



Factions Among the Shia in Iraq **CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam**

Speaking at a Capitol Hill meeting on March 13, Harvard University's Gurney Professor of History, Roy Mottahedeh, offered congressional staff a perspective on the religious and political development of the Iraqi Shia.

Mottahedeh questioned the notion that Shia have a tradition of political quietism. Observers of the Middle East have often presumed that Shia are unlikely to revolt against an oppressive government, in part because of a Shia belief that is similar to a Christian belief in the Second Coming. Orthodox Shia believe that just government will only prevail upon the return of the twelfth Imam, or Mahdi, who will combine temporal and spiritual authority. The last Shia Imam, Mohamed bin Hassan, disappeared in the year 874; most Shia believe that he did not die, but instead went into hiding, and will reappear to establish a reign of justice and peace. Mottahedeh said millennialism is a growing trend not only in Iraq (where many Shia see their tribulations as a sign of the Mahdi's imminent return), but also in Iran, where President Ahmedinejad is a prominent exponent of millennialist thought.

Despite a history of millennialism, Mottahedeh pointed to a long history of Shia political engagement in the modern period, including in the Iranian constitutional revolution of 1906 and the Iraqi revolt of 1920. He added that the tradition of quietism, which developed around the religious scholars in Najaf, is better described as one of limited confrontation. In practice, he said, the Iraqi Shia community does not voice strong contestation readily, but will manifest its opposition under extreme circumstances. For example, religious leaders formed an inter-sectarian coalition against the Iraqi Communist Party in the 1960s and 1970s, and, more recently, they stood with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in opposition to the Shah in the 1970s.

Mottahedeh also noted the heavy influence of Persian elements on Iraqi Shia cities and Iraqi Shia leaders. Indeed, the Shia community has historically been so mobile between Southern Lebanon, Iran and Iraq that it is sometimes difficult to identify its members as Persian or Arab. Shia religious leaders pursue their training in Qom or Najaf regardless of nationality, and the religious elite have transnational constituencies and are bilingual in Persian and Arabic. Mottahedeh noted, for example that over 70 percent of Iranians regard the Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani—now Iraq's highest ranking cleric—as the highest Shia religious authority, despite his long residence in Iraq. In addition, many members of the Iranian clerical establishment today are Iraqis who Saddam Hussein forced into exile.

Shia leaders in Iran and Iraq maintain their international networks through a tithing system. Shia communities from Lebanon, the Gulf, or Southeast Asia often send a young member of their community to study in Qom or Najaf, during which time young scholars become loyal to their instructors. The sponsoring community then sends tithes to those instructors, and thus the influence of certain religious leaders grows internationally over time. Religious leaders also maintain influence by self-reproduction; the sons of leading Shia clerics very often become clerics themselves.

Finally, Mottahedeh pointed to a history of tension between scholars and preachers in the Shia world. Scholars such as Sistani complete many years of arduous religious and legal training and often do not attain senior clerical rank until late in their careers. There are just over 500 senior Shia clerics based in Najaf, recognized by their peers and constituting a sort of senior council of scholars. As elites, however, their connection to street politics is sometimes diffuse. Preachers, on the other hand, are less learned, enjoy more popular support, frequently engage in daily politics, and often have local organizations directly below them. A prominent example is Muqtada al-Sadr, the only surviving son of Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. The firebrand cleric is a charismatic figure with his own militia (the Mahdi Army), and he is widely thought to be less than 35 years old. With more pedigree than learning—his late father was a towering figure in Shia jurisprudence before being killed by Saddam Hussein in 1999—Sadr has a following in Iraqi slums, but not much in the rarified world of Najaf academies. Sadr speaks loudly and gets results; senior clerics like Sistani often speak softly, but because of the respect they command and the rarity of their utterances, they get results as well.