



Shia Rising? Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon

CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam

“Each Shi’a community is driven by its own agenda and interests” claimed Professor Yitzhak Nakash on January 22. Nakash, a professor at Brandeis University and currently a Carnegie scholar, spoke with senior Congressional staffers as part of the CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam. The presentation, entitled “Shi’a Rising? Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon,” focused on the rising influence of Shi’a political forces in the Middle East. Different agendas, argued Nakash, would likely prevent Shi’a domination of the Middle East, and instead would lead to a trend of Shi’a accommodation as Shi’a communities attempt to carve out political space for themselves in a Sunni dominated world.

Nakash argued that the religious revival in Sunni and Shi’a communities has reinforced the political struggle between these two groups. Shi’a communities in Iraq and Lebanon seeking increased political representation from the grassroots level are also being supported by religious leaders from the top. Although the success of the Iranian revolution may have initially encouraged Shi’a political activism, the overthrow of Saddam and the popular rise of Hezbollah have created a new window of opportunity for Arab Shi’a to obtain political representation proportional to their populations.

According to Dr. Nakash, “Sunni religious clerics are experiencing a crisis of authority and have lost their ability to restrain many of their followers.” Conversely, Shi’a clerics increasingly lead their communities as coalition builders, anticipating an eagerly awaited opportunity to obtain political representation and legitimacy. In comparing the political activism of these two groups, Nakash stressed the importance of differentiating between the tactics employed by Sunni and Shi’a extremists. Dr. Nakash claims that since 1991, “Shi’a groups have increasingly decried acts of violence against Western targets, while extremist Sunni groups have increasingly used violence against Western targets.”

Fear of Sunni or Shi’ite dominance exists on both sides of the sectarian divide, but fears of a menacing Shi’a bloc in the Middle East appear misplaced. According to him, “Each Shi’a community is driven by a different agenda.” Shi’ism is not monolithic, and the absence of unified political or religious leadership allows national and ethnic identities to play major roles in defining individual identity.

In Iraq the rise of Shi’a power has reinforced sectarian conflict. Internal fighting between Iraqi Sunnis and the majority Shi’a population revolves around a competition for political power and the meaning of nationalism. Nakash posited two reasons to explain the emergence of heavily religious rhetoric in a clearly political struggle. First, after enduring years of oppression and the targeted destruction of political infrastructure under the Ba’ath party, religious clerics and organizations were the only section of society left with the organizational resources to fill the void of political leadership. Second, a decade of economic sanctions eroded the existence of a secular middle class strong enough to challenge the religious groups and militias. Nakash argued that the emergence of an Iraqi

middle class will take time, and advocated U.S. support of politicized Shi'a groups in Iraq. Although these groups may not embrace western style liberalism, the rise of a legitimate and hopefully moderate Shi'ite leadership can diminish Iran's influence in Iraq by providing a capable alternative.

Despite numerous points of divergence between the region's Shi'ites, many share a common desire to increase their political representation. In Lebanon, the large Shi'a plurality has been restrained by the Taif agreement of proportional representation based on outdated demographic statistics. Hezbollah's showing against Israel raised its profile and power domestically, so that today according to Nakash "there is no alternative to Nasrallah in Lebanon." Hezbollah has evolved into a popular Shi'a political movement, building coalitions, challenging the Taif agreement, and most importantly granting Lebanese Shi'a an increased voice in their country's affairs.

Nakash proposed that confronting Hezbollah and stabilizing Iraq will require the United States to engage Iran diplomatically. Iran today is not the same revolutionary Iran of 1979, and he warned not to confuse Ahmadinejad's populist rhetoric for messianic conviction. The United States and Iran have a shared interest in regional stability, ensuring the free flow of oil, and efficiently running economies, arguing that "Iran cannot maintain power by thriving on chaos."

For this strategy to succeed, the United States must engage not only with moderates but with hardliners as well. The difficulty for both sides will be leaving the "psychological baggage" of recent history behind. The U.S. lead overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953 calcified in the Iranian psyche the perception of the United States as a malevolent imperial force, the Iranian hostage crisis had the same effect on Americans.

Engagement will require compromises though, and caveats to engagement could include a U.S. guarantee of peace, a more transparent Iranian nuclear program, Iranian acknowledgement of the right of Middle Eastern states to exist, and Iran's end to the funding of terrorist groups like Islamic Jihad (but not Hezbollah).

Engagement for the United States could yield a diplomatic relationship that "would reverberate in Shi'a communities throughout the region." Preventing Iraqi Shia's from aligning themselves with Iran will mean working in concert with the Iranians to bring stability to Iraq. Within Iran this diplomatic engagement could help the United States build a bridge towards reformers, and give the Iranian leadership a wider incentive to act in a responsible way. In addition an improved U.S. - Iranian relationship could pressure Syria and Hezbollah where past tactics have failed.

Nakash concluded that political activism within the Shi'a communities combined with unprecedented opportunity now forces the ruling Sunni elites to recognize the growing influence of Shi'a groups as a political force. To mitigate the growing tension between these groups the main centers of Sunni and Shi'a power will have to work together to bring stability to the region. Therefore, any lasting peace would have to include coordinated efforts between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Reminiscent of the former U.S. "Twin Pillars" policy, the United States would depend on Saudi Arabia and Iran to provide for regional stability, and Iran and Saudi Arabia would depend on the United States to be an honest broker between the two. The resultant triangular relationship between the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Iran would be a detente of convenience and strategic interest, offering the best chance of containing interregional conflicts and providing long-term regional stability.