

will emerge, and Shia states and political communities are likely to endorse different ones. The prospect of a monolithic pan-Shia polity or regime model dominated by Iran is remote. In fact, it is evident that Iran is hard-pressed to assert the claim of its supreme leader to a Shia "papacy." Iran will be an influential big brother but not a "heavy father," much less a master.

The pluralism and the contentions within Shia ranks do not mean that there is no basic shared vision of Shia interests or of what the Shia revival means. Shias are surprisingly in agreement over the stakes of what is happening in Iraq. They seem to recognize that regardless of whatever disagreements may come between them, they have a common interest in protecting, entrenching, and furthering the gains that the cause of Shia empowerment has made in the affairs of the new Iraq struggling to be born. It was in this context and in confirmation of Sistani's initiative that conservative Iranian newspapers began to talk of a Nasrallah-Sistani-Khamenei axis, bringing Hezbollah, Iraqi Shias, and the Iranian government together to defend Shia interests. This was a regional Shia project, not an Iranian one. This axis was no different from the "Shia crescent" that Jordan's King Abdullah warned of. What Abdullah saw as a threat, Shias saw as the bedrock of their newfound regional power.

The Shia revival rests on three pillars: the newly empowered Shia majority in Iraq, the current rise of Iran as regional leader, and the empowerment of Shias across Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, and Pakistan. The three are interconnected, and each reinforces the others. Together they ensure a greater Shia voice in Middle East politics and are pressing events toward a new power distribution in the region. All this will also mean a more even Shia-Sunni balance of power in the Middle East than has been seen in nearly fourteen centuries.

## Chapter 7

### IRAQ

#### *The First Arab Shia State*

**A**l-Rashid Street is an old colonnaded road of shops in the heart of Baghdad. At its entrance sits the historic British Residency, where the influential British administrator and diplomat Gertrude Bell, the famous "Daughter of the Desert" and "uncrowned queen of Iraq," once lived and literally drew Iraq onto the map. Bell was a red-haired, Oxford-educated mountaineer and an honored poet with a passion for pearls, flowery hats, and everything Arab. She first went to the Middle East in 1900 and over the next decade crisscrossed the deserts of Arabia six times astride a camel, all along eating from fine china that her caravan lugged across the sandy terrain. When British attention turned to controlling Iraq after World War I, it was Bell, sitting in Al-Rashid Street, who determined the course of history. She conceived of Iraq and groomed its future king, Emir Faysal of Mecca. Bell showed him the country that he would rule, introduced him to local sheikhs, and

explained tribal lineages and clan loyalties to him. She had a very clear idea of what Iraq would be and who would wield power in it.

It is said that Bell harbored deep suspicions of the Shia and had little patience for their prickly religious leaders, who she believed had most to do with the revolt against the British at the end of the war and who had always been a thorn in the side of her colleagues in neighboring Iran. The Shia ulama reciprocated, cultivating ample distrust of the British and nursing a bitterness that would percolate through the years. The Shia and their religious leaders did not fit Bell's romantic view of Arabs. She did not know them, at least not as well as she knew the tribal leaders that she visited on her tours of the desert. The world of Najaf was alien to her and would not have any place in the country that she imagined. The new state of Iraq would be entrusted to Sunnis. They would rule it for the following eight decades as a minority with the mindset of a majority, and Shias would look from the outside in, a majority that lived as a minority.

When King Faysal's twenty-three-year-old grandson Faysal II was overthrown and murdered in a July 1958 coup, the Shia enjoyed a brief taste of power, owing to the fact that the coup's leader, Colonel Qasim, whose mother was Shia, had close ties with communists, many of whom were also Shia. Qasim was overthrown in another coup in 1963, and the subsequent rise of Arab nationalism and Ba'athism only further marginalized the Shia. Ba'athism may have been secularist and nationalist on the surface, but at heart it was yet another vehicle for at times brutal Sunni hegemony. Many Shias embraced Arab nationalism, and some were initially prominent in the leadership of the Ba'ath Party. But by the time the party took full control of power in 1968, it was led by a group of Sunnis with roots in the tightly knit tribes of Saddam's hometown of Tikrit and its environs. The tribal Sunni leadership was anti-Shia and anticommunist (which by default meant anti-Shia). Thirty-five years of Ba'ath

rule would prove hard for the Shias, and the Saddam years would be the worst. He relentlessly suppressed and mistreated them. For the Shia, Saddam was Yazid.

The Shia are predominantly a people of the Iraqi south. During Saddam's rule they were ruthlessly assaulted, their cities systematically neglected and starved of services, their magnificent riparian wetlands punitively drained so that they could no longer shelter anti-Saddam rebels as they had in the early 1990s. Many joined an accelerated exodus to Basra, Baghdad, and other Iraqi cities. Some one million Shias who just a generation or less ago could have been found on farms and in villages across the lower Tigris-Euphrates river system now eke out a precarious urban existence in the vast northeast Baghdad slum that was once known as Saddam City and is now called Sadr City, after the murdered Ayatollah Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr, Muqtada's father.

The Ba'athists banned public celebrations of Shia festivals such as Ashoura and murdered popular religious leaders. It is said that Saddam's henchmen murdered the popular Shia cleric Muhammad Baqer al-Sadr in 1980 in particularly gruesome fashion (allegedly they forced him to watch his sister's rape and then drove nails into his forehead).<sup>1</sup> Ba'ath Party thugs also killed many of his followers in the Da'wa movement and chased many more underground or into exile in Iran, where they joined such Shia activists as the cadres of SCIRI. These groups received training and support from Iran to launch a violent but futile anti-Ba'athist insurgency.

