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# A Difficult Marriage

*How Iraqi Shiites could save the presidency of George W. Bush*

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BY REUEL MARC GERECHT

Ever since 1979, Shiite Muslim clerics have scared Americans. The trepidation is, of course, understandable. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini energized a generation of Islamic radicals. His theocratic revolution in Iran held 52 Americans hostage for 444 days. His disciples directed and incited lethal attacks against the United States. The slaughter of U.S. soldiers in Beirut in 1983 and at Khobar in Saudi Arabia in 1996 were inspirational for Osama bin Laden and other Sunni holy warriors who have promised victory through terrorism.

Far more often than their Sunni Muslim counterparts, Shiite clerics are charismatic. Their long, arduous legal education, which builds a self-confident, serious elite, and their historic position between ruler and ruled have often earned them the respect of common man and king. Shiite clerics have been powers to be reckoned with—complimented, appeased, or squashed—in great part because their authority has been popularly based. In an autocratic Muslim world, they have, more often than not, been defenders of decency. The greatest strength of the Muslim community has always been its secure and ordered home, and the clergy has been its redoubtable guardian. Even the most irreligious Shiites can revere these men because they are vivid, stubborn repositories of the wisdom, vicissitudes, and pride of an often abused and maligned community.

Shiism teaches that individual men, through their determination, sacrifice, and suffering, shape history. The Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein, the father of all Muslim martyrs, did not flee certain death on the plains of Karbala in southern Iraq because his cause was just. His end, even more than the unlucky life of his father, the Caliph Ali, has become the baptismal font of the Shiite identity. Like Christians, Shiites are

pretty sure that redemption will not come in this life. Their clerics often see themselves in a continuing passion play of good versus evil. They have stood between tyrants and the oppressed, between domineering Sunnis and belittled Shiites, and, not infrequently, between threatening foreigners and besieged Muslims. Though in modern times the Shiite clergy have become a diverse lot—progressives, traditionalists, revolutionaries, and reactionaries—they are similar in their continuing firm belief that the clergy has a historic duty to defend the flock. Guided by the Holy Law, nationalism, Marx, or John Locke, they see themselves as a vanguard for *and* against change.

The Coalition Provisional Authority and the Bush administration are now unavoidably part of the great Shiite drama that is unfolding inside Iraq. Shiites will determine the fate of a democratic Iraq; they will likely determine the political future of George W. Bush. If all goes well with Iraq's Shiites, the eventual spread of democracy throughout the Middle East becomes a real possibility. If the Shiites go south on us, then the Middle East's next "Liberal Age" (a tolerably accurate description of the period from 1880 to 1945) will likely be a long time coming. And if things fall apart, what will the future look like? When planning for success, it's always a good idea to imagine failure.

What an Iraqi Shiite dictatorship would do is difficult to foresee, but Shiite authoritarian rule is inevitable if the democratic experiment fails. The Shiites represent at least 60 percent of the Iraqi population. (The rule of thumb in the Muslim Middle East is that the Shiite population in Sunni-dominated countries is underestimated in official figures. The common breakdown of the Iraqi population—55 percent Shiite Arab, 20 percent Sunni Arab, 20 percent Kurd, and 5 percent Turkoman/Christian Arab—probably gives too much to the Arab Sunnis, who have ruled the country since 1920.)

After the brutal repression the Shiites have endured in the country since the collapse of the Ottoman empire, it is most unlikely that they will again accept Sunni

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Arab suzerainty. The old legitimizing engine of Sunni domination—Arab nationalism—is dead among the Shiites. Though the Shiites have so far shown remarkable forbearance towards the Sunnis who were the backbone of Saddam Hussein’s regime (the former know the latter, too, were trapped in an Orwellian nightmare), it’s doubtful that you could find many Shiites who still trust the political reflexes of even their most abused Sunni compatriots. The Shiites also know that the Arab Sunni Middle East didn’t cry in 1991 when Saddam Hussein slaughtered thousands of them during the great rebellion following the first Gulf War.

