headed by Iyad Allawi subsequently amounted to no more than 20% of seats. There were fears in many Sunni circles that retribution of sorts would be exacted by their Shi’a compatriots in the new order. Such fears were evident in the early organization of Sunni religious elements and the extent to which such elements looked to supporters outside of Iraq as well. Sectarian tensions have
subsequently increased and led to a more communal approach to politics for the new *Sunni* ‘minority’. This propelled the *Sunni* clergy in Iraq to reassess its position and voice in the community. Unlike the *Shi’a* clergy who were historically autonomous and later persecuted for their opposition to the regime, the *Sunni* now had to create distance. Post-Saddam the challenge lay in seeking to establish an independent network of religious and, inevitably, political authority for the *Sunni ulema*. This has been manifest in a variety of ways. The founding of the Committee of the Muslim Ulema (CMU) in 2003 as a religious institution of the *Sunni* clergy has been successful in attracting a significant level of support with over 3,000 joining the organization. The members of the CMU claim the middle ground among Muslims in Iraq. Moreover in the absence of a *Sunni* equivalent of the *Shi’a Marja’ias* there was an aspiration that the CMU could represent and protect the rights of the *Sunni*. It is allegedly supported financially by number of rich businessmen who donate large amounts of money to the organisation.

During the siege of Fallujah in April 2004 the CMU announced, ‘We are the political arm of the resistance fighting to evict American forces from Iraq.’ Yet throughout the siege it also interceded between guerrilla groups and foreign diplomats that had their nationals kidnapped. The CMU worked to try to secure the release of several kidnapped nationals. Its leaders have issued statements against cooperating with the Occupation authorities, and also called for peaceful civil disobedience. Its leaders acted as intermediaries during the US assault on Fallujah in April 2004 and the siege of Muqtada al-Sadr in Najaf. They have also issued a fatwa condemning the kidnapping of
foreigners as un-Islamic. Fearful of the power of their Shi’a counterparts and the relative importance of the traditional hawza structures and the importance of Ayatollah al-Sistani’s legitimacy for the Western reconstruction project CMU leaders have publicly warned against sectarian division in Iraq.

The CMU claims to represent a wide spectrum of Sunni Muslims in Iraq but the leadership has been taken over by a wing of Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood. The CMU states that it embraces groups as diverse as austere Salafi fundamentalists and mystical Sufis, but is dominated by the Iraqi wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, a political organisation seeking the creation of an Islamic state. The CMU boycotted the January 2005 poll citing the continuing presence of American troops as an obstacle to meaningful democracy, ‘We have consistently argued that elections can only occur in a democracy that enjoys sovereignty. Our sovereignty is incomplete. Our sovereignty is usurped by foreign forces that have occupied our land and hurt our dignity,’ declared their spokesman. The CMU also enjoys considerable support from elements in Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. This will have potent consequences for final battle for power ahead.

The CMU are closely rivalled in terms of the Islamization project by radical salafi (fundamentalist) Sunni elements. These elements were originally drawn from areas of Iraq that border Saudi Arabia and are deeply influenced by salafi trends within that state and elsewhere in the region. They enjoy significant financial support from donors in Saudi Arabia and salafi elements have been associated either directly with al-Qaeda or other Mujahideen in
Afghanistan. Along with a locally drawn membership these groups include hundreds of fighters who came from neighbouring countries and Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Egypt. They have been present in towns such as Fallujah and local sources report that they enjoy support from local civilians, ex-Ba'thist and ex-military officers who are nominally in control. Local sources also report that in Fallujah they are revered as heroes and called the new Mujahideen. At the local graveyard the sacrifices of these fighters are recorded in the tombstones of the ‘Mujahideen of Saudi Arabia who came to fight the infidel Americans and paid with his life for a just cause.’ Few would dare to speak out in public against the presence of these fighters even if they believe that without their presence Fallujah might be a safer place.

Another rising local Sunni Islamist grouping is called The Higher Council for Ifta (ifta comes from the word Fatwa). This group is led by Abdul Qadir Alani. The group advocate violence to get rid of the occupation forces but they do not exclude peaceful struggle. The HIC have failed to translate their spiritual devotion into political gains. Accordingly their impact remains limited and they are active only in the mosques especially in Baghdad.

**Ummah take the streets of Fallujah**

The city of Fallujah, located south-west of Baghdad has come to symbolize the nature of the Sunni Islamization and insurgency in Iraq. By this I mean that in Fallujah and its outlying villages one finds evidence of the amorphous
mix of foreign Salafi, local jihad, and ex-Ba’thist Sunni elements mounting a serious assault on the Allied occupation as well as a movement to alter society. Fallujah is a traditional and conservative city that has always worn its piety on its sleeve. The city has a large number of mosques whose imams and worshippers have always been open to the sermons of radical Islamic ideologies.

