

“US policies in the Middle East may have helped create the conditions for a second phase of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, which is now at long last having a significant impact among Iran’s Arab neighbors.”

## A “Shiite Crescent”? The Regional Impact of the Iraq War

JUAN COLE

Most of the earth’s approximately 1.3 billion Muslims are divided into two great branches, the Sunni and the Shiite. The Arab world has been for the most part ruled by Sunni regimes. They might be divided on the issue of nationalist republicanism versus monarchy, but their sectarian character colors their religious policies. Some countries, such as Iraq and Bahrain, have Shiite majorities, or, as with Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, significant Shiite minorities, but they have been repressed.

Today, in the wake of the Bush administration’s overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the character of sectarian politics in the region has changed dramatically. The US ouster of the Sunni dictatorship politically unleashed Iraq’s Shiite majority. Elsewhere in the Middle East, Shiite masses are appraising the new situation, becoming more restive and beginning to seek new bargains with their rulers. It is the sectarian balance within states, rather than primarily the relationship among states—though the two are obviously related—that is driving these political developments. The question thus is posed: Will newly awakened Shiite populations, less enamored of pan-Arab and secularist projects than the Sunnis, push their states toward pronounced republicanism and at least vague theocracy?

Although about 10 percent of Muslims worldwide are Shiites, they have an especially strong presence in the greater oil-producing Gulf area. The king of Jordan has worried aloud about the rise of a “Shiite crescent” in the Arab east that would ally with Shiite Iran and menace the traditional monarchies. Indeed,

US policies in the Middle East, including the promotion of democratization, may have helped create the conditions for a second phase of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, which is now at long last having a significant impact among Iran’s Arab neighbors.

### ALI’S HEIRS IN IRAQ

The difference between Sunnis and Shiites goes back to disputes in the early Muslim community over the rightful successor to the prophet Mohammed after his death in 632. Shiites wanted the prophet to be succeeded by Ali ibn Abi Talib, his son-in-law and cousin, and then by his descendants thereafter. What became the Sunni branch was content to have caliphs—the respected elders of the prophet’s tribe—succeed him.

The precise forms that religious authority took in the two branches changed radically over time. From the 1500s, Shiism experienced a great deal of dynamism and expansion, becoming the majority in Iran and later in Iraq. In the course of the twentieth century, the structures of authority in the two branches diverged. Shiites rallied to a handful of ayatollahs, prominent clerical jurists whose legal advice on leading a pious life was considered incontrovertible by the laity. In Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini introduced the novel doctrine that clerics should actually rule, an idea that remained controversial outside that country. In the early 1920s, the newly secular republic of Turkey abolished the Sunni caliphate, which had been claimed (to mixed acclaim) by the last Ottoman sultans. The increasingly Protestant-like Sunnis gave less veneration to their clerics and developed a range of lay, activist organizations, usually based in particular nation-states.

Modern, ideological Shiite politics in Iraq began in many ways with the founding of the Dawa Party

---

JUAN COLE is a professor of history at the University of Michigan and author of the web log “Informed Comment” ([juancole.com](http://juancole.com)). His most recent book is *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture, and History of Shiite Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002).

in the late 1950s. The party's theorists wanted to offer young Shiites an alternative to the secular mass parties, such as the Baath Socialist Party and the Communist Party. These were becoming enormously popular in the 1950s as discontent grew with the British-installed constitutional monarchy dating from the 1920s. Dawa organizers sought a Shiite utopia to compete with the Communist one, which would uplift not workers as a class but pious Muslims as a status group. They were convinced that Shiite law could provide social justice, and they sought ways of incorporating consultative decision-making on a national scale into their vision, so long as it did not lead to the contravention of Islamic law. They imagined themselves a modern Shiite response to Iraq's rapid social change, provoked by the influx of oil money and by strides in urbanization. But in many ways they simply repackaged traditionalism and undergirded it with Stalinist-style cells and party discipline.

The Dawa Party tradition looked forward to a Shiite Islamic republic in Iraq with a strong central government. In 1968, the Baath Party came to power in a coup led by Brigadier General Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, and it gradually cracked down on the Dawa and the Communists during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1980, Saddam Hussein, the Baathist dictator, made membership in the Shiite Dawa Party a capital crime.