A Shiite dictatorship could possibly fracture Iraq. Though there is no ill will between the Sunni Kurds and the Arab Shiites, the Kurds, who have the weakest Iraqi identity among the country’s major groups, could decide not to risk another Arab dictatorship. After 10 years of autonomy, a great many younger Kurds know no Arabic. De facto separatism could become de jure. Though profound Iraqi nationalists, the Arab Shiites may not have the stomach to do to the Kurds what Arab Sunni regimes have done since 1925. Conversely, fear among the Kurds of a possible Turkish invasion—which has become less likely with the growth of Turkish democracy—might not trump the fear of a new centralized Iraqi Arab power.

In any case, the Shiites will eventually triumph over their better organized, more militarily adept, former Arab Sunni overlords. The victory could well be ugly. The larger Arab Sunni world will undoubtedly be horrified. They are already aghast that the Americans are trying to create a Shiite-dominated democratic state in their midst. (The Jordanians, Egyptians, and Saudis—all devoutly Sunni societies—are particularly apoplectic on the Iraqi Shiite issue.) But once the historic emotions have calmed down, these undemocratic regimes may well realize an authoritarian Shiite government in Baghdad is far preferable to a functioning democracy next door. All the despotic regimes of the Middle East survived Ayatollah Khomeini and his revolution. No matter what Shiite force gains the upper hand in a new Iraqi dictatorship, it cannot possibly generate the whirlwind that Iran’s imam unleashed. Democracy, on the other hand, is the great unknown—and easily most feared—revolutionary force in the region.

**T**he failure of the democratic experiment in Iraq would, however, have much worse consequences for the United States. George Bush has staked his presidency on Iraq. Indeed, the United States’ standing in the Middle East and in the world depends on the

transformation of American power into an Iraqi democracy. America is invested far more in Iraq today than we were in prerevolutionary Iran. The shah’s fall and the triumph of Khomeini set in motion in the Middle East the perception that the United States could not hold its ground. Psychologically, America’s failure in Iran reinforced the Vietnam syndrome in Washington. The collapse of American will in Beirut in 1983 and Somalia in 1993 is inextricably linked to the Iranian crisis of ’79. In this sense, and in others, Ayatollah Khomeini produced Osama bin Laden and the Sunni jihadist creed that America can be worn down through terrorism.

Failure in Iraq would surely produce a new bout of timidity in America’s foreign policy elite. One can already see in Washington and New York, among both Republicans and Democrats, a strong desire to return to a pre-9/11 world, where the fear of terrorism and rogue states did not define America’s international relations and rail transatlantic ties. The French and the Germans, and perhaps the Brits, too (with the possible exception of Prime Minister Tony Blair), desperately want the Americans to act less “Promethean,” to let democracy spread to the Arabs in the fullness of time, to treat terrorism, as the Clinton administration did, as a police problem, and to view again the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation as the fulcrum of the Middle East. It’s easy to imagine Peace-Now Democrats and Wall Street-realist Republicans, chastened by Iraq, galloping backwards in time.

Unfortunately for them, what psychologically happened in the Middle East after ’79 is likely to happen again if Iraq becomes unmanageable for the United States. In the Middle East and in the angry Muslim communities of Western Europe, bin Ladenism is by no means dead. Neither is the Lebanese Hezbollah, whose members are the terrorist foot soldiers of Iran’s hard-core clergy. The Hezbollah and al Qaeda are spiritually, if not operationally, joined in their anti-Americanism and in the belief that terrorism is the most efficient expression of God’s will on earth. An American retreat from Iraq—even if we camouflage it as an “orderly” withdrawal preceded by the successful “Iraqification” of security forces—will be seen as a stunning American defeat, both by our friends and our enemies in the Middle East. Rogue and non-rogue states of the region could enthusiastically default to their *modus vivendi* with militant Islam in an effort to co-opt its renewed strength spawned by America’s retreat. The officially supported conservative Egyptian and Saudi presses give a good idea how fear and hatred of America can create common ground between otherwise hostile parties. This reinforcing mixture of conservative Muslim despotism and

Islamic fundamentalism has been a major catalyst for bin Ladenism.