Under occupation the city fell increasingly to the authority of this mix of Sunni forces. By early 2004 the jurisdiction of the city lay in the hands of the various Islamist groups known collectively as the Mujahideen. Each element led, locally, by an emir (prince). These elements took sole responsibility for the security and law and order in the city – mounting their own guards, vehicle checkpoints, and so forth. Within the locally organised elements the tribes of the city are also represented. The emirs are all members of the ‘Majlis as-Shura’ (Consultative Council) founded in February 2004 and headed by two local clerics Abdullah al-Janabi and Dafir al-Ubaidi. Al-Janabi has called the mujahideen of Fallujah ‘the sons of the city’ providing protection to its inhabitants. Al-Janabi allegedly led foreign as well as local mujahideen. His organization enjoys support from former Ba’athists, share intelligence, and proxy sabotage operations against US targets. In return Ba’thist intelligence has assisted al-Janabi in avoiding American capture. The influence of the mujahideen was also apparent in the social and political regulation of the city. The Arabic press reported that the Majlis as-Shura had effectively established a theocracy in the city with Islamification of social mores and values – such as
dress, banning alcohol consumption and so forth – high on the agenda of the clerical cabal. 21

Days before the US offensive against the city in early November 2004 al-Janabi’s organization issued a bayan (communiqué) declaring ‘an outmost sacred jihad and civil rebellion in retaliation for any coalition forces and puppet government attack on Fallujah.’22 The defeat of the insurgents and the re-capture of Fallujah, however, have not eradicated the Sunni insurgency. Both local and foreign leaders survived the assault, insurgents mounted raids in other Iraqi towns and in a statement issued after the US capture of Fallujah Sheikh al-Janabi declared, "The Americans have opened the gates of hell," Abdullah Janabi said Monday in Fallujah. "The battle of Fallujah is the beginning of other battles."23

**The global Muslim tempo**

Much scholarship on political Islam since 9/11 has conflated such activities with a sense of growing global Muslim rebellion directed at unpopular leaders at home and Western government’s abroad. Yet at the outset of any insurgency there may be little by way of popular local support. Those who undertake training in guerrilla warfare or who volunteer for a jihad may be a insignificant element of a wider Muslim population. Yet, as history demonstrates, in Iraq and other Muslim domains, there is a point in the wider political environment where insurgents derive popular support for the overthrow of authority. This may even be at a point where the insurgents understand that they will never win militarily but achieve change through the
legitimacy derived from an emasculated wider population who support their goals. This psychological dimension to contemporary Muslim rebellion and social protest is often overlooked by opponents seeking to dominate militarily.

In Iraq the incipient insurgency that broke out in the wake of the US-led occupation of the country has continued to garner widespread popular support among a multi-faceted Muslim population who currently feel less secure under US-led protection than they did under Saddam Hussein’s brutal regime, 71% of Iraqis surveyed for a US poll in Spring 2004 believed the US to be ‘occupiers’ not ‘liberators’ of their country. In this respect it can be argued that Western military powers have thus failed to demonstrate that through their role in Iraq they seek to move the country from conflict (under the tyranny of Saddam Hussein) to peace and democracy.

It can be argued that the US authorities have made erroneous analysis of the politics of the Muslim world post 9/11 and their effects in and on Iraq. This analysis stems from the fundamental belief and message to the global community that Islamic insurgents are a global criminal element with no popular support for its aims. They believe that the call to put Islam at the centre of any political project in Muslim domains is simply part of the irrational megalomania derived from Bin Laden’s innate evil. They fail to understand that Muslim insurgents and others engaged in the reconstruction of the Muslim polity parallel the deep sense of unresolved grievance in the Muslim world against the West as a result of what it regards at unwarranted Western
interference in Muslim countries, exploitation of their resources and disrespect for their faith. This in fact is not about a hatred of western values but the current experiences and perceptions of Muslim communities of enmity from the West who are seen as hating Muslim values and seeing them as antithetical to their own.

Despite the (relative) security quiet that prevailed when Iraq went to the polls the insurgency has not withered away as newly elected legislators convene to haggle over power and constitution. The insurgency in Iraq is positively helped by its irregular and diverse character. By this I mean that there is more than one constituency of support at work here – both inside and outside the country. What unites them is hostility to foreign occupation in their country. This means that rather like a wild fire as one local insurgency is ‘put out’ through US military might another will rise elsewhere in Iraq – each time with a different constituency of support. Only the Kurdish areas are likely to remain untainted. Moreover, as the Soviets learnt in Afghanistan, for every terrorist ‘taken out’ in a military operation more spring up to take their place. In Iraq there has been no shortage of volunteers for the fight and the virtual dimension of this campaign also ensures that support remains constant despite on-the ground setbacks

**Democratic elections and the promise of Muslim polity**

The current re-Islamization of Iraq is part of a wider movement of Muslim polity against perceived western authority over the political, economic and cultural landscape of contemporary Islamism. The elections of January 2005
have been cited as the dawn of new democracy in the Middle East amidst claims that they were creating new pressures for democratisation in states such as Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon. The election was open for the 275 seats in the National Assembly. According to the figures published by the Independent Elections Commission in Iraq (IECI), approximately 59 percent or 14.2 million of the registered electorate voted. While it is true that democracy has to start somewhere and the elections were an achievement in and of themselves they are not the solution or symbol that democracy has arrived in Iraq.

