

A Look at the Shi'ites of Iraq

By David Gardner (summary by Chris Ford)

With the recent war, Iraqi Shi'ites have gained prominence and see the possibility of political involvement. In this article I will seek to summarize an article called 'Time of the Shia', by David Gardner, Financial Times Weekend, August 2003, pages W1-2.

Thousands came to the shrine in Karbala, barefoot, blood streaming from self-inflicted wounds. These Shi'ite Muslims were celebrating the defeat of Saddam Hussein, their latest enemy. The march was also an emotional response to the suppression they had experienced under the former regime. They were driven underground by the Baath party, the tool of power of some Saddamite clans drawn from the Sunni minority.

In this march to Karbala, the faithful were exhibiting their grief at betraying Hussein, prophet Muhammad's grandson, in the seventh century. They held pictures of Hussein as a Christ-like figure, along with black banners. It was also an earnest expression of their desire to take back political power after being downtrodden for a century. Lebanese Shi'ite leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, exclaimed from Beirut that the Karbala pilgrims were 'inspired by Imam Hussein's spirit of revolution'.

Americans looking on were unnerved. To them, the Shi'ites were a bunch of turbans beholden to Tehran, and they were not about to be allowed to create a nation in Iran's image. The US had watched Iraq from the air for a decade and listened to Pentagon-favoured exiles. The US wanted to liberate Iraq, but it was unaware of

the hopes and fears of the people, especially the Shi'ites.

No More Uprisings

Why did the Shi'ites not rise up when the Americans stormed Baghdad last spring? After the Gulf War in the early 1990s, the then President of the US encouraged a Shi'ite uprising that came close to overthrowing Saddam. But when Saddam fought back, the US did not support the Shi'ites, and Saddam massacred untold thousands. Senior Iraqi Shi'ites say that they cannot forget what the Americans did in 1991. In Najaf, mass graves exist where thousands of Shi'ites were buried at that time.

Washington and London eventually realised the level of trauma experienced by the Shi'ites in 1991. But they were taken aback when various Iraqi Shi'ites established power among Iraqis. They established services in the power vacuum left when the Baath party was dismantled. Law and order were in place in Shi'ite areas while anarchy reigned in the Sunni triangle.

The Shi'ites themselves are the larger issue here. Whether the war was justified or not, the Anglo-American rulers transformed the balance of power in the region. By empowering the Shi'ites, Bush has 'undermined the nearly millennium-old dominance of

Sunni Islam in the Arab world' (Gardener, page W1).

Sunni Response

Sunni leaders are not quite sure what to make of what the US is doing. Until now, Washington has backed Sunni leaders and has been frightened by Shi'ites.

Shi'ites remember that the US backed Saddam in the 1980-88 war against Iran in order to stop the Persian Shi'ite teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini from reaching the Arab world. When Saddam's armies collapsed in 1991, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, America's two chief allies in the region, persuaded the US not to attack Baghdad. They argued for the preservation of the 'territorial integrity of Iraq'. This was purportedly to prevent an Iranian satellite state in south Iraq, yet Iraqi Shi'ites had fought against Iranian Shi'ites for eight years. What Cairo and Riyadh really wanted was to conserve the Sunni order, and they believed that Saddam staying in power was a price worth paying to achieve it.

Neither Saudi Arabia nor Egypt is democratic. They have convinced the US that it is too risky in the Arab world, as it would only serve fundamentalism and Iran. Yet, it was the 'ossified Sunni order that incubated September 11 — inspired, planned and executed largely by Saudis and Egyptians' (Gardener, page W2). The Shi'ites have no part in this order, and their attitudes are different. But now, they can smell power.

Shi'ite Victories

A month after Baghdad fell, Iran's reformist leader, Ayatollah Khatemi, visited Beirut and was welcomed in a fashion unrivalled since Pope John Paul visited Lebanon in 1997. In perfect Arabic, he called for democracy and a popular government in Baghdad. He also called Saddam's fall a 'valuable opportunity' for reform in the region and justice for the Shi'ites.

Four hundred and fifty Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia also demanded justice that week. They presented a petition to Prince Abdullah requesting partnership in the nation, something they have never had. Wahhabis regard them as heretics. A Saudi Shi'ite writer remarked that the change in Iraq has 'uncovered' issues that have been simmering in the Gulf and the region.

Ironically, Shi'ite fortunes were brightened by a Wahhabi — Osama Bin Laden. The events of 9/11 resulted in a series of wins for Shi'ites. In Afghanistan, the Hazara Shi'ite minority was persecuted by the Taleban, which fell. Also, in Iraq, through the defeat of a Sunni regime, the Shi'ites have gained. The Afghanistan and Iraq wars have rid Tehran of the Taleban and Saddam and have boosted Shi'ite influence.

Dynamism

Besides the difference in numbers of Shi'ites and Sunnis, there are a number of other key differences. The role of the imam is one example. For Sunnis, he is a prayer leader, but for Shi'ites, he is a priest-king. Also, Shi'ites' thinking is more dynamic than Sunnis', partly

due, perhaps, to the fact that they are a minority among Muslims, making up only 15%, and numbering 160 million.

