

# The Rise of Islamic Insurgency in Iraq

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## Résumé de l'article

The insurgency that has grown in Iraq since the downfall of the regime of Saddam Hussein and Allied occupation in April 2003, has gripped the country in a spiral of lawlessness and anarchy. Despite the presence of over 150,000 Allied forces and the training of thousands of local Iraqi police and security forces, Iraq is still dominated by armed insurgents who are weakening and sabotaging post-war reconstruction in the areas of law and order, oil production, and road infrastructure. In this article I will contend that the most serious dimension of this insurgency is Islamic in manifestation and examine its importance not merely to the internal political dynamic of the country but the wider American objective of the war on terrorism and the discourses that surround it. These discourses include radical Islamism, contemporary facets of foreign occupation, and the Muslim prohibition to avoid civil conflict (fitna). In the latter part of the article I examine the dimensions of Islamist interpretation, support, and objective to the current insurgency. This includes analysis of both Sunni and Shi'a elements of insurgency that have arisen in the Iraqi context as well as a wider explanation of Muslim revolt against perceived Western domination of the political, economic, and cultural landscape of contemporary Islamism and its resurgence in Iraq.

## The Rise of Islamic Insurgency in Iraq

by

Beverley Milton-Edwards

### ABSTRACT

*The insurgency that has grown in Iraq since the downfall of the regime of Saddam Hussein and Allied occupation in April 2003, has gripped the country in a spiral of lawlessness and anarchy.<sup>1</sup> Despite the presence of over 150,000 Allied forces and the training of thousands of local Iraqi police and security forces, Iraq is still dominated by armed insurgents who are weakening and sabotaging post-war reconstruction in the areas of law and order, oil production, and road infrastructure. In this article I will contend that the most serious dimension of this insurgency is Islamic in manifestation and examine its importance not merely to the internal political dynamic of the country but the wider American objective of the war on terrorism and the discourses that surround it. These discourses include radical Islamism, contemporary facets of foreign occupation, and the Muslim prohibition to avoid civil conflict (fitna). In the latter part of the article I examine the dimensions of Islamist interpretation, support, and objective to the current insurgency. This includes analysis of both Sunni and Shi'a elements of insurgency that have arisen in the Iraqi context as well a wider explanation of Muslim revolt against perceived Western domination of the political, economic, and cultural landscape of contemporary Islamism and its resurgence in Iraq.*

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary political Islam is a dimension of life that many Muslim societies have had difficulty coming to terms with, and the radical dimension of this phenomenon has been perceived as being a threat to prevailing political orders. Despite this threat, most regimes have failed in totally repressing it. That radical Islam is a dynamic force is a foregone conclusion. As a revolutionary

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political force it presents, as was the case with Iran, a formidable challenge to power-holders in the state.

Whereas in the case of Iran a corrupt regime and its aggressive secularization project resulted in growing revolutionary fervor that led to the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, in the decades following the end of the Cold War the dynamic of revolution and rebellion as promoted by radical Islam has assumed new characteristics. Both in Islamic and non-Islamic societies there is once again an attempt to consolidate the identity of the society – including the state – on the basis of faith. In Islam this task is all the more complicated because of the perennial tension between faith and state (*din wa dawla*) that has preoccupied successive generations of Muslim rulers and theologians.<sup>2</sup> The current uncertainties facing Iraq brings into sharp relief the issue of the role of religion or the place of faith in politics and governance. Indeed, it may at first glance be hard to comprehend why a secular state such as Iraq with a well-known secular outlook (Ba’thism was an ideology of Arab secularism) has so suddenly become vulnerable to political Islam including its radical versions. Upon further scrutiny, however, it is not difficult to uncover the import of Iraq’s Muslim polity and its growth and political as well as societal resurgence throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century. For, although Ba’thism was perpetrated by state agents as an all-encompassing identity, as Samir al-Khalil highlights, “a degree of personal refuge from the onslaught of Ba’thism [wa]s still possible by a sort of “reverse dissolution,” back into the arms of an original social group, whether family or confessional.”<sup>3</sup> Like other states in the Arab world this resurgence is explained in part by state weakness/breakdown brought on as a result (in Iraq) of factors such as the sanctions regime, post-war reconstruction crisis, the collapse of the Iraqi economy, and the extent to which religious institutions, organizations, and civil society provided services and functions that in some way replaced or provided a meaningful alternative to the state.<sup>4</sup> Another part of the explanation – again in common with other Arab state responses to Islamic resurgence – is the extent to which, after the defeat of Iraq in its occupation of Kuwait in 1990-91, President Saddam Hussein embarked on a state-sponsored Islamization campaign (*hamla imaniya*) as a way of shoring up state legitimacy and meeting his opponents on common ground.<sup>5</sup> Religion and politics were always infused with each other whether Saddam Hussein liked it or not. The collapse of his regime in April 2003 unleashed both old and new religious political forces on the Iraqi landscape. But the issue here is whether the regime collapse was the factor that in and of itself promoted insurgency with an Islamist dimension or if other factors contributed to the emergence of a phenomenon in post-war Iraq that has bedeviled the post-war planners?

## **OCCUPATION AND INSURGENCY**

State collapse as a result of the Allied coalition intervention in Iraq in the spring of 2003 resulted in a military and administrative occupation by the

Western powers. This process of occupation was accompanied by scenes of local looting and disorder that the Allied troops appeared disinclined to halt. This loss of control was accompanied by a decision by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to disband the coercive arm of the Iraqi state (including the army, police, and intelligence services) as well as to implement the de-Ba'athification of the state, to the extent that chaos and institutional collapse occurred in every institution. The collapse of law and order was perhaps one of the most serious issues confronting the CPA because it subsequently created a vacuum that many elements, including cronies of the Ba'athist regime, local as well as foreign Islamists, and such others as external private security contractors, sought to exploit. Within this maelstrom the insurgency was born.

The insurgency is diverse in character and tactics, in terms of participants and end goals. Initially, the primary target constituted symbols of the "occupation," including foreign troops and local Iraqis accused of "collaborating" in some way. Moreover, other insurgents attacked international governmental and non-governmental targets, such as the United Nations, the Red Cross, and international aid workers. As the insurgence gathered momentum sectarian attacks, primarily against *Shi'a* and Kurdish elements, also took place. It was clear early on in the insurgency that some elements were Islamist in inspiration. Throughout 2003 and 2004 news reports described the growing number of both local and foreign insurgent groups operating under the banner of Islam.<sup>6</sup> However, as Coalition forces began to engage the insurgents there was little time to ponder or analyze the cause of such a virulent and growing explosion of violence and terrorism coming from mushrooming Islamist groups in Iraq.

## **INSURGENCE AND CHAOS: THE MUSLIM PROHIBITION**

Even at the outset of an occupation that was never widely received by the Iraqi people as a celebrated Western liberation, there was little widespread support for violent attacks against the occupation. Not much energy existed for the type of political revolt that has characterized other contemporary Muslim rebellions.<sup>7</sup> The uprisings of 1991 had depleted many Islamists; moreover, the machinery of the Ba'athist state had effectively undermined the organizing capacity of militant elements in opposition to authority. In short, the means for rebellion were simply not present. Survival rather than rebellion constituted the key strategy of such Islamist elements as the Dawa party or the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution In Iraq (SCIRI). Then, in the initial weeks after the war all too often the energies of the people were preoccupied with the frenzy of looting and disorder that took place across the country.

The religious leadership of Iraq reacted to such chaos by calling for calm, lawfulness and order. The fear of civil disorder (*fitna*) characteristic of so much traditional Islamic thought also played its part in shaping the themes of countless sermons and *fatwa* issued across the country.