A regime like clerical Iran's, which has a longstanding affection for terrorism, might decide the moment is ripe to hit the United States again, as it did in Lebanon. If Tehran believes America is retreating from Iraq, the odds are poor that it will fear a preemptive American strike against its nuclear-weapons program. Without that restraining fear—irrespective of the brilliance of European diplomacy—a nuclear-armed clerical regime is inevitable. Perceiving stultifying weakness in Washington, the revolutionary hard core in Tehran could develop a more liberal policy of “detention” for the members of al Qaeda, who are, so says Iran's foreign minister, now under arrest. With a secure base of operations, al Qaeda could plot and plan more professionally. Men who live to embrace God through suicide and the slaughter of Americans could again more easily find and fortify each other.

And Iraq could become quickly unmanageable if only a small slice of the Shiite community became guerrillas. We cannot long garrison and pacify an entire country we intend to democratize. For good reason, we don't have the will, and we probably don't have the military means, to take on Shiite insurrectionists in numbers. The British successfully did it after World War I, but they had the Sunnis as allies, and the Shiite community was seriously divided. The Brits then were also willing to use tactics that we today aren't.

It would be enormously difficult for the most moderate of clerics in Iraq to encourage calm and cooperation with Americans once U.S. counterinsurgency operations among the Shiites reached a certain amplitude. The political “Iraqification” of the country, which in great part means enfranchising the Shiites, would fall apart. The Coalition Provisional Authority and the Bush administration have assumed that the Shiite community will continue to support the American occupation of Iraq. Contrary to so much press reporting, the Shiites have indeed welcomed the Americans as liberators. There has been substantial, if indirect, cooperation between the Americans and senior clerics of the Shiite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. Three of the four grand ayatollahs of Najaf have met with American officials. The most senior cleric, Ali Sistani, has not, though his minions have.

A general consensus has indeed developed within the CPA and the Pentagon that the traditional clerics, partic-

ularly Sistani and his followers, more or less have to play along with the Americans since they, too, sincerely want stability in the country. And, after all, they have as much to fear from radical Shiites, like the young clerical firebrand Moktada al-Sadr, as the Americans. They certainly don't want to aid and abet the Sunni Baathist reactionaries and holy warriors who are trying to abort a new order in Iraq. Some CPA and senior administration officials have even questioned whether Sistani really has that much clout. Iraq is a big country, Shiites are by no means all the same, and urban, secularized Shiites are obviously abundant (especially to CPA officials, who can't because of security restrictions socialize much with the natives). Some administration and CPA officials have even viewed dismissively the famous fatwa of Sistani declaring null and void the legitimacy of any nonelected

constitutional assembly. The fatwa was, it appears, the reaction to a mischievous question put to the cleric by an Agence France-Presse reporter. (The journalist queried the grand ayatollah about whether he knew that an American Jew was helping to write the Iraqi constitution. The Jew in question was apparently Noah Feldman, a law professor at NYU who served as a legal adviser to the Provisional Authority.) A

judicial response to such a naughty, flippant question does not deserve, so the Americans' reasoning went, that much serious consideration.

This is, of course, the official American frame of mind most likely to derail the Bush administration in Iraq. It is entirely possible that Grand Ayatollah Sistani will go to the mat against the Provisional Authority to ensure that the provisional government is directly elected by the people. Whatever the provocation for a fatwa, grand ayatollahs do not lightly issue opinions. Ayatollahs are, above all else, jurists, who, like American judges, live by what they write. And what Sistani has written about a provisional Iraqi government is a model of concision:

... the mechanism [of the American plan] to choose members of the Transitional Legislative Assembly does not guarantee the establishment of an assembly that truly represents the Iraqi people. Therefore this mechanism must be replaced with one that guarantees the aforesaid, which is “elections,” so the Assembly will emanate from the desire of the Iraqi people and will represent them fairly without its legitimacy being tarnished in any way.

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As the Provisional Authority should have learned with its original, aborted plan for drafting a new Iraqi constitution, Sistani has the power to stall the political process. His power is not, as the *Washington Post* inaccurately put it, just one man's. His authority comes from the voluntary assent of the Shiite community. The old Shiite order in Iraq, where Shiite tribal leaders, *sayyids* (descendants of the Prophet), and, most important, Shiite merchants provided countervailing forces to the influence of the great divines, is long gone, blown away by the Hashemite Sunni monarchy, military dictatorship, and finally and most effectively, the Baath party and Saddam Hussein. For many, probably most Iraqi Shiites, Sistani is the saving remnant of the old Shiite identity. He, unlike the returned exiles, endured in Iraq. He is the last of the great transnational Shiite clerics. Born in Iran, educated in Iran and Iraq, he embodies the undefeated spirit of his flock. Virtually everything else in the Iraqi Shiite world was crushed.