Every Shia clerical family of note in Iraq suffered under Saddam and has tales of torture and murder to recount. Saddam killed the grand ayatollah Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr and his two sons (Muqtada al-Sadr's father and elder brothers) in 1999, and several uncles and cousins and ten brothers of Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, the current head of SCIRI.

Despite all this the Shia remained generally loyal—that is, until 1991, when Shia soldiers returning from first Gulf war in Kuwait sparked a riot in Basra that quickly spread north to Najaf. The Shia looked to the United States for support, interpreting President George H. W. Bush's call to the Iraqi people to overthrow Saddam to mean American intervention on their behalf. However, Saudi Arabia warned Washington in no uncertain terms that if Saddam were to fall from power, Iran would gain control of southern Iraq. The House of Saud did not wish to see the Shia uprising against Saddam succeed. Riyadh saw the same threat in Shia empowerment in Iraq in 1991 that it sees today. It preferred to keep Iraq under a Sunni dictatorship rather than risk empowering the Shia. Influenced by their ally in the war, the United States balked at involvement in the uprising. U.S. forces stationed in the Euphrates Valley looked on as Saddam sent his dreaded Republican Guards to the south, armed with tanks and helicopter gunships to crush the rebellion.

Large parts of Shia towns were razed, the shrines in Najaf and Karbala were shelled, and tens of thousands of Shias were killed. Bodies were draped across the beams of the shrine of Husayn in Karbala. The brutality was merciless; as one Iraqi general said about a massacre of Shias in Hilla after the 1991 uprising, "We captured many people and separated them into three groups. The first group we were sure was made up of people who were guilty. The second group we had doubts about, and the third group was innocent. We telephoned the high command to ask what we should do with them. They said we should kill them all, and that's what we did."<sup>2</sup> The mass graves from all the killings would be uncovered only after the fall of Saddam. Saddam forced an uncle of Abdul-Aziz Hakim to watch several of his nephews being hanged and then sent him to Tehran to relate the scene to Abdul-Aziz and his elder brother, Baqer, who was then the head of SCIRI. In Saddam's Iraq there

were no legal Shia political organizations, and the only leaders to whom the Shia could look for support and guidance were their ayatollahs, who continued to shepherd their community despite the regime's viciousness.

Some fifteen years later, on January 30, 2005, millions of Iraqi Shias went to the polls, not so much to celebrate the rise of democracy in Iraq as to confirm the Shia dominance in it. Ayatollah Sistani had argued for a truce between various Shia factions, forcing them to join hands in the United Iraqi Alliance (also known as the Shia House) and to focus on confirming their power at the polls. Once the prize of Shia majority rule was won, he suggested, then the Shia could quibble over who precisely should rule and under what exact system. But the first item of business had to be protecting and consolidating the basic Shia gains without which no future achievements could be made. Sistani also issued both written and verbal fatwas compelling Shias to vote—going so far as to tell women that they were religiously obligated to vote, even if their husbands had forbidden them to do so.<sup>3</sup> "Truly, women who go forth to the polling centers on election day," he said "are like Zaynab, who went forth to [the field of battle at] Karbala."<sup>4</sup> It was no surprise that every third candidate on the Shia list that Sistani helped to create was a woman.<sup>5</sup>

The Shia House did well in the elections, winning 48 percent of the vote and close to half of the seats in the parliament. Its most religious elements, SCIRI and al-Da'wa, were the top vote-getters. The former even swept Baghdad's municipal seats. Washington now had to learn to deal with the religiously inspired leaders that the Shia had chosen to represent them. The coalition would further confirm its dominant position almost a year later in the December 15, 2005, national elections, winning 46 percent of the seats in the parliament, more than the Sunni and Kurdish blocks put together—

although this time Muqtada al-Sadr's followers would win a lion's share of UIA seats.

In the aftermath of the war, the Shia and their ayatollahs became Iraq's real power brokers. This did not, however, mean a repeat of Iran's experiment with theocracy. The issue in Iraq was not how much Shiism but whose Shiism. As they prepared to take over the country, Shia clerics found themselves deeply divided, more over political than purely theological issues.

Three clerical positions emerged to dominate Shia politics in the new Iraq. The first was the quietist posture. This was the camp of Ayatollah Sistani and the other grand ayatollahs of Najaf, Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayyad, Bashir al-Najafi al-Pakistani, and Said al-Hakim, and included their representatives in various cities and towns across Iraq as well as those Shia leaders in exile who were associated with Ayatollah Khoi, most notably his son Majid al-Khoi, who was stabbed to death shortly after returning to Iraq from British exile in the spring of 2003, possibly at the behest of Muqtada al-Sadr.

The second tendency was represented by Sadr and his supporters in the slums of Baghdad and Basra, but also in Kirkuk and among Turkoman Shias in the north. Although the Sadr movement is fractured and others claim its leadership, Muqtada dominates the movement. His father was a popular cleric during the Saddam era, known for his extensive social work among the Shia urban poor. Muqtada inherited his father's devoted flock and his network of social services, which was particularly strong in the Sadr City area of Baghdad.

Muqtada was not a proper cleric. To begin with, he was too young; his father's legacy gave him charisma and support but not the scholarly attainment and respect that are the real sinews of lasting esteem among the Shia clergy. It did not help that he had failed to finish his seminary education, and that as a youth he was better

at playing video games than dealing with the intricacies of Shia law and theology (in his seminary days he was nicknamed Mulla Atari, after the maker of electronic amusements). Like the scions of many other clerical families of Iraq, he found himself catapulted into a position of power and prominence because his father and older brothers had been killed. So weak were Muqtada's religious credentials that he had to rely initially on the authority of one of his father's allies, the Qom-based Ayatollah Kadhim Husayn al-Haeri, until al-Haeri, worried by Muqtada's erratic politics, found it prudent to distance himself.