In a surprising show of unity, imams throughout Iraq have been preaching a common message: that Iraqis should remain united and vigilant against attempts to invoke sectarian conflict. ‘There is a persistent effort to fuel tension and cause fitna [strife] between Iraq’s *Sunnis* and *Shi’ites*,’ Sheikh Mahmoud Al-Ethawy, the imam of Abdel-Qader Al-Kilani Mosque in central Baghdad warned his Friday congregates.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, such factors did not deter certain Islamist elements that were preparing for irregular warfare in an attempt to gain the psychological edge over a Western superpower which now occupied their country. Moreover, at the start of the occupation they were able to exploit the vacuum that resulted from the American policy to totally dismantle the forces of the old regime and to provide an address for the grievances of the many disgruntled and demobilized soldiers of the former Iraqi army and security structures. The growing insurgency was well-funded and former *Sunni* elements of the old Ba’thist structure welcomed those “old soldiers” willing to oppose the occupation. In this case religion and economic imperative were a powerful combination in grounding the incipient insurgency as a local rather than “foreign”-led phenomenon in some *Sunni* circles. This is not to say that by merely reversing their policy and increasing employment rates among the new Iraqi army the US would have been able to rectify or end the insurgency. For it became increasingly clear that by deliberately excluding such an important strand of Iraqi society from the post-war vista marginalization would be hard to reverse.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the insurgents both before and after the war were able to infiltrate Iraq’s borders with radical Islamists who were determined to bring a bloody end to America’s occupation of Iraq.

## **ROOTS OF RADICAL ISLAMISM AND INSURGENCY IN IRAQ**

Contrary to the assertions of the Bush administration it was clear to experts on Iraq that the nature of the Ba’thist regime under Saddam Hussein – as secularist and socialist – was in fact one of the least hospitable to radical Islam in the Middle East at the time.<sup>10</sup> Recent history in Iraq had been colored by a decade long war against the radical fundamentalist regime of Iran by Saddam Hussein’s forces encouraged by conservative Gulf States and the governments of the West. Furthermore, the late 1980s and early 1990s had given rise to a decade where any manifestation of Islamist opposition or Islamist radicalism in Iraq had been brutally suppressed. In the south of the country where the majority of the *Shi’a* had staged an uprising against Saddam Hussein in the spring of 1991 their clerical and political leadership, along with thousands of their followers, had perished in the officially-sanctioned massacres designed to put down the uprising and preserve the regime under the personal fiefdom of Saddam Hussein.

Historically, although the *Shi’a* made up a demographic majority in the country, they had taken second place under a *Sunni* minority who enjoyed pref-

erential rule designated to them by the Ottoman rulers of Constantinople. When the British seized Iraq during World War I and set about state-building in the post-war years, they decided to perpetuate the *Sunni* ruling classes as an all-too-important indigenous prop to a *Sunni* monarch imported to Iraq from the Hejaz of Arabia. Moreover, as one *Shi'a* representative has acknowledged, during this period the question was not really one of a British policy designed to exclude the *Shi'a* from power, but rather that the *Shi'a* leadership of the time,

had never governed themselves, they had never participated in a government. They had notions of idealism about how government should be . . . . And they did not want to make their hands dirty with politics . . . and they encouraged the community to step back. So the majority of *Shi'a* actually took a negative attitude towards participating in the government.<sup>11</sup>

This perspective, however, contrasts with the demand from certain *Shi'a* clerical elements, as early as 1919, for Islamic government in Iraq. It didn't take long before the *Shi'a* religious leadership of the country crossed the Rubicon into the political realm. Moreover, they achieved unprecedented unity with their *Sunni* brethren in political agitation that led to local revolt and insurgency.

Insurgent behavior against the British occupation of the new state came in sporadic outbursts of violence throughout the early 1920s as the country inched toward a break down of law and order. In 1920, a revolt, which included Kurds, *Sunni*, and *Shi'a*, broke out as news filtered into the country that control of Iraq would be held in British hands. The locus of agitation included *Shi'a* cities such as Najaf and Karbala, and some of its most important leaders were *Shi'a* clerics including Mirza Mohammed Taqi Shirazi and his son Mohammed Rida Shirazi. It is clear that Islam and the self-defense of Muslim lands from foreign occupation were a key motif and motive for the insurgency. "From their seat in the shrine cities, the *mujtahids* [clerics] regarded the [British] occupation of Muslim Iraq by Christian infidels as a sign of the collapse of Islamic civilization."<sup>12</sup> Action would have to be taken to recover Muslim pride. Religious events became a vehicle for unprecedented political protest and by the summer of 1920 a violent revolt had broken out throughout the country. For three months the insurgency brought the country to a stand still and the British employed brutal means to eventually put down the insurgency.

The revolt communicated a symbol of Muslim power – autonomous from the state – that would remain a constant element from the past to the present. This power lay in the powerful clerical elites of the shrine cities of Iraq and the unbroken bonds they enjoyed with their *Shi'a* counterparts in Iran. It also succeeded in unifying elements of society across both sectarian and class divides in ways which, hitherto the present insurgency, had largely been neglected. As with the Iraqi insurgency today sectarian unity was a key element of the 1920 revolt in communicating an insurgent rejection of state authority within the framework of

a new nascent and ultimately weak and “failed” state.<sup>13</sup> The state was rejected, not because of its constitutional nature – the plebiscite of 1919 had delivered overwhelming support for this form of governance – but because of foreign tutelage and control of governance and state resources that made citizens of a majority Muslim multi-ethnic population beholden to British power. Iraqis were not fooled into thinking that their new monarch from the Hejaz – Faisal – was anything more than a puppet for the real rulers of Iraq who were the imperial British.

With the exception perhaps of Gertrude Bell, the woman who invented modern Iraq, there was barely a British official that heeded the Iraqi demand for self-determination and independence. The British paid a high price for their deafness to Iraqi demands and their persistence in occupation. Hundreds of British soldiers lost their lives in the three-month revolt and a considerable economic drain on the British taxpayer was inevitable. “Whether by accident or design, the regime introduced after the 1920 rising took little account of the fact that the *Shi’i* accounted for more than half the population of the country . . .”<sup>14</sup> The insurgency led Britain to reconsider its method of rule in Iraq but painful lessons were not fully learnt until the coup of 1958 ended the Iraqi monarchy and its British backers. Elections did not deceive Iraqis into thinking they enjoyed true sovereignty and independence for the continuing presence of British troops and “advisors” was a constant reminder of where much of the power in the country really lay. As one British official in Iraq remarked in the late 1950s, “Local Iraqis maintained that this independence was a charade and the country was being run by stooge governments which took their orders from the British Embassy in Baghdad.”<sup>15</sup> In this respect elections were not sufficient in and of themselves to promote state, nation, and sovereignty in Iraq. The coup of 1958 heralded an era of instability within the state that would eventually lead to the assumption to power of the Ba’th party and, by 1979, Saddam Hussein, as head of the state.

## **FAST FORWARD TO THE PRESENT**

The prospect that the American-led war on Iraq might lead to the inauguration of a new era of occupation with all its implications for the resurrection of state power, legitimacy, and authority were, I would contend, largely absent from the post-war calculations of American planners in Washington. Instead, there was a widespread belief that ordinary Iraqis would happily couple the act of deposing a hated dictator with the wholesale import of a democratic project for Iraq that was Western inspired, built around only western values, and would serve as a blueprint for the rest of the Middle East.