There is no doubt that Sistani does not want to pick a fight with the Americans. His clerical aides have repeatedly made this clear. However, Ambassador Bremer's determination to move forward with an unelected transitional legislative assembly collides with Iraqi Shiite history. The Shiites have been, in their eyes, repeatedly denied political prominence in society appropriate to their numbers and accomplishments. Iraqi Sunnis like to remember the Hashemite monarchy (1921-1958) as a democratic Iraqi golden age. It was certainly a more humane, civilized moment, but for the Shiites, especially the Shiite clergy, it was not a memorably democratic period. The Hashemites methodically denied the Shiites influence in parliament, maintaining with British help the old Ottoman Sunni-dominated power structure. They circumscribed the influence of the Shiite clergy, and halted the enormously successful conversion of Sunni tribes to Shiism. And after the Hashemites, things only got worse.

Bremer's plan plays on memories of decades of betrayal. The plan is seen in Iraq and in Washington as an explicit attempt to limit Shiite influence, which would inevitably be greater through open elections. The Provisional Authority and the Pentagon are understandably concerned about finding a means to vest the minority Sunni Arab community in a post-Saddam Iraq. The plan for a nonelected government is, in part, an effort to enlist as quickly as possible greater Sunni support for a

new post-Saddam order. If you can win the hearts and minds of the Sunni Arabs, so the theory goes, you can likely diminish the palpable fear and sympathy among the Sunnis for the Baathist reactionaries and holy warriors who are, with increasing effectiveness, killing Americans and Iraqis. At a minimum, more Sunnis in power might improve the chances of gaining battle-ready intelligence against the insurrectionists. The Pentagon's and the Central Intelligence Agency's decision to use the former exile organization, the Iraqi National Accord, as the basis for a new domestic Iraqi intelligence-and-security service is part of Washington's and the Provisional Authority's new "pro-Sunni" push. Though headed by a secular Shiite, the Accord is a well-known repository of former Sunni military officers.

But this is not a wise way to enhance Shiite confidence (and it won't in all probability do much for the Sunni in the street, either). Ambassador Bremer's decision, which he now apparently regrets, to disband the Iraqi Army was unquestionably his finest order. To most Iraqi Shiites, this meant that the Sunni Baathist officer corps was never coming back. The Americans would not try to bribe the old order for "peace." The Pentagon's and the CIA's recent decision to rebuild an Iraqi intelligence service through the Accord could not thus be more poorly timed and planned.

The INA has been working with the CIA for years. Its track record for producing first-rate, actionable intelligence is not encouraging. It is highly doubtful that the gain in intelligence from this new service will be worth the symbolism and honor lost among ordinary Iraqis, especially among the Shiites. The Shiite-American alliance—on which all hinges in Iraq—can snap if only a small number of Shiites grow fearful about America's intentions. Working with Baathists, which is a longstanding predilection in certain offices of the State Department, the CIA, and, more recently, among some American military field commanders, is an efficient way to kick the Iraqi conspiracy machine into high gear. And conspiracy theories in Iraq, as elsewhere in the Middle East, are often far harder than facts.

The CPA and the Bush administration obviously believe that democracy now is unworkable. The growing violence in Iraq, many officials fear, would enormously complicate and delay national elections. They also fear, though they don't like to say so publicly, that elections now might empower illiberal forces and give the Shiite clergy—especially Sistani—a potential veto

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over the nation's future. More than a few fear that Sistani will want, in some shape and form, an "Islamic government," an Iraqi version of clerical Iran. The Sunni Kurds might also find the whole thing offensive, and decamp from the nation. Arab Sunnis could just grow angrier and more violent.

