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ISLAMISM IN IRAQ**Introduction**

- 1 Iraq is a relatively secular state. Many of the models for possible future governments, whether representative or even democratic, proposed by commentators are broadly secular too. This may be the preferred outcome, but there is a risk we underplay the importance of Islamic forces in Iraq.
- 2 In any period of post Saddam political instability, it is likely groups will be looking for identities and ideologies on which to base movements. Ba'thism will have been largely discredited. Communism is no longer the force it once was in Iraq. Islamism, ethnicity and nationalism are obvious alternatives. This paper considers the possibility that Islamism emerges as one of the main organising principles for Iraqis.

Religion in Iraq

- 3 Iraq's population of 23 million is approximately 97 percent Muslim - divided between Shi'a Arabs (55-60 percent), Sunni Arabs (15-20 percent) and Sunni Kurds (20-25 percent). There are also Sunni Turkoman, Shia (Fayli) Kurd and Christian minorities.
- 4 Religion is not the only - or even main - determinant of identity in Iraq. Many urban Shi'a have more in common with their Sunni Arab or Kurdish neighbours than with rural Shi'a. Ethnicity, tribal group and social status are often equally important.
- 5 But there are religious undercurrents which could come to the fore in the more open environment likely to emerge in many of the post Saddam scenarios. It is worth highlighting the following in particular:-
 - a) Religion is playing an increasing role in Iraqi life. This trend started during the Iran/Iraq War, but became more pronounced during the 1990s. Religious instruction has been actively promoted by the state. There has been an increase in mosque building. Many of Saddam's pronouncements have become more overtly religious in tone.
 - b) Iraq is a major Shi'a centre. The cities of Najaf, Karbala, Samarra and Kazimayn contain important Shi'a shrines. They attract millions of pilgrims each year and have long-established theological schools and other centres of Shi'a learning. These have been closely watched and controlled by the Iraqi Government. Post Saddam they could once more become the focus for lively and diverse religious debate, and exert wider influence across the Muslim world.

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- c) The relative marginalisation and repression of many, but not all, Shi'a provides a large pool of disaffected Iraqis which could be exploited by effective religious leadership. Greater Shi'a activism could provoke an opposite reaction from Sunni Arabs, fearing Shi'a domination.
- d) Many Shia Grand Ayatollahs are Iraqi. Sistani, still based in Najaf, and Shirazi, based in Qom in Iran, are particularly important. The assassination by Saddam of Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq Al-Sadr in 1999 sparked violent demonstrations in Najaf and Karbala, and demonstrated the regime's concern about the emergence of credible religious leaders and the potential for Shi'a to coalesce around them.
- e) Many of the Iraqi opposition groups are Islamist. Most of these are Shi'a, including the Da'wah Party; Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI); and the Organisation of Islamic Action. The (Sunni) Muslim Brotherhood has been active in Baghdad and Mosul. The two main Kurdish parties (KDP and PUK) are secular in outlook, although they both court Islamic parties from time to time. There are a number of smaller Kurdish Islamist movements, including the Kurdish Islamic Union (KIU) and Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK). IMIK is an umbrella organisation and has several offshoots which are more extremist, notably Ansar Al Islam.
- f) Iraqi religious movements already receive support from elsewhere. Islamic (often Saudi) NGOs are engaged in welfare work and prominent mosque building in northern Iraq. They are also working in central and southern Iraq, although we have little information on this. Such external assistance would probably increase if Saddam fell from power. It is likely to be harder to restrict this than interference by foreign governments (eg Iran's more politically driven support for SCIRI and Islamist groups in the north).

The role of religion in a Post Saddam Iraq

- 6 Against this background, it is almost certain that political Islam would become more prominent in post Saddam Iraq. It is less clear how it would manifest itself. Much depends on how Saddam fell from power; the nature and effectiveness of any post Saddam administration; developments in Israel/Palestine; and the level of external support given to Islamist groups.
- 7 It is possible to reach some tentative conclusions at this stage:-
 - a) Many popular political groupings emerging in the aftermath are likely to have or profess religious agendas of some sort. Some of these may be relatively liberal, broadly along the lines of the Islamist parties which exist in Turkey. Others are likely to be more conservative and

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overtly anti-Western in outlook, perhaps calling for a state based on sharia law.