US administrators and politicians, however, could be forgiven for misreading the signals on the import of Islam in terms of the new state structure, governance, and the impact of external Islamist influences including radical elements. Before the war in April 2003, the American government had assiduous-

ly cultivated the Iraqi national opposition movement in exile, which included powerful religious representatives from both *Sunni* and *Shi'a* communities, as well as other religious groups, in Iraq. The INC (Iraqi National Congress), led by Ahmad Chalabi, had convinced the US administration that the transition to power – America's way – would not be a difficult task in Iraq once Saddam Hussein was deposed. Chalabi had asserted, "religious difference is not the issue here . . . We all of us united in our opposition . . . and determined to bring about a better brighter future for Iraq."<sup>16</sup> Many others in the loose opposition movement to Saddam Hussein spoke of a new state for Iraq that was founded on secular principles for its multi-ethnic and multi-religious citizenry. Kanan Makiya contended that the war against Saddam Hussein should be about the restoration of democracy in Iraq, led by the US, to change the regime and that sectarian differences could be overcome in a secular framework of governance. Yet, even at this point, figures such as Makiya were warning of the perils to democracy of an American occupation. "At the moment I think it is most important to convince the US administration not to do this [democracy reconstruction] by way of a military occupation."<sup>17</sup>

If the Americans had been prepared to listen, however, they would have found others within the loose coalition of opposition to Saddam who were prepared to be a little bolder about their religious vision for any future Iraq. The Islamist elements of note that had any significant influence in Iraq were the SCIRI whose leadership attended the historic Iraqi National Opposition Conference in London in December 2003.<sup>18</sup> At that conference Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the brother of the organization's spiritual and political leader Mohammed Bakir al-Hakim, made clear a demand for Muslim leadership in Iraq and opposition to any form of external hegemony over the country. "Islam is the model of inspiration . . . We must reject foreign intervention or rule . . . We must maintain the values, lessons and true principles in the holy message . . ."<sup>19</sup> On the eve of the war 1,000 of SCIRI's al-Badr Army were deployed in the Kurdish-Iraqi city of Sulaymaniya but remained out of American control. By September 2003, leaders of SCIRI confirmed that the group's armed force, the Badr Corps, remained active despite a US demand that the militia disband.

## GATHERING STORM CLOUDS

The advent of a radical, populist, or armed element of Islamism is not a new occurrence. Radical Islam is a feature of the contemporary global landscape that in the latter part of the twentieth century altered the nature of international relations and global conflict and conflict resolution efforts. This can be explained in two ways. Firstly, political Islam became a reflection of and was drawn into the wider geopolitical and strategic battles of the Cold War. This is highlighted, in particular, by the case of Afghanistan, but also in debates and discourses of the Cold War as they affected a variety of Muslim countries and organizations. Secondly, after the end of the Cold War political Islam was identified as a new



signifier in global politics – often replacing the old communist threat – in its own right and as an important dimension of the ethnicization of conflict in civil wars and disputes.

Radical Islam has emerged as a dynamic force in this modern maelstrom of international politics and developed distinct internal identities and differences from within as well. In this way even the radical end of the spectrum of Islam cannot be represented in a monolithic fashion *à la* the 1979 Iranian revolution. Such an approach ignores the growing importance of sectarian differences within the radical camp and ascendant ideologues around whom many followers emerged. Convergence against a common enemy was often neither as easy intellectually or logistically as had been assumed at the time. In Iraq, by the mid to late 1990s, it was apparent that within the radical spectrum more than one element was at work. The first was Iranian and *Shi'a* in origin. It stemmed from both historical and recent alliances between neighbors and came on the heels, not only of Iran's tortuous experience of war at the hands of Iraq (1980-1989), but the exodus of scholars, clerics, and others following the bloody punishments exacted by Saddam Hussein's regime following the *Shi'a* uprisings of 1991.

The second element was found in the radical inspired factions that had emerged from the Afghan war in the early 1990s to form a new, radical, armed, and ideologically fanatical diaspora. Saudi fundamentalist clerics, such as Sheikh Ali Bin Khudayr al-Khudayr and Sheikh Nasir bin Hamad al-Fahd – both of whom were disciples of Sheikh Hamoud al-Shuaybi – were leading personalities in this trend. Such figures are believed, along with others, such as Yusuf al-Ayyri, to have sanctioned to the new *jihadi* factions that began to emerge and wage insurgent attacks in Iraq in the late spring of 2003. In November 2004, a group of Saudi clerics issued a call for Iraqis to undertake a *jihad* against “occupation” targets in the country. This element was not indigenous to Iraq but its near neighbors in Saudi Arabia and Jordan was host to such groups. They found it easy to infiltrate the border into Iraq and set up in the chaos that ensued following the fall of Saddam Hussein.

The *jihadi* elements quickly gained ground in Iraq. Their ideology of puritanical theology and militancy through violent action – packaged as *jihad* – appealed to those in Iraq who were left powerless in the ensuing break down in law and order and chaos in their own society. It became quite clear that common cause could be made in turning the global message of the *jihad* groups into a local insurgent struggle against a Western occupation of Iraq. Thousands of Arab *mujahidin* elements had entered Iraq before, during, and after the war as part of the rallying cry to wage *jihad*. European intelligence sources had remarked that

[the] influx is not necessarily evidence of coordination by al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups, since it remains unclear if the men are under the control of any one leader or what, if any, role they have had in the kind of deadly attacks that shook Baghdad on Monday. A

European intelligence official called the foreign recruits ‘foot soldiers with limited or no training.’<sup>20</sup>

Even before the outbreak of the war Arab volunteers were reported to be crossing into Iraq to begin training led by militant *jihad* groupings.<sup>21</sup> As the country slid under Allied occupation and the first suicide bombs against prominent targets in Baghdad took place sources pointed to the Arab *mujahidin* as the operatives.

The presence of such elements has added a new dimension to the *Sunni* face of insurgency in Iraq. The involvement of Arab *mujahidin* in this context reflects the global nature of the conflict as it unfolds in Iraq. This trend is symbolized by the Arab *jihad* fighters with their extreme violent tactics and assaults on Allied Coalition targets and local Iraqis deemed “collaborators,” such as police and national guard personnel. Their motivation is centered on the ideology of a global *jihad* to end Western domination in Muslim lands.<sup>22</sup> It is localized through their alliance with Iraqi *Sunni* elements and common cause of antipathy against the military dimension of the Western presence in the country. This union introduces a new Islamist dimension to post-war politics in Iraq – accelerating the Islamization of Iraqi society as a deeply political signifier that is posited on a deep-seated anti-Americanism and hostility to Western external elements. The re-rooting of Islam as a political force becomes entwined in an extreme position. This in turn has significant consequences, as we have seen in Iraq, for the American-promoted democracy project.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, this expression of *Sunni* insurgency in Iraq has also promoted a degree of sectarian and ideological tension through a series of actual and propaganda attacks on the *Shi'a*, both locally and elsewhere in the Middle East region. This in turn has given rise to the belief that both *wahabbi* Saudi Arabia and *Shi'a* Iran see Iraq as a new battleground for a contest for the future of the Muslim soul. The effect of this is unifying for the local Iraqi population that is still clearly coming to terms with a re-ordering of the components of post-Saddam identity as religious, political, ethnic, class, gender, rural/urban, or otherwise. By the early summer of 2003, such tensions were apparent in the manifestation of communal violence in Iraq and in particular a series of bomb attacks in the *Shi'a* holy cities in the summer of 2003. In one such attack in Najaf near the Imam Ali mosque suicide bombers killed 126 pilgrims, including the senior *Shi'a* religious cleric Ayatollah Mohammed Bakir al-Hakim.<sup>24</sup> Such attacks were not only interpreted as a *Sunni* broadside against the *Shi'a* but as a warning to such *Shi'a* elements to curb their past and present associations with the ambitions of the Coalition for Iraq. The counter effect of such attacks was to also unleash the more radical elements within the *Shi'a* community as evidenced by the growing input of Iran’s Republican Guard in the south of Iraq and the rising prominence by the autumn of 2003 of the Baghdad-based *Muqtada al-Sadr*. Clearly, Islamic resurgence and insurgency would go hand in hand in post-war Iraq.

