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The big question is: Is there anything to indicate that [Syrian President Bashar al-Assad] would show any deviation from past behavior? We’re certainly not trying to penalize and isolate that regime until it makes “a strategic decision to fundamentally change its behavior.” Off the record, US officials allude to a more far-reaching agenda. As one “senior US policymaker” told the Washington Post on October 23: “The big question is: Is there anything to indicate that [Syrian President Bashar al-Assad] would show any deviation from past behavior? We’re certainly not trying to save the regime.”

Taking the hint, Russia and China have so far resisted US pressure to sanction Syria for its grudging and partial acquiescence in the demands of Detlev Mehlis, the UN-appointed investigator of the February 2005 assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, ex-premier of Lebanon. But their signatures are on the unanimous UNSC Resolution 1636, which leaves open the possibility of “further action” if Mehlis is not satisfied. The Syrian president, also reading the tea leaves, has indicated the regime might comply with the investigator’s requests, but with a caveat: “Whatever we do, and no matter how much we cooperate, after a month, the result will be that we did not cooperate. We should appreciate this fact.”

This observation came halfway through a speech at Damascus University in which Asad identified Syria as “targeted” by an enemy whose message is: “Kill yourself or I will kill you.” There is no difference between these two options, the Syrian leader continued, except that “if you kill yourself, the enemy deprives you…of the honor of defending yourself.” He warned students in the audience that the “theorists of the war [against Syria] are pinpointing our youth” because youths did not live through the decades when Syria remained “steadfast in the face of tornadoes.” Now Syrians should hunker down for a protracted confrontation, because in the present circumstances “resistance and steadfastness” are the only alternative to chaos. Here Asad was clearly referring to post-Saddam Iraq, and perhaps echoing Deputy Foreign Minister Walid Mu’allim’s complaint reported in the October 26 edition of the pan-Arab daily al-Hayat. The Mehlis investigation, Mu’allim said, is a “tool” for implementing a master plan: “The Arab region is threatened by a second Sykes-Picot that will divide us on the basis of ethnicities and religions.”

Of course, Washington’s bones of contention with Damascus do number more than the regime insiders fingered in the unredacted version of the October 21 Mehlis report. The Bush administration, which pronounced itself “appalled” by Asad’s speech, probably was glad to hear it and may even have aimed to produce it. The letter of demarche delivered by Ambassador Margaret Scobey upon leaving Damascus after Hariri’s killing, the summertime cross-border raids that reportedly killed several Syrian soldiers, the rebuff of Syria’s offer to resume post-September 11 intelligence sharing on al-Qaeda, and now the cutoff of nearly all bilateral ties have all been attempts to erect hurdles upon which Syria will stumble as it comes before the Security Council. The US does not need to entertain the Libyan-style deal that Syria hopes for because of the strength of the international consensus behind Mehlis. As with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Washington is meanwhile signaling to Asad’s regime that it faces an existential threat, counting on the regime, in turn, to lash out in response. Damascus, so far, has obliged.
Undoubtedly, the Bush administration’s belligerent policy should be resisted, but the question is how. As the UN awaits the second installment of the Mehlis report, due on December 15, the danger is that blowhard rhetoric from both Damascus and Washington will create the illusion that the choice is between damaging sanctions (or worse) and defense of a sclerotic dictatorship with a dangerous siege mentality. The Clinton and Bush administrations played expertly with the terms of this false choice vis-à-vis Iraq, with the painfully ironic result in the spring of 2003 that much of the anti-war and anti-sanctions left applauded a French initiative to roll over sanctions as a way of averting war.

The choice is not between punishing all of Syria and shoring up the regime. Sanctions, if they are warranted by the evidence and made necessary by regime intransigence, should be directed carefully at those who are shown to be culpable—and only them. The experience of Iraq in the 1990s proves that more extensive measures not only lead to humanitarian crisis, but also fail to achieve either “behavior-changing” or regime-changing objectives, since they debilitate the very people who presumably are supposed to impel the regime to change. This much, by now, ought to be common sense.

One would think, moreover, that the experience of Iraq in the 2000s would caution even the self-styled revolutionaries in the Bush administration to think more modestly about what their version of regime change can bring. It may usher in a different authoritarian regime: Knight Ridder has reported on a classified study commissioned by the office of Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte concluding that a coup in Damascus would install a harder-line junta than Asad’s inner circle. Or, as in Iraq, regime change may induce the collapse of the entire state—a development that an old-school realist like Negroponte must have regretted during his tenure as ambassador in Baghdad.

Of course, sociologically and historically, the Bush administration’s initial vision of regime change was a sheer fabrication. Simply ridding a country of a dictator and his top 54 lieutenants is not destined magically to institute a liberal democracy, one that can be marketed and consumed across the region like any other American product. However, to the extent that war critics now blame the US for failing to institute “real democracy” in Iraq, they too are trapped in, and thereby lend credence to, the discourse of instant democratization. The Bush administration has certainly trumpeted each “milestone” in the post-Saddam political transition to demonstrate “progress.”
to skeptical Americans. But the problem with US-sponsored democratization is precisely that, for Iraq itself, each of these “milestones” has been considerably more than a public relations exercise. Each stage of the transition, though arguably making Iraq more democratic, has served to further polarize the country along sectarian and ethnic lines, suggesting that a more deliberate and less ambitious process might have been better for all concerned. But this was not to be: despite the vocal dissent of (at least) 22 percent of the voters, the draft constitution that passed the October 15 referendum will decisively shape the new Iraqi reality.

The Iraqi constitution was written on a US timetable, and partly by Iraqi politicians with US bodyguards, but in very few respects is it the document Washington would have drafted. While the language is vague, articles on the economy seem to commit the nascent state to providing universal health care and free higher education. Muslim clerics and religious scholars could assume a role in the highest court in the land, and the federalism provisions mean that personal status matters in some parts of the country could be adjudicated in religious, rather than civil, courts. The form of federalism established by the constitution is so loose that Baghdad might never really govern the whole country again. That fact in itself is innocuous, but since it was imposed by the Kurdish and Shi’i religious parties rather than agreed upon by consensus, it is fueling the low-grade civil war that has intensified in 2005. From the official US point of view, therefore, the constitution greatly complicates the exit strategy. Knowing full well that the constitution would sharpen Iraq’s internal divisions, and in particular would confirm anti-federalist Sunni Arabs in their suspicion that participation in formal politics would not equate to an actual voice, the US scrambled throughout to soften its terms. A phone call from Bush himself did not dissuade the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq from its newfound embrace of federalism. While a last-minute deal set up a committee for revising the constitution after the December 15 elections for a permanent government, actually revising the document would require a complete turnaround in the present balance of political power.

Despite yet more polls showing that Iraqis believe the US presence to be a cause of the insurgency rather than its remedy, the de facto exit strategy is therefore to assist the Kurds and the Shi’i religious parties in defeating their political opponents, as well as the insurgents. The victors in the January 2005 elections do not yet believe they can secure the gains of the constitution without their foreign protector, who is also winking at such “facts on the ground” as the rapidly “Kurdifying” vicinity of oil-rich Kirkuk. At the request of the transitional prime minister, Ibrahim Jaafari of the Da’wa Party, and the transitional president, Jalal Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, on November 8 the Security Council very quietly authorized an extension of the mandate of the “multinational force” in Iraq until December 31, 2006. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice appeared before Congress to present a new strategy to “clear, hold and build” towns controlled by guerrillas, and Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) took a break from his advocacy of a ban on torture by US forces to plead for deployment of 10,000 more US soldiers to Iraq. The pieces are in place for the indefinite, steady escalation of the war—a trend that is closely related to both the US isolation of Syria and Bashar al-Asad’s yelp of defiance.

The best-laid plans for regime change in both Syria and Iraq, of course, may very well be derailed by belated democratic upheavals in the United States. Three years after the fact, Bush’s Iraq adventure is now completely entangled in the web of falsehoods the administration spun to frighten Americans into backing the invasion of a country that posed no conceivable threat to them. A mid-November Washington Post poll reveals that 60 percent of Americans now believe the invasion of Iraq was not “worth it.” Nearly 3 in 5 voters in the poll think that Bush himself is dishonest. Slowly, this outpouring of discontent is trickling into the collective consciousness of Democrats, some of whom now realize they need to say something about Iraq besides insist that they would prosecute the war more effectively if they were in charge.

Egged on by McCain and the war’s inveterate cheerleaders at the Weekly Standard, Bush is trying to fight back, reminding audiences of how many Democrats voted for his October 2002 war resolution and smearing those who didn’t as people who “didn’t support the liberation of Iraq.” But these rearguard tactics will not work. The White House’s wild and willful distortions of the danger of Saddam Hussein’s illicit arsenal are on trial in the court of opinion, even if they are never aired in the courtroom of the prosecutor investigating the leaked identity of ex-CIA agent Valerie Plame. After the prosecutor’s indictment of Scooter Libby, former chief of staff for Vice President Dick Cheney, on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice, there is no perfuming the smell of a rat. Why would this most secretive of aides to the most secretive of government officials blow Plame’s cover? The White House had something to hide and it wanted to make sure no one else inside government lifted the curtain.

In light of everything else the Bush team has gotten away with, the prospect of penalty for just one of them, and for such a minor, sordid offense, offers only the grimmest of satisfaction. Libby is charged with participating in a cover-up of a cover-up of the real crime—the manufacture of a “mortal threat” to justify an illegal and unnecessary war. Much more than the long promised second phase of the Senate Intelligence Committee report is necessary to ensure that others in the venal crew in the White House are eventually held to account. Meanwhile, rattled as they are by the scandals of their second term, the Bush administration is still pursuing the first term’s “transformational” Middle East policy, though thus far by different means, as if it has been a success. On the questions of Syria and Iraq, as well as Israel-Palestine and other issues, the imperative is therefore not just to hope for more indictments and another tumble in the polls, but to articulate clear, principled alternatives as well.
Democracy’s succinct definition, and perhaps its best attribute, is majority rule. But it is unclear that majority rule equates to democracy in places like Lebanon, Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries that are contending with past and present religious or ethnic conflict. Clearly, democracy in such diverse societies would minimally require that citizens of all ethnic and religious backgrounds enjoy the same civil and human rights; it would also require that the government refrain from religious or ethnic persecution. A democracy should also allow its citizens to practice their faith or express their cultural traditions, provided such practices do not contradict other fundamental values the state is bound to uphold. But beyond these minimum guarantees, what constitutes a “just” distribution of political power among majority and minority groups in a religiously or ethnically divided society? And how can that distribution be reconciled with the principle of majority rule?

Who’s Afraid of Democracy?

All democratic political systems have elected parliaments; some also have directly elected presidents with substantial legislative influence. In both parliamentary and presidential systems, it is generally the case that laws must be passed by the parliament. With some exceptions, such as amending the constitution, which may require a “super-majority,” it is also the case that laws are passed by the majority of the members of parliament. As long as the basic human and civil rights of minorities are protected,
this kind of “majority rule” is not inherently discriminatory against the minority—if the composition of the minority and the majority can change over time. In a parliament made up of several parties, the combination of parties that comes together to pass one law may be different from the combination that passes the next, so that “the majority” may actually change from day to day. In a parliament made up of two parties, the majority party may vote as a bloc so consistently that that party actually makes almost all the laws by itself. But, in theory, this majority can be overturned in the next elections.

Democracies without permanent majorities may have parties based on ethnic or religious groups that are likely to remain permanently in the minority. Such parties, however, can wield great power when the population is so divided that there is no single majority party. In a parliamentary system in which no party has 50 percent of the seats, a government cannot be formed until some coalition of parties is put together that controls 51 percent of the votes in parliament. Creating such a coalition often requires one of the larger parties to woo one or more minority parties, and even a small minority party can extract important concessions for joining—or not defecting afterwards. Minority parties can also flex their muscles if the parliament is so divided on a major issue that the minority party’s votes are enough to decide it.

But what if one majority ethnic or religious group consistently, election after election, votes to put members of its group into office? If the country has a judiciary committed to individual rights, then the basic human rights of minority groups might still be protected, but minorities will be unable to pass laws differing from the agenda of the majority. This scenario is not inevitable, since the majority might be quite divided along ideological lines and not share a common agenda. But it is also clear why minorities might find democracy threatening—as a permanent majority might abuse its power to their detriment.

For that reason, countries with significant heterogeneity, and particularly those with a history of religious or ethnic conflict, often create democracies with prominent anti-majoritarian features. A country might explicitly mandate direct representation of each group in the political system so that members of each group can look out for their own group’s interests. Or, framers might give as much power as possible to local or regional governments, rather than the national government, so that religious and ethnic groups are largely left to run their own affairs in the particular areas of the country where they are concentrated. Finally, countries might seek to protect various groups’ interests by ensuring that majority groups cannot take and exercise power without gaining the support of some minorities.

**Consociationalism**

Lebanon, whose system of “consociationalism” mediates between 18 ethno-confessional groups, is the classic example of the first approach. In 1932, when Lebanon’s last census was held, the ratio of Christians (Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Armenian Catholics and other denominations) to Muslims (Sunnis, Shi’a, Druze and Alawis) was six to five. Maronites were the single largest group in the population at 30 percent and Sunnis the second largest at 20 percent. The 1943 National Pact, a verbal agreement concluded between Maronite and Sunni leaders, established unwritten rules whereby the president would always be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni and the speaker of parliament a Shi’i, with lesser positions being guaranteed to other, smaller groups. Seats in parliament would be divided in a six to five ratio between Christians and Muslims. Although Christians, who had historically been close to European powers such as France, were a majority at the time of the National Pact, they feared becoming a minority due to the aspiration of many Lebanese Muslims to dissolve Lebanon into a larger (majority-Muslim) Arab state. The National Pact was designed to protect the interests of the Christian majority as much as any minority group, as it was based upon the principle that “Lebanon’s Muslims should cease to strive for unification with Syria and the Christians should renounce Western tutelage.”

Over time, the relative size of each group in the Lebanese population shifted, so that by 1998 it was estimated that Lebanon was about 70 percent Muslim and 30 percent Christian, and that the Shi’a had probably become the single largest group. The Ta’if agreement of 1989 that paved the way for the end of the 1975–1990 civil war modestly adjusted the distribution of political power in the direction of this reality. Ta’if stipulated that Christians and Muslims would split seats in parliament 50–50. The agreement also modified a formula specifying the exact distribution of seats among confessions in each electoral district, so that, for example, one particular constituency in the 2005 elections elected five Shi’is, one Sunni, one Druze, one Greek Orthodox, one Maronite and two Greek Catholics. While keeping the presidency for the Maronite, Ta’if substantively limited presidential powers in favor of the Sunni prime minister and the Shi’i speaker of parliament, as well as the Cabinet.