The belief in a united Iraq under a strong central government was also characteristic of the strictly religious leadership of the Iraqi Shiites, collectively called the *marjaiyyah* or "source" of guidance. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the foremost authority in the holy city of Najaf, south of Baghdad, called for national unity just after the fall of the Baath Party on April 9, 2003, condemned the foreign occupation of Iraq, and reminded his listeners that the leading Shiite clergy had played a central part in the 1920 great rebellion against British rule, imposed during and after World War I. When it became clear to Sistani, in the winter of 2003 and 2004, that the Americans did not intend to allow Iraqis to hold one-person, one-vote elections—a clear interest for the Shiite majority—he brought huge crowds into the streets and demanded them. The Bush administration reluctantly acquiesced, and set the polls for January 2005.

The turning point for Shiite power in Iraq came with the results of the provincial elections on Jan-

uary 30, 2005. The religious Shiite parties had, under Sistani's sponsorship, formed a single party list, the United Iraqi Alliance. It was dominated by the Dawa Party and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). SCIRI had been founded in 1982 by expatriate Shiite religious activists who sought asylum in Tehran during Hussein's crackdown. Initially SCIRI included the Dawa Party, but Dawa leaders left in 1984 to retain their own independence as a party.

The SCIRI leadership had returned to Iraq after the fall of Hussein, and had demonstrated a remarkable aptitude for grassroots organizing. SCIRI political offices opened in villages all over the Shiite south, and its provincial party leaders gained popularity. Part of the reason for SCIRI's success probably lay with its paramilitary wing, the Badr Corps, which was trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and had been fighting the Baath regime from bases in Iran for two decades. The Badr Corps often supplied security to small towns in the Shiite south, forestalling the sort of chaos that

---

*The king of Jordan has worried aloud about the rise of a "Shiite crescent" in the Arab east that would ally with Shiite Iran and menace the traditional monarchies.*

---

afflicted provinces of the center-north, and gaining the gratitude of a violence-weary public. The SCIRI leadership had long been rooted in the old nexus of the Shiite clerisy and the bazaar merchants, and it increasingly became the party of choice for the traditional Shiite bourgeoisie.

The United Iraqi Alliance won a simple majority in the January interim parliamentary election, and was able to form a government in coalition with the Kurdistan Alliance. It chose Dawa Party leader Ibrahim Jaafari as prime minister. Most cabinet posts went either to Kurds or to members of Shiite religious parties such as SCIRI and Dawa. The constitution hammered out by this parliament stipulated that Islam is the religion of state and that the civil parliament could pass no legislation that contravened established Islamic laws.

In addition, various provincial Shiite religious coalitions, mainly led by SCIRI, won the vote in 11 of Iraq's 18 provinces, including Baghdad Province. Each province had a provincial assembly, roughly consisting of between 20 and 40 members, which in turn selected the governor and deputy governor. That SCIRI was the leading party in most of these lists made it a force in Iraqi provincial politics and gave it grassroots support and local interests.

In the December 15, 2005, elections, the religious parties ran again as a coalition, this time adding followers of the young Shiite nationalist cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, to the list. The results ensure some representation in parliament by Sunnis, since they did not boycott the elections. But the Shiite religious parties did very well again, confirming their likely dominance of Iraq for the next few years. Sunni political representation in any case does not mean an end to armed resistance or sectarian violence. Nor does it change the fact of the Shiites' new power, based on their majority status.

### JORDAN AND THE SHIITE AXIS

What are the regional implications of this political earthquake? The United States has overthrown a secular Arab nationalist regime and been forced to permit fundamentalist Shiite parties to come to power through the ballot box. In December 2004, King Abdullah II of Jordan gave an interview to *The Washington Post* in which he voiced his concern about the rise of a "Shiite Crescent" in the eastern stretches of the Middle East. Iran already had a clerically run Shiite government. Now Iraq, he could foresee, would also be dominated by religious Shiite parties. Abdullah even suggested that hundreds of thousands of Iranians might cross the border, pretending to be Iraqi Shiites, and vote in the elections. This fear was based on complete fantasy, of course.

But the anxiety is very real. Jordan is a small country of about 5 million people. It was formed as a result of the World War I Arab revolt against the Ottomans in alliance with the British, who awarded the territory between Palestine and Iraq to the Hashemite dynasty. As a result of the long period of UN sanctions, Baath repression, and the instability that followed the 2003 invasion, some 500,000 Iraqis became economic and political refugees in Jordan. They are thus a tenth of the population and one of the major ethnic groups on Jordanian soil. Most Jordanians are either from a Bedouin, East Bank background or are of Palestinian heritage, and are Sunni Muslims.