## **BRINGING THE *JIHAD* BACK TO BAGHDAD**

The manifestation of the *jihād* in post-war Iraq is apparent on two levels. Firstly, in the growing band of forces that have sprung up to wage attacks against Allied Coalition targets, along with and including local Iraqi elements considered to be “colluding” with the enemy. The victims of this insurgency, therefore, include regular combatants, such as soldiers of the US and British Army, Iraqi National Guard, the Iraqi Police Force, recruits to Iraqi police force and National Guard, as well as ordinary Iraqi civilians. An example of a civilian victim of this insurgency gives an indication of the depth of lawlessness and insecurity that characterizes Iraq under Allied occupation.<sup>25</sup> Iraqi police and other security forces are being killed at a rate of 4 to 1 compared to American soldiers and, since the elections in January 2005 and the formation of a new government in the spring of 2005 insurgent attacks have been on the increase against such targets.<sup>26</sup> For it is in this security vacuum that very ordinary people have become victims, accounting for recent statistical estimates that calculate a civilian cost of over 100,000 Iraqi lives since April 2003.<sup>27</sup> Such elements – insurgent and criminal – have been able to take advantage of the onset of lawlessness that erupted with the rampage of looting beginning in April 2003.

Secondly, there is a virtual dimension to the new *jihād* that is primarily designed to be consumed by an audience external to Iraq but who broadly accord with and support the different aims (rather than the methods) of various insurgent elements, including the Islamists. The virtual dimension consists of websites and exploitation of the representative function of television media to publicize their activities and even their goals. Counter-terrorism experts in the West have incurred significant resources in their attempts to close down websites, and critique the media for amplifying the insurgents and the insurgency. Moreover they even contest the applicability of the term insurgent was compared to the label of terrorism.<sup>28</sup> This virtual dimension, however, has contributed significantly to turning the insurgency from a local into global affair, which, along with the choice of Western targets, succeeds in drawing in global audiences. This in turn has created particular pressure in foreign policy discourse, especially among those Western governments who have or had troop deployments in Iraq.<sup>29</sup> The websites of the insurgent elements and their supporters are often “closed down” if servers are located abroad but such closures are quickly defied and new internet sites appear. Even when “virtual insurgents” involved in operating such sites are arrested or killed other supporters quickly replace them. The sites function for information propagation, as a means of virtual communication, and possibly recruitment of supporters into activists for the insurgency in Iraq. The authenticity of such sites and the materials (audio and video) is often questioned but it fails to diminish the campaigning ability of associated insurgent elements. One such site, entitled *Muaskar al-Battar* (Battar Camp), hosts a series of articles and guides to tactical warfare and techniques. It is a virtual Islamic insurgent equivalent of Che Guevara’s *Guerrilla Warfare Manual* of the 1960s. It is supported

by “virtual insurgents” outside of Iraq located elsewhere in the Muslim world and the West. Government authorities in such states have tried to halt the proliferation of such Islamist websites fearing the extent to which they amplify the message and power of the extremists. In Iraq the internet has become an important weapon in the insurgency.

There is no overarching organizational structure that currently propels the insurgency in Iraq but various groups ranging from Ba’thist and Arab Socialists to *Salafi* foreign *jihad* are now involved in the insurgency. As has already been noted, although these elements are disparate they converge over the common conviction that Western elements must be evicted from Iraq. They are united in a belief that Iraq has been seized as a result of Western force and violence, and that it must be reclaimed through the same means. They regard the Western presence as a further episode in a modern crusade led by the West against the Muslim East. These elements have benefited from the support of individuals who are experienced in command and control, enlisting support and funding from both local and external sources. Such groups are supported by individuals located in Syria and Jordan who travel to Iraq to direct and provide supplies to various insurgent elements.<sup>30</sup> While it is acknowledged that the insurgency is ideologically multi-faceted the banner of Islam dominates the insurgent landscape. As an excerpt from the leader of *Tawhid wa Jihad*, Abu Musab Zarqawi, makes clear, at the height of the Fallujah showdown in November 2004,

America and her allies have fully realized this unmistakable fact, and consequently, the earth shook up under their feet. They know only too well that the winds of Jihad will dismantle their thrones and crack and wobble their foundations. They set aside their difference and became united under one banner to fight their one and only enemy, Islam. The infidels have realized that what is happening now is a true Jihad, and the banner (under which this Jihad is operating) is “No God but Allah.”<sup>31</sup>

*Tawhid wa Jihad* is but one of the many small Iraqi-based groups that has mushroomed since the commencement of the Allied occupation of Iraq and the subsequent handover of authority to the interim government led by Iyad Allawi in the early summer of 2004. These groups are populated by both Arabs and Iranians, locals and foreigners. Some of these elements operate autonomously from each other and degrees of rivalry also exist. Some insurgents that were prominent in 2003, had, by 2005 been eclipsed by others who appeared to be marshalling or receiving widespread local support.

From the early months of the Allied occupation it was evident that an incipient insurgency – led by Islamists – was apparent in Iraq. Many of the thousands of Arab fighters who had traveled across the border to Iraq from elsewhere in the region did not return home but remained and found a place for themselves in the *Sunni* towns and cities in Baghdad and the Triangle.<sup>32</sup>

## THE SUNNI BANNER

In a *Shi'a* majority country such as Iraq is it surprising that one distinct face of the Islamist insurgency is *Sunni*? If the insurgency is a reflection of a local power struggle then there is a historic determinism to the events that have unfolded since the US occupation of the country that ousted Saddam Hussein. As I have detailed earlier in this article, the *Sunnis* of Iraq had traditionally enjoyed a degree of power that did not necessarily accord with their demographic strength in this multi-religious and ethnic society.<sup>33</sup> The collapse of the Hussein regime also signalled a threat to *Sunni* hegemony over the apparatus of the Iraqi state and all the privileges this accrued. These fears were realized when it became apparent that *Sunni* representation in the Interim Governing Council headed by Iyad Allawi would amount to no more than 20 percent of the seats.

Furthermore, there were genuine fears in many *Sunni* circles that retribution of sorts would be exacted by their *Shi'a* compatriots in the new order. Such fears were evident in the early organization of *Sunni* religious elements and the extent to which such groups looked to supporters outside of Iraq as well. Sectarian tensions have subsequently increased and led to a more communal approach to politics for the new *Sunni* "minority." This propelled many *Sunni* clerics in Iraq to reassess their position and voice in the community. Unlike the *Shi'a* clergy who were historically autonomous and later persecuted for their opposition to the regime of Saddam Hussein, *Sunni* clerics were latterly tied to the state through Saddam Hussein. Post-war the challenge lay in seeking to establish an independent network of religious and, inevitably, political authority for the *Sunni*. This has been manifest in a variety of ways. The founding of the Committee of the Muslim Ulema (CMU) in 2003 as a religious institution of the *Sunni* clergy has been successful in attracting a significant level of support with over 3,000 joining the organization. The members of the CMU claim the middle ground among Muslims in Iraq. Moreover, in the absence of a *Sunni* equivalent of the *Shi'a Marja'ias* (council-opinions of Ayatollahs) there was an aspiration that the CMU could represent and protect the rights of *Sunni*. Indeed, the CMU claims to be the *Sunni* counterpart to the *Shi'a Marja'ias*, or central spiritual authority, which is led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf. It is allegedly supported financially by a number of rich businessmen who donate large amounts of money to the organization.