What Muqtada lacked in religious credentials he tried to make up for with a radical brand of politics exacerbated by his own unstable personality. He preferred fighting his battles in the political arena, and actors ranging from Hezbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guards to Ahmad Chalabi manipulated him to serve their own ends. Even Sistani, who was a target of Muqtada's rash politics, found the young firebrand cleric a useful tool in dealing with the U.S. administration in Baghdad, since he and Muqtada formed a kind of de facto "good cop, bad cop" team that helped to keep the Americans off balance.

Muqtada's rebel image, mixing Islam and nationalism, and his willingness to challenge U.S. authority, gained him popularity. His movement, however, lacked coherence. It was powerful but chaotic, best characterized as street (or barrio) politics. He had a cultlike following among poor and uneducated Shia youth, and his support in southern Iraq grew after he threw his Mahdi Army into a fight against U.S. forces in 2004. He gained a foothold in that city as well as Basra and, most notably, Karbala, where commerce associated with pilgrims' visits to the shrine of Husayn provided him with funding. His supporters participated in the January 2005 elections, and although his party did poorly compared to the Shia House, he

was able to open government jobs to his followers. After a period of bickering with SCIRI and Sistani, Sadr decided to join forces with them in the December 2005 elections. The election results elevated Sadr's status. With control over a large portion of the Shia alliance's seats in the parliament, he became a king-maker—choosing the alliance's candidate for prime minister.

Somewhere in between Sistani and Sadr on the political scale were SCIRI and its military wing, the Badr Brigade. SCIRI's leaders were the Hakim brothers, Baqer and Abdul-Aziz, whose father had been Najaf's leading ayatollah in the 1960s. In the 1980s the Hakims went into exile in Iran, settling in Tehran and Qom. There they organized SCIRI. During the Iran-Iraq war, Iran's Revolutionary Guards formed and trained the Badr Brigade, which fought alongside Iranian troops against Saddam's military. SCIRI and its brigade played an important role in the 1991 Iraqi Shia uprising, for which they paid dearly. After an enormous August 2003 bomb blast by Sunni extremists killed Baqer and another eighty-five people outside the Imam Ali shrine in Najaf, Abdul-Aziz became SCIRI's leader.

Abdul-Aziz cuts an impressive figure.<sup>6</sup> Tall and at first seemingly shy, he has the air of an accidental leader. While close to his slain brother and a veteran of many of the same experiences, Abdul-Aziz had long lived in the more worldly-wise Baqer's shadow. In the summer of 2002, he presented the moderate and appealing face of SCIRI when he traveled to Washington to meet with Vice President Richard Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Despite some observers' early skepticism that he would be able to assert control over the organization and its militia on his own, he succeeded at this task and put himself firmly in charge. The emissary and adviser became the leader.

Other, nonclerical Shia groups also garnered support. Most notable was al-Da'wa, which had once been the torchbearer for Shia

activism and had organized the Shia against Saddam in the 1980s. Al-Da'wa had a religious orientation, but clerics did not run it. Some of its members, including Iraq's first elected prime minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, had lived in exile in Iran and Europe; others had stayed in Iraq and continued to agitate against the Saddam regime. There were also secular Shia politicians. Some were Iraqi exiles with close U.S. ties, including Ahmad Chalabi and the transitional prime minister, Iyad Allawi. Others were affiliated with the Iraqi Communist Party, which had always been a mostly Shia outfit.

No sooner had Baghdad fallen to American troops than the various Shia factions began to compete for power. Making much of the foreign origins and ties of Sistani and the Hakims, Sadr argued that he alone among the Shia clerical leaders was an Iraqi Arab, a son of the soil (*ibn al-balad*). As the drama of occupation, reconstruction, and state-building played out through various twists and turns, he and his rivals clashed, shifted positions, and switched alliances as tactical necessity seemed to dictate. The factions disagreed over cooperation with the United States, elections, governance, reaching out to Sunnis and Kurds, the constitution, and federalism.

Sadr mostly went his own way, refusing to accept Sistani's leadership and even challenging SCIRI and the Badr Brigade. More than once the Iranians, the Lebanese Hezbollah, or Ahmad Chalabi stepped in to broker truces between Sadr and rival Shia forces. Eager to strengthen his position by playing the nationalist and anti-American cards, Sadr openly challenged U.S. authority. He hoped at once to appeal to the Sunnis and to undermine those Shia leaders who were cooperating with the United States. Anti-Americanism, he thought, would make him the perfect Iraqi leader—Shia like the country's majority, but acceptable to Sunnis as well.

In summer 2004, Sadr defied a truce agreement with U.S. forces by moving Mahdi Army gunmen into Najaf, where they occupied

the shrine of Imam Ali and the vast necropolis and narrow alleys that surround it. U.S. Marines, later joined by troops of the U.S. Army, moved to dislodge him. Pitched battles scarred the holy cemetery around the shrine, and only after American troops reached the walls of the shrine itself—with the prospect looming that U.S.-trained Iraqi commandos would have to storm the sacred site—did Sistani return from a medical trip to London and negotiate Sadr's withdrawal. Sistani had apparently been counting on the United States to remove Sadr permanently from the scene, but he decided to intervene—it is said with the encouragement of Hezbollah, which had close ties to Sadr and did not wish to see the Mahdi Army destroyed—when it seemed that an assault on the shrine complex might rouse an uncontrollable storm of popular anger.