Why is Abdullah so nervous about Iraq? Before the Iraq War, the region had been characterized by a Sunni-dominated, secular Iraq; a Sunni Jordan; a Sunni-majority Syria with a secular Baath government; a Sunni Palestine; a Lebanon dominated jointly by Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims; and a Sunni Saudi Arabia and Gulf. From the vantage point of Amman, Sunni-dominated Iraq had served as a bulwark against the influence of Iranian Shiism and Khomeinist ideas. Ayatollah Khomeini

had believed in Islamic governance and maintained that Islam is incompatible with monarchy. Millions of Iraqi Shiites were privately sympathetic to Khomeinist ideas. Those ideas are now on Jordan's doorstep, with no Baath Party buffer.

Amman worries that the new Shiite axis of Baghdad and Tehran will have natural allies in a Syria dominated by Alawis (an offshoot of Shiites) and in the Shiite Hezbollah Party of southern Lebanon. Shiites may now be over 40 percent of the Lebanese population, and they will likely form a majority of the country within 20 years. A Shiite Iraq would also inevitably establish ties with the Shiite majority in Bahrain and the Shiite plurality in the oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

### THE HOLY WAR SPREADS

It is not only the rise to power of political Shiism in Iraq that threatens Jordan. The overthrow of the secular Arab nationalist Baath Party has provided an opening to the revivalist Salafi movement among Iraq's Sunni Arabs. Salafism had its origins in a nineteenth-century reform movement that advocated a return to the practice of Islam characteristic of the prophet Mohammed's companions in Islam's first generation. It had a somewhat "Protestant" emphasis on sloughing off tradition. Salafism then split into modernist and fundamentalist branches. In the later twentieth century, especially under the influence of the Afghanistan jihad against the Soviet Union, some of the fundamentalist Salafis turned to violence and became known as the Salafiyah Jihadiyyah.

A major figure in this movement was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who fled his hometown of Zarqa in Jordan for Afghanistan in 1989. He returned to Jordan in the 1990s and was imprisoned. He fled again to Afghanistan, and then in late 2001 relocated to northern Iraq, where he joined the radical Ansar al-Islam group, dominated by Kurdish Muslim extremists, some of whom had fought in Afghanistan.

The United States military had an opportunity to bomb the Ansar al-Islam base in March 2003, but the Bush administration declined to attack. Some observers suspect that this reticence derived from the administration's use of Zarqawi as a pretext for attacking Baathist Iraq, insofar as Vice President Dick Cheney and others connected Zarqawi both to Al Qaeda and to Saddam Hussein. With Zarqawi and Ansar al-Islam gone, Washington would have lost a talking point in its search for reasons to invade.

After the fall of Hussein's regime, Zarqawi's Monotheism and Holy War (Al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad) organization, which he had begun in Afghanistan in

the 1990s as a rival to Al Qaeda, and which he had organized as well in Jordan and Germany, became a major player. Although less than 6 percent of the fighters in the Sunni Arab guerrilla movement in Iraq are foreigners (an estimate based on capture ratios), they are disproportionately willing to undertake suicide bombings. Tawhid has also been eager to carry out attacks on Shiite civilian targets, hoping to provoke a civil war.

In the jihadists' view, sectarian violence could make Iraq so unstable that American troops would have to withdraw, creating an opportunity for a coup by the allied neo-Baathist and Salafi forces of the Sunni Arabs. In fact, without a tank corps and helicopter gunships, they would find it almost impossible to again subdue the now-mobilized Shiites and Kurds. However, with many experienced men from the officer corps, military intelligence, and managerial elite in their ranks, the Sunnis might well be able to inflict substantial defeats on the mainly peasant or slum-dwelling Shiites. An inconclusive, hot civil war could ensue.

A year or so into the guerrilla war in Iraq, Zarqawi's group announced on the Internet that it was changing its name to "Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia" and pledged fealty to Osama bin Laden. In western Iraq, Sunni Arabs are said to continue to refer to the organization as Monotheism and Holy War, and it is unclear whether it actually has operational contact with Al Qaeda (or, indeed, if Zarqawi is still alive). Some group or groups such as Tawhid certainly operate in Iraq, but they are a small part of the guerrilla movement, which is largely Iraqi.

