

CIS Bulletin: Tribal and Religious Divisions in Iraq

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The People of Iraq

The population of Iraq was estimated at 26.8 million in 2006.

Sixty percent of Iraqis are Twelve-Imam Shi'a Muslims (also called 'Twelvers'), many of whom are Persians or Arabs of Persian descent. There are two major legal schools within Shi'a Islam and a number of sub-sects.

Ninety-two percent of Iranians are Shi'a Muslims; the remainder are Sunni Muslims.

Thirty-five percent of Iraqis are Sunni Muslims.

Yazidis make up .3 percent of the population. There are also 20,000 Mandaeans living in Baghdad.

Less than four percent of Iraqis were Christian in 2001; that percentage is believed to have fallen since the current war began in 2003 as Christians have fled the violence, some to the Kurdish region in the north. Christians include Chaldean and Jacobite Uniate Christians, who are in communion with the Roman Catholic Church, and Jacobite Christians. Assyrian Christians make up the largest group of Christians in Iraq.

Nearly 78 percent of the population are Arabs; 18 percent are Kurds (who are Sunni Muslims, but not Arabs) and slightly more than one percent are Persians, and slightly more than one percent are Turkmen.

A Brief History of Iraq

The nation of Iraq was created in 1921 from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire which had sided with the Germans during World War I.

In the Ottoman Empire, there were three distinct administrative units in Iraq: Basra in the Shi'a south, Baghdad in the Sunni center, and Mosul in the Kurdish north. Without regard to tribal or religious divisions in Iraq, the British High Commissioner for Iraq drew the borders between Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. These borders were drawn with British interests in mind to ensure access to the vast oil deposits in Iraq. The British installed a monarch who was kept in office by British military presence in the country.

Foreign control led to numerous uprisings through the years, all of which were put down by the British military. In 1947, the Arab Socialist Ba'ath (Arabic word meaning "resurrection") Party was founded as a secular Arab nationalist political party. The Ba'ath (also spelled Baath or Ba'th) Party came to power in 1963. By 1969, Saddam Hussein had become the moving force behind the Ba'ath Party. In 1979, Hussein, as vice-president, pushed the ruling Ba'athist general, his cousin, out and ruled Iraq until 2003. Hussein organized a security force to prevent the wide divisions within the country to cause violence. He seized the international-owned oil companies operating in Iraq. Perceived opponents to his regime were imprisoned or hanged.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who overthrew the Shah of Iran in 1979 to establish the Islamic Revolution in Iran, lived in exile in Iraq from 1964 until 1978. During these years, Khomeini developed a close relationship to the Arab Shi'a Muslims in Iraq.

From 1980 to 1988, Iraq fought a bloody war with Iran, allegedly over a disputed waterway between the two countries. The war, which ended in a stalemate, cost the lives of nearly two million on both sides of the conflict. The economies of both countries were left in ruins. Hussein also attacked Kurds in northern Iraq, killing thousands with poison gas, to prevent any attempt at the establishment of an independent state while Iraq was involved in and after the conflict with Iraq.

After the war with Iran ended, Hussein attempted to increase the price of oil by cutting back oil production to pay off the debt Iraq had incurred during the war. Kuwait led OPEC to continue oil

production at the then current level.

Iraq has long considered Kuwait a legitimate part of Iraq, arguing that the British had created Kuwait as "independent sheikhdom under British protectorate" from a part of Iraq after World War I. Although allied with Iraq during its war with Iran, Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. During the six-week Persian Gulf War in 1991, the United States and its allies forced Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait.

Charging the Iraqi regime with plotting to "develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade" as well as possessing other weapons of "mass destruction," the United States and its coalition forces invaded Iraq in 2003. Some Iraq watchers believe Hussein had not developed weapons of mass destruction, but allowed the rumor to flourish to keep Iran from attacking Iraq.

The coalition forces quickly entered Baghdad, prompting hopes that peace would soon be realized. However, religious violence, a reality in Iraq for 1,300 years, continued. Hope for a peaceful resolution to the violence remains elusive.

Divisions in Iraq

Long before Hussein came to power, Iraq had been split along social, ethnic, religious, and economic lines: Sunni versus Shi'a, Arab versus Kurd, and tribal chief versus urban dweller. During his reign, Hussein used the power of his personality and military to prevent most of the divisions in Iraq from threatening his position. Hussein's forces killed thousands of Kurds and Shi'as, as well as close members of his own family, when he felt they were a threat. His iron-fisted rule for twenty-four years left indelible marks on the Iraqi people, marks now seen in the violence in Iraq that some call a "civil war."