While Sadr was exploring his prospects by throwing his poorly trained militia into pitched battles with U.S. troops, SCIRI was making up for the time lost to its twenty-year Iranian exile by rapidly assembling support in the Shia south, with Iranian and Hezbollah help. A special focus of SCIRI's interest was Basra, where the Badr Brigade quickly became the de facto government. SCIRI's efforts paid off in the form of a strong showing in the national and municipal balloting of January 2005, when SCIRI won six out of eight Shia-majority governorates and came in first in Baghdad, with 40 percent of the vote.<sup>7</sup>

After their victory at the polls in January, SCIRI and al-Da'wa joined with other Shia factions, including Chalabi's group and some of Sadr's followers, to confirm that power had indeed passed into Shia hands in the election's wake. SCIRI quickly set about infiltrating various ministries with its members. In particular, the Badr Brigade became entrenched in the Interior Ministry, ensuring a favorable position for SCIRI in the country's future.

Electoral victory for the Shia as a whole—Sistani's top priority—spawned intensified rivalries among various subgroups. Throughout 2005 the pan-Iraqi debate over a new constitution ran parallel with an intra-Shia debate about the nature of the future Shia state. The Shia government at the center presented a far more pluralist image than did Basra's SCIRI-run city government, which showed great enthusiasm for enforcing religious law, closing cinemas and video shops, harshly punishing prostitutes and alcohol vendors, enforcing a stringent dress code, and expelling Sunnis from the municipality. The prospect of an Islamic republic in Basra raised the ire of many Shias in Baghdad and brought to the fore all those questions that Sistani had postponed for consideration at a later time. Meanwhile, al-Da'wa and SCIRI's municipal administrations solved few social problems while appearing to tolerate a great deal of corruption and nepotism. SCIRI's government in Basra was particularly problematic, not only for its theocratic bent but for its corruption. Its critics saw it as theocracy mixed with thuggery.<sup>8</sup>

Sadr's followers meanwhile reorganized and began to challenge SCIRI in Baghdad and also the south. SCIRI and the Badr Brigade had used control over levers of power to expand their reach into the bureaucracy and security forces. Sadr was keen to keep SCIRI out of his turf and conversely to find his own way back into the thick of Shia politics. He and SCIRI fought turf battles and accused one another of betraying the Shia cause—Sadr for his overtures to the Sunni Ba'thists and SCIRI for its ties to Iran. The fate of the Iraqi constitution that was being negotiated in August 2005 intensified conflict as a resurgent Sadr movement, enjoying greater popularity in southern Iraq, grew closer to Da'wa because of their shared commitment to a centralized Iraqi state, while SCIRI began to demand an autonomous Shia zone in the south under a loose pan-Iraqi federation. These political debates precipitated bloody clashes. They

reflected philosophical differences about the shape of the Iraqi state but also the deep-seated fears and angers of various factions within Iraq's Shia population. SCIRI's position reflected the mood of Basra and Shia areas south of Naseriya, where residents tended to believe that Baghdad had long been starving them of resources. These southerners did not trust a strong center and looked at Baghdad as a bastion from which Sunnis could keep a chokehold on their resources and their future. Shias who lived in Baghdad, Kirkuk, Mosul, or even al-Anbar, by contrast, viewed with alarm a loose federal arrangement that would make them minorities in heavily Kurdish or Sunni autonomous regions.

Throughout all this debate and conflict, Sistani tried to stay above the fray. He continued to keep his eyes on the big prize: delivering Iraq to the Shia and protecting Shia identity by ensuring its embodiment in the new constitution and the state arising from it. He did not get bogged down in debates over who was Iranian and who was Iraqi. Most Iraqi Shias were clearly Arabs, but that identity was surfacing in a new way, different from the way in which Arab nationalism and Ba'thism had always envisioned it.

The bombing of marketplaces, police stations, mosques, and open-air religious gatherings meanwhile occurred almost daily, generating a tale of sorrow and rage that would tear Shias and Sunnis apart. On August 31, 2005, about a million Shia pilgrims gathered at the shrine of Kazemiya in Baghdad to mark the anniversary of the death of the seventh imam, who is buried there. The crowd stretched from the mosque across the River Tigris to Sadr City, clogging the bridge over the river. A mortar attack on the crowd early in the day killed sixteen and injured many more. The crowd was on edge when some person or persons on the bridge spread a rumor—Shias believed deliberately—that there was a suicide bomber in their midst. Anxious and fearful, the crowd panicked. In the ensuing

stampede, more than a thousand people died; some were trampled to death, while others drowned after jumping into the river. Most of the victims were women and children. The incident showed the extent to which the insurgency could disrupt Shias' lives and turn their commemoration of the death of their imams into a new occasion for mourning. It also underscored the inability of the Iraqi government to contend with the violence, and even more the extent to which the insurgency had succeeded in instilling fear in Shias' hearts and minds.

Urged by Sistani and his clerical network not to respond in kind, Shias showed tremendous restraint. Their patience was taxed, but their sense of distinct identity only grew under the onslaught of Sunni terror (a good deal of which was the work of non-Iraqis, such as the terror group run by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian Salafi who masterminded the insurgency's most violent excesses). Attitudes on the street hardened, as did Shias' determination to stay in charge of their own destiny. Even where relations between Shia and Sunni neighbors remained friendly, distrust of Ba'thists and the Wahhabi influence on Sunni clerics intensified.