The activities of the Jordanian Salafi jihadis in Iraq have enraged the Iraqi Shiites. At the end of February 2005, a suicide bomber from Salt, Jordan, detonated his payload at a clinic in largely Shiite Hilla, killing over a hundred and wounding more. Although the main target was Iraqi recruits for the new regime's police or soldiers who were receiving physical examinations, the bomb's victims were mostly civilians, including children. Then reports surfaced in the Arabic press that the suicide

bomber's family in Salt held a funeral for him at which they celebrated his "martyrdom." Thousands of Shiites demonstrated in Najaf, and hundreds in Baghdad, demanding that all Jordanians be expelled from Iraq. Diplomacy by King Abdullah II and Iraqi Shiite notables gradually defused the crisis, but hard feelings linger.

In November 2005, the violence in Sunni western Iraq, in which Jordanian networks are important, spilled over into the Jordanian capital. Four Iraqi suicide bombers from the Salafiyyah Jihadiyyah struck three tourist hotels, killing at least 67 people and wounding 200. Amman's five-star hotels had begun functioning as an alternative to Baghdad for meetings among prominent Iraqi politicians, and were as thick with spies as had been Berlin in the old

days. Zarqawi issued a communiqué in which he claimed to have struck at the hotels to disrupt intelligence activities aimed at the guerrilla movement in Iraq.

The bombers were from the area around the city of Ramadi, due west of Baghdad. The bomb belt of one, a woman named Sajida Mubarak Atrus al-Rishawi,

did not detonate, and she was later captured and interrogated. She turned out to be the sister of the leader in Iraq's western Anbar province of the Monotheism and Holy War (Al Qaeda in Iraq) group, who was killed at some point in Falluja. Jordanian security officials said that they more than once discovered information suggesting that Al Qaeda in Iraq was striving to spread its activities beyond Iraq. This alert set off extra surveillance of the jihadis in Jordan. That the Salafiyyah Jihadiyyah was so well penetrated by Jordanian intelligence was presumably the reason Iraqi operatives were used for the Amman bombings instead. There were subsequently substantial demonstrations in the streets of Jordan against terrorism. Politicians began a push to outlaw the groups that believe in "excommunication" (*takfir*) of other Muslims who do not agree with their militancy.

The Jordanian regime, a pro-Western Sunni monarchy, thus feels increasingly squeezed between



Khomeini's Revenge: A Campaign Poster in Baghdad

two forms of Muslim fundamentalism—the theocratic tendencies of the Iraqi and Iranian Shiites, and the radical Sunni jihadis of the Zarqawi stripe. The US invasion of Iraq unleashed both forces, providing them with a new arena in which they could operate freely. The Shiite religious parties are more likely to make their peace with the Hashemite rulers of Jordan (who had incurred their ire by siding with Saddam Hussein) as they become mainstream parliamentary parties in control of the Iraqi government. The radicalization of Iraq's Sunni Arabs, and their alliance with extremist Jordanian Salafis, are probably a longer-term and more menacing development for Amman.

### ALARM IN SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia's monarchy has not had the Hashemites' secular pragmatism, and is far more intimately allied with Sunni Muslim clerics. Those of Saudi Arabia adhere in the majority to the puritanical Wahhabi branch of Islam, which itself has in the past not hesitated to pronounce other Muslims "unbelievers" for not practicing with the requisite rigor. The Saudis, like the Jordanians, deeply fear the influence of Khomeinism, with its insistence that Islam and monarchy are incompatible. Saudi Arabia had strongly backed Iraq's war against Iran between 1980 and 1988, and relations between Riyadh and Tehran were bad until the mid- to late 1990s. The Wahhabi branch of Islam is fiercely anti-Shiite.

Within Saudi Arabia, the Shiites are thought to constitute some 10 percent of the population. But they live largely in the strategic Eastern Province (al-Ahsa), the site of the kingdom's vast oil reserves, where they make up a significant number of the workers on oil rigs. Saudi Shiites have traditionally been repressed and unable to conduct their rituals in public, and have from all accounts taken heart from the rise of new allies in Basra and Baghdad. Many Saudi Shiites follow Grand Ayatollah Sistani of Najaf, raising fears in Riyadh that they will be more loyal to him than to the House of Saud.

The increasing alarm with which the Saudi elite views the rise of Shiite power in Baghdad, growing Iranian influence, and the ethnic separatism that threatens to pull countries apart was apparent in remarks made by Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York in September 2005. He accused Iran of moving substantial numbers of men, as well as goods and matériel, into Iraq. The charge in fact is absurd. But it mirrors the accusations of hard-line Iraqi Sunnis,

who have never reconciled themselves to the Shiite majority in Iraq and so are always positing large Iranian population transfers into the south.