During the siege of Fallujah in April 2004<sup>34</sup> the CMU announced, "We are the political arm of the resistance fighting to evict American forces from Iraq." Its leaders acted as intermediaries during the US assault on Fallujah and the siege of Muqtada al-Sadr in Najaf in April 2004. Throughout the siege it interceded between guerrilla groups and foreign diplomats that had their nationals kidnapped, working to try to secure the release of several kidnapped nationals. They have also issued a fatwa condemning the kidnapping of foreigners as un-Islamic. Nevertheless, fearful of the power of their *Shi'a* counterparts and the relative

importance of the traditional *hawza* structures and the importance of Ayatollah Sistani's legitimacy for the Western reconstruction project, CMU leaders have publicly warned against sectarian division in Iraq. Its leaders have issued statements against cooperating with the Occupation authorities and called for peaceful civil disobedience. They also opposed participation in the legislative elections held in January 2005.

Since its early foundations then the CMU has enjoyed good relations with Muqtada al-Sadr and the *Shi'a* clerical supporters of the al-Mahdi army. During the clashes between the al-Mahdi Army and Iraqi Forces backed by Allied forces in Najaf, CMU formed a delegation led by its member Fawzi Kubaisi to meet Muqtada and offer their support. Moreover, the CMU delegation visited Najaf with the approval of the Iraqi Interim Government. Unbeknownst to the government the delegation took food and ammunition and secretly handed them over to the Mahdi fighters.<sup>35</sup>

The CMU claims to represent a wide spectrum of *Sunni* Muslims in Iraq but the leadership has been taken over by a wing of Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood. However, other groups of Muslim scholars, including the Iraqi Islamic Party (which has a seat on the Interim Governing Council), have denounced the CMU as irrelevant impostors who represent no one. Some of these critics claim the CMU are merely re-branded Ba'hist passing as *Sunni* representatives. The CMU does have *Shi'a* members and this, it is believed, allays fears that the body is sectarian and promotes Muslim unity in the face of American occupation. Well-known *Shi'a* figures include Najaf-based Ayatollah Bashir al-Najafi who is close to Ayatollah al-Sistani, and Sheikh Jawad al-Khalisi of the Kadumiya neighborhood in Baghdad. Ayatollah Najafi is one of the most powerful Ayatollah's in Iraq and a possible successor to Ayatollah Sistani.

Hani Ashour, Baghdad correspondent of the London-based Arabic newspaper, *Al Quds al Arabi*, credits the council with much influence in post-war Iraq. "Their leaders occupy the main *Sunni* mosques, each commanding the loyalty of thousands of believers,"<sup>36</sup> he says. The council claims to embrace groups as diverse as austere *Salafi* fundamentalists and mystical *Sufis*, but is led by a cabal of the Iraqi wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, a political organization seeking the creation of an Islamic state.

However, its claim to represent the resistance was undermined when a Baghdad mosque run by strict Islamic puritans was plastered in posters denouncing the council members as impostors, and warning them not speak in the name of the resistance. Fakhri al-Qaissi, a *Salafi* who recently established his own council to represent Iraq's *Sunnis*, says the council is largely irrelevant: "The Muslim Scholars Council speaks for no one but themselves."<sup>37</sup> There were similar denunciations from the Islamic party, led by a rival group of Muslim Brotherhood leaders who accepted US administrator Paul Bremer's invitation to join the Iraqi Governing Council. "These people [in the CMU] are good at giv-

ing speeches, but they have little impact on the ground of Fallujah,”<sup>38</sup> said Hakim Hassani, the party’s deputy, who also claims to be leading negotiations and orchestrating relief to Fallujah.

The divisions among *Sunni* groups underline US difficulties in finding a *Sunni* leader to represent Iraq’s minority Muslim sect. And, although the CMU still claims to embrace *Sunni* Islamist elements from *Sufis* to fundamentalist *Salafis*, and other *Sunni* leaders, including Iraqi Islamic Party member and interim government minister Hakim Hassani, there is not doubt that the CMU has at its core an all-important faction drawn from the Iraqi wing of the *Sunni* Muslim Brotherhood. What they have lacked is the ability to lead *Sunni* Muslims away from insurgency and into the electoral fold in post-war Iraq. In late December 2004, the Iraqi Islamic Party also withdrew from the elections. Moreover, only two percent of voters turned out for the January election in the *Sunni*-dominated province of al-Anbar leaving *Sunni* Islamists largely bereft of a voice in the legislative assembly and government that would go on to negotiate the Iraqi constitution.

The CMU are closely rivaled on the political front by radical *salafi* (fundamentalist) *Sunni* elements. Originally these groups were drawn from areas of Iraq that bordered Saudi Arabia and are deeply influenced by *salafi* trends within that state and elsewhere in the region. They enjoy significant financial support from donors in Saudi Arabia and have been associated directly either with *al-Qaeda* or other *Mujahidin* in Afghanistan. Along with a locally drawn membership these groups include hundreds of fighters who came from neighboring countries and Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Egypt. They have been present in towns such as Fallujah for some time and local sources have reported that they enjoy support from local civilians, ex-Ba’thists, and ex-military officers who are nominally in control.

Local sources also reported that in Fallujah they are revered as heroes and called the new *Mujahidin*. At the local graveyard the deaths of these fighters are recorded on the tombstones of the “Mujahideen of Saudi Arabia who came to fight the infidel Americans and paid with his life for a just cause.”<sup>39</sup> Few would dare to speak out in public against the presence of these fighters, even if they believed that without their presence Fallujah might be a safer place, nor would anyone dare openly to deny the impact that they have had on the communal identity of a city like Fallujah.

Increasingly, *Sunnis* have been compelled to retreat into their own geographic communities and enclaves, such as Fallujah, Mosul, and the Adhamiyyah district in Baghdad. Fallujah became the locus of much of the insurgency. It is where pivotal groupings, such as the *Mujahidin Shura* Council, led by local *Sunni* clerics, and *jihad* groups, such as *Tawhid wa Jihad* under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, have been located and supported.

## THE FALLUJAH FACTOR

The city of Fallujah, located south-west of Baghdad has come to symbolize the nature of the *Sunni* insurgency in Iraq. By this I mean that in Fallujah and its outlying villages one finds evidence of the amorphous mix of foreign *Salafi*, local *jihad*, and ex-Ba'thist *Sunni* elements mounting a serious assault on the Allied occupation. Fallujah is a traditional and conservative city that has always worn its piety on its sleeve. The city has a large number of mosques whose imams and worshippers have always been open to the sermons of radical Islamic ideologies.<sup>40</sup>

Under occupation the city fell increasingly to the authority of this mix of *Sunni* forces. By early 2004, the jurisdiction of the city lay in the hands of the various Islamist groups known collectively as the *Mujahidin*. Each element is led locally by an *emir* (prince). These elements have taken sole responsibility for security and law and order in the city, mounting their own guards, vehicle checkpoints, and so forth. Within the locally organized elements the tribes of the city are also represented. The *emirs* are all members of the *Majlis as-Shura* (Consultative Council) founded in February 2004, and are headed by two local clerics, Abdullah al-Janabi and Dafir al-Ubaidi. Al-Janabi has called the *mujahidin* of Fallujah "the sons of the city" providing protection to its inhabitants.<sup>41</sup> Al-Janabi allegedly has led foreign as well as local *mujahidin*. His organization enjoyed support from former Ba'thist, shared intelligence, and engaged in proxy sabotage operations against US targets. In return, Ba'thist intelligence has assisted al-Janabi in avoiding American capture.<sup>42</sup> The influence of these Islamist insurgents has also been apparent in the social and political regulation of the city. The Arabic press reported that the *Majlis as-Shura* effectively established a theocracy in the city with Islamization of social mores and values, such as dress, banning alcohol consumption, and so forth, high on the agenda of this cabal.<sup>43</sup>

Days before the US offensive against the city in early November 2004, al-Janabi's organization issued a *bayan* (communiqué) declaring "an utmost sacred jihad and civil rebellion in retaliation for any coalition forces and puppet government attack on Fallujah."<sup>44</sup> The defeat of the insurgents and the re-capture of Fallujah, however, have not eradicated the *Sunni* insurgency. Both local and foreign leaders survived the assault, insurgents mounted raids in other Iraqi towns, and in a statement issued after the US capture of Fallujah Sheikh al-Janabi declared, "'The Americans have opened the gates of hell,' Abdullah Janabi said Monday in Fallujah. 'The battle of Fallujah is the beginning of other battles.'"<sup>45</sup> The continuance of the insurgency elsewhere in Iraq throughout the winter of 2004 and spring of 2005 appeared to undermine the American ambition of democracy bringing an end to insurgency in Iraq.