Increasingly, Shias saw Sunnis as vicious brutes and ridiculed their historical claims to grandeur. In Basra and other places in the south, Sunnis came under attack. Targeted killing of Sunni clerics and community leaders served notice to others to move away. These acts, which some blamed on the Badr Brigade, reflected the mood on the street. Anger and prejudice were rising on both sides of the sectarian divide. The manner in which Shia identity was taking form was directly tied to the intensity of the sectarian conflict.

This became clear when a bombing attack on the Shia Askariya shrine (where the tenth and eleventh imams are buried, and where—from the Twelfth Imam went into hiding) brought sectarian conflict into the open. Hundreds died as angry Shias and Sunnis attacked

mosques, killed clerics, and abducted and murdered civilians. Despite calls for calm the violence continued to rage, exposing the deep sectarian fissures that were shaping Shia identity and politics.

As American tanks rolled across the plains of Iraq, the majority that Gertrude Bell had wished away began to act its part. No sooner had statues of Saddam tumbled across Baghdad than the scope of change became apparent. Pictures of imams and ayatollahs were ubiquitous on walls from Basra to Baghdad, and the bazaars and alleyways of Karbala and Najaf came alive with pilgrims who came from near and far to visit the Shia shrines. Change was also evident in the composition of the Iraqi Interim Governing Council (IGC), the transitional governing body that the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority had set up as a first step toward handing over power to Iraqis. Thirteen of the IGC's twenty-five members were Shias, as was its first head, Ibrahim al-Jaafari. As Iraq's Shia vice president, Adel Abdul-Mahdi, put it, "The Shia could now raise their head; they could represent Iraq."<sup>9</sup>

While many hailed the Shias' prominence on the IGC and saw it as a mark of greater pluralism, Sunnis took it as an ominous sign. Sunni leaders in suits and clerical robes alike objected vigorously. After the United States began "de-Ba'athification" of government agencies and summarily disbanded what was left of the Saddam-era Iraqi military, Sunni concern turned to alienation and anger. Many saw "de-Ba'athification" as another name for "de-Sunnification." The championing of the policy by once-exiled Shia politicians such as Ahmad Chalabi and Abdul-Aziz Hakim only heightened this angst.

Sunnis associated growing Shia power with Iran. Sunni leaders, especially those with Ba'hist ties, even accused the Shia point-blank of being tools in a nefarious Iranian campaign to subjugate and con-

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rol Iraq. Hazem Shaalan, who served as defense minister in the interim government of the secular Shia prime minister Iyad Allawi, called Iran Iraq's enemy number one and claimed that Tehran was responsible for most of the violence in the country. Shaalan hoped to prevent emerging ties between Iraq's Shias and Iran from determining the course of Iraqi politics. This became clearer when he characterized the election list of the Shia-dominated United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) as the "cat's paw of Iran."<sup>10</sup> Shaalan's views were a reflection of the way that many Iraqi Sunnis and some secular Shias saw the UIA and the government that it would form after winning the January 2005 elections. It was not only openly Shia but was led by men who had maintained close ties with Iran since the 1980s. Many Sunnis spoke of it with bitter derision as "the Safavid government."

When, during the ensuing constitutional debates, elements of the UIA called for federalism and a Shia autonomous zone in the south, Sunnis were quick to dismiss the idea as an Iranian plot to dismember Iraq.<sup>11</sup> All this underlined the strikingly different notions of identity, and also perceptions of the Iran-Iraq war, that were at play among the Sunni and the Shia. Whereas Sunnis emphasized the Arab-Iranian and Iraqi-Iranian divide and still saw Iran through the blood-coated lenses of the 1980s, Shias felt an attachment to the religious identity that they shared with Iranians, who were their only source of support in the aftermath of their ill-fated 1991 uprising. They saw the war as Saddam's sin, in which Shias from both sides of the border were caught up as combatant-victims.<sup>12</sup> In the minds of Iranians and many Iraqi Shias, the Iran-Iraq war became the Iran-Saddam war. Shia soldiers on both sides fought for faith and country, but they were wrapped into a Sunni dictator's war of ambition and fear. With Saddam gone, the memory of the war unites rather than divides Shias in the two countries.

That Shias would vote for leaders such as Ibrahim Jaafari and Abdul-Aziz Hakim, who had spent the war years living in Tehran



and whom many Sunnis saw as traitors, showed the widening gulf between the two communities. This became more evident after Prime Minister Jaafari opened diplomatic ties with Iran and expressed regret for Iraq's conduct during the war.

Outside the precincts of government, Muqtada's popularity grew in the months following the U.S.-led invasion, but not because of his anti-Iranian posturing. In fact, his superficial nationalist rhetoric belied his actual interest in drawing Iranian money and support.<sup>13</sup> Iranian birth and citizenship did not diminish Ayatollah Sistani's broad support among Iraq's Shias, and despite close ties with Iran, SCIRI was able to deepen its support in Baghdad and the south. At the same time, Iyad Allawi, who campaigned in the January elections as a bridge-builder, reaching out to Sunnis, did poorly; by some estimates his support was even weaker than his numbers suggested.<sup>14</sup> Almost a year later in the December 2005 elections his popularity would plummet even further. All this showed that amid the raucous accusations of Iranian influence-peddling in Iraq, for the country's Shias the enemy was not external—not Iran—but rather internal. The problems, as Shias saw them, were Ba'thism and Salafi-style extremism, which could easily foster tactical alliances and which were casting a grim double shadow over Sunni politics.