In the early stages of the US-led occupation of Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) adopted a Lebanese-style idea of ensuring direct representation in positions of political power for Iraq’s myriad ethnic and religious groups. Larry Diamond, the *Journal of Democracy* editor who served as a CPA adviser on democratization, notes that when US viceroy L. Paul Bremer created the Iraqi Governing Council in July 2003, “a numerical balance was agreed upon that would be replicated in each batch of appointments, beginning with the ministers. The Shiites, who constituted a majority of the population, would have a bare majority on the Governing Council—13 of the 25 members—and there would be five Kurds, five Arab Sunnis, one Assyrian Christian and one Turkoman.” A version of this approach continued from May 2004, one month before the CPA’s dissolution, until the January 2005 elections of a transitional national assembly. In the interim government headed by Iyad Allawi, ministers were selected according to the same strict religious-ethnic calculus.

The idea of guaranteeing such direct representation for ethnic and religious groups is intuitively appealing; how better
to protect any group’s rights—majority or minority—than to promise hands-on participation in lawmaking to every group? In practice, however, this type of system tends to freeze existing power distributions in place, to decrease the weight of majority opinion and to hinder the development of an overarching national identity. Although Ta’if changed the equation slightly, Lebanese Christians are still guaranteed more political positions than any other group even though they are no longer a majority. By contrast, Lebanese Shi’a, who probably make up a larger percentage of the population than all the Christian denominations together, are only allocated 22 percent of the seats in parliament. A new census could produce a more proportional allocation of positions, but political systems which tie power directly to the size of a group’s population turn censuses into sources of potentially violent contention, with strong temptations to engage in rigging. Even if positions were doled out in strict and updated proportions, what are the long-term consequences of inculcating the idea that citizens of a particular religious or ethnic identity automatically have distinct interests that only fellow members of the group can be expected to protect? One obvious corollary is that fellow citizens from other religious or ethnic groups cannot be trusted to have one’s interests at heart.

The Lebanese system is a curious way of institutionalizing this idea, because while each group is guaranteed a certain number of seats in parliament, members of many religious groups vote on which members of each group will take those seats. In a district in which one seat is to be filled by a Sunni, all registered voters in the district choose which Sunni will fill the position, so if Shi’a were the majority of the district, the Sunni member will probably be chosen by the Shi’i voters. This system has the advantage of encouraging cooperation across communities, as politicians of various faiths join to create one slate that includes the number of members of each religious group required to win in that district. Nevertheless, this system entrenches the idea that there are specific and enduring Maronite or Sunni concerns that are different from, and perhaps even require special protection from, other communities. The lack of a strong Lebanese national identity facilitated the outbreak of the civil war, and it is not surprising that Ta’if, while reaffirming the principle of guaranteed positions for each community, also stipulated future review with an eye toward the “deconfessionalization” of Lebanese politics.

**An Extreme Form of Federalism**

Since the promulgation of a Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) in March 2004, the post-Saddam Iraqi political order has been moving toward a form of federalism that devolves considerable power to regional governments. Federalism was initially advocated by the Kurds, but has since garnered the support of many Shi’a. Since 1991, with the establishment of the northern no-fly zone and the withdrawal of the Iraqi army from the three majority-Kurdish provinces in northern Iraq, the two major Kurdish parties have enjoyed a great deal of autonomy from Baghdad. Kurdish militias (*peshmerga*) policed the region, and, though there was much internecine conflict, the two parties formed institutions of a quasi-unified Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992 and 1996. The Kurdish parties entered post-Saddam political negotiations, then, with the demands that the *peshmerga* remain intact and that the KRG retain its existing autonomy. The Kurds pressed for a clause in the TAL saying that a permanent Iraqi constitution, even if approved by a simple majority in a referendum, could be defeated by the opposition of two thirds of the voters in any three of Iraq’s 18 provinces, a requirement crafted to allow the Kurds alone to veto the constitution. On October 15, 2005, however, it was Sunni Arabs and other opponents of the same federalism provisions who came close to defeating Iraq’s new constitution with a two thirds “no” vote in two provinces and a 55 percent “no” vote in a third.

The wide margins of victory for the constitution in majority-Kurdish provinces came largely from the document’s explicit recognition that Iraqi Kurdistan already is an autonomous region, as well as its promise to uphold the TAL’s provision for a future referendum on whether the oil-rich Kirkuk area will be annexed to the Kurdish provinces. Many Shi’a, however, also came to appreciate the decentralizing thrust of the constitution, which
makes it very easy for provinces to form “regions” that enjoy significant autonomy from Baghdad. This autonomy includes the right to amend laws passed by the national government except in such areas as foreign policy, the national budget and national security. Even diplomatic representation would in fact no longer be the exclusive domain of the national government, as Article 116 of the constitution authorizes regions and provinces to “establish offices in [Iraqi] embassies…to pursue cultural and social affairs, and issues of local development.”

Many democracies with significant diversity adopt federalism to allow local groups significant power over many issues that directly affect them. But these systems generally tip the balance of powers much more definitively in favor of the national government than does the current Iraqi constitution. The Iraqi version of extreme decentralization could give rise to extremely different social policies from one area of the country to another. To date it is not clear, for example, if there would be any way to prevent some future regions from implementing strict shari’a law provisions substantially limiting women’s rights in marriage, divorce and child custody, while Kurdistan and other regions will certainly have much more liberal laws. Over time, it appears that the current constitution could give rise to regions living side by side with such different laws that it would be hard to imagine them being, in any meaningful sense, part of the same country. It is also unclear whether all Iraqis would share equally in the benefits of Iraq’s natural resources, particularly oil; the fear that occupants of oil-rich regions would be able to keep most of “their” own profits terrifies the Sunni Arabs, who could be impoverished by such an arrangement. While the kind of consociationalism seen in Lebanon can hurt national unity by enshrining the idea that only members of one’s own group can protect one’s own interests, at least there politicians of different confessions work together to create laws that will apply to all Lebanese.

Nigeria

A third way to deal with diversity is demonstrated by Nigeria, where aspects of consociationalism and federalism are combined with requirements that political parties cannot function, and presidential candidates cannot win, unless they draw support from many different states and ethnic groups. Nigeria’s three main ethnic groups are the Hausa-Fulani with 29 percent of the population, the Yoruba with 21 percent, and the Ibo with 18 percent; over 200 other ethnic groups comprise the remaining 32 percent. In 1954, the British made Nigeria into a tripartite federation in which the Hausa-Fulani constituted the majority in the north, the Yoruba in the west and the Igbo in the east. In addition, the north has always had just over half the population of the country and has largely dominated politics. After independence in 1960, the three regions were changed to four. These in turn were replaced by 12 states in 1967 to decrease northern dominance as the Igbo east pressed for secession. This failed to prevent Igbo secession, leading to three years of civil war.

Three important changes were subsequently introduced in an attempt to defuse ethnic and regional conflict. The number of states was again increased to form ethnic minority states that, together, had more states than any of the three major groups had, decreasing the importance of the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo identities by forcing politicians to appeal to the smaller minorities. A presidential system was created in which, among other requirements, successful candidates had to win at least 25 percent of the votes in at least two thirds of the states. New conditions on parties included the stipulation that they have “functional branches in, or a governing body that includes members from at least, two thirds of the states.”

These changes have not made Nigeria into a successful democracy. After they were passed, the military resumed power until 1999. Members of ethnic minority groups in the oil-rich Niger Delta were persecuted and even executed, the number of states continued to balloon as more and more groups pressed for their own states, and corruption was further entrenched. But presidents began to be elected with support far beyond their own regional or ethnic group—with the resumption of democratic rule in 1999 both candidates for president were Yoruban southerners, and Olusegun Obasanjo won the presidency, despite little support from his fellow Yorubans, by winning votes in the north and the east. Nigeria has long had consociational elements in its governments, including a requirement that at least one member of each state receive a cabinet post, but at least since the 1980s, political parties have begun to ensure that their candidates for key government and party posts are distributed across members from many different regions. These practices, too, have hardly been foolproof; Obasanjo received little support from Yorubans in the 1999 election but has subsequently been seen as favoring their interests.

Nonetheless, the level of inter-regional and inter-ethnic cooperation at the national political level now in Nigeria is something that the new Iraqi constitution is unlikely to produce. If Iraq’s new constitution had created a directly elected and powerful president, it is hard to imagine now an outcome analogous to Obasanjo’s victory—for example, a Kurd who lost the Kurdish vote but was carried to victory by Shi’i and Sunni Arab voters. The Nigerian experience, however, is also notable for the extent to which the political system in place at independence changed over the next several decades as different recipes for reducing conflict were adopted or discarded. Iraq, if it remains a single nation-state, may well embark on such an experimental trajectory of its own.

Endnotes

4 Suberu and Diamond, p. 416.
5 Ibid., p. 416.
Many commentators on the state of Iraq after the removal of the Baathist regime in 2003 have attributed the chaos and sectarian-ethnic conflict to some essence of Iraqi society: fissiparous and tribal, only governable by the firm hand of authoritarian dictatorship. This is, of course, an ahistorical view. These traits are not, somehow, in the “nature” of Iraqi society; they are products of its transformation by the violent and arbitrary regime, along with three destructive wars.

It would be equally ahistorical to assert the existence of some golden age of uninterrupted inter-communal harmony and national unity before the deposed regime took charge. In all the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional states that succeeded the Ottoman Empire and European colonial mandates, non-Arab ethnic and non-Muslim religious communities were faced with the question of how to react to the dominance of mostly Arab Muslim states and elites embracing ideologies of Arab nationalism and naming Islam as the official religion. Muslims, as well, were faced with dictatorial regimes that, despite their nationalist pretensions, depended for their perpetuation on communal and tribal solidarities that sharpen boundaries and differences. Citizenship, the path to integration into a national life for all communities, was mostly a thwarted aspiration. The regimes’ wars on ethnic autonomy and their elimination of pluralist politics had the consequence of leaving the field to religious and communal ideologies and movements, of which Islamism is the most prominent, thus further barring the way to common citizenship.

Modern Iraq presents an extreme example of these processes. An important distinction has to be made between the Kurdish "national" minority, striving as it has for separation or self-governance, and religious differences within the presumed national entity of Arab Iraq. Kurdish aspirations, for the most part, were met with such intransigence by the state that the Kurds took up arms they are reluctant to part with even now that Iraq’s new constitution recognizes far-reaching autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan. Even within Arab Iraq, however, the regime systematically undermined communities’ integration as citizens, pushing Iraqis toward communalism.

Between Citizenship and Communalism

At the start of the twentieth century, like the rest of the old Ottoman Empire, what is now the state of Iraq was divided by boundaries of ethnicity, religion, kinship, tribe and locality. In this respect, it was like most of the rest of the Middle East, only perhaps more so because the country had been an Ottoman backwater. Nevertheless, Ottoman reforms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries trickled slowly into Iraq, culminating in the Young Turks’ constitution of 1908. Reform created spheres and institutions that were home to the new intelligentsia; they were further expanded with the British Mandate, and then the new state. The new Iraqi intelligentsia, drawn from various communities and regions, became a “national class,” one that imagined the nation and spoke the modern language of national politics. Their outlook was shaped by stirrings of modern politics in the region: the Young Turks, the Iranian constitutional revolution of 1906 and the “Arab revolt” coming from the Hijaz during World War I. Christian and Jewish intellectuals were prominent in these classes, and had particular reason to desire an escape from their cultural and social ghettos and oppressive religious authorities into the public domain of citizenship, ideas and culture. Jewish entrepreneurs had introduced the first printing presses into Iraq in the twentieth century.

These developments, of course, did not erase the communal boundaries—far from it. But the boundaries did not stand still. The processes of modernity that proceeded throughout the twentieth century led to wide-ranging social and geographical mobility, which loosened and, in some cases, transformed communal bonds and redrew the boundaries. Most notably, the “national class” of the intelligentsia became ever larger and more complex. They formed parties and movements, and interacted in cafés, clubs and salons, declaiming poetry, pursuing (sometimes violent) polemics and weaving conspiracies. These were functionaries, poets, journalists, teachers, professionals, military officers and modern businessmen. They were drawn from the various communities of religion, tribe and locality, and the traces of these affiliations were never erased: everyone knew who was who. Against the pull of these affiliations, however, they harbored aspirations to escape from traditional bonds and communal ghettos and to form parts of a universalist and national public life. In the violent politics that followed, though, each participant’s communal affiliation counted and was used for or against him or her.

Governments and their police were repressive and arbitrary, but never totally so. Until the Baathist regime of the 1970s, Iraq always contained a plurality of parties and movements, public and clandestine, and had some elements of (controlled and corrupt) parliamentary life. The Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), formed in the 1920s, but reaching its apogee between the 1940s and 1970s, was central to this national life. For most of its existence it was a clandestine party, suffering from repression and giving many martyrs. Like other communist parties, it followed the Soviet line, with adverse effects on its national operations. Yet it continued to be at the heart of Iraqi politics and cultural spheres, with the adherence of many prominent intellectuals, poets, journalists, academics and students, as well as grassroots affiliations to trade unions, syndicates, peasant associations, and women’s and youth organizations. Above all, it was the national party, drawing Arabs and Kurds, Sunnis and Shi’is, Christians and Jews. Most other parties, if they were not vehicles for the leadership of prominent personalities, appealed to narrow constituencies, Kurdish nationalist parties being only one case in point. Arab nationalist parties, including the Baath, had their main constituency among Arab Sunnis (with some Shi’is and Christians). The National Democratic Party was another national party with a small and elite constituency of the modern bourgeoisie.

Until the 1970s, Iraqi society featured a lively, and sometimes violent, political field, with a plurality of actors with diverse constituencies. It also featured diverse sources and forms of social power, some based on primordial solidarities of community and religion, but others on property (not yet controlled and distributed by the arbitrary appropriations of regime cliques) and common interests and actions. Religion, tribe and locality continued to play important roles in the drawing of boundaries and solidarities, but these ties were rivaled, transformed and mediated by the formations and ideologies of modern politics. One illustration of these processes is the unique history of the Jews of Iraq, a history of which we need to be reminded.