## THE UNITY COMMUNITY? *SHI'ISM* AND THE INSURGENCY

Despite the early violence that beset the *Shi'a* religious leadership and the attacks on their followers, US administrators of Iraq in Baghdad and Washington believed that the omens were good with respect to marshalling widespread *Shi'a* support for their reconstruction and democracy project. Key to this ambition has been Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, the prime *marja*, or spiritual guide for the *Shi'a*. As the most senior *Shi'a* cleric in Iraq, forced under Saddam Hussein to remain virtually underground, the political dimensions of leadership in the new era have been a challenge. This low-key style has led al-Sistani's leadership to be criticized by younger *Shi'a* leaders, including supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr. Al-Sistani, however, has continued to reject demands for an Iranian theocratic model for post-war Iraq, arguing instead for a separation between faith and politics in the affairs of the new Iraqi state.

The Ayatollah has avoided the political arena, only speaking out to urge the *Shi'a* to avoid violence against Western occupation forces and to participate in elections to the national assembly. He has been consistent in his demand for elections in Iraq, and a corresponding early exit for occupation troops. He understands and believes that democracy and free elections will deliver an Islamic outcome in Iraq.<sup>46</sup> In January 2004, thousands of his supporters held demonstrations calling for free elections in Iraq. As a religious and spiritual leader al-Sistani commands huge respect but this does not mean that he presides over a community of believers that is unified in either its attitude to the Western presence in Iraq or the best means to bring its end about.

Al-Sistani was a key mediator in the *Shi'a* insurgent fighting that took place in May 2004 helping to broker an all-important ceasefire. But when he was forced to London in August 2004 due to health problems the young guard flexed their muscles again.

### NAJAF NEXUS

The leader of the Najaf insurgency had already exerted influence in Baghdad and other *Shi'a* towns in southern Iraq, and is also seen to enjoy a significant religious inheritance in terms of Iraq's *Shi'a* community. For insurgent leader Muqtada al-Sadr, often discounted as a minor irritant by US administrators in the early months of the occupation, is the son of the late Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr who was murdered under the regime of Saddam Hussein. Muqtada's father enjoyed an influential following among Iraq's urban poor and dispossessed, and his tracts, sermons, and input into social and welfare programs emphasized the important social justice and mobilization mantra at the heart of al-Sadr's vision. Muqtada inherited his father's vision, and social influence and standing in the poor neighborhoods of Baghdad, Najaf, and other cities such as Basra and Hilles.

Al-Sadr and his followers also played a pivotal role in asserting a law and

order function in many *Shi'a* areas, providing much needed security in the wake of the power vacuum that emerged in the early months of the occupation. It was claimed that, "The Sadr movement wants an Islamic republic in Iraq even if not one exactly like the one Khomeini built in Iran. Press reports from the slums of Baghdad suggest that Muqtada is idolized there and that most of the armed militiamen now patrolling the neighborhoods of the renamed Sadr City (formerly Saddam City) are his followers."<sup>47</sup> Indeed, a symbol of this influence was apparent in the renaming of a Baghdad slum from "Saddam/Revolution City" to "Sadr City." For the residents of this slum al-Sadr appeared to offer protection to the *Shi'a* community against a Western presence in Iraq that was represented as posing both a political as well as physical threat to the people. This was summarized in a statement from Sheikh Hassan, an al-Sadr supporter, who remarked that, "We just want the American troops to stay out of our city because they are killing everyone . . . Nobody expects good things from the soldiers any longer since they break every promise they make to us."<sup>48</sup> Whilst the fighting in Sadr city led by al-Sadr was soon over, it flared again in Najaf in the summer of 2004 as Ayatollah al-Sistani was temporarily incapacitated due to ill-health.

For al-Sadr, al-Sistani's absence offered an opportunity to propel the insurgency according to his own agenda, including military engagements with US forces. And while it may have appeared that there were great disparities between al-Sistani and al-Sadr by this point the only difference was one of tactics rather than aims. This was seen over the issues of opposition to the US occupation and the desire for an Islamic political outcome in Iraq. Although al-Sistani may have been at variance with the young guard represented by al-Sadr because he believed that elections would bring an end to occupation and a US withdrawal from Iraq, nevertheless, al-Sadr wanted the US out of Iraq first so the Muslims would then be the masters of their own sovereignty and fate.

Al-Sadr's prophecy of Iraq signaled his conviction that the future Iraqi state should be unambiguously Islamic rather than being an accommodation of power with other ethnic, sectarian, and secular forces, which he believed al-Sistani supported. In this respect al-Sadr's insurgency and his followers could not be ignored, for they represented ideas and enjoyed a constituency that has widespread support among the *Shi'a* of Iraq. These *Shi'a* were fearful of remaining marginal in post-war Iraq. They had already seen an interim administration whose *Shi'a* leaders were not necessarily considered to be their own – indeed even al-Sistani ordered *Shi'a* governing council members to boycott the ceremonies for the "handover" of US administrative power in the summer of 2004. The fact that the Mahdi Army that follows al-Sadr had proved itself capable of mounting a credible insurgency against the Americans had also won al-Sadr as much praise as criticism. The exclusion of Sadrist forces from governance has been cited as a strategic error by the Americans as was their inability in Iraq "to accept that there are political forces on the ground in Iraq . . . [that] it cannot dic-

tate . . . without frankly becoming a colonial power . . . .”<sup>49</sup>

Al-Sistani has drawn widespread criticism for his principle of non-intervention in the spiraling political crisis that has gripped Iraq since the interim government took authority in the summer of 2004. Non-intervention as a principle has not always elided well with the local demands of *Shi'a* in Iraq for their communities to be protected from within. Al-Sistani's engagement with al-Sadr during the Najaf crisis also elevated al-Sadr's status – one that his critics say belies his true abilities and power.