Iraqi Sunnis' attitudes were from the outset shaped by their belief that they would be able to get back on top. Many Sunnis clung to the illusion that the Shias' majority status within the country was a myth spread by America. One Sunni talking point, repeated by no less a figure than Jordan's King Abdullah as well as then Defense Minister Shaalan, was that Iranians were crossing the border into Iraq in order to inflate Shia numbers.<sup>15</sup> The insinuation was that many, if not most, Shias were not actually Iraqi at all—that Iraq was being turned into a Shia state by force and fraud.

The currency of such beliefs among Sunni Arabs was important in driving the Sunni decision to boycott the January 2005 elections—a choice that the weight of Sunni opinion later came to recognize as a mistake. Many Sunnis at the time, however, were still overestimating their own share of Iraq's population and so believed that sitting out the January vote would hold turnout below the final mark of almost 60 percent. The same belief was also at play when Sunni members of the committee charged with drafting a new constitution first rejected the final draft in the summer of 2005 and then agreed to putting it to a vote—only after securing guarantees that key clauses could be renegotiated later. They expected to be able to sink this draft in the referendum that would have to sanction the constitution. The Sunnis would then, they hoped, have a noticeably greater say in the new parliament that would have to be elected to restart the process. Despite large Sunni turnout, the referendum approved the constitution. The results showed the universal Sunni disdain for the constitution but failed to derail it, disappointing Sunnis by confirming that there are fewer Sunnis in Iraq than they had estimated. This point became irrefutably clear in the December 2005 national elections. The Sunni turnout was high but Sunni parties still lagged behind the Shia coalition in the final tally of the vote by a margin of more than two to one. Parties that had led Sunnis into the political process now stood accused of having only confirmed their minority status. Having exposed Sunni weakness, all the Sunni parties could do was challenge the election results.

Sunnis also believed, perhaps with some justification, that Shias would not be able to rule Iraq without their cooperation. Otherwise a Shia government would work only if propped up by Iran and the United States. Accusing Shias of ties with Iran was designed to isolate them politically and sully their relations with the United States, and also to underscore the fact that they could not rule without for-

eign support. This strategy required attacking the country's infrastructure, along with international agencies and humanitarian groups, to weaken the government and prevent it from providing basic services to the population. Attacking the Shia government and its security forces directly would further emphasize its inability to provide security.

Iraqi Shias had joined the new security forces in droves. They were encouraged to do so by their leaders; even Ayatollah Sistani openly encouraged Shia youth to join, which they continued to do in the face of the raging violence. The Shia saw the new state as their state. There was no reason for them to resist state-building; to the contrary, they had everything to gain. Thus the Sunni attacks—killing recruits standing in queues to join the police and security forces, bombing police stations, and kidnapping and killing police and security forces—were not just (or even primarily) acts of resistance against American occupation but efforts to impede the emergence of a Shia-dominated nation.

Sunnis viewed Iraqi security forces as Shia—and at times Kurdish—militias and interpreted their security operations in Sunni towns as sectarian provocations. For Sunnis, the Badr Brigade, many of whose cadres had joined the Interior Ministry and the security forces and were accused of abusing Sunni prisoners in government-run detention centers, looked much like Lebanese Shia militias such as Amal and Hezbollah, and prospects of its assumption of power evoked images of the bloody civil war that tore at Lebanon from 1975 to 1990. The Badr troops appeared to be the most anti-Sunni element in Iraq's Shia politics, and Sunnis held it responsible for attacks on their mosques and clerics. In July 2005, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi formed the Umar Brigade to confront the Badr forces directly.<sup>16</sup> The choice of name—of the second caliph, hero to Sunnis and villain to Shias—was to inflame sectarian passions on

both sides. The new brigade targeted Shias, and especially the members of the Amiri tribe (many of whom live in Sadr City), to which the Badr Brigade's commander Hadi al-Amiri belongs.

Suicide bombings throughout 2005 continued to be aimed at Shias for the most part, killing policemen, construction workers, clerics, community leaders, government officials, pilgrims, and men, women, and children at work, at play, at prayer, and in markets, hospitals, and offices, and on streets everywhere. These actions were designed to intimidate the Shia and sap their confidence. In addition, hundreds more ordinary Shias were murdered in what has appeared to be random violence. Some were shot at home or in the street. Others were abducted and found floating in the Tigris, their hands bound and throats cut. Throughout 2005, each dawn revealed bodies dumped by the roadsides or on garbage heaps. Some were killed alone or in small groups. Others were killed in large numbers. The deaths were a testament to the Sunni resistance against the Shia revival and the deepening of the sectarian divide.<sup>17</sup> The violence drew on the Sunnis' long-held belief that when intimidated, the Shia always back down. That was how the Abbasids dealt with Shia unrest, how Saddam ruled over his Shia majority, and how Pakistan's Sunni extremists ended the challenge from their Shia minority. Sunni responses to the Shia challenge have always been displays of force and power. The insurgency strove to show the Shia—and the United States—that the Sunnis could keep the violence going forever, in the belief that this would eventually force the United States to abandon the Shia, thereby paving the way for the return of some form of Sunni rule.

The attacks were also meant to show the Shia that their chosen government and their venerated religious leaders were feeble and incapable of protecting them. Nor was the United States able to provide the security the Shia yearned for. Shias were not safe in their

markets, homes, mosques, police stations, or, symbolically, at the large religious gatherings that were banned under Saddam and were now commemorated by millions as a mark of Shia empowerment.