Democratisation, or rather the establishment of a political and public landscape that has become highly plural means that a range of political values and ideologies are expressed. The compatibility of Islam with democracy and pluralism in Iraq may well be dependent on the extent to which Islamists actively shape the democratisation process itself. This has been met with limited success so far. The US-led democratisation effort has only bowed to the considerable pressure exerted by Ayatollah al-Sistani but the process failed almost from inception to promote ‘inclusive democratisation’ in which Iraqis felt they were key-stakeholders in determining how pluralism can be translated into democracy the Iraqi way. This strategic error in American calculations stems from the establishment of the CPA as a Western possession and the fact that pro-Western secular exiles were favoured over the Islamists. The social order that has given rise to the plurality of voices in post-Saddam Iraq has remained largely untamed by the expression of US military power. In the town of Samarra, for example, the municipal council resigned en masse in early March 2005 in protest at the US failure to honour
a promise to withdraw from the city. In Tikrit, in the same month, civil police announce an indefinite strike at the arrest of one of their colleague by American military on the charges of supporting the insurgency. Islamization in Iraq is engulfing its citizens through a reassertion of piety, ritual, religious study and the expression of Muslim identity whether the occasion is Ashura, Eid al-Adha, or Ramadan. The key determinants of the Islamization are already apparent in restrictions and even the banning of the sale of alcohol, Ramadan observance, and the wearing of the hijab and increased social control of women. Rival visions within movements and along sectarian lines are being played out in a struggle for power over the whole of society.

If democracy is the goal then what kind of democracy are Iraqis supposed to embrace? In principle it appears that federal or consociational arrangements were already in evidence in the establishment of the Iraqi Coalition Provisional Authority and the Interim Government where the ethnic cleavages of the state were met in terms of the distribution of power. For within this particular rainbow coalition, with its contrived regulations for a rapidly revolving presidency, important ethnic religious and, communal realities are reflected. In practice the manifestation of profound federal arrangements is a long way off and the current provisions for unitary governance do not secure them. There are still moves afoot, despite the important electoral showing of the Kurds, to sidestep autonomy and demand Kurdish independence from the rest of Iraq. Of course the impulse to the unitary formula is almost impossible for western powers to resist as such arrangements ensure a control mechanism can be
rapidly applied to the evolving political character of the new governing authorities.

Moreover if the political vision for democracy to root and flourish in Iraq is to be realised then the agenda for reconstruction would be better served if significant capacity building projects were undertaken to re-engage Iraqi citizens with ‘politics’ per se rather than permitting self-interested groups – such as clerical or tribal elements – to reinforce pre-existing and rigid notions of power as expressed in the new context. For the demand should be to avoid the old British trap of looking for leaders and not rulers of post-Ba'thist Iraq and concentrate on building capacity among all its citizens as a counterbalance to the state. In this way important and essential social capital elements such as young people and women, as well as minorities, are provided with an opportunity to realise the capacity to become stakeholders in a democratic Iraq. Such actions will enhance prospects for transition to new democratic behaviours that mirror the gradualist reformist democratic impulse at large around the region and demonstrated more recently in neighbouring states such as Jordan and Kuwait. For reinforcing or helping to establish a political culture where some elements remain privileged over others will undermine the generation of a majority-based democratising pattern.

1 The exception is the Islamic Republic of Iran established by the Ayatollah’s in 1979 and the Taliban regime of Afghanistan.


3 In the siege of Fallujah in late 2004 there were reports that the US military used dimensions of Shi’a symbolism as part of the black-psychological operations that were employed. Similarly some elements of the Sunni insurgency have deliberately targeted the Shi’a.


9 Reproduced with kind permission of Clay Bennett.
13 The term refers to the scholars of Shi’a Islam.
14 This principle was developed by Ayatollah Khomeini as rule by clerics or jurists.
18 Johnson, S. ‘We pray the insurgents will achieve victory’, *Newsweek*, 7 August 2004.
19 See report from: This is Rumor Control: [http://www.thisisrumorcontrol.org/node/view/1054](http://www.thisisrumorcontrol.org/node/view/1054)
21 [www.al-moharer.net/mohhtm/mujhdeen_shura_council201.htm](http://www.al-moharer.net/mohhtm/mujhdeen_shura_council201.htm)
24 See: [http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1273715,00.html](http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1273715,00.html)
25 See the Amnesty Report about Violence against women in Iraq, [http://news.amnesty.org/index/ENGMDE14310320042004](http://news.amnesty.org/index/ENGMDE14310320042004)
26 Moreover rival Kurdish demands for autonomy and independence also have to be part of any future calculations for power