- b) There is no reason why the emergence of such groups is inconsistent with moves towards more representative/democratic government. Many Islamists in the external opposition have said they would be content to see democracy in Iraq, albeit defined along Islamic lines. (Of course, it is not certain they would sustain this line post Saddam; and it is hard to assess the extent to which they reflect the views of Iraqis still in Iraq.)
- c) We do not expect a massive surge in extremist sentiment. It is unlikely the Shi'a would call openly for the creation of a Khomeinist regime. They did this in 1991, thereby intimidating many other Iraqis who might have joined them, and are unlikely to repeat this mistake.
- d) A number of extremist groups will probably use violence to pursue their political ends. Many of the existing opposition groups have already demonstrated a willingness to resort to violence. Some of this may have been a response to oppression by Saddam and cease if they could achieve their objectives by more peaceful means. But the Da'wah party carried out bombings of US targets in Kuwait in the 1980s. There is some evidence that Ansar Al Islam has links with Al Qa'ida, although the nature of these links remains unclear. And Islamist groups in the north have already targeted beauty parlours, mixed cafes and bookshops selling western literature in small bomb attacks.

What should we do in response?

- 8 There are a number of practical steps we can take to limit the likely support for the more extreme Islamist groups in the short term. (Most are already factored into our planning.) They include:-
 - Careful avoidance of Shi'a shrines and other important religious buildings in any military action.
 - Delivering improved economic conditions as quickly as possible.
 - Ensuring that any interim administration of Iraq is backed by the UN, draws on as many Iraqis as possible and has the support and involvement of the Muslim world.
 - Winning hearts and minds through an effective media/public information campaign.
 - Discouraging any external meddling by Iran or other regional players.

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- Maintaining Israeli neutrality throughout any military action. Looking to make progress on Israel/Palestine, or at least discouraging provocative Israeli actions.
 - Maintaining firm control on the internal security situation and moving quickly to suppress any international terrorist groups in the country.
- 9 We also need to consider Iraq's longer-term stability and development. Immediately after any military action we will have an overriding interest in re-establishing Iraq's stability and seeing the rapid emergence of a political class with whom we can do business. This may encourage us to focus on pro-Western and external opposition groups even if they have little popular credibility; and to squeeze out political Islamists who are more critical of the West and harder for us to deal with.
- 10 This would be short-sighted. It could simply create a further breeding ground for resentment, extremism and ultimately terrorism directed both against any new regime and Western targets. It would be seen as another example of Western hostility to Islam and double standards. It would be a recipe for longer-term instability.
- 11 We should therefore actively seek to involve Islamist groups and religious leaders in the building of the new Iraqi political system. If they are not, they could become increasingly radicalised. This is likely to mean:-
- a) working with groups which are critical of the West and disagree strongly with some of our values, as long as they display a willingness to agree with some basic principles (eg basic human rights; pluralism; religious tolerance); and
 - b) being willing to accept the possibility that a future Iraqi Government may be fairly conservative and anti-Western/Israeli if that is what Iraqis want, rather than loading the dice against them.

Conclusion

- 12 The conclusion of this analysis is that:-
- **We should plan on the basis that political Islam will be a significant force in many of the post Saddam scenarios. It is unclear how it would manifest itself. But we should anticipate a number of groups/parties ranging from the moderate to more extremist and violent.**
 - **We should work to limit the support the extremist elements receive. In particular we need to ensure the possible impact of**

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our actions on religious sentiment is factored into our planning, including our military planning.

- We should look to engage those moderate groups which are willing to work with us, even if they disagree strongly with some of our values. This means being prepared to accept the emergence of a religiously conservative and anti-Western regime if that is what Iraqis want.**
- The approach the Americans adopt will be critical. We should engage them on this issue.**

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