Yet, even before they were a minority, Shi'ite clerics updated their teachings in light of modern developments. The Sunnis, in contrast, discouraged philosophical development after the tenth and eleventh centuries, as this caused divisions and heresies. A further difference between Shi'ites and Sunnis relates to structure. Sunni scholars are part of the state, while Shi'ite scholars or reasoners, have followers who see them as 'sources of emulation'. Shi'ite clergy receive part of the Muslim *zakat*, giving them 'financial clout and patronage' (Gardener, page W2). So, where Sunni clergy conform, the Shi'ite approach creates varying centres of influence, leading to lively debate.

Najaf

The centre of that debate is now Najaf. The time of the Shi'ite may have come at last. Banners of the countless Shi'ite martyrs under Saddam are everywhere. Bookstores are crowded with visitors from within Iraq, as well as Iranians and Azeris. New newspapers line the pavement, and mullahs come and go in the houses of leading clerics.

Muhammad Bahr al-Ulum is a reformist ayatollah and a member of Iraq's governing council. He traces the Shia decline in power back to the British, the colonial power that created Iraq in the 1920s. Shi'ites stupidly rose up against them, clearing the way for the Sunni minority to take power. He endorses a broad-based democratic

government where the rights of all majorities, minorities and religious groups are protected. He and others dismiss the possibility that Khomeinist theocracy could come to Iraq, or the rule of the supreme jurisprudent. This is not Shi'ite and is declining even in Iran.

Divisions exist under the surface of Shi'ite politics. The mob murder of Abdel Majid al-Khoi, the pro-western son of an exile and Hawza leader, was blamed on Muqtada al-Sadr, whose father was executed by Saddam in 1999 and whose uncle was a Hawza leader who was executed in 1980. Images of these two prominent al-Sadr martyrs are displayed with pride in many windows in southern Iraq. Muqtada is claiming the al-Sadr heritage. His uncle founded the Dawa Party that was repressed repeatedly and made seven assassination attempts against Saddam.

US Response

The US has revised its plans and has included a small Shi'ite majority on the Iraqi Governing Council. The Shi'ite have great expectations for the region and for Iraq. A radical Najaf cleric pronounced that if all Arab and Muslim governments would give Shi'ites their rights, there would be no problems.

Note: Today, January 15, a large, peaceful demonstration, comprised of thousands of Shi'ites and showing support for a democratically-elected government, is taking place in Basra.

New Testaments in Najaf

Last fall I spent several weeks in Iraq in a Shi'ite area. Many times, I heard about the openness of Shi'ite Muslims to read and discuss Scripture. During visits, the Bible was opened quickly.

This is partly due to the openness of Shi'ite theology to adapt to modernity. It is also the Spirit of God. Read about a worker's visit to the famed city of Najaf.

Some of us visited Najaf on a number of occasions in order to meet people and share about Jesus. We met some men in a coffee shop, but they were not interested in discussing spiritual matters. We went to another area and met some others, but they were not interested either.

One day, it was hot. We needed a drink, so we went into a shop and visited with the shopkeeper, named Ali. During the last few minutes, we shared the Gospel with him and left him an *Injil* (New Testament).

I returned to Najaf a month later. I met Ali and he told me that he read the *Injil* every day as he sits alone in his shop. I had a complete Bible with me, and we sat together and went through the various sections of the Bible—the *Torah* (Pentateuch), the *Zaboor* (Psalms) and led up to the *Injil*. We talked about sin and redemption.

I asked Ali if he wanted my Bible so that he could start from the beginning of the story. He agreed, and we returned a few days later to find out that he had read Genesis 1-16. With his permission, we began a series of studies that began with Genesis and led up to Jesus.

During these studies, Ali's neighbour, Abu Abbas, came in. He told me that he had heard about these studies from Ali and that he had wanted to read the Bible for a long time. Abu Abbas told me that he had written to the radio station and asked for a Bible, but they had not sent him one. Could we get him one?

I tried not to act surprised and asked about the radio station. Abu Abbas said that he and all of his friends listen to the BBC and to Radio Monte Carlo, a Christian radio broadcaster from Europe. Abu Abbas took the Bible and said that he would read it, but he was not open to studying together.

I learned that this was not an isolated incident. I met a guy yesterday who was not open to the Gospel at all. But he did say that what I was saying was the same thing that he heard every night on Radio Monte Carlo. 'They say the same things you're saying,' he told me.

Ali now confesses that Jesus is the Saviour and the Redeemer. But he has yet to make Jesus the Lord of his life. He is not willing to confess that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He is still depending on other things to save him.

Pray for Ali, that he would embrace Jesus as his Lord and Saviour. Praise God that Iraqis are listening to Christian radio programmes and that God's truths are being heard in Iraq. Pray that God would reap a great harvest among the Shi'ites of Iraq.