Al-Faisal also said at the council meeting that Washington and Riyadh had "fought a war together to keep Iran out of Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait. Now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason." This allegation is bizarre, since the United States and Saudi Arabia did not in fact fight a war to keep Iran out of Iraq, although they do appear to have colluded in allowing Hussein to put down the Shiite uprising of March and April 1991, with great brutality. Many Iraqi Shiites have never forgiven the United States and its Gulf War allies for this inaction and even perfidy (given that President George H. W. Bush had called for the uprising).

The foreign minister's remarks sparked an increase in Sunni-Shiite tensions in the region, and a testy exchange between al-Faisal and Iraqi Minister of the Interior Bayan Jabr. Jabr is the *nom de guerre* of Bayan Sulagh, a member of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which al-Faisal implied was an Iranian puppet. He angrily replied that Iraqis did not need lecturing on democracy from Saudi Arabia (an absolute monarchy), saying that Iraqis had invented civilization and needed no advice from some Bedouin on camelback. Jabr is a Turkmen Shiite and not an Arab at all. His retort recalled ancient non-Arab taunts that Arabs were desert-dwelling lizard eaters.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiar Zebari (a Kurd) hastily intervened to deplore Jabr's outburst as "inappropriate," apologizing for it profusely. Zebari had to sit at conference tables with al-Faisal, and knew that Iraq's future depended on good relations with the kingdom. Several members of the Iraqi parliament called on Jabr to apologize or step down, saying that he had insulted all Arabs, including those of Iraq. Jabr weathered the storm, and Iraqi-Saudi relations returned to frostily correct. But the outbreak of frankness in Gulf discourse, which is notoriously reserved in public, points to severe regime anxieties over the new geopolitical posture of Iran and Shiism in the area.

### REGIONAL PRESSURES MOUNT

Among Iraq's Arab neighbors, Jordan and Saudi Arabia have been the most deeply affected by the geopolitical changes since the fall of the Iraqi Baath. The mainly Sunni Kuwaitis hated Saddam Hussein so much because of his 1990 invasion of their country that they appear to be willing to

accept the rise of Shiite and Kurdish power in Baghdad with few complaints.

Bahrain, an island nation of some 450,000 citizens and half as many guest workers, has been ruled by a Sunni dynasty for over two centuries. With the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, some Shiites in Bahrain—who comprise two-thirds of the nation's citizenry—became politicized. During the 1990s there was substantial political dissidence and alleged secret police crackdowns. In 2002, a new young king held parliamentary elections for a lower house of 40 seats, but appointed the upper house and the prime minister. Shiite activists were outraged that the parliament's prerogatives had been so circumscribed, and that the lower house could be overruled by the appointed upper chamber. They mounted a successful boycott of the elections, which led to dominance of the lower house by Sunni fundamentalists (who were not even representative of the minority Sunni community of Bahrain's citizens).

Bahrain's Shiites continue to agitate for a fully elected sovereign parliament. Their movement has gained momentum from Sistani's political emergence in Najaf. The majority of Bahrain's Shiites are Akhbaris, who decline to give blind obedience to the rulings of ayatollahs, and who believe that scripture and other sacred texts are a sufficient guide for the believer. A substantial minority, however, is of Iranian or other foreign extraction and belongs to the Usuli school that predominates in Iraq and Iran, which does mandate obedience to an ayatollah. In recent years it is alleged that some Bahrainis who had been Akhbari traditionalists have increasingly become followers of Sistani. Sistani, of course, had come out for one-person, one-vote elections as compatible with Shiite law, giving heart to Bahrainis who want more popular sovereignty and less monarchical authoritarianism.

When US Marines and a Shiite militia fought in the holy city of Najaf in the spring and late summer of 2005, Bahrainian Shiite clerics and crowds waving banners showing Sistani's somber visage mounted protests in Manama, the capital, against the presence on Bahraini soil of an American naval base. In one incident in spring 2005, the Interior Ministry attempted to crack down on a demonstration, resulting in the injury of 20 protesters, some of them prominent. The Interior Minister, a relative of the

king, was forced to resign. Although the Bush administration paints its Iraq policy as one of democratization and cooperation with even fundamentalist religious parties willing to contest elections, it has not publicly commented on the problems in Bahrain. The island nation's Shiite majority has interpreted the change of regime in Baghdad and the rise of Shiite democracy sanctioned by Sistani as encouragement to redouble their efforts to elect a sovereign parliament that they can dominate.