Kurds

Kurds trace their history back to the ancient Medes. Approximately 16 million Kurds now live in northern Iraq, western Iran, eastern Turkey, and northeastern Syria. The Kurds are the largest tribal group in the world without their own country.

Kurds make up twenty percent of the population in Turkey. In recent years, the Kurdish population in eastern Turkey has attempted to break away from Turkey to form a transnational Kurdistan with Kurds in Iraq. The Turkish military has put down these attempts with force. Kurds are considered terrorists by many Turks. In May 2006, while this writer was visiting Turkey, a bomb exploded at the international airport at Istanbul, Turkey. Kurdish rebels were blamed.

Most Kurds are Sunnis, although Kurds in Iran are predominantly Twelve-Imam Shi'as. Their tribal allegiance sets Kurds apart from the rest of Iraq.

Minority Groups

Minority groups include the Yazidis and the Alawis. Yazidis, who number up to 500,000 in several countries, have a complex religious belief in which a peacock angel is the chief of seven angels or Seven Mysteries. Apparently influenced by Christian Gnosticism, reincarnation is accepted. Yazidis believe they are descended from Adam, but not from Eve. Yazidis do not consider themselves Muslims and do not accept the *Qur'an* as a divine book. Yazidi holy books are the *Book of Revelation* and the *Black Book*.

Alwais, also called Alevis and Nusayris, are found mainly in Syria and Turkey. Their theology is also complex. Often considered Shi'as, their theology is not compatible with Shi'a Islam. Their theology appears to be a mixture of various religions, including tribal religions and Christian Gnosticism. Alwai religious practices are conducted in secret; outsiders are not allowed. Their holy book

is called *Kitab al-Majmu* or *The Book of the Collection*.

Shi'a Islam

Shi'a Islam makes up only ten percent of the world's Muslim population, but makes up sixty percent of Iraq's population. The division between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims goes back to the death of Muhammad in A. D. 632. At Muhammad's death, the question arose as to who should lead the new religion. Some Muslims believe Ali, Muhammad's cousin, son-in-law, and the first male to accept Islam, was named by Muhammad as his successor. They began to call themselves Shi'as, a word meaning "followers," as in "followers of Ali."

According to Shi'as Muslims, Muhammad said that twelve Imams would follow him. Ali is considered the first of those Imams. In Shi'a Islam, an Imam is a leader that *must* be followed since he is appointed by Allah; he is a guide in all areas of life. Sunni Muslims insist Muhammad named no successor and that Muslims should be led by a consensus of the community, hence the name "Sunni," a word meaning "path," as in "the path of the Prophet Muhammad."

The twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Madhi, or Imam Madhi (b. A. D. 868), mysteriously disappeared and is believed to be "in hiding." Shi'a Muslims believe he will return as a military leader, great teacher and lawgiver at the end of the age.

Several Muslims have claimed to be the returned Imam Madhi. Perhaps the best known is Baha'u'llah (1817-1892), whose followers, known as Baha'is, believe he is the world prophet for the next 1,000 years. Baha'is have been persecuted by Shi'a Muslims in Iran for heresy because Baha'is claim that Muhammad is not the last and greatest prophet.

Another more interesting claim comes from Benjamin Crème (1922-), a New Age teacher who believes the Buddhist eschatological figure Maitreya, who has appeared in the past as Krishna, Christ, and the Imam Madhi, will soon appear as the "Great Teacher" and usher in a world of peace. Crème predicted this appearance in 1982, but when it failed to occur, he announced a delay because humans are not ready for Maitreya. One of the symbols of Maitreya, according to Crème, are lighted crosses. Such a lighted cross began appearing in windows in a rural Baptist church near Knoxville, Tennessee, in the mid-1980s. Photos of the lighted crosses in the windows have been shown in a New Age fair in Atlanta. With a quick trip to the church one Wednesday evening, this writer couldn't help but notice that the crosses suddenly appeared in the windows when the newly installed security light in the parking lot came on.

In Shi'a eschatology, as interpreted by religious leaders in Iran and promoted by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, predicts the return of Imam Madhi as soon as the 2007 Spring Equinox. The sixth Imam (702-765) is said to have predicted the Imam Madhi's return at that time of the year.

In a series, called "The World Towards Illumination," on the official Iranian website over the past few months, the return of the Imam Madhi was explained. According to the website, "Imam Madhi (may Allah hasten his reappearance) will appear all of a sudden on the world scene with a voice from the skies announcing his reappearance at the holy Ka'ba in Mecca [in Saudi Arabia]."