All of these feared outcomes are possible. But the Bush administration's plan for Iraq does not, in any meaningful way, preclude them. Two years' time will not make Iraqis philosophically more ready for democracy than they are today. Iraqi culture isn't going to change to fit America's schedule. It ought to be obvious that the Shiites as a group, and the clergy in particular, are much more likely to entertain nondemocratic sentiments toward their fellow citizenry if for two years they are denied the vote. In theory, elections for a constitutional convention won't happen until March 15, 2005, national elections until December 31, 2005. If the administration really believes the "hearts and minds" argument about counterinsurgency, doesn't it make more sense to begin the election process sooner, not later, so that a new class of national Iraqi politicians can develop?

Hand-picked provincial officials and self-selecting local "notables" can't possibly have the traction of would-be politicians constantly pressing the flesh. Don't we *want* the Iraqis to get excited about determining their own destiny? Don't we want this sooner, not later? Shouldn't we find out sooner, not later, whether the Arab Sunnis as a group want to participate in a democratic process? Ditto for the Kurds? Does the administration really think that six months down the road the violence in the Sunni belt is going to diminish? That holding peaceful elections will indeed be any easier than now? Are we going to allow Sunni reactionaries and foreign jihadists to hold hostage national elections?

And suppose the Sunni insurgents take the war south into the Shiite zone. Remember the bombs of August when Washington and Baghdad panicked, fearing the two-front nightmare scenario had arrived? Isn't it a better idea to have the Shiites fully on board, committed to participatory democracy? Do we want to see bombs going off in Najaf, Karbala, or Hilla and an increasing number of Shiites arguing that the Americans, who deny them democracy, also deny them security? Shouldn't we assume a worst-case scenario, that we've got an incipient Sunni insurrection on our hands? Don't we want to see whether the Sunnis will go to the ballot booth? If they do, won't they be more inclined to join us in the arduous and ugly counterinsurgency campaign to root out the guerrillas-cum-terrorists? Don't we want the Shiites and the Kurds

to back us and themselves morally through the ballot box for the difficult and bloody campaign that may lie ahead?

At present, we still have Ali Sistani on our side. The old man is a product of the most politically skeptical and cautious grand ayatollahs of the last 50 years, Sayyid Abu'l-Qasim Kho'i and Hajj Hosayn Borujerdi. Sistani's fatwas on elections and his pithy commentary on the role of Islam in society have been consistently moderate. The absence of Islamically loaded language in his political commentary is indeed striking. And grand ayatollahs are as they appear: They are not masters of deception (as are others in the Shiite tradition). Their minds and manners evolve openly over decades.

Does this moderation mean that Sistani believes in a secular society, with a firm wall between religion and state? Certainly not. But he and his clerical lieutenants clearly understand how combustible Iraq is. They know that Shiites, let alone Arab Sunnis and Kurds, are a variegated lot. Sistani's followers have been explicit in their disapproval of the clerical dictatorship in neighboring Iran. They don't like clerics intertwined with politics. Sistani and his men have so far made it clear that they believe the commonweal, not a cleric interpreting the holy law, holds ultimate political power. The Sistani crowd is certainly more moderate than the Shiites of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the Dawa party, whom the Coalition Provisional Authority has grown too fond of. (That SCIRI and Dawa representatives serve as important channels for the CPA to Sistani is bizarre.) And the grand ayatollah has so far shown great sensitivity toward Sunni fears of Shiite predominance. He has not allowed his dispossessed followers to take back the mosques that were stolen from them after the '91 rebellion. To put it succinctly: We are enormously lucky to have Sistani in post-Saddam Iraq. If the old cleric were to die, our position among the Shiites might collapse overnight. Our objective with the grand ayatollah thus ought to be to cooperate (and preempt), not confront.

If the Bush administration is wise, it will change its provisional-government plans and allow for direct elections as soon as feasible. If it refuses to change, and Sistani and the Shiites force it to abort the plan later, we will be left weaker than if we change now. We ought not dissipate our strength so profligately. There will undoubtedly be moments where we will need to intimidate. Dealing with Muslim clerics has, understandably, never been an American strong suit. Though many in the CPA and the administration may want to wish Sistani away, fortunately they can't. He is America's most powerful democratic weapon in Iraq, even if we don't know how to wield him. If President Bush is reelected in 2004, however, Grand Ayatollah Sistani will have certainly done his part. ♦