Iran, although publicly eschewing a role for itself in determining *Shi'a* dynamics in Iraq – “The policy of Iran is to solve the problems of Iraq. We want calm in that country”<sup>50</sup> – has indeed exerted considerable influence with respect to insurgent activities. By the late summer of 2004, it was an openly acknowledged fact that the Iranian republican guard had established a significant presence for itself in *Shi'a* cities. In cities like Basra, just 20 miles from the border with Iran, the Iranian supported *Hizb Allah* operated openly in providing civilian assistance and organization.<sup>51</sup> Iran's influence in Iraq was designed to work as a countervailing force not only to American influence but Saudi Arabian as well.<sup>52</sup> Such elements provided as much succor to al-Sistani as al-Sadr. Moreover, rumors circulating in Baghdad in late October 2004 alleged that arms handed into the Iraqi authorities in return for payments by Sadr city militants were also being quickly replaced by weapons bought and supplied by Iran.<sup>53</sup>

While it may be true that Iraqi *Shi'a* leaders differ in their discourse on Iraqi democracy, it is clear that they do not want a democracy based on an Iranian model — with the *Vilayat-a-Fiqih* as its centerpiece. Rather, al-Sistani envisages a *Shi'a*-led democracy that is moderately Islamist and guided by *Shari'a* in which clerics do not play a dominant role. Al-Sistani favors a form of “separation of powers,” though not in the traditional Western sense. In al-Sistani's view the clerics would stay aloof from the day-to-day transactions of government, but would intervene periodically to give direction on broad moral questions. Najaf's clerics have not been impressed by the system of *Vilayat-a-Fiqih* in Iran, because they see it as having resulted in inertia caused by the endless struggle between a clerical executive and a popularly elected legislature.

Iraqis speculate that al-Sistani saw his vision of elections which would peacefully empower *Shi'a* moderates as collapsing before an assertive Iranian policy and Sadr's onslaught.<sup>54</sup> This represents the core divide between al-Sistani and the Iranians. The Iranians see as naive the hope that the “quietist” al-Sistani approach will yield the outcome espoused by al-Sistani. Iran believes that the US will pursue its interests in a secular, Westernized, global capitalist government in Iraq ruthlessly. Iran has pointed to the US determination to destroy Muqtada al-Sadr as a political force as evidence of this viewpoint.<sup>55</sup> The deepening crisis in Najaf brought this argument to a head: the possible US destruction of al-Sadr seemed to confirm the Iranian view for many *Shi'a* and create

conditions for a wider *Shi'a* insurgency against the US occupation — which Iran could then fan for its own purposes.

Al-Sistani believed that if the Allawi government was totally discredited, its ability to mount elections might collapse. Given these factors, al-Sistani saw no alternative to his intervention. While he has no love for the occupation, he recognized that without some resolution to the Najaf crisis, his plans for a moderate *Shi'a* democracy would be finished. His intervention was not intended to set a political agenda (as the terms of his peace plan make clear), but to provide breathing room so that elections could go forward. Al-Sistani strongly believed that those elections will deliver an Islamist victory in Iraq.

### TRUTH OF PROPHECY

Al-Sistani's ambition for elections in Iraq was of course realized in January 2005. When the election results were announced the following month it was confirmed that the *Shi'a* parties had won more than 47 percent of the vote to the 275-member national assembly charged with writing a new constitution for the country. The results of the vote reversed the historic political marginalization of the majority *Shi'a* population translating their demographic significance into legislative power for the first time in the history of the state. Moreover, the religious list of the Iraqi National Alliance (INA) won more votes than the secular *Shi'a* list of former Provisional Government head, Iyad Allawi. The INA is a coalition of three distinct groupings under the *Shi'a* umbrella, including SCIRI led by Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, the *al-Dawa* Party headed by Ibrahim al-Ja'afari, and the secular Iraqi National Congress led by Ahmad Chalabi. Half the INA consisted of party members and half of independents approved by al-Sistani's aides. They jostled for votes in the poll alongside an alliance of 30 small *Shi'a* parties who opposed the clerical composition of the INA. The virtual absence of *Sunni* Islamist parties meant that an opportunity to counter the "politics of the insurgency" was lost as a result of self-imposed marginalization and the obvious lack of security in *Sunni* areas at a time when religious identity has become more and more important.<sup>56</sup> The new government that was formed in the months of haggling that followed the elections results offered only token representation to *Sunni* elements and came amidst an alarming spiral of insurgent activities that left thousands injured and hundreds dead. American officials also recognized the importance of political stability as a counter-force to the instability that the insurgents were provoking.<sup>57</sup>

The understandable Western preoccupation with democracy, elections, constitution, and power-sharing government coalitions in Iraq, however, ignores the principle preoccupation of Islamists in general and the insurgents in particular with the continuing presence of what it considers to be military forces of the American and British occupation in Iraq. From this perspective — summed up in the positions and views outlined by both *Sunni* and *Shi'a* Islamist elements in

Iraq – democracy was not the problem, American intervention was. In this way the Islamist elements of the insurgency in Iraq have captured a more widely expressed antipathy toward foreign intervention in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East. One expression of this antipathy, echoing the sentiments of Iraqis a generation before regarding British influence, was revealed in the *Newsday*/CNN poll of 2004 in which the majority polled believed that any transfer of power “would not reduce US influence in Iraq.”<sup>58</sup>

## **THE WIDER MESSAGE**

Much scholarship on political Islam since 9/11 has conflated such activities with a sense of growing global Muslim rebellion directed at unpopular leaders at home and Western government’s abroad. Yet, at the outset of any insurgency there may be little by way of popular local support. Those who undertake training in guerrilla warfare or who volunteer for a *jihad* may be an insignificant element of a wider Muslim population. Nevertheless, as history demonstrates, in Iraq and other Muslim domains there is a point in the wider political environment where insurgents derive popular support for the overthrow of authority. This may even be at a point where the insurgents understand that they will never win militarily but achieve change through the legitimacy derived from an emasculated wider population who support their goals. This psychological dimension to contemporary Muslim rebellion and social protest is often overlooked by opponents seeking to dominate militarily.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has examined the manifestation of insurgency and its Islamist dimension in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime in April 2003. It has demonstrated that the incipient insurgency that broke out in the wake of the US-led occupation has impacted deeply on a multi-faceted Muslim population who have felt less secure under US-led protection than they did under Saddam Hussein’s brutal regime: 71 percent of Iraqis surveyed for a US poll in Spring 2004 believed the US to be “occupiers” not “liberators” of their country.<sup>59</sup>

This could well be because in its analysis of the politics of the Muslim world post-9/11 Western policy makers have believed that the call to put Islam at the center of any political project in Muslim domains is simply part of a wider plot by *al-Qaeda* for global domination. In Iraq they have failed to understand that many of the Muslim insurgents parallel the deep sense of unresolved grievance in the Muslim world against the West as a result of what it regards as unwarranted Western interference in Muslim countries, exploitation of their resources, and disrespect for their faith.

Furthermore, will the rising Islamic insurgency in Iraq remain unsupported and simply wither and die as a result of overwhelming US firepower? Firstly, it is important to remember that the insurgency in Iraq is positively helped by its

irregular and diverse character. By this I mean that there is more than one constituency of support at work here – both inside and outside the country. What unites them is hostility to foreign occupation in their country. This means that rather like a wild fire as one local insurgency is “put out” through US military might another will rise elsewhere in Iraq – each time with a different constituency of support. Only the Kurdish areas are likely to remain untainted. Moreover, as the Soviets learnt in Afghanistan, for every terrorist “taken out” in a military operation more spring up to take his place. In Iraq there has been no shortage of volunteers for the fight. In April 2005, there were 67 suicide attacks by insurgents alone and the virtual dimension of this campaign also ensures that support and the number of Muslim volunteers remains constant despite on-the-ground setbacks. The stream of foreign *jihads* prepared to come to Iraq and with local support undermine the American presence through terrorism, had, by the spring of 2005, taken on a limitless quality that was alarming Western military and intelligence officials.<sup>60</sup>

In the wake of the Fallujah offensive in November 2004 and the victory of US forces in killing and capturing the insurgents and freeing the city from their grip it appeared that the Islamic insurgency in Iraq had reached a crossroads. Down one road lay the prospect of such events radicalizing mainstream Islamist groups and constituencies in the country into a wider embrace of the insurgent’s goals and even their tactics. The other road lay in finding the means to allow Islamists a voice and power in governance through meaningful popular participation and an end to a policy perceived as constructing an artificial mode of democratic governance that was avowedly secular in orientation and presided over by an elite of former-exiles. This meant finding a place for the spectrum of *Shi’a* as well as *Sunni* Islamist identity through structures of governance in Iraq. To some extent the Iraqi elections of January 2005 created the opportunity for inclusion for some but not all Islamic elements. The challenge inherent in constitution making in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious state now lies in finding further means of balancing the competing demands for Islamic governance, democratic rule, and accommodation of power that recognizes the ethnic rights of the Kurdish people. In this way the Islamist dimension of the insurgency will surely be diminished.