For many Iraqis, what was unfolding in the country in the summer of 2005 was no longer just an insurgency but a civil war. As suicide bombers killed and maimed, attacked shrines and mosques, provoking retaliations and chaos on the streets, the country began slowly to come apart. In the midst of the violence, the fuss over democracy, development, and writing constitutions did not answer the fundamental question: How would the new Iraq give the Shia majority not only *de jure* political control but also *de facto* protection from violence? Without Sunni acquiescence to the new reality, it would not be easy to achieve both goals.

It was in this context that many Shias in the south, secular as well as those associated with SCIRI, abandoned commitment to a strong central government and demanded autonomy for Shia regions in the south under a federal constitution. The violence perpetrated against them made the notion of an Iraqi nation a distant dream, with no reflection in the hatred and violence that faced them. If the United States and Iraqi forces could neither crush nor mollify the insurgency, and if Sunnis were unwilling to accept Shia rule over Iraq, then perhaps Shias would need to think about Iraq differently.

The Sunnis found federalism threatening, not only because the Shia—and the Kurds—would have sole control over oil revenue, but because it challenged their conception of a unitary Iraq. If there was to be no strong center in Iraq, then there would be no basis to the Sunni claim that without them it would not be possible to govern the country.

By the summer of 2005, the insurgency consisted of as many as forty groups, but its most important and potent elements were former Ba'athists as well as extreme Salafis and other jihadis.<sup>18</sup> These

two defined the force and ideology of the insurgency, and the thrust of their campaigns, which became increasingly entwined as the insurgency unfolded between 2003 and 2005, was directed at forcing the United States to leave Iraq but also to stop the Shia from inheriting it.<sup>19</sup>

It was left to the insurgency's most extreme element, the Iraqi and foreign fighters gathered around Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, to erase any doubt in Shia and Sunni minds that the issues on the table were not power-sharing, pluralism, and democracy but which sectarian community would rule over Iraq. Zarqawi put religion front and center in the conflict. In February 2004 he described his view of the conflict in an open letter. Its anti-American tone and its call to jihad were not surprising—they fit in the mold of extremist propaganda and al-Qaeda's communiqués. What was new was what Zarqawi said about the Shia and the sectarian focus of his insurgency. The letter is worth quoting:

[The Shia are] the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom. We here are entering a battle on two levels. One, evident and open, is with an attacking enemy and patent infidelity. [Another is] a difficult, fierce battle with a crafty enemy who wears the garb of a friend . . . but harbors ill will . . . These are a people who added to their infidelity and augmented their atheism with political cunning and a feverish effort to seize upon the crisis of governance . . . whose features they are trying to draw . . . in cooperation with their hidden allies the Americans.

Their religious and political 'ulama have been able to con-

control the affairs of their sect, so as not to have the battle between them and the Sunnis become an open sectarian war, because they know that they will not succeed in this way. They know that if a sectarian war was to take place, many in the [Islamic] nation would rise to defend the Sunnis in Iraq . . . Our combat against the Americans is something easy . . . Crusader forces will disappear tomorrow or the day after. The police, which [are] made up of the Shi'i filled out with Sunni agents, is the real danger that we face. They [Shi'is] are more cunning than their Crusader masters . . . As the days pass, their hopes are growing that they will establish a Shi'i state stretching from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and ending in the Cardboard Kingdom of the Gulf . . . Targeting and hitting them in [their] religious, political, and military depth will provoke them to show the Sunnis their rabies . . . and bare the teeth of the hidden rancor working in their breasts. If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these Sabians [pagans] . . . Most of the Sunnis are aware of the danger of these people . . . Awakening of the slumbered and rousing of the sleeper also includes neutralizing these [Shi'i] people and pulling out their teeth before the inevitable battle, along with the anticipated incitement of the wrath of the people against the Americans, who brought destruction and were the reason for this miasma.<sup>20</sup>

Zarqawi wove together a number of themes: Sunni political concerns in postwar Iraq, the legacy of Shia-Sunni rivalry over the centuries, the future of Islam and that of Sunnis in Iraq. The rationale for insurgency here thus related the past to the present and tied the theological to the political and antioccupation nation-

alism to anti-Shia sectarianism. Zarqawi evoked the memory of Ibn Taymiya, many of whose anti-Shia fatwas were cited in the letter, and repeated many well-known (as well as forgotten) Sunni polemics against the Shia to drive a theological wedge between the two communities.

For Zarqawi, the aim was to start a civil war. This would not only confound state-building but also weaken the Shia position and force the United States to leave Iraq without a positive political outcome. In September 2005, after U.S. and Iraqi troops launched a major offensive against insurgent forces along the Iraq-Syria border, Zarqawi retaliated with three days of mayhem, during which suicide bombings and assassinations killed and maimed hundreds of Shias, including clerics and government workers. The attacks were followed by a posting on an al-Qaeda-affiliated website that called for a "full-scale war on Shiites all over Iraq, whenever and wherever they are found."<sup>21</sup>

Zarqawi's extremist posture also found reflection in the angry rejection of occupation and Shia empowerment by Iraq's Sunni clerics, especially those who gathered in the more militant and also broadly popular Association of Muslim Clerics (Hay'at al-Ulama al-Muslimin). The association was important in giving the insurgency religious sanction. In particular, some of its leaders, such as Ayyash al-Kubaisi, openly endorsed the insurgency as a legitimate jihad. The association also reflected the sectarian bias of the insurgency's Salafi sentinels. Some of its ulama had maintained ties with Saudi Arabia, from which they received financial and moral support. Some of the association's leaders who had recently returned to Iraq after the fall of Saddam, such as its spokesman, Muthanna Harith al-Dhari, who was also an important link between the association and the insurgency, had studied in the kingdom.<sup>22</sup> These ulama favored Hanbali law, associated with Ibn Taymiya and Wahhabism (and thus

a strong anti-Shia posture), over the Hanafi law that has long been the traditional creed of Iraq's Sunni Arabs.