Syria has been under a great deal of pressure by the United States because its territory is used by jihadis seeking to infiltrate Iraq (although it should be noted that volunteer fighters also enter from Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which are never cited as sources of infiltration by US government spokesmen). Syria's Baath Party was a bitter rival of its counterpart in Iraq, and the fall of Hussein may have been wel-

come in Damascus. But the advent of so many US troops next door was not equally welcome, nor was Washington's diplomatic pressure on Syria to stop the infiltration and to withdraw from neighboring Leb-

anon. (The Ford administration had given the Syrians a green light to put a large peacekeeping force in Lebanon in 1976 to quell civil war, but they had long outlasted their welcome.)

Once the Syrians had withdrawn their remaining troops from Lebanon in the spring of 2005, however, much of the wind was taken out of Washington's sails with regard to Syria policy, and the regime has so far weathered the changes. Syria's major ally in Lebanon, the fundamentalist Shiite Hezbollah Party, continues to support Damascus strongly, and Hezbollah has picked up powerful behind-the-scenes supporters in the newly liberated Iraqi Shiite community. Iran even suggested, in the fall of 2005, that Baghdad, Tehran, and Damascus form a security pact.

## ISLAMIC REVOLUTION, PART 2

The 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War was intended by Hussein to bottle up fundamentalist Shiism and to keep it from having a major impact in Iraq and the Gulf. The Arab world, including Saudi Arabia and Jordan, had lined up behind Hussein (as had the United States), and Iran had indeed been boxed in. By its recent intervention in Iraq, the United States has changed that dynamic completely. The discrediting of the secular, Arab nationalist Baath Party of

---

*The old sectarian balance in the eastern Arab world, with Sunni rulers and Shiite ruled, is coming unraveled as Shiite masses are mobilized into new forms of sectarian politics.*

---

Iraq has unleashed significant political and social change in the eastern reaches of the Arab world. Once-isolated Iran has emerged as a major regional player. Tehran is developing warm and positive links with newly Shiite-dominated Baghdad, and exercising new influence in the Persian Gulf.

Saudi Arabia has lost a key ally (King Fahd had referred to Hussein as his "brother"). The anti-Shiite Wahhabis can only gnash their teeth as they see the Dawa Party and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq come to power next door. Riyadh fears that its own Shiites will become more restive, putting in doubt Saudi control of its vast oil reserves in the Eastern Province.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has long been uncomfortably wedged between Israel and the Palestinians on the one side, and the Baathist socialists and the traditional Gulf monarchies on the other. Both King Hussein and his successor, King Abdullah II, had managed to find a modus vivendi among these four forces. The Jordanian regime is therefore dismayed to see the status quo unraveled and the rise of a fifth movement, Shiite religious republicanism, come to the fore next door.

If the Sunni Arab regimes have felt a chill blowing in from Tehran and Najaf, and fear catching cold, the Shiite masses in the region are starting to show signs of wanting new relationships with their rulers. The Bahraini Shiites have become increasingly restless, taking from George W. Bush and Grand Ayatollah Sistani a message that parliamen-

tary Shiism is a legitimate goal, even though that message might make the US Fifth Fleet uncomfortable. In Lebanon, with its Shiite plurality and militant Hezbollah Party, Shiite influence has if anything grown, and has gained new backing from Iraqi allies. The Alawi ruling elite of Syria has so far managed to tough out pressure from Washington and to retain control.

Has the Shiite Islamic Revolution unleashed in Iran in 1979 entered a second phase? There is cause to believe so. The first phase brought to power as rulers for the first time the Shiite clerical corps and replaced most civil law with Shiite canon law. The Khomeinists were deeply disappointed that no Arab state adopted their new system, since their aspirations had been pan-Islamic. Until 2003, Iranian Khomeinist influences had been largely contained in the Arab world, although Tehran had a foothold in Lebanon through the radical Hezbollah Party. With religious Shiite parties now operating freely in Iraq, and even influencing government policy and the wording of the new constitution, Khomeini's ideas have finally entered a phase of wider practical influence.

Whatever happens, it seems evident that the old sectarian balance in the eastern Arab world, with Sunni rulers and Shiite ruled, is coming unraveled as Shiite masses are mobilized into new forms of sectarian politics. Bush's invasion of Iraq unwittingly set off a religious tsunami, which has yet fully to make landfall. ■