## Endnotes

1. Figures for the average number of insurgent attacks per day range from 10-70. Most commentators, including American press and other sources, estimate an average of 60 attacks per day (November 2003-November 2004). One of the most significant aspects of the insurgency is the extent to which suicide bombings have become a *modus operandi* for the majority of Islamist insurgent elements.
2. See B. Milton-Edwards, *Islam and Politics in the Contemporary World* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2004); and J. Esposito, *Islam and Politics* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1984).
3. Samir al-Khalil (Kanan Makiya), *Republic of Fear, the inside story of Saddam's Iraq* (New York: Random House, 1989), p. 106.
4. I am referring to issues such as combatant demobilization, high rates of unemployment, infrastructure recovery as a result of the war between Iraq and Iran (1980-88).
5. President Anwar Sadat of Egypt also promoted an Islamization campaign by the state in Egypt throughout the 1970s. Sadat went as far as re-inventing himself as the "Believer-President." See N. Ayubi, *Political Islam, Religion and Politics in the Arab world* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 74-76.
6. An initial explanation of the Islamic insurgents of Iraq was that they were small in number and linked to *al-Qaeda*. Other sources cite Islamic groups as outnumbering other elements, such as former Ba'athists or criminal elements (see: hyperlink "[http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq\\_insurgency.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq_insurgency.htm)" [http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq\\_insurgency.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq_insurgency.htm)).
7. Mohammed Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004).
8. *Al-Ahram*, 670, 25 December 2003, p. 2.
9. The author is grateful to Professor Adrian Guelke and Dr. Mohammed Hafez for developing this argument.
10. See Faleh A Jaber, *The Shi'ite movement in Iraq* (London: Saqi Books, 2003), pp. 269-70.
11. Interview with Laith Kubba, London, December 2002.
12. Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 67.
13. See Amaledu Misra, *Afghanistan, The labyrinth of violence* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2004), pp. 3-5.
14. Peter Sluglett and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958, From Revolution to Dictatorship* (London: IB Tauris, 1990), p. 308.
15. Interview with Sir Sam Falle, former British first-secretary, Baghdad, December 2002.
16. Interview with Ahmad Chalabi, London, December 2002.
17. Interview with Kanan Makiya, London, December 2002.
18. Authors own notes and interviews, December 2002, London – attendance of the conference.
19. Author transcript of speech delivered by Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, December 2002, London.
20. See D. Van Natta, and D. Butler, "Calls to jihad are said to lure hundreds of militants into Iraq," *New York Times*, 1 November 2003.
21. See: images of such volunteers at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_depth/photo\\_gallery/2903433.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/photo_gallery/2903433.stm)
22. See: hyperlink "<http://www.upi.com/view.cfm?StoryID=20031203-115217-9537r>" <http://www.upi.com/view.cfm?StoryID=20031203-115217-9537r>, further hyperlink "<http://www.countercurrents.org/iraq-prothero051203.htm>" <http://www.countercurrents.org/iraq-prothero051203.htm>.
23. See Open Democracy interview with Gilles Kepel <http://opendemocracy.net/debates/article-5-57-2216.jsp>

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24. See: hyperlink "<http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/08/30/sprj.iqr.funeral/>" <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/08/30/sprj.iqr.funeral/> for full report on the Najaf bombing.
25. An Iraqi author and journalist related how his niece, who had been a pharmacist in Baghdad, had been murdered by insurgents because she had been forced to offer first aid to a wounded American soldier and was then accused of collaborating. She and her assistant were brutally murdered. Interview with anonymous Iraqi, 5 November 2004.
26. One example of countless insurgent attacks is the bombing of a police recruit center in the town of Hilla in February 2005 when 125 Iraqis (mostly recruit applicants) were killed.
27. See R. Stein, "100,000 Civilian deaths estimated in Iraq," *Washington Post*, 29 October 2004, p. 4.
28. Hallden explores this in relation to the *Salafi* movement in Saudi Arabia. See P. Hallden, "Salafi in Virtual and Physical reality," *ISIM Newsletter*, December 2003, p. 38. The author is grateful to Hallden for his comments.
29. This has been the case particularly with respect to Spain, Italy, and Japan.
30. Interview with Abbas - Iraqi source July 2004, London.
31. Translation of statement published in the name of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, 12 November 2004.
32. See R.C. Paddock, A.J. Rubin, and G. Miller, "Iraq seen as al-Qaeda's top battlefield," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 November 2003.
33. See Y. Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 126-28.
34. P. Cockburn, "Siege of Fallujah provokes second mutiny," *The Independent*, 29 April 2004.
35. Notes from the field, received August 2004.
36. [www.occupationwatch.org/print\\_article.php?&id=4410](http://www.occupationwatch.org/print_article.php?&id=4410)
37. Ibid.
38. This is rumor control, [www.thisisrumorcontrol.org](http://www.thisisrumorcontrol.org).
39. Ibid.
40. For report on Fallujah, see Hamza Hendawi, "Fast resembling an Islamic mini-state, Fallujah may be glimpse of Iraq," *Associated Press*, 25 May 2004.
41. S. Johnson, "We pray the insurgents will achieve victory," *Newsweek*, 7 August 2004.
42. See report from This is Rumor Control: <http://www.thisisrumorcontrol.org/node/view/1054>
43. See *Al-Hayat* and *Sharq al-Awsat* newspapers, June–October 2004.
44. [www.al-moharer.net/mohhtm/mujhdeen\\_shura\\_council201.htm](http://www.al-moharer.net/mohhtm/mujhdeen_shura_council201.htm)
45. See: [http://www.theunionleader.com/articles\\_showa.html?article=47155](http://www.theunionleader.com/articles_showa.html?article=47155)
46. See N. Klein, "Of course the White House fears free elections in Iraq," *The Guardian*, 24 January 2004.
47. Juan Cole, "Shiite religious parties fill vacuum in southern Iraq," *Middle East Report*, April 2003, p. 4.
48. See: [http://newstandardnews.net/content/?action=show\\_item&itemid=513](http://newstandardnews.net/content/?action=show_item&itemid=513)
49. Juan Cole, testimony before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 20 April 2004, p. 5, at - <http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2004/ColeTestimony040420.pdf>
50. Statement from President Mohammed Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 28 August 2004, Iranian News Agencies.
51. See, for example, hyperlink "[http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2004-02-12-iran-iraq-usat\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2004-02-12-iran-iraq-usat_x.htm)" [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2004-02-12-iran-iraq-usat\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2004-02-12-iran-iraq-usat_x.htm)



52. See the transcript of testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee from Larry Diamond (senior advisor to the CPA) on the extent to which he believes Iran is influencing political outcomes in Iraq, 19 May 2004, at [http://www.stanford.edu/~ldiamond/iraq/Senate\\_testimony\\_051904.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/~ldiamond/iraq/Senate_testimony_051904.htm)
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58. See: <http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2004-04-29-gallup-poll-identity-full.htm>
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60. D. Murphy, "US strategy in Iraq: Is it working?," *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 June 2005.