The Shia understood the rage and the roots of the violence that was perpetrated against them. As one Shia cleric put it, "The killers of today are the same killers as yesterday."<sup>23</sup> Still, Shia leaders and their flock, victims and bystanders, all repeatedly chose to blame outsiders for the violence against them. It was almost as if there was great fear in identifying neighbors and countrymen as those responsible. But even if this were true, and if the Shia genuinely believed it, then the question would remain: Who were these outsiders? They were Jordanians, Syrians, Egyptians, and most of all Saudis—all Sunni extremists who had come to Iraq to fight Americans and kill Shias. Their national identity would cast them as outsiders to Iraq, but they were still Sunni Arabs. They shared Sunni religious, Arab ethnic, and in some cases even tribal identities with Iraq's Sunni insurgents, and shared in a Salafi ideology that guided their actions.

The notion of insider and outsider had little meaning when broader identities such as Shia and Sunni, Arab and non-Arab were defining the conflict. This point was made clear by Ayatollah Ahmad al-Safi, a close aide of Ayatollah Sistani's and his representative in Karbala. Safi reacted to the Kazemiya stampede by calling on the ulama of al-Azhar in Egypt—symbolizing the Sunni world—to break their "negative" silence and condemn the insurgency, just as he called on Shias to maintain their "positive" silence and refrain from responding in kind to the violence.<sup>24</sup> Other Shia leaders more directly criticized the country's Sunni clerics for not forcefully denouncing the insurgency's anti-Shia violence.

When Zarqawi declared a "full-scale war on Shiites," the association's Abu Bashir al-Tartousi objected, criticizing this brazen call to arms in a tract entitled "About Sectarian War in Iraq."<sup>25</sup> Tartousi

argued that Shia civilians did not bear responsibility for the actions of the Shia-led government or U.S. forces and should not be the object of war. However, he prefaced his criticism by validating the general thrust of Zarqawi's sectarian rhetoric, saying that "although sectarian war in Iraq *may* have been provoked and sparked by the Shia, perceived to be major allies of the occupation forces; and although it is the right of the Muslim mujahid [one who undertakes jihad] to defend himself, his honor, and his cities against the crusader invaders and whoever is allied with them, killing according to sectarian affiliation is not justified by Islamic Law." Tartousi saw the victims as responsible for the violence. The insurgents were justified in their anger at the Shia and should merely refrain from "taking justice into their own hands." It was a matter not of the Shias' guilt—Tartousi took that for granted—but of the kind of justice that they should face and from whom.

Tartousi was also less concerned with the morality of killing Shia civilians than with its implications for the success of the insurgency. He wrote in detail on this theme: "Sectarian war is [in] the crusader's interest, aimed at dividing the efforts of the mujahideen . . . [and] gives grounds for a longer occupation . . . and causes the legitimate Iraqi resistance to lose its credibility in the eyes of the Islamic world." Tartousi's argument was also reflected in the veiled criticism of Zarqawi by Saudi Arabia's most senior cleric, Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Sheikh, who objected to sectarian war because it would "serve the aims of enemies conspiring against Islam."<sup>26</sup> This hardly amounted to the kind of condemnation that the Shia had demanded from Sunni clerics.

Unrepentant, Zarqawi sharply rebuked the Sunni ulama and reiterated his call to war.<sup>27</sup> However, he qualified the "war on Shia" to "war on all collaborators with the occupation."<sup>28</sup> He named a few Shia groups that he would no longer target, including the Sadr

group and its Mahdi Army, which had opposed the occupation. Since Zarqawi had always justified his anti-Shiism in terms of the Shia complicity in fall of the Saddam regime, he was willing to call a truce with those Shias who would join the insurgency or stop working with the government. Although the olive branch to Saddam was important, the truce clearly did not extend to the large number of Shias who voted in the January 2005 elections and continued to support the UJA government and join its security forces. In fact, pronouncements by Zarqawi's supporters named SCIRI, al-Da'wa, and Ahmad Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress as legitimate targets for attacks, along with Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National Accord Party and the two Kurdish parties that were part of the government.<sup>29</sup> All this hair-splitting between Sunni extremists and Sunni ulama did not amount to a sectarian truce. In fact, it put the burden on Shias to prove that they were not "collaborators," which they could do only by joining the insurgency and succumbing to Sunni domination. Giving the attacks on Shias a nationalist cover thus served as the mantra for sectarian politics in Iraq.

## Chapter 8

## THE RISE OF IRAN

In May 2005 the Iranian foreign minister, Kamal Kharrazi, arrived at the checkpoint in the small town of Mehran on the Iran-Iraq border. He got into a car and unceremoniously drove one hundred miles west to Baghdad to meet with the newly elected prime minister of Iraq, Ibrahim al-Jaafari. Kharrazi's trip came fresh on the heels of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's brief stop in Baghdad only forty-eight hours earlier, also to congratulate Mr. Jaafari. The timing of the trip was symbolic, and so was the fact that Kharrazi had driven across eastern Iraq in a car without concern for the violence that raged across the country. Throughout his stay in Iraq, Kharrazi never donned a bulletproof vest, and his demeanor and schedule somehow did not betray concern with security. Asked about future relations between Iran and Iraq while bantering in Persian with Iraq's Kurdish foreign minister, Hoshyar Zebari, Kharrazi told a gathering of journalists, "The party that will leave