The Jews of Iraq

By the time of their mass migration, mostly to Israel, in 1950–1951, there were an estimated 120,000 to 150,000 Jews in an Iraqi population of five million. Their presence in Baghdad, however, was disproportionate to their numbers. They constituted a considerable part of the Iraqi middle class, although the majority of their number worked in the more humble occupations of peddlers and craftsmen. Iraqi Jews were Arabophone, unlike many other Middle Eastern communities that spoke Ladino or French. Their elites, like their Christian compatriots, enjoyed the opportunities for a European education from the later decades of the nineteenth century, through the schools of the Alliance Israélite, then a diversity of communal schools,
for boys and girls, featuring curricula in French and English, as well as following the Arabic national curriculum installed by the national government. This gave Jews an advantage in recruitment to positions in government, public utilities (notably the railways), the professions, the arts and education, as well as in business and finance. Jews were prominent in medicine, law, journalism, literature and, above all, in music: all the instrumentalists in the Iraqi radio orchestra at its inception in 1936 were Jews, who also formed the Iraqi delegation to the 1932 Arab Music Congress in Cairo. Their presence in the markets of Baghdad was such that the weekly holiday fell on Saturday. Where did this community feature in the social and political landscape?

The majority of Jews, like any other people, aspired to a quiet and secure life. They avoided politics, and sought for their chiefs and notables to exert influence and ensure communal security through connections and bribes. Jews, despite their prominence in public life and business, or perhaps partly because of it, were always vulnerable and open to suspicion and accusation of sympathy or collaboration with the “enemies”: first British imperialism, then Zionism. Indeed, the pro-Nazi nationalist coup of 1941 culminated in a “pogrom” of the Jews before it was put down by British intervention. This left a bitter memory for the community.

At the same time, the intelligentsia and professionals of the community were divided between the two orientations of Iraqi citizenship and European/Zionist identification. Those in the professions, the arts and public service shared the social and cultural spheres and networks with their other compatriots, and identified with an Iraqi national life. Some of the younger members, rebelling against the conservatism and caution of their elders, jumped into the illicit politics of the ICP and the left. They sought comradeship with their non-Jewish fellows and the dream of a better world. Jews were prominent in the leadership of the ICP in the 1940s, and suffered imprisonment, torture and execution, alongside their comrades. They were among the foremost activists in the anti-Zionist league. The shift in party orientation, in line with Soviet policy in the later 1950s, toward a Third Worldist nationalism in support of Nasserism and the “national bourgeoisie,” made the ICP cautious about its Jewish members, whom it discarded, but that is another history. Other Jews sought their citizenship aspirations in Zionist organizations and the dream of a modern Jewish state. Many were to be disappointed in the early days of Iraqis in Israel, and the contempt in which “orientals” were held there.

The creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and the nationalist and Islamic fervor that gripped the Arab world, made life difficult for the Jews of Iraq. Public servants were sacked, arbitrary limitations were imposed on professions, business and property, and waves of arrest and persecution accompanied accusations of communism and Zionism (the two conveniently merged in police parlance). These were powerful push factors that led to the migration of Jews under a secret agreement between Iraqi politicians and the Jewish Agency in Israel. Mass migration left a few thousand, mostly prosperous, Jews in Iraq after 1951. Those, in turn, were targeted by the second Baathist regime for another wave of persecution as Israeli spies in 1968–1969, culminating in the exodus of the survivors in the following years.

One important aspect of the departure of the Jews is that a vital sector of the middle classes was eliminated from Iraqi society, with their property confiscated, and their knowledge, skills and sentiments lost to the country. Their place in the Baghdad markets was taken by the Shi'i bourgeoisie, who were already active in business, having been excluded from many other spheres of public life. Those, in turn, were expelled by Saddam Hussein’s regime in the 1970s and 1980s, on the pretext that they were Iranian, and their property was confiscated to the benefit of regime personalities. Thus, Iraq lost its propertied middle classes twice in the span of three decades. This is part of the malaise of Iraqi society and politics. Those middle classes are the most important props of civil society and public life, and their elimination could only facilitate the ascendancy of dictatorship in government and tribalism in society.

The Jews, of course, were a special case, given their association in the public mind with Israel and the bitter conflict
with the Arabs. Their story, however, does illustrate the tension between communalism and citizenship in Iraq. Modern political and social forces were making good progress against the old politics of communities and tribes, and the height of this progress occurred during the Qasim years of 1958–1963.

The Qasim Regime

‘Abd al-Karim Qasim led the military coup that toppled the monarchy and the British client regime. He broke with his fellow “free officers,” mostly Sunni Arab nationalists who wanted union with Nasser’s Egypt, to pursue an Iraqiist politics, appealing to the various sectors of Iraqi society. In that aim he was supported by the ICP, with whom he entered into an uneasy relationship. It was during this period that ideological politics of left and right, communists and nationalists, came to the fore, including yet another bloody battle with the Kurds. Qasim’s was also the regime that secularized family law in the country in favor of women’s rights, much to the chagrin of religious authorities, Sunni and Shi‘i. The regime was not democratic: in fact it abolished the limp parliament of the monarchy. It was, however, pluralist, with a diversity of political forces and social constituencies. The old religious and tribal forces were on the retreat in the face of land reforms and secularizing measures. Some sought influence in hitching their cause to the Sunni Arab nationalists as resistance to the strident forces of the left. Violent confrontations and attempted coups followed.

One was the ultimately successful Baathist coup in 1963 (reportedly with the aid of the CIA conspiring against Qasim and the ICP in the Cold War context), which was marked by a large-scale massacre of the communists and their allies. The coup featured the first televised assassination of a political leader, when the Baathists exhibited Qasim’s corpse to dissuade his followers from further resistance. The Baath always resorted to excessive violence, then and now, to make up for the fact that they have a small constituency in the country and can only rule by inordinate repression. In 1963, however, they were displaced by conservative Sunni nationalist officers who reversed many of the progressive and secularizing policies of the Qasim regime. This was not the end of the plural political field and its rival ideologies. The clandestine ICP, the Baath, the Kurds and various nationalist factions continued to operate. It was the second Baathist coup of 1968 which ultimately ended pluralism, by first bringing the communists into a common “front” government, and then, once their organization was exposed, turning on them in another massacre in 1978–1979. The ensuing collapse of communism on the world stage led to a further diminution in the importance of the ICP.

Falling Back on the Old

On the face of it, the Baathist regime stood for Iraq as part of the Arab nation, a polity of citizens faithful to the “revolution” and the party. In reality, the regime was always based on narrow sectarian and clan loyalties, a base that narrowed even further under the stresses of the Iran-Iraq war, the two wars with the West and the intervening 13 years of UN sanctions. Nationalist and “socialist” thrusts were used to dismantle and suppress all forms of independent association and centers of social power that the regime did not control. The regime controlled property, with arbitrary confiscations and appropriation by the denizens of the ruling family and its inner circle. It cultivated “crony capitalism” with contracts and businesses dependent on its favor. The largest confiscations followed the sectarian expulsion of the “Iranian” Shi‘a.

The salaried middle classes and professionals were firmly subordinated to Baath Party and regime control. Those who were not suppressed or driven into exile were first pampered in the “good years” of 1970s prosperity, then increasingly impoverished and repressed in the years of wars and sanctions from the 1980s. Women, first emancipated by the secular measures of the early years, were similarly subordinated and repressed when the regime turned to religion and tribe in the 1990s. Those years of war and sanctions, leading to poverty, disease and violence in many parts of the country, also drove people to take refuge in communities and localities of solidarity and mutual aid. These social milieux are dominated by the authority of religion and tribe.

When the regime failed to assert control of the population through war on external enemies, it sought to reconstruct the very primordial forces of tribe and religion it had once denounced, but as its own creatures and puppets. Since the regime had destroyed or taken over civic and political associations, and subordinated the educated middle classes, the opposition, too, had only the formations of religion, community and tribe to fall back on, mainly in sectarian and ethnic formations of Shi‘a and Kurds. The terrible trauma of the 2003 invasion and the insurgency that followed only reinforced these trends, crystallizing political allegiances around local, religious and communal leaderships. The secular and liberal middle classes, long suppressed and disorganized, have little voice or organization.

Can the pillars of civil society be raised again from chaos and ruin left by the regime and the invasion? It is difficult to give clear answers at this point, because there are so many imperceptibles. For one, a whole generation grew up under harsh authoritarian rule, coupled with the poverty and devastation of war and sanctions. Alienated and impoverished, what allegiances and outlooks can this young generation have? One thing is certain: to pursue, against mighty odds, a renewed civil life, they will need resources and security, which are the foremost problems of the Iraqi present.

Endnotes

1 For an elaboration, see Sami Zubaida, “The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq,” International Journal of Middle East Studies 34/5 (May 2002).
Within the political opposition to the US occupation and the transitional Iraqi government, by far the most important Sunni Islamist organization is the Association of Muslim Scholars based at the massive Umm al-Qura mosque in Baghdad. This group of imams and clerics aspires to be the Sunni equivalent to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, but their rigidity has left these aspirations unrealized.
The October 15, 2005 referendum on the new Iraqi constitution, like other stages in the US-sponsored political transition after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, drew fresh attention to the many opponents of that transition and the US occupation who are not directly involved in the ongoing insurgency. In keeping with the pattern in place since the old regime fell, the global media identified this opposition as “Sunni,” implying that political attitudes in Iraq are uniquely determined by religious affiliation. In fact, these opposition forces are not uniformly Sunni Arab, and many are secular nationalist—not sectarian or even religious—in orientation and identity. Yet it is true that the course of the post-Saddam political transition, coupled with the disproportionate representation of Sunni Arabs in the old Iraqi state and the Baath Party, and the heavy-handed counterinsurgency campaign in majority-Sunni Arab areas, have conspired to concentrate opposition to the new order in the Sunni Arab community.

By the early summer of 2003, it was clear that sectarian and ethnic identity would be a major organizing principle of post-Saddam Iraqi politics, if not the most important one. Seats on the Iraqi Governing Council appointed by US viceroy L. Paul Bremer were allocated according to a sectarian-ethnic quota system. Powerful Iraqi actors on the council, chiefly the Shi‘i religious parties returned from exile and the twin Kurdish parties, advocated strongly for the interests of pious Iraqi Shi‘a and the Kurds, respectively. Zealous “debashification” of ministries and the dissolution of the Iraqi army threw a sizable number of Sunni Arabs, who had been favored for leadership positions under the old regime, out of work. In this environment, and with an insurgency growing, numerous organizations emerged to advocate for Sunni Arab interests.

“Under One Roof”

By far the most important hardline Sunni Arab political organization has been the Association of Muslim Scholars (Hay‘at ‘Ulama‘ al-Muslimin). The Association was founded five days after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime. Its headquarters are in the immense Umm al-Qura mosque in Baghdad, which was built by the old regime after the 1991 Gulf war and is famous for its minarets in the shape of Scud missiles. Its leader, Harith al-Dhari, 64, acquired a degree at al-Azhar University in Islamic studies and taught at Baghdad University, before fleeing Saddam Hussein’s regime at the end of the 1990s, returning only after the regime’s fall. Although the Association claims to include all Sunnis, “whether Arabs, Kurds or Turkmen,” in practice it represents mainly Sunni Arab imams and clerics of mosques and schools in the “Sunni triangle”—the area of northwestern Iraq heavily inhabited by Sunni Arabs—but also in Sunni pockets in the Shi‘i south, such as in Basra. The Association is well-organized, with a newspaper named al-Basa‘ir and a sophisticated website, as well as articulate representatives, such as Harith al-Dhari himself, his son Muthanna al-Dhari, chief ideologue and international spokesman Muhammad ‘Ayash al-Kubaysi, and domestic spokesman ‘Abd al-Salam al-Kubaysi and Bashar al-Faydhi. All of these men are regularly asked to comment on pan-Arab satellite channels like al-Jazeera and al-Arabiyya. They travel frequently to neighboring Arab countries, where they are received by such figures as Amr Moussa, head of the Arab League, and they have garnered the explicit support of prominent Islamist intellectuals like Fahmi Huwaydi.

In stark contrast to its present role as a major political force, the Association denies any political ambitions. ‘Abd al-Salam al-Kubaysi claims that “we are not a political party no a movement.” Rather, the purpose of the Association is to “bring the Sunni community under one roof.” Other Sunni organizations contest the Association’s aspiration to become the spokesman of the Sunni community. One of these is the Sunni Endowment headed by the septuagenarian ‘Adnan Dulaymi. The Sunni Endowment was established subsequent to the Coalition Provisional Authority’s decision to split the Ministry of Religious Endowments (awqaf) into a Shi‘i and a Sunni section. Although financially stronger than the Association, the Sunni Endowment is politically weaker. Because its head is a government official, he can be fired; after Dulaymi criticized the draft constitution in July, he was succeeded by Ahmad al-Samarra‘i. The second major competitor is the Iraqi Islamic Party, particularly those members of the party close to ‘Abd al-Muhsin Hamid, who served in the CPA’s Iraqi Governing Council. Like the Association, the party springs from the Muslim Brotherhood, but it has taken a much more accommodating attitude toward cooperation with the US. It also maintains close relations with Saudi Arabia.

The main strategy the Association has adopted to counter its Sunni competitors is to claim to be a Sunni counterpart to the Shi‘i marja‘iyya (religious authority) in Najaf, led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. As the marja‘iyya does for the Shi‘a of Iraq, the Association aspires to act as a power broker behind the scenes in the Sunni community of Iraq, laying down the main political guidelines and strategy for the whole community, interfering in day-to-day politics only when necessary. Another strategy the Association has adopted is to claim to speak for those engaged in anti-occupation struggle. The exact nature of the Association’s relations with the insurgency is unclear, and it is unknown which groups it represents, but its influence is apparent from the role it played in securing

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The Association claims to include all Sunnis, “whether Arabs, Kurds or Turkmen,” but in practice it represents mainly Sunni Arab imams and clerics.

its intellectual input, the association also provided the insurgency with a more sophisticated political platform. Reflecting the highly mixed character of the insurgency, ranging from conservative ‘ulama’ in Falluja to jihadis in Ramadi, as well as the Baathist officers who may be the most organized leadership, the Association mixed an ideological cocktail to justify the rebels’ fight. Apart from numerous interviews with its spokesmen, the best concise expression of the Association’s ideology is found in a series of 20 articles by Muhammad ‘Ayyash al-Kubaysi collected as the Jurisprudence of Resistance (Fiqh al-muqawama).4 Through these writings, the Association aimed to counter the constant US effort to denigrate the insurgency as nothing, to use the words of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, but “thugs, gangs and terrorists.”

Resistance or Jihad
Initially, the political platform of the Association was based not on Islam, but on universal rights mixed with nationalism—namely the natural right of every people, Muslim or non-Muslim, to resist occupation (ishi‘al), as had been the case with the Vietnamese. As the right to defend oneself is a natural human right, Muhammad ‘Ayyash al-Kubaysi said in a December 2004 debate on al-Jazeera, it was not necessary to call for a jihad or issue a religious edict (futu‘a) to sanction the Iraqi struggle for independence. Another reason for not adopting Islamic terminology was that it might scare off non-Muslims who feel outrage at the occupation of Iraq.5 Instead of the term “jihad,” the Association preferred the more neutral term “resistance” (muqawama), which it borrowed from Hamas. Implied is that the United States plays the same role in Iraq that Israel does in the occupied Palestinian territories. On a higher level, the struggle is cast as part of a overall civilizational war between “crusading” forces of evil bent on destroying the Iraqi nation—to “sequester its mind, thought, social relations and way of life,” said Kubaysi on al-Jazeera—and the heroic resistance which defends the “land,” “honor” and “religion” of Iraq.

However, despite its defense of armed resistance as both a human right and a national right, the Association was ultimately unable to withstand the lure of calling for a jihad and adopting a discourse that resembles that of the jihadi salafis in its praise of violence. Most of its defense of armed resistance is directed against “moderate ‘ulama”—a code word for its rivals who have been more flexible toward the US presence. Muhammad ‘Ayyash al-Kubaysi states that the present crisis leaves no room for moderate political means. All efforts should be subordinated to waging a jihad because “the call to Islam is the call to jihad, because jihad is Islam.”6 Like the jihadi, he regards resistance as a personal duty (fard ‘ayn) that is ignored at the risk of denying tawhid, the unity of God.7 In fact, Kubaysi states that joining the muqawama and taking up arms is a “duty of the times” that takes precedence over duties like fasting and even prayer.8 On the other hand, Kubaysi and the Association have on numerous occasions denounced the use of indiscriminate violence against Iraqi civilians, such as that attributed to Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi’s al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia organization.9 Even attacks directed against the Shi‘i-dominated National Guard are condemned, because, as Kubaysi argues, Islamic law stipulates that criminals can only be convicted in a court of law. His statement, “You cannot execute them without legal proceedings; an Iraqi is not an occupier but a citizen of the nation,” demonstrates that the real distinction is not so much a classical legal one between Muslims and infidels as a nationalist one between citizens and occupiers. While citizens are protected by law, Iraqis have a national as well as a religious duty to fight occupiers.10 That this nationalist struggle is the main defining feature of being an Iraqi and acquiring a citizen’s rights is underscored by the general attitude of the Association toward the Iraqi Shi’a. Shi’ism in itself is not condemned, as is the case with the salafis who regard Shi’a as “rejectionists” (rafida) of Islam, but participation in the resistance is the main criterion for inclusion in the nation. In this regard, the Association even lays claim to the legacy of Imam Hussein. His choice to die an exemplary martyr’s
death and establish a “school of martyrdom” (madrasat al-Husayn al-istish-hadiyya), instead of capitulating to the “tyrant of the age” (taghut al-'asr), has been betrayed by the Shi'i leadership itself. If it were not for the US and their continuous attempts to instigate sectarian strife (al-fitna al-ta'iyya) by deliberately playing the sectarian card (al-waraga al-ta'iyya), the Association argues, Iraq would now be in better shape. The division of the nation and the weakening of the state itself through the introduction of federalism have been successful because the US has convinced the Shi'i leadership that they head an oppressed sect (ta'ifa mazluma). Consequently, the Shi'i leadership adopted the US policy to base the interim political system on proportional representation, which enhanced the ethnic and religious divisions in Iraq. As “true democracy is impossible under occupation,” the Association has decided to boycott all Iraqi political institutions as long as the US does not agree to a timetable for withdrawing its troops from Iraqi soil.

A Fleeting Alliance

The high point in the Association’s power occurred between April 2004 and March 2005, when it succeeded in mobilizing the myth of a “national” insurgency to promote all-out political boycott as the only means to defend the interests of the Sunni community. It outmaneuvered its rivals because Sunni Arabs (and many other Iraqis) were outraged by the destruction of Fallujah in April and November 2004 and the massive US counterinsurgency campaign in the Anbar province in the following months, while that summer they found a Shi'i ally in the firebrand Muqtada al-Sadr, whose militia rose up against the US in several towns in the south. Against this background, any attempt by Sunni moderates to join the “democratic process” offered by the January 30, 2005 elections would have meant committing suicide.

Pointing to Sadr, who stressed the Arab character of the Shi'a in his clash with the formerly Tehran-based Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Da'wa Party, the Association seemed justified in arguing that Iraq’s problems were political, and not religious or ethnic, in nature. The Shi'a, in their view, were working with the US because they sought political gain within the proportional system that favored their numerical majority, not because they were against the Sunnis as such. Moreover,
Muhammad ‘Ayyash al-Kubyasi argued, not only Shi‘a, or Kurds for that matter, had suffered from Saddam Hussein’s repression. In the new myth of the nation extolled by the Association, all groups had suffered equally. 12 To underscore cross-sectarian solidarity, the Association organized a rally at Umm al-Qura during the first attack on Falluja in April, in which, according to some reports, up to 200,000 Shi‘i’s and Sunnis participated. 13 At the same time it participated in the establishment of several joint Sunni-Shi‘i organizations to “encourage unity and end the division between the sects that has sprung up.”

The Association of Muslim Scholars did not succeed, however, in convincing a critical mass of Iraqis to adopt its view of the strategic picture. Their gestures toward pan-Iraqi solidarity petered out after Sistani’s acceptance of the elections scheme in October 2004. In a mirror image of the Association’s platform denouncing the January elections as movement stood Dulaymi, head of the Sunni Endowment. He argued that the boycott of the January elections had been a disaster and that the Sunni Arab community should take part in the “political process.” Otherwise, they would be completely and perhaps permanently marginalized, politically and economically. Dulaymi urged his co-religionists to offer input to the committee appointed by the transitional national assembly to draft a permanent constitution for Iraq.

Other Sunni Arab leaders, including the Iraqi Islamic Party and Ahmad al-Samarra‘i, imam of the Umm al-Qura mosque, warmly welcomed this turn toward engagement with the nascent state. On April 1, al-Samarra‘i issued a fatwa, signed by 64 prominent Sunni clerics, many of them members of the Association, in which he urged Sunni Arab young men to join the National Guard. The Guard’s recruitment among Shi‘a meant that, increasingly, the clash between the US and insurgents was turning into an intra-Iraqi confrontation with clear sectarian overtones. The fatwa demonstrated that the Sunni leadership was deeply disturbed by the Shi‘i and Kurdish takeover of the state, which they feared would further damage Sunni interests. The appointment of Bayan Jabr Solagh, a former high-ranking official in SCIRI’s Ba‘r Brigades, as minister of interior confirmed their worst suspicions.

Meanwhile, and despite promises to the contrary, the leadership of the transitional government did not exactly bend over backwards to locate Sunnis to serve on the constitution drafting committee. Only after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Baghdad in May to push Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari and President Jalal Talabani to include the Sunni Arabs did their numbers on the 55-member constitutional committee increase from the original two to 15. Their participation, however, proved an enormous disappointment. By the time they were included in June, the Kurds and Shi‘a had already tailored the draft constitution to their liking. Due to the intense pressure exerted by the US to reach an agreement before the deadline of August 15, the negotiations brought out the differences between the groups instead of bringing them closer to each other.

As the contents of the draft constitution leaked out in July and August, Sunni Arab leaders registered especially strong objections to three components. They regarded the inclusion of an article outlining procedures for ongoing “debaathification” of the Iraqi state as a gross insult and, de facto, a way of excluding Sunni Arabs from the government. They resented the clause reading that “the Arab people of Iraq are part of the Arab nation,” which seemed to imply that Iraq as a whole is not part of the Arab nation. Third and foremost, they rejected the sections allowing Iraq’s transformation into a federation in which provinces might acquire rights over future oil finds instead of the central state. The majority of Sunni

The Association’s most redeeming project, the search for allies among the Shi‘a, has not been very successful.

The sectarian-ethnic dividing lines were especially clear-cut on January 30, when the combination of boycott calls and rampant insecurity kept Sunni Arab turnout extremely low—as little as 2 percent in the Anbar province. Moderates and hardliners alike stayed home. As a result, Sunni Arabs were not represented in numbers proportionate to their share of the population in the transitional national assembly, and their inclusion in important political decisions has occurred only at the suffrance of the victorious Kurdish and Shi‘i religious parties.

Toward Engagement

Soon afterward, moderate Sunni Arab leaders seized the initiative from the hardliners. At the forefront of this
Arab leaders argued that voters should take part in the referendum, but only to vote no. Six insurgent organizations issued the same call, and some offered to protect the ballot boxes during the referendum. This newfound unity was, however, undermined two days before the referendum when the Iraqi Islamic Party and the Sunni Endowment, in return for concessions from the government, especially a major revision of the debaathification article, urged their followers to vote yes. Hardliners emerged to denounce this step immediately. The Baghdad headquarters of the Iraqi Islamic Party was bombed and its Falluja office was set on fire.

Aspirations Unrealized

For its part, the Association of Muslim Scholars retained its rigid attitude toward the post-Saddam political transition during the constitution drafting process, refusing to send a member to the Sunni delegation on the constitutional committee. The group’s Sunni rivals were more flexible, joining the process belatedly and turning the negotiations to somewhat to their advantage by depicting the negotiators of the Kurdish and Shi’i religious parties as intransigent and self-interested. Even after the draft constitution was rejected by the Sunni negotiators, instead of calling for a mass mobilization to vote no in the referendum, Muhammad ‘Ayyash al-Kubaysi issued a fatwa formulated in the most negative terms, calling upon the Association’s followers to vote against the constitution, but only with the utmost reluctance. While he upheld Association dogma that it is illegal to vote under occupation, he argued that under present “exceptional circumstances” one could break this rule. As one’s survival depended upon political participation, it had become a “necessity” (darura), provided that participation did not hamper the jihad against the US or lead to “cooperation” (muhadana) with the enemy. In an open letter, the Association was even more negative. While condemning the draft constitution, the letter left it to voters themselves to decide whether to vote no or to boycott the referendum, warning them that, if they opted to vote, politicians could mislead them. It is clear that the Association, although it is not anti-parliamentarian in principle and rejects the constitution because it does “not present the will of the people,” has not contributed much to disseminating democratic concepts.

The Association of Muslim Scholars has constructed an ideology on the basis of resistance to the US occupation, and its relations with other groups in Iraq are seen entirely from this perspective. Consequently, the Association does not realize that a shift in power has taken place from the US to the Shi’i and Kurdish parties in the transitional government. In this respect, its most redeeming project, the search for allies among the Shi’a, has not been
very successful. The alliance with Sadr would reemerge only during negotiations over the draft constitution a year later, when Sadr organized mass demonstrations against federalism in close cooperation with the leaders of the Association and possibly former regime elements as well. In Ramadi and other “Sunni triangle” towns, demonstrators hoisted pictures of Sadr next to those of Saddam Hussein. Sadr also intervened on behalf of the Association when the latter accused the Badr Brigades, operating under the guise of security forces, of waging a campaign of terror against Sunni clerics, particularly members of the Association. From the time of the invasion until the end of September 2005, an Association report claims, 107 ‘ulama’ have been assassinated and 163 arrested, and 663 Sunni mosques have been destroyed or taken over. The Association’s leadership has not been spared, and both Harith al-Dhari and Bashar al-Faydhi lost a brother to assassins’ bullets during the turmoil of the past two years.

The Association’s concentration on the most radical Shi’i groups and its obsession with the occupation and armed resistance has not only alienated SCIRI and Da’wa, but also the more neutral figure of Sistani, who has also criticized the federalism provisions in the new constitution. Meanwhile, Sunni organizations that are willing to act like political parties, like the Iraqi Islamic Party, have partly transcended the confines of the Sunni Arab minority, an achievement the Association still only aspires to. Although its demand for a timetable for the withdrawal of US troops has been popular, the Association for Muslim Scholars’ inflexibility has prevented it from becoming accepted as the Sunni equivalent to the marja’iyya. Its future influence will depend on the success of other Sunni organizations in mobilizing Sunni Arabs to take part in the December 2005 elections.

Endnotes
1 Interview with ’Abd al-Salam al-Kubaysi, al-Sabil [Amman], October 7, 2003.
4 Most of the issues of the series have been published in abridged form by al-Sabil, the Islamist weekly commonly associated with the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, between February and August of 2005. The Association’s website now migrated to http://www.iraq-amsi.org/.
8 “Al-Muqawama wa wajib al-waqt,” Min fiqh al-muqawama, part X, published in

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al-Sabil, April 26, 2005.
10 Interview with Muhammad 'Ayyah al-Kubaysi in al-Sabil, February 1, 2005.
12 Ibid.
14 IslamOnline.net, August 22, 2005.
16 Interview with ‘Abd al-Salam al-Kubaysi in al-Sabil, June 28, 2005.
17 For the full text of the fatwa, issued on August 19, 2005, see http://www.thissis-syria.net.
19 al-Sabil, August 13, 2005.
21 IslamOnline.net, September 25, 2005.

Correction
There was an editorial error in Bassel Salloukh's article, "Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed," in the last issue. The forces arrayed against Christian militias in 1976 called themselves the Lebanese National Movement, not the Muslim National Movement. We regret the error.
The roughly two million Shi’a of Saudi Arabia live in a sea of sectarian hostility. Although the rise of their Iraqi co-religionists to power has emboldened their own communal advocacy, it has also set back their long struggle to dissociate themselves in their fellow citizens’ minds from the Iranian bogeyman.

Shi’is in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have watched Iraq’s political transformation with a combination of horror and optimism. Iraq’s slide toward civil war, the carnage wrought by militant violence and the targeted slaughter of thousands of Iraqi Shi’is by Sunni insurgents have sown fears among Shi’a in the kingdom that they might be the next to suffer bloodshed. Their worries are not unwarranted. They live in a sea of sectarian hostility, where the Sunni government and its clerical backers have long made clear their antipathy for the Muslim minority sect.

The violence in Iraq has led Saudi Arabian Shi’is to distance themselves from the war and the US role in bringing Iraqi Shi’is to power. Even so, the new political dynamic there has fed a growing opportunism, feelings set in motion by both domestic

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and regional events. Many now believe that with the recent accession of King Abdallah, who is widely viewed as sympathetic to Shi’is, and with the balance of power shifting in the region, resolution of long-standing Shi’a grievances may finally be achievable. Shi’is demand inclusion in formal politics, the right to observe religious rituals and the right to move their struggle against the extreme anti-Shi’ism that permeates society and is condoned by the state into the public sphere.

As many as two million Shi’is live in Saudi Arabia, where they make up between 10–15 percent of the population. Although some live in the cities of Mecca, Medina and Riyadh, the majority of Shi’is are concentrated in the two oases of Qatif and al-Hasa in the kingdom’s Eastern Province, a region that is also home to most of Saudi Arabia’s massive oil reserves. Most Saudi Arabian Shi’is are from the “Twelver” branch that claims the majority of the world’s Shi’a; they believe that the last successor to the Prophet Muhammad as religio-political leader of Muslims was the twelfth imam who went into occultation in the ninth century. A smaller community of around 100,000 Isma’ili’s, who observe an offshoot of Shi’ism that traces imamic descent from the seventh imam, makes its home in Najran near the southern border with Yemen.

The Shi’is’ sense of vulnerability is easy to understand. Although sectarian violence has only been episodic in the twentieth century, leading religious scholars in the kingdom have denounced Shi’is as apostates, and since the founding of Saudi Arabia in 1932 have periodically called for their extermination. Historicall, Saudi leaders have done little to tone down anti-Shi’a rhetoric and at times have manipulated the sentiment that fuels it. Until the end of the twentieth century, the kingdom’s rulers preferred publicly to ignore the Shi’is’ existence. The nationalist narrative popularized in recent years in various media, including the press, national television, historical texts and most visibly a series of exhibits displayed at an annual Riyadh fair called the Janadriyya, spotlights the “heroic” efforts of the kingdom’s founder, ‘Abd al-’Aziz, in bringing together warring tribes. It scarcely mentions the Shi’a. But recent events have made this erasure untenable.

With Iraq possibly disintegrating along sectarian lines and hundreds and perhaps thousands of Saudi Arabian Sunnis taking part in the anti-occupation and anti-Shi’a insurgency, many in Saudi Arabia fear that the spread of sectarian violence is just a matter of time. Remarkably, the Shi’is’ anticipation that they will eventually be targeted by their fellow countrymen and the widely held belief that Saudi rulers have abetted, if not actually supported, sectarian violence have not altered the Shi’is’ pursuit of rapprochement and cooperation with the state.

In recent years, liberal-minded and even Sunni Islamist reformers in the kingdom have welcomed Shi’is as part of a small but vocal reform lobby that has pressed Saudi Arabia’s rulers for the expansion of political rights and greater religious tolerance. Some Saudi leaders, particularly King Abdallah, have given Shi’is reason for hope by cautiously supporting the community’s call for greater rights and an end to systemic discrimination. But it is not clear how much support there is within the Al Saud for relief for the embattled minority. Inasmuch as the Shi’i ascendency in Iraq has emboldened their co-religionists in Saudi Arabia, it has also intensified anti-Shi’ism in the kingdom. Most obviously, although it does not manifest itself openly, there is support for the anti-Shi’a and anti-occupation violence, as many Saudi Arabians consider the US occupation and the Iraqi Shi’as’ ascendency one and the same. Perhaps more importantly, the belief in the kingdom that Iran is playing an increasingly active role in shaping Iraqi politics is resuscitating old animosities about a pan-Shi’a threat, a trend that does not bode well for regional security or for Shi’is living in Saudi Arabia.

A Savior from the Al Saud?

Setting aside decades of political oppression, suffering and their distrust of the royal family in general, most Shi’is embraced Abdallah when he ascended to the throne in early August 2005. Many consider him the best hope for much needed political and social reform as well as the only likely champion for tolerance in a country better known for its religious virulence and fanatical anti-Shi’ism. A community leader from Qatif said that endorsements for the new king rang out from the pulpits of mosques and the daisies of community centers (husseinyyas) across the region. A busload of clerics, religious scholars and other political figures even trekked to Riyadh to pay homage to the new monarch and pledge loyalty after his predecessor’s death. On the widespread and very public support for Abdallah’s succession, an activist remarked: “I have never seen anything like it.”

In spite of the embrace of the new king, however, the Shi’i community remains deeply skeptical of the kingdom’s rulers and their willingness or ability to deal genuinely and effectively with the challenge of sectarianism. Even Abdallah, who has supported Shi’is in the past, is viewed as insufficiently proactive, a potentially critical but conservative ally who must be prodded to act. A Shi’i activist noted that while the new king is compassionate, he “responds to rather than initiates discussions about community grievances.” Abdallah has been the focal point of Shi’i communal advocacy since 2003, when he received a delegation bearing a petition signed by 450 Shi’i men and women entreat ing him for help in rolling back “fanatical sectarian tendencies stimulating hatred,” protecting Shi’a from official and unofficial forms of discrimination, and securing Shi’i representation in local and national government. With talk of reform more open since then, Shi’is have become more aggressive in pursuing their interests and more shrewd in using Abdallah’s public embrace of tolerance and pluralism as an excuse to align him with their interests, which they achieve by emphasizing whenever possible that he is their defender.

The Shi’i political strategy is not new. Since the early 1990s, the most popular political network, the Shi’a Islamic Reform Movement headed by Hasan al-Saffar, has promoted improved relations with the ruling family and Saudi Arabian Sunnis. Shi’i leaders have emphasized that the rebelliousness that dominated
the community’s politics in previous decades, resulting in widespread violence in November and December 1979, was not an effective instrument for resolving Shi’a grievances.4

Their strategy held true to form in the weeks after King Fahd’s death. Within two months of his accession, King Abdullah hosted two significant meetings with different Shi’a delegations, who quickly mobilized to support the new sovereign and press him to move more boldly. In mid-August, Saffar headed a mission of activists and leaders from the Eastern Province to Jidda to meet with the new regent. There, Saffar, who has guided the Shi’a community since the late 1970s, and the other delegates offered personal oaths of loyalty (bay’a) as well as their commitment to the Saudi Arabian nation. The delegates also used the meeting to plead for amnesty for political prisoners who have languished in Saudi prisons since the mid-1990s, and to remind the monarch of the need for ongoing efforts to end anti-Shi’ism.5

On September 17, 2005, five Isma’ili leaders from Najran met with Abdullah and added their own pledges of loyalty. Emboldened by Abdullah’s comment immediately after his accession that he sought “prayer and advice” and desired to install “the principles of justice and equality among [Saudi Arabsians] without distinguishing between them,” they also delivered a respectful letter filled with demands. The five first appealed for opportunities to “serve the nation,” asking directly for enhanced roles in and an end to their exclusion from the “highest institutions in the country including the Council of Ministers, the Majlis al-Shura [Consultative Council], the Royal Court and the Foreign Ministry.”

While there is little reason to doubt the sincerity of the letter writers’ interest in greater involvement in government, the letter’s main objective was to highlight continued frustration with anti-Isma’ili discrimination and plead with Abdullah to end punitive state policies directed against them. Most importantly, the petition asked for amnesty for political prisoners jailed in 2000 following lethal violence between the authorities and residents in Najran. In April of that year, the governor of Najran dispatched security forces to the al-Mansura mosque, the main Isma’ili center of learning, where they arrested Sheikh Ahmad bin Muhammad al-Khawayf, a cleric and teacher who was subsequently imprisoned on charges of sorcery. In the clashes that followed, protesters killed at least one security officer and wounded several others. But it was the Isma’ili community that endured the harshest suffering. Security forces killed two protesters and arrested hundreds of others, many of whom alleged torture at the hands of their captors. Two years
after the unrest, King Fahd pardoned an unknown number of prisoners, halved the jail terms for 70 others and commuted the death sentences of 17 to ten years in jail.6

In addition to the hardnosed police response, Saudi officials expelled thousands of Isma’ils from Najran, forcing them to relocate to other regions, where they remain today, forbidden from returning home. The government’s attempt to break up Isma’il social and cultural cohesion in the south echoed similar efforts at manipulation of sectarian demography throughout the twentieth century, including attempts to dilute the numerical strength of Shi’is in the Eastern Province by displacing them or flooding the region with settlers from elsewhere in the kingdom. Claiming that many of their exiles had grown old, feeble and impoverished, the Najran petitioners called for their return on humanitarian grounds. For the remainder, they cited the need for qualified people and local leadership to return to the region in order to reduce unemployment and aid those forced into poverty.

As was the case with Saffar’s delegation, the 2005 meetings were not the first of their kind between Abdallah and the Isma’ils. In April 2001, a year after the violence in Najran, a handful of Isma’il activists met with the then crown prince in Jidda, where they beseeched him to protect the region from what they believed were attempts by the local governor, Prince Mish‘al, and Interior Minister Prince Nayif to impose a system of apartheid that discriminated against the Isma’ilis, a reference to the expulsion of thousands the year before. Furthermore, they claimed that the two princes were working directly to provoke a confrontation between the region’s Shi’is and Sunni radicals by inundating Najran with Wahhabi mosques and schools and defaming Isma’il beliefs. Reports of the meeting, which reportedly upset Prince Nayif, landed several of the activists in prison in spite of an alleged promise by Abdallah that he would address their grievances. Abdallah eventually intervened to orchestrate their release, although he was unable to order the right of return for those expelled from Najran the previous year to secure the release of the remaining prisoners.

Abdallah’s willingness to meet with both groups of Shi’i activists after becoming king demonstrated his continued engagement with the beleaguered minority. More importantly, that he permitted the details of the meetings to be disclosed publicly, although they were barely commented upon inside the kingdom, sent a clear signal to Shi’i bashers that Abdallah remains committed in principle to the pursuit of Islamic pluralism within Saudi Arabia, an objective he made a centerpiece of a national unity and national dialogue campaign he launched in 2003. But in spite of appearances, it remains to be seen if Abdallah is willing or able to effect significant change. The king no doubt understands that while perception matters, it has little bearing on political reality in Saudi Arabia.

The Politics of Hostility

Whatever Abdallah’s actual interest in a campaign to roll back sectarian enmity in Saudi Arabia, he did little as crown prince to achieve comprehensive results. Shi’is enjoy only a few more rights than in the past. Most important is the ability to observe the ‘Ashura holiday on the Tenth of Muharram, the holiest Shi’a holiday and the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. Restrictions have eased on the building of Shi’a mosques. But the most severe forms of discrimination, including the unfettered publication of anti-Shi’a religious texts, anti-Shi’ism in schools, restrictions on employment in the government and in private business, and the royal family’s refusal to include Shi’is in representative numbers in its national institutions, such as the Majlis al-Shura, a quasi-legislative body that advises the monarch, where four out of the 150 members are Shi’is, remain firmly in place. There are powerful reasons to doubt that Abdallah can achieve more as king.

It is not at all clear that Abdallah’s support for greater tolerance is widely shared within the royal family or that he even considers it a political priority. While he has been nominally in charge of running the state’s affairs since his brother and predecessor Fahd suffered a stroke in 1995, Abdallah hardly enjoys free rein to do as he pleases. Rivals, including his half-brothers Sultan (the crown prince), Nayif and Salman (the governor of Riyadh), wield considerable authority and restrain the king’s ability to forge ahead with what they may see as risky or disagreeable measures. Considering that anti-Shi’ism retains a powerful grip on popular thought in Saudi Arabia, a grip rendered tighter by the Iraq war, directly confronting sectarian animosity is fraught with uncertainty. So ingrained is the hostility for Shi’is in Saudi Arabia that leaders in the royal family, even if they are interested in dealing with the phenomenon, are unable to root out anti-Shi’i ideologues in powerful state bureaucracies and non-governmental organizations, let alone stem the production of hate materials and their dissemination.

The roots of such hatred are directly traceable to the state’s historical reliance on a particularly austere interpretation of Islam, Wahhabism, for its political authority. But the commanding, normative power that anti-Shi’ism enjoys today is more the result of political decisions made by the government in the late 1970s and 1980s, when Saudi leaders feared the rise of Shi’a Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini, who directly threatened Saudi rulers by encouraging coups, loudly broadcast his desire to export the Islamic Revolution and sparked a decade-long security crisis in the region. Although Khomeini played no direct role in fostering domestic unrest inside Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Revolution did help galvanize civil disobedience by the kingdom’s Shi’a in 1979.

To counter the perceived Khomeinist threat, Saudi Arabia threw its weight behind ideological efforts that excoriated the Shi’a as a global enemy (like the Soviets in Afghanistan) and damned what they viewed as un-Islamic Shi’i political and theological principles. These efforts included the publication and distribution of key monographs exploring the theological and political justifications for anti-Shi’ism, including a broad assault on Shi’a theology written by Ibrahim Sulayman al-Jab-
han in 1980, entitled *Removing the Darkness and Awakening to the Danger of Shi’ism to Muslims and Islam*. Jabban’s book was licensed by the office of the highest religious authority in Saudi Arabia. Other tracts followed throughout the 1980s, including a series of malicious volumes by the vitriolic Pakistani author Ihsan Ilahi Zahir, *The Shi’a and the Sunna, The Shi’a and the Qur’an, The Shi’a and the Prophet’s Family* and a stand-alone screed against Isma’ili.

Even after Khomeini’s death and an improvement in Saudi-Iranian relations, the production of anti-Shi’a material continued apace. In the early 1990s, Nasir al-‘Umar, a particularly vicious Sunni cleric, wrote a treatise called “The Rafida in the Land of Tawhid.” *Rafida*, or *rawafid*, is a pejorative term meaning “rejectionists,” a reference to how radical Sunnis consider the Shi’a to be outside Islam. Religious edicts (*fatawa*) issued by other well-known clerics, including several by Abdallah bin Abd al-Rahman al-Jibrin—then a member of the Higher Council of ‘Ulama—condoned and even mandated the killing of Shi’is. As late as 2002, a leading Saudi Arabia-based charity, the International Islamic Relief Organization, circulated a pamphlet entitled *One Hundred Questions and Answers on Charitable Work* in the Eastern Province. The pamphlet contained passages slandering the Shi’a as apostates and called for efforts to “get rid of their evil.”

### The Bogyeman Returns

The Iraq war has stoked sectarian ill will. Internet discussion forums popularized by Saudi Arabian visitors are full of vitriolic denunciations of Shi’is inside the kingdom and out. At least one website supportive of Sunni jihadis reported a widely believed rumor that militants planned to kill the Shi’a cleric Hasan al-Saffar during ‘Ashura in 2004. Similar threats may have been leveled at Shi’a communities in Bahrain and Kuwait in 2005.

Most troubling to Saudi Arabians is the appearance of cooperation between the US and the new Shi’i power brokers in Iraq. Nasir al-‘Umar launched a simultaneous direct assault on Iraqi Shi’is and the US when he denounced the “strong relationship between America and the *rafida*” and argued that they were both the enemies of Muslims everywhere.

The appearance of coordination between the US and Iraqi Shi’is to marginalize and oppress Iraqi Sunnis has produced widespread anger. During the November 2004 US-led siege of Falluja, popular websites published images of Iraqi Shi’i national guardsmen carrying pictures of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani alongside photographs of US tanks with rosaries dangling from their barrels, providing symbolic power to arguments about the forces aligning against Sunni Muslims. Speculation that the US and Shi’is are actively working to alter the sectarian shape of the region has been further fueled by the widespread belief that Iran, the bogyeman from the 1980s, is actively promoting the establishment of what, in December 2004, Jordanian King Abdullah II called a “crescent” of Shi’i-dominated polities stretching from Iran to
Lebanon “that will be very destabilizing for the Gulf countries and for the whole region.”

In addition to popular outrage about the sectarian transformation of Iraq, fears that Iran intends to use its influence in Iraq to ignite a wider conflict are evident within the royal family. On September 20, 2005, Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Saud Al Faisal worried aloud at the Council of Foreign Relations that “if you allow...for a civil war to happen between the Shiites and the Sunnis, Iraq is finished forever. It will be dismembered. It will not only be dismembered, it will cause so many conflicts in the region that it will bring the whole region into a turmoil that will be hard to resolve.” The foreign minister seemed most upset by the prospect that the US was “handing the whole country over to Iran without reason.” In apparent disbelief, he said, “It seems out of this world that you do this. We fought a war to keep Iran from occupying Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait.” King Abdallah was more circumspect in comments he made to an American television news program, but he hardly put the issue to rest. “Iran is a friendly country,” he said. “Iran is a Muslim country. We hope that Iran will not become an obstacle to peace and security in Iraq. This is what we hope for and this is what we believe the Iraqi people hope for.”

Saud Al Faisal’s comments are important not only for what they reveal about Saudi Arabia’s regional interests, but also the logic that continues to frame its approach to geostrategic challenges in the Gulf and how they will likely impact domestic sectarian tensions. While the kingdom has maintained much improved relations with Iran since 1990s, it is clear that the old political anxieties and uncertainties remain, as does the old anti-Shi’i thinking that framed it. The reemergence of Iran as a regional threat, a sense compounded by its alleged pursuit of nuclear weapons, will likely push anti-Shi‘i thinking even further. A few weeks after the foreign minister made his provocative comments, Sa’d bin Abdallah al-Barik, a contributor to the website of Salman al-Awda, a prominent Saudi Arabian cleric who has a history of political activism, wrote an article called “The Tribulation of the Sunnis: Is Iraq the Gateway for Iranian Shi‘ism?” The article is significant not only because it demonstrates the interest of Saudi Arabia’s powerful religious scholars in the issue, but because Salman al-Awda had previously set aside his personal sectarian prejudices to work with Shi‘is in King Abdallah’s national unity project. If al-Awda determines that working with Shi‘is is no longer politically useful, then there is little hope that the kingdom’s sectarian problems will go away any time soon.

Saudi Arabian Shi‘i political leaders are well aware of how fragile the current political moment might be. To be sure, the Iraq war has unleashed a wave of foreign pressure on Saudi rulers to reform and affirmed Saudi Arabian Shi‘is in their conviction that they, like the Shi‘a of Iraq, deserve more political opportunity. But more importantly, and perhaps tragically in the end, the war has set back the kingdom’s Shi‘a in their titanic struggle to delink themselves from the politics of sectarianism set in motion by Iran’s Islamic Revolution and to assert a sense of loyalty that transcends sectarian difference. Saudi Arabian Shi‘is are caught in a delicate balancing act, forced to constantly renew and demonstrate their loyalty to a state that has historically displayed overwhelming animus toward them, while outmaneuvering charges that they are preternaturally bonded with their co-religionists elsewhere in the region. The rise of the Shi‘is in Iraq, and more importantly the role that the Iraq war has played in re-politicizing sectarianism in the region more generally, has made their task considerably more difficult.

Endnotes
1 According to government figures, there are 16.5 million Saudi Arabsians living in the Kingdom. There are no reliable figures for the number of Shi‘is in Saudi Arabia. Community leaders put the number at around 1.5 million.
3 All interviews were conducted by the author in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain between April and August 2005.
4 There are Shi‘a political groups that have previously rejected the legitimacy of and cooperating with the Al Saud, most notably the network widely known as Saudi Hizballah, whose local name is the Followers of the Line of the Imam (Khomeini) (Ansar Khatt al-Imam). See International Crisis Group, The Shi‘ite Question in Saudi Arabia (Brussels/Amman, September 2005), p. 6.
5 Reuters, October 2, 2005.
6 Agence France Presse, September 22, 2005.
7 In Arabic, Tabdid al-zalam wa tanbih al-niyam ila khatar al-tashayyu’ ‘ala al-muslimin wa al-islam.
9 The original threat against al-Saffar was reported at http://www.d-unnah.net.
10 International Crisis Group, p. 11.

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States of Fragmentation in North Africa

Paul Silverstein

Nearly 50 years after independence, Morocco and Algeria continue to struggle with unresolved tensions in the definition of the nation-state. Declarations of national unity by ideological fiat, even when enforced by military might, have been inadequate to silence the questions raised by movements for ethnic and regional autonomy.

Nearly 50 years after independence, the North African states of Algeria and Morocco face challenges to their national unity and territorial integrity. In Algeria, a contentious referendum on a “Peace and National Reconciliation” charter proposed by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika passed on September 29, 2005, in spite of opposition calls for a boycott. The charter, which will grant members of the military and Islamist militias immunity from prosecution for all but the most heinous crimes committed during the country’s 13-year civil war, was vigorously criticized by local and global human rights organizations for sidestepping victims’ rights in the name of regime consolidation and military impunity. Meanwhile, Morocco, also in the final stages of “turning the page” on its “years of lead”—the period of human rights abuse in the name of state security under the deceased King Hassan II—has found itself the

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object of international scrutiny for its strong-arm handling of sub-Saharan African trans-migrants attempting desperate crossings into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in October. Reports of brutality by Moroccan security forces (at least 14 migrants lost their lives in the attempted crossings) and mass deportations from refugee centers belie overt state attempts over the last six years to present Morocco as a modern democratic state that guarantees human rights writ large.

In both the Moroccan and Algerian cases, the authorities face ethnic, racial and religious fragmentation from within and political-demographic pressures from without. These internal and external challenges are directly linked. Morocco’s increasingly close trade and diplomatic relations with the European Union and the United States are premised on its ability to control its borders and prosecute jihadi groups with supposed links to the bombings in Madrid and London and the assassination of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, all while proving itself more respectful of human rights and democracy. To accomplish this paradoxical task, the state has sought an ally in the secularist Berber opposition that has consistently looked down upon black populations—in spite of much talk of “Africanity.” The Algerian state has struck similar alliances with Marxist and Berberist movements against the Islamist opposition in its own war on terror, although this strategy has proven increasingly difficult in light of calls for autonomy in the Berberophone region of Kabylia in the wake of the regional uprising of April 2001. A fractured ethnic, racial and religious landscape thus persists as the ground on which the contemporary North African politics of violence takes place.

**Berbers and Arabs**

To speak of fragmentation in Morocco and Algeria is to reference a set of unresolved tensions in the definition of the nation-state following independence, achieved by Morocco in 1956 and Algeria in 1962. The nationalist movements in Algeria and Morocco, which were subsumed by the 1950s under the leadership of the National Liberation Front (FLN) and Istiqlal parties, respectively, forged national ideologies that insisted on Islam and Arabic as the unifying features of North Africa. Claims that Berberness was a foundational identity for nationhood were countered by historical narratives that insisted on the prior and voluntary fusion of Arabs and Berbers under the mantle of Islam. Although self-described Berber leaders were central to the national revolutions, and Berberophone regions were made to pay a heavy price by the French colonial army for their support of the fighters, these people and places were largely marginalized (sometimes violently) from the nationalist movements which eventually looked to the Arabophone centers of Algiers, Oran and Fez for the direction of the nascent states.

Upon assuming power, the ruling parties made it official: in the Moroccan constitution and the Algerian national charter, Islam and Arabic were named the national religion and language. The Algerian document decried Berber claims to cultural difference as “feudal survivals” and “obstacles to national integration.” Such national unity through ideological fiat was in and of itself insufficient, however. The repeated use of military might was required to suppress a variety of movements for regional autonomy and ethnic self-determination that arose in the immediate aftermath of independence. In Algeria, the Kabyle revolutionary leader Hocine Aït Ahmed led a ten-month insurrection beginning in September 1961 against the “ethnic fascism” of the single-party FLN government. Violently suppressed by the Algerian national army, Aït Ahmed’s Socialist Forces Front (FFS) remained active as an oppositional force in European exile until it was legalized as a political party after the 1989 liberalization. In the interim, the army remained ever vigilant of Kabyle regionalism, intervening with force during the student unrest and labor strikes of March-April 1980 (the “Berber Spring”) and October 1988.

In Morocco, the early years after independence witnessed a similar use of state violence to ensure national unity, particularly in the peripheral Berberophone regions that had been historically characterized as constituting (and continued to self-identify as) a “land of dissidence” (bilad al-siba) against the authority of the central state (al-makhzen). In 1957, the army of Crown Prince Moulay Hassan was forced to intervene in the southeastern Tafilalet province when the local governor, Addi ou Bihi, refused to accept the Rabat-based Ministry of Interior’s nomination of provincial qaids, jailed local members of the Istiqlal party and took direct control over the towns of Midelt and Rich. In December of the following year, a number of Berber tribes in the northern Rif mountains fought a three-month rebellion against central state rule. The revolt followed the government’s arrest of leaders of the rural-based Mouvement Populaire political movement, and the insurgents demanded neutral (non-Istiqlal) local administrators as well as more state investment in the region. The eventual repression by Moulay Hassan’s forces was brutal, with artillery fire and aerial bombardments of the dissident regions resulting in severe casualties, and the near decimation of the Beni Ouriaghel tribe. In 1972–1973, in conjunction with the attempted assassination of King Hassan II by army forces loyal to General Mohammed Oufkir, Berber groups in the Middle Atlas, High Atlas and pre-Saharan southeast amassed arms and attempted a revolutionary secession. Likewise severely repressed, hundreds of the participants were jailed, and over 20 were sentenced to death and subsequently shot.

In spite of the failure of these particular movements, the memory of these threats to the territorial integrity of the state continues to haunt the Algerian and Moroccan regimes. In response, increasingly powerful Interior Ministries have pursued the centralization of political authority, the sur-
Veillance of dissent, the ongoing economic marginalization of Berberophone regions in favor of more loyal areas, and explicit processes of cultural assimilation through the Arabization of the media and the school system. Until the late 1980s, advocates of Berber culture were consistently accused of colonial toadyism and sectarianism by the national media, and were on occasion arrested for sedition, if not forced into exile. Indeed, nationalist ideologues dismissed the very notion of Berber ethnic particularity as a colonial invention.

In spite of these efforts, a Berber cultural renaissance has transpired since the late 1960s, with activists operating originally in the diaspora (primarily in France) and increasingly in North Africa proper to make Berberness an object of political struggle, create a standardized language (Tamazight), and disseminate notions of a pan-Berber identity through cultural associations, newspapers and political song. In Algeria, these activities were directed by the Berber Cultural Movement formed in the wake of the 1980 Berber Spring, and later by the rival, Kabylia-based FFS and Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), parties legalized after 1989. By the mid-1990s, the state had largely acceded to the demands, agreeing to incorporate Tamazight into the national media and the school system, establishing a High Commission on Amazighité (Berberness) and recognizing Tamazight as “one of the foundations of national identity” in the November 1996 constitutional reform. The RCD even joined coalition governments in the late 1990s under the elected presidents Liamine Zéroual and Bouteflika, both of whom were primarily backed by the military.

These gains on the cultural front have not, however, translated into the institutional self-determination that many Kabyles have demanded—at times, violently. During the civil war that began in 1992 but reached its nadir in the late 1990s, Kabylia was a battleground where assertions of de facto autonomy were countered by measures to centralize government control. In general, while the civil war destabilized local authority in much of the country, the violence allowed the military to reassert its absolute control of the Algerian state, canceling much of the electoral processes and democratic openings achieved in the late 1980s. Among other efforts, the state sought to expand its power locally through the formation of civilian “patriot” militias—officially “Self-Defense Groups”—intended to fight a proxy war against Islamist forces. Whatever the effectiveness of these organizations, with many coming to serve essentially as private armies for local mayors, their presence in Kabylia ironically provided certain villages an aura of control over their borders and internal affairs.

Nonetheless, this sense of self-determination proved to be superficial and ultimately fragile. The assassination of political singer Lounès Matoub in June 1998 at the hands of unknown assailants, and the killing of teenager Massinissa Guermah in April 2001 by military gendarmes, underlined for many Kabyles the extant conditions of hogra, an expression referring to socio-economic marginalization and inequality, a lack of transparent justice and treatment as “second-class citizens” (citoyens de seconde zone). Accusing the Algerian government of ultimate responsibility for the two deaths, young Kabyle men took to the streets of the provincial capitals of Tizi Ouzou and Bejaïa, as well as other towns throughout the region, chanting “Government, Assassin” (Pouvoir, Assassin), attacking local government offices and confronting government security forces. While the 1998 demonstrations died down after a week with minimal casualties, the 2001 “Black Spring” proved much more deadly, with at least 60 young men killed and over 300 injured by state troops, and aftershocks continuing throughout the year.

The violence in Kabylia provoked a number of political ramifications that have furthered the effective regional and ethnic fragmentation of the country. In the first place, the FFS-RCD impasse that had hamstrung Kabyle politics was broken down, with the RCD breaking from its coalition with Bouteflika’s ruling party, and both parties participating in joint efforts to promote a peaceful settlement. Moreover, these parties were transcended by a new political actor, the Coordination of ‘Aarouch, Daïras and Communes (CADC), which united a series of non-governmental, village-based decision-making bodies into a single negotiating partner with the state. If the RCD and FFS had been discredited in the eyes of the general populace due to their inability to achieve a minimum of security, social welfare and economic expansion in Kabylia—and indeed local offices of the two parties were directly attacked in the two sets of demonstrations—the CADC managed to mobilize 500,000 people in a “black march” in Tizi Ouzou on May 21, 2001 that marked the end of the major violence. Alongside the CADC, several other new regional actors emerged: a nebulous Armed Berber Movement (MAB) and a France-based Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylia (MAK). If the MAB—which vowed, in the wake of Matoub’s assassination, to rid Kabylia of Islamists by any means necessary—provided the state with an excuse to maintain an armed presence in the region (and thus has been cited by conspiracy theorists as a government Trojan horse), the MAK has proved to be an enduring voice in the present conflict.
Disavowing the violence of the MAB, the MAK nonetheless advocates the creation of autonomous local government bodies and security forces that would replace the Algiers-directed communal assemblies and gendarmerie. While the MAK recognizes the rights of the national (and, to its mind, future federal) state to maintain an army, regulate inter-regional commerce and provide a single currency, it nonetheless proposes a separate Kabyle flag that would be hung alongside the Algerian one. In fact, throughout its Proposition for a Project of Autonomy for Kabylia, it consistently presents Kabylia and Algeria as parallel entities: “Kabylia will be more open to Algerians, and Algeria to Kabyles.”

Given the pressures for regional autonomy and the ethnic dimensions of the violence, Bouteflika’s recent Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation should be read as more than simply an attempt to encourage the remaining 1,000 or so Islamist fighters to give up their arms and thus mark the end of a civil war that has been substantially over since 1999. In the first place, Algeria remains an important partner to the US in its global “war on terror,” so any indemnification of Islamist militia members is necessarily balanced by the increasing surveillance and “uprooting” of groups like the Salafist Group for Prayer and Combat (GSPC) with declared ties to al-Qaeda. As well, the enduring challenge to state national rule is the low-intensity warfare between military gendarmes and Kabyle civilians, marked by the widespread demands for the removal of the gendarmes from Kabylia. In this respect, the charter on “national reconciliation” signals an attempt by the regime to reinforce the “nation” as the super-ordinate vector of political practice and citizen loyalty, and to legitimize its leadership of said nation through a popular vote of approval. The importance of such symbolic support is paramount, not only so that the regime can promote its policies across the country in the wake of the hotly contested 2004 presidential election, but also so that it can prove to an international audience its respect for human rights. Such stakes are not lost on Kabyle political movements and parties, which have roundly condemned the charter for being simply a means for the regime to “auto-amnesty” and to continue to pursue violent means with near impunity. As Ferhat Mehenni of the MAK insisted at a July 25, 2005 press conference, Kabyles will not so easily forget their fallen comrades, whether those killed during the 1963 uprising, the Black Spring, or during any point in between.

Racial Politics

Relatively speaking, Morocco has experienced a calm transition from authoritarian rule to a regime of moderate transparency, with no protracted civil war or ethnic violence such as afflicted Algeria. Yet it too has been pursuing a process of national reconciliation designed to re-suture a nation ideologically and regionally fragmented by the state violence that persisted through the 1970s. While Berber associations have been an active element of urban civil society since the
In the mid-1980s, they were subject to heavy state surveillance, with six members of the southeastern association Tilelli arrested as late as 1994 for displaying signs written in Tamazight during a May Day parade in Errachidia. Responding to the international outcry protesting these arrests, the government promised a series of reforms that have subsequently led to the 2001 establishment of a Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) and the introduction of Tamazight into the media and primary school classrooms.

To a large extent, the opening of a dialogue between the state and the secularist Amazigh movement, while a sea change from even a decade before, has been part of a longer monarchical politics of cooptation. This cooptation has proven especially urgent in light of two contemporary factors: first, the very real challenges to state rule in the form of Islamist movements and jihadi groups, whose emerging presence in Morocco was made dramatically clear with the May 2003 bombings in Casablanca; second, the success of Berber associations (like the Rabat-based Tamaynut) in redefining Berberness as a cultural right and in mobilizing UNESCO, various EU commissions and international NGOs in support of such a claim. In this respect, IRCAM should be understood as part and parcel of both the Moroccan state’s efforts to “turn the page” on the past and its larger “war on terror.”

Moroccan Berber groups are understandably wary of this politics of cooptation. While many association members joined IRCAM as researchers or members of its advisory board, many others have remained on the periphery and have been vocally critical of its actions. The latter accuse the Moroccan state of trying to “folklorize” Berber culture, viewing IRCAM’s decision to adopt the Tifinagh script over the Latin one, and to standardize three regional dialects instead of a single Tamazight, as clear attempts to cut off the Moroccan Berber community from those in Algeria and the diaspora. Moreover, they argue that the exclusive focus on language and culture has sidelined more important issues over the control of local land and resources. As early as 1996, Tamaynut had advocated for Berber regional autonomy as defined by the self-determination of economic, social and cultural affairs. Such issues remain squarely on the agenda for those taking part in the amorphous Amazigh Movement (who have explicitly dropped the term “Culture” from their self-appellation), a group based in Rabat but made up of Berberophones from the southern and southeastern regions, most of whom had been members of Tamaynut before it
joined IRCAM. These activists keep in close contact with Kabyle militants over the Internet, host the latter when they visit Morocco and plot their own visions of Berber autonomy through the discourse of the MAK and other such groups.

More than simply an agenda item, Berber regional autonomy in Morocco has been an object of recent conflicts that have pitted local activists against state officials and their legal resources across a geographic spread that recapitulates the earlier struggles of the late 1950s and early 1970s, if at a lower scale of intensity. Since the establishment of IRCAM, many Berber cultural associations from the High Atlas mountains, the southern Sous valley and the pre-Saharan southeast have recentered their activities around socio-economic development, environmental protection and community education—treatting these arenas as equivalently subject to a universal discourse of human rights. In recent years, these groups have been involved in protests against state efforts to expropriate tribal lands for municipal, national or even private use. In February-March 2004, the Averroès Foundation for Education and Development based in the pre-Saharan town of Goulmima launched a sustained protest against the provincial governor’s attempt to procure the cession of five hectares of collective land to a non-local private investor in compensation for the latter’s loss of business following the construction of a new bridge across the river bed. Five members of the association were interrogated by the municipal police and threatened with arrest and criminal prosecution before the association was able to call on connections in Rabat to pressure the governor to drop the case. A smaller conflict erupted during the same period in neighboring Tinjdad over the state electric company’s attempts to secure local land for the building of an electrical relay station, with similar threats of prosecution narrowly averted. Members of the Association for Integration and Durable Development of the High Atlas region of the Tasemmit massif were not so lucky when they attempted to block the state’s establishment of a nature preserve for wild mouflon sheep that would cut off village inhabitants from their grazing lands and easy access to local market and educational centers. Three women from the area were sentenced to two months in prison for having cut a hole in the reserve’s boundary fence to gain access to a water source, and the president of the association was correspondingly put on trial for his role in “inciting racial hatred, tribalism, inciting destruction of public property, threatening the public order.”

If state accusations of “racial hatred” and “tribalism” were clearly exaggerated, in all three cases, the conflict was between state efforts at national development and the attempts of local groups to control resources that they identified in Berber tribal terms. In other words, the struggle is not merely taking place within the framework of ethnicity—between an Arabized state apparatus and a Berberophone “indigenous people” seeking regional autonomy—but also on a racialized terrain of contestation over the definition and control of the “local.” Berber activists’ claims to indigeneity in given localities are premised on a timeline that begins with the arrival of French colonizers. While Berberophones clearly antedated Arabophones in Morocco, they belonged generally to transhumant tribal confederations that battled each other for pastoral grazing rights and the ability to control local agriculture. What made this livelihood possible, particularly in the pre-Saharan regions, was the existence of an agrarian class of black sharecroppers, the Berber-speaking Haratine, who tilled the oasis fields as dependent clients of the Berber tribes, enjoying neither legal rights nor the ability to own and inherit land. The arrival of the French and the “pacification” of the bilad al-siba fixed the tribes and landholding relations in their place, with the French recognizing the Berbers’ tribal land claims.

The independent Moroccan state inherited this colonial legal architecture recognizing tribal claims, but simultaneously granted the Haratine citizenship, thus freeing them from their legal dependence on the Berber tribes and enabling the possibility of mobility and private land ownership. No longer able to benefit from an enforced Haratine labor regime, and subject to practices of partible inheritance whereby land was equally divided between the sons of the deceased, Berber residents of the pre-Saharan periphery had to seek additional means of livelihood, either through the establishment of small businesses, or through the upward social mobility enabled by the national educational system. In the 1960s and 1970s, young Berber men from the areas around Goulmima and Tinjdad achieved disproportionate success on national exams, moving into high positions within the state apparatus and the army as engineers and high-level functionaries. However, this success primarily resulted in the further fragmentation of local notable families, with migrated men setting up households in Casablanca or Rabat and keeping their distance from local affairs.

Haratine (or Iqbliyen, as former Haratine refer to themselves) mobility, in contrast, remained directly tied to local concerns. Lacking similar access to the state apparatus due to embedded racism and a relative distance from educational facilities, the Iqbliyen pursued migrant construction and factory work in the northern Moroccan cities and in Europe. Not only did they remit a large percentage of their income, they also for the most part returned to their oasis communities, transforming their economic capital into local social capital.
The continued silence of Berber activists on Western Sahara is why the government negotiates with them over cultural and linguistic rights.

In the form of land acquisition and the purchase of political influence. In this respect, both private land and political power began to pass from diminishing Berber households to demographically expanding Iqblien families, with Iqblien demanding and gaining representation on informal community councils and displacing Berbers as elected heads of municipal boards and assemblies.\(^\text{12}\)

This shift in the racialized political economy—what Hsain Ilahiane calls the “retribalization of the village space”\(^\text{13}\)—of southern and southeastern Morocco has only deepened the divide between Berber and Iqblien Moroccan citizens. In general, Iqblien, while Berber-speakers themselves and full participants in much of the ritual life that the Amazigh cultural movement highlights as markers of Berber culture, are suspicious of Berber associations and land-claim struggles as mere props for a tribalist politics for local resource dominance. Iqblien feel excluded from the social and economic promotion that claims to Berber cultural rights have enabled, whether for members of IRCAM or for the variety of association leaders, journalists and other engaged intellectuals now living and working in Rabat and abroad who have proﬁted from the marketing of Berber culture to the government and diasporic consumers. In the meantime, the Iqblien’s lack of active engagement in Berber politics has fostered further resentment from the majority of Berber activists from the region, who regard them as self-hating Berber-speakers, if not direct supporters of the makhzen. This resentment feeds into a larger racism that draws on an older form of ideological justiﬁcation for Haratine disenfranchisement, that blacks are without honor or asl (pastoral ancestry), merely “flies” (izzzen) who reproduce too much. Such racism persists among many Berber members of cultural and human rights associations, in spite of their avowal of universalist principles and detailing of “Africanty” as an element of Berber and Moroccan identity. Occasionally, this racialized ideological tension plays out violently, as occurred on the campus of the University of Errachidia in December 2003, when Iqblien members of a Marxist student group and Berber students in the Amazigh Cultural Movement physically fought over whether or not to support an exam boycott in support of the Palestinian intifada, resulting in several hospitalizations and one near fatality.

The Berber-Iqblien divide is matched by a lack of solidarity between the Amazigh movement and the fight for Sahrawi self-determination in the disputed Western Sahara. To a great extent, the wide participation of southern Berbers in the 1975 Green March—in which Hassan II mobilized 350,000 Moroccan citizens in an auto-da-fe occupation of lands left behind by the departing Spanish colonial regime—relegitimated them as loyal citizens in the eyes of the monarchy. Many of them have remained in the Sahara, benefiting from government living and educational subsidies. The continued silence of Berber activists on the Sahara question remains the condition of possibility for their ongoing negotiations with the government for cultural and linguistic rights. Such silence, combined with persistent racism, marks a black-Berber racial divide that parallels and occasionally reinforces ongoing Arab-Berber ethnic fragmentation.

Borders and Nations

It is literally upon this fragmented ethnic and racial landscape that the current crisis over African trans-migration takes place. On the one hand, the unresolved Sahara question, in conjunction with relaxed visa requirements for sub-Saharan Africans, creates a porous southern border zone under the parallel and competing administrations of the Moroccan state, the Sahrawi POLISARIO Front and the UN peacekeeping operation, all allowing southern migrants relatively easy entrance to Morocco. As migrant remittances and smuggling contribute substantially to the Moroccan economy, the Moroccan state appears unwilling to devote great resources to dismantling the migration circuit in toto, thus keeping Morocco a prominent transit point on the African migration route. On the other hand, a heavily reinforced northern border (particularly into Melilla and Ceuta), made all the more impermeable by new EU imperatives to restrict undocumented migration and patrol against the movement of suspected terrorists, traps transmigrants in Morocco.

Within this ambivalent context, sub-Saharan trans-migrants are socially and politically invisible, falling under the purview of neither citizen rights nor refugee protection, neither benefit-
NGOs, they inhabit Morocco in a state of permanent transit, subjected to intense police surveillance as in Europe. Numbering as many as 30,000 and ignored by all but a few international NGOs, they inhabit Morocco in a state of permanent transit, in the forests of the Rif mountains, or occupying makeshift holding centers on the fringes of Oujda in the north and Guelmine in the south, with no formal institutions or advocacy groups of their own. While international human rights groups have decried the living conditions as deplorable and accused the Moroccan police of brutality in the recent killings and roundups, domestic human rights and cultural associations—manned primarily by urban and/or Berber intellectuals—have remained, for the most part, silent. In the end, and in spite of promises of protection from the monarch who sets himself above racial and ethnic divisions as “commander of the faithful,” these black trans-migrants remain permanent outsiders to the Moroccan nation, whose very foreclosure from the national membership and loyalty. In both movements for regional autonomy in Algeria and the conflict over trans-migration in Morocco, what remains at issue is the territorial integrity of the state as marked by the control of the internal and external borders of the nation.

Endnotes


2 Although Algiers and Fez in fact have large populations of Berber-speakers, Arabic remains the dominant language, monopolizing the public sphere.


4 See the compelling account of the revolt by the son of one of its leaders, Mohamed Bennoua: Mohamed Bennoua, Héros sans gloire: Echec d’une révolution, 1963–1973 (Casablanca: Tarik Editions, 2002).


8 The text is available online at: http://www.makabylie.info/article.php3?id_article=147.


10 Slyomovics, “Self-Determination as Self-Definition,” p. 149.

11 Details are available online at: http://usdd.teamfr.com/.


13 Ibid., p. 193.
Hizballah is the only Lebanese party that retains an armed wing 15 years after the civil war and five years after Israel’s departure from southern Lebanon. But the party rejects the charge that it is “a state within a state,” and through its enhanced political participation, it has arguably conferred irreversible recognition upon the non-Islamic Lebanese state.

Since the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 in September 2004, Hizballah has been in the international spotlight. In addition to demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, the resolution calls for the “disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias,” primarily a reference to the Islamic Resistance that is Hizballah’s armed wing. Following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, the resulting “Independence Uprising” in Lebanon and the hasty withdrawal of the Syrian army in the spring of 2005, some thought Hizballah would have to bow to pressure and dissolve the only Lebanese militia remaining after the Ta’if agreement that helped to end the 1975–1990 civil war. Yet months later, the Shi’i Islamist party continues to vow to “safeguard” the Islamic Resistance, and the new Lebanese government, like its predecessor, continues to say that disarmament should be “dealt with within the framework of internal national dialogue.”

Hizballah commenced its stepped-up engagement in formal politics even before the last Syrian soldiers left Lebanon at the end of April 2005. In an unprecedented move, the party’s deputies in parliament lent their vote of confidence to the caretaker cabinet of Najib Miqati empaneled in the middle of that month. Miqati’s cabinet included a man Hizballah had named, Trad Hamada, who is not a member of the party but is a sympathizer with most of its positions. Hamada’s appointment as head of the Ministry of Labor and Agriculture was a precursor of more direct representation to come after the four rounds of parliamentary elections in May and June.

The prelude to the elections was consumed by a controversy having to do with an electoral law drafted in 2000 with heavy-handed Syrian guidance. Lebanon is divided into five provinces or governorates: Beirut, Mount Lebanon, North Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley and South Lebanon. According to a system laid out in the Ta’if agreement, every electoral district must send to parliament a certain number of members of each of Lebanon’s 18 ethno-confessional communities that has demographic weight in that district. Voters in each district choose

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between lists each of which is composed according to the same confessional formula. Contrary to the Ta’if agreement, which says that “the electoral district shall be the governorate,” the 2000 electoral law subdivided the five provinces into 14 electoral districts: Beirut was divided into three districts; Mount Lebanon into four; North Lebanon into two; the Bekaa into three; and the South into two. Drawing the districts in this way had produced a heavily “pro-Syrian” parliament in 2000, and Christian MPs who had been in opposition to Syria demanded that it be scrapped, lest it produce the same result in 2005. They called for using a 1960 electoral law dividing the country into even smaller districts that would enhance the representation of Lebanon’s smaller ethno-confessional communities. For its part, Hizballah lobbied the government to institute a new electoral law based on proportional representation, which the party believed would give larger ethno-confessional communities—especially the Shi’a—a more equitable share of seats. In the end, however, there was insufficient political will in parliament to redraw the districts, particularly since that process might have delayed the elections.

Although the 2005 elections were conducted according to the 2000 election law, they did not reproduce the 2000 results, maybe because the Syrians were no longer physically present. The new parliament is composed of 61 new faces and 67 incumbents, but many of the incumbents were oppositionists. Of the 84 “pro-Syrian” MPs in the previous parliament, only four remained. The forces that had been in active opposition to Syrian influence, led by Saad Hariri, son of the late prime minister, won 72 seats out of the 128, with Hariri’s own bloc winning half of the 72.

Hizballah made a strong showing through strategic alliances with its main Shi’i rival Amal and other players, including, surprisingly to some, the Hariri bloc in Beirut and even the right-wing Christian Lebanese Forces in the Baabda-Aley district of Mount Lebanon. In accordance with its policy of rotating deputies, Hizballah’s “Loyalty to the Resistance” bloc fielded ten new candidates, including a Maronite Christian and two Sunnis, alongside four incumbents. In the end, the Loyalty to the Resistance bloc added two seats to the 12 it already held.

After Amal leader Nabih Berri was elected to a fourth consecutive term as speaker of parliament on June 30, the president asked the legislature to approve Fuad Siniora, the ex-minister of finance and a veteran of the Hariri bloc, to form the new cabinet. Hizballah gave the newly appointed prime minister its unprecedented full and unequivocal support.

After 19 days of bickering, the first 24-seat “national unity” cabinet after the Syrian withdrawal saw the light of day on July 19. Hizballah retained its sympathizer Trad Hamada as minister of labor, and, for the first time, a leading cadre, Muhammad Fanayish, directly represents the party in the cabinet, where he serves as energy minister. During the negotiations that preceded the formation of the cabinet, Hizballah endeavored to break the taboo that bars Islamist movements from obtaining the two sensitive Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs. Hizballah pushed hard for the Foreign Ministry, but international pressure, especially from the US and France, as well as domestic reservations, stood in the way. In order to avoid deadlock, Hizballah proposed a moderate Shi’i independent, Fawzi Salloukh, an ex-ambassador and a veteran diplomat who is also acceptable to Amal, and he was appointed. However,
Hizballah is represented in the parliamentary committee for foreign affairs by two MPs who were elected to their posts.

**Basic Strategic Choices**

Hizballah has been sending party members to the Lebanese parliament since 1992, and the size of its delegation has previously been sufficient to warrant the offer of a ministry, but the party has never wanted to join the government before. Knowing that they would be a small minority, party leaders recoiled from the prospect of being tainted by unfavorable decisions adopted by a two-thirds majority vote of the ministers. Its representatives, the party argued, could do nothing to alter these decisions. Two ministers will not be able to alter decisions of the current government. So why didn’t Hizballah change its mind about ministerial representation?

According to Nawwaf al-Musawi, Hizballah’s politburo member in charge of international relations, the party decided to join the Lebanese cabinet on March 5, 2005, immediately after Syrian President Bashar al-Asad announced his intention to withdraw Syria’s army from Lebanon. “Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon created a vacuum in the country’s political scene,” Musawi later explained, “and international powers are trying to take advantage of this vacuum and impose their tutelage over Lebanon.” The decision to join was not public until midway through the election campaign. On June 6, Sheikh ‘Affif al-Nabulsi, the head of the Lebanese Shi’i religious scholars of Jabal ‘Amil, signaled his approval of the idea. Four days later, Hizballah Secretary-General Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah delivered a fiery speech in which he vowed the party’s complete engagement in Lebanese political and economic life as well as participation in government institutions, including the cabinet. The Syrian withdrawal, party spokesmen explained, had forced the decision.

Later, in a Reuters interview reported in Beirut’s al-Safir newspaper, Deputy Secretary-General Sheikh Na’im Qasim explained some more. The party had resolved not to join the cabinet as long as the Syrians were present in Lebanon, since their presence accorded Hizballah political protection. After the Syrian withdrawal, however, Hizballah felt that the Lebanese cabinet would be faced with decisions that might have grave consequences for the future of Lebanon, specifically the country’s official state of war with Israel, the status of the disputed Shebaa Farms and the status of the Islamic Resistance. The current parliament, Nasrallah has said, “is the most important and most dangerous (ubamm wa akhtar) parliament since 1992, because it is obliged to decide the basic political and strategic choices for Lebanon in the decades to come.” The party deemed it necessary to seek a seat at the cabinet table so as to be able at least to speak strongly and directly to power against steps it opposes.

To date, Hizballah’s record of success in this “most important” parliament is mixed. The party helped to prevent the proposed pardon of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), who fought alongside Israel before its May 2000 withdrawal and then fled southward. Nasrallah considered the proposal “a big insult” to the Lebanese people and “an unequivocal threat to national security.” But the walkout of the Hizballah bloc did not stop the legislators from pardoning Samir Geagea—the leader of the Lebanese Forces who served an 11-year jail sentence on charges of planning the assassination of former Prime Minister Rashid Karami. Parliament is scheduled to enact a new and more representative electoral law, and is holding weekly hearings to check the performance of the cabinet, a first in Lebanese politics. It is also discussing the disarmament of Palestinians inside and outside refugee camps in accordance with UNSC 1559, which many consider the prelude to discussions of Hizballah’s disarmament. To Hizballah’s dismay, the parliament debated whether it should avail itself of FBI assistance in training Lebanese security forces to better investigate killings and assassination attempts targeting politicians and journalists.

**“Safeguarding the Resistance”**

It is clear, however, from the party’s publicly expressed agenda during the campaign what cabinet step it would most militantly oppose. In speeches and interviews with party print and broadcast media, Na’im Qasim outlined the party’s platform. The party pledged to: “safeguard the Islamic Resistance; facilitate the mission of the UN team investigating Hariri’s assassination; maintain a special relationship between Lebanon and Syria; reject foreign interference in Lebanese affairs; work hard to attract the broadest possible popular support; affirm the value of national dialogue; and stress the need for a comprehensive socio-economic program in the country.” Referring to its alliances with Amal and the Hariri bloc, Hizballah emphasized that whatever electoral alliances it might strike would not come at the expense of its political beliefs. Protecting its militia from the demands of UNSC 1559 is clearly job one.

Given the publicity surrounding that resolution, Hizballah interpreted its performance in the elections as a national referendum authorizing the party to retain its arms—“a slap in the face of international pressure.” The election results do indeed imply that Hizballah is going to hold on to its weapons for the time being.

In the wake of his victory in the Beirut round, Saad Hariri told CNN that, like the Lebanese state and most Lebanese citizens, he considers Hizballah to be a national liberation movement and not a militia. He added that Hizballah would not be disarmed in the near future, unless a comprehensive peace settlement is reached in the Middle East. In that case, the Lebanese would sit together and discuss Hizballah’s military role. Saad Hariri claimed to be echoing his late father’s position, a contention bolstered by an earlier speech by Nasrallah on May 25, the fifth anniversary of the “liberation” of southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation. Nasrallah revealed that, prior to Hariri’s assassination, he had held weekly meetings with the...
former prime minister to discuss the future of the Islamic Resistance. At those meetings, Nasrallah claimed, Hariri promised that if he came to power again he would neither fight the Resistance nor allow Lebanon to become another Algeria. If the pressure to confront Hizballah were too great, he would resign and leave the country. In the same speech, Nasrallah declared: “If anyone entertains the idea of disarming Hizballah, we will fight him as the martyrs did in Karbala”—the Shi’i holy city in Iraq where Imam Hussein was killed almost seven centuries ago.

Such threatening rhetoric may be unnecessary, since Hizballah still enjoys considerable political credit from its role in the Israeli withdrawal and other Lebanese accept its strategic arguments. Many Lebanese accept Hizballah’s position—which is also the position of the Lebanese and Syrian states—that the Shebaa Farms along the border between Lebanon and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights are Lebanese territory. The UN and Israel claim that the farms are in the Golan, and hence are part of Syria. Edmond Naim, a Lebanese Forces member newly elected to parliament, went further, telling Hizballah’s al-Nur radio on July 15 that, from the standpoint of international law, Hizballah should not give up its arms before Israel withdraws from Palestinian territories occupied in 1967. Hizballah or any other group or state, Naim contended, is entitled to come to the rescue of the weaker party.

For its own purposes, Syria also still looks out for the interests of its former “Lebanese card.” Shortly after Naim’s remarks, the Syrian prime minister stated that Hizballah’s disarmament would pose a threat to Syria’s national security since Lebanon would become a “playground for Israeli intelligence.” In mid-July, Syria closed its border with Lebanon, blocking the access of Lebanese goods to the Syrian and Arab markets and stranding numerous Lebanese truckers who rely on the Beirut-Damascus trade for a living. In an attempt to appease Syria, the Lebanese parliament passed a policy statement by a margin of 92 votes upholding Hizballah’s right to bear arms and defend the “sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon.” The statement also stressed Lebanese respect for all UN resolutions, but specifically mentioning Resolution 194 that accords Palestinian refugees the right of return to former homes in what is now Israel, not UNSC 1559. The next day, Siniora visited Damascus. Talks bore fruit and on August 1, Syria partially lifted its economic embargo and opened the border to Lebanese trucks.

Perhaps sensing the fragility of a Lebanese consensus enforced partly by intimidation, Hizballah has backed away from long-standing rhetoric about needing its militia to liberate Palestine as well as Lebanon. Speaking on the al-Arabiyya satellite channel on September 2, Nasrallah spelled out clearly that after Israel withdraws from the Shebaa Farms, Hizballah is ready to put down its arms after receiving assurances and guarantees from the international community and leading world powers that Israel would not attack Lebanon again. “Resistance is a reaction against aggression,” he said. “When the aggression ends, resistance ends.” Although this development is too recent for adequate analysis, it seems to be a rhetorical shift rather than a policy shift, since no one in the international community would presently enforce guarantees, and Hizballah would never be satisfied with mere assurances. The move may also be tied to the weakening of the armed Palestinian intifada in the last two years. Still, in a speech on October 13, Nasrallah reiterated the offer: “We do not need a regional war to regain occupied land; we just need to liberate Lebanese occupied land [Shebaa Farms] and free our remaining prisoners of war…. If this could be accomplished by recourse to the international community and international relations, then we welcome that.”
Washington’s Circumspection

Such overtures, of course, are partly intended for the ears of the US government, which brands Hizballah a “terrorist organization” and vocally seeks its disarmament in accordance with UNSC 1559. Faced with the reality of attitudes toward Hizballah like Saad Hariri’s, Washington has remained more circumspect than one might think about the Shi’i party’s incorporation into the government. When Trad Hamada joined Miqati’s cabinet, the US did not voice opposition. On the contrary, in June and with Hizballah’s blessing, Hamada met US officials including Elizabeth Dibble, the deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, in his capacity as a minister representing Hizballah in the cabinet. At that meeting, Hamada advised the US to place UNSC 1559 on the shelf for at least two years.10

In response to the appointment of Fanayish, the State Department said it would not have any dealings with “terrorists,” but had to clarify that while it would boycott the Hizballah minister, his presence in government would not adversely affect regular dealings with the cabinet. Fanayish responded that the US should stop interfering in Lebanese affairs. Making clear that Hizballah’s animosity is toward the US government, not the American people, Muhammad Raad, the head of Hizballah’s parliamentary bloc, argued that if the Bush administration considers Hizballah a terrorist organization then it should boycott the whole cabinet.11 Hizballah MP Hussein Hajj Hasan told al-Nur radio that the party refuses to deal with the “oppressive” Bush administration that is “against freedom and democracy” because it will not recognize that the will of the Lebanese people accorded Hizballah its representation in the parliament and cabinet.

In her unexpected visit to Lebanon on July 22, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice praised Lebanon’s “progressive path towards democracy.” She affirmed the Bush administration’s desire for full implementation of UNSC 1559 “even if it would take some time,” while stressing the need for Lebanon to honor its obligations. But this pressure seems, so far at least, to be only verbal.

Tending to the Base

The reality is that Hizballah is too important a part of the Lebanese political and social order to be dealt with by the police action that Washington might prefer. First, there is the weight of being a prime representative of the Lebanese Shi’a. Nasrallah claimed in August that Rafiq al-Hariri had told him that Muslims constitute 70–75 percent of the population, while Christians are estimated at 20–25 percent. Nasrallah added that independent research centers gauge the Christian population at 17–20 percent.12 But as recent estimates by the Ministry of Interior indicate, the Shi’a comprise around 55 percent of the population—they are the majority.13
Then there are Hizballah’s substantial financial resources. Since 1995, when Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, appointed Nasrallah and Sheik