The website said Saudi Arabia will join the Imam and help form an army of many Muslim countries to defeat Islam's enemies, beginning with Israel. Jerusalem, which is said to be "currently under occupation of the Zionists," is the Muslim's third most holy city. One report said many Iranian Muslims pray daily that they will be one of the companions of the returned Imam Madhi, who will establish "peace, justice and equity" after all "enemies and oppressors" are vanquished.

Muhammad is said to have ascended to heaven "on a winged horse" from Jerusalem. Muslims insist "the Western Wall," sacred to Jews, was not part of Herod's temple, but is part of Al-Aqsa Mosque. Muslims call the wall the Al-Buraq Wall, after the name of Muhammad's "winged horse."

The website states that "Jesus, son of Mary" will return with

the Imam Madhi and will be the Imam's "lieutenant."

The seat of Imam Madhi's government will be Kufa, Iraq, located about 100 miles south of Baghdad. Kufa, Samarra, Karbala, and Najaf are holy Shi'a cities in Iraq. Saddam Hussein refused to allow Shi'a Muslim to go on pilgrimages to these cities during his reign.

In the decades after Muhammad's death in A.D. 632, a struggle ensued to determine who and what kind of leader should succeed Muhammad.

Imam Ali, the first Shi'a Imam, was murdered in Kufa and then secretly buried in Najaf. The Imam Ali Mosque was later built over the burial site. Najaf is the third most holy city for Shi'a Muslims after Mecca and Medina. Only Mecca and Medina receive more Muslim pilgrims than does Najaf.

Hussain ibn Ali is revered as the Third Imam by Shi'a Muslims. He was killed ("martyred") in the Battle of Karbala in A. D. 680. The anniversary of his death is called Ashura and is a day of mourning and religious observance for Shi'a Muslims. To remember Hussain's "martyrdom" at the hands of Sunni Muslims, Shi'a Muslims fast and practice a form of self-mutilation: beating their chests, whipping their backs and cutting themselves with knives to commemorate Hussain on the day known as Ashura. Sunni Muslims, and some Shi'a clerics, reject this practice as an "innovation" not permitted in Islam. Because the Islamic lunar calendar is eleven days shorter than the Gregorian solar calendar used in the West, Ashura falls on January 19, 2008, January 7, 2009 and December 27, 2009, according to the Gregorian calendar.

Martyrdom is a legitimate activity in much of Islam, if it is a part of the struggle (*jihad*) against enemies or to spread the faith. Although both are Muslim, Shi'as and Sunnis have historically opposed one another's belief systems and have, at times, such as in Iraq today, used martyrdom in the form of suicide bombings as a form of *jihad*.

The tenth and eleventh Shi'a Imams are buried in Samarra. There is also a shrine to the Imam Madhi in Samarra. Two of Muhammad's female relatives are buried in Samarra.

Sunni Islam

The minority Sunnis in Iraq accuse the current government, made up primarily of Shi'a and Kurdish politicians, of trying to divide Iraq along ethnic and religious lines. Some Sunnis call the Iraqi constitution the "Jewish constitution." Sunnis are fearful that if Iraq is divided into three parts, a fear with some justification, they will be left with the part of Iraq which has no oil fields.

Because Shi'as are a minority in all countries, except in Iraq and Iran, they accuse the majority Sunnis of religious discrimination. There is also some justification to this belief. In December 2006, a Saudi cleric, a Sunni, issued a *fatwa*, a religious ruling, about the Shi'as, "The rejectionists [Shi'as] in their entirety are the worst of the Islamic nation's sects. They bear all the characteristics of infidels." Shi'as "don't believe the basics [of Islam]," said another Sunni cleric.

A Wider Conflict?

The conflict in Iraq could easily spread to other Islamic countries. Saudi Arabia would almost certainly send troops into the Sunni areas of Iraq if Iran moves its forces into Shi'a areas.

Kurds would finally realize their long dream of an independent Kurdistan. However, an independent Kurdistan could easily cause the conflict in Iraq to spill over into Turkey, which is fearful of a strengthened Kurdistan.

Dividing Iraq into three autonomous regions would not necessarily solve the Iraqi problem. Iraqi Shi'as, although not all, would welcome Iran's assistance. The Sunni and Kurdish regions would have no access to the ocean except through the Shi'a region or through another country. Most of the oil in Iraq would be under Kurdish and Shi'a control.

There is no simple solution to the centuries-old conflict between the Shi'a and Sunni Muslims in Iraq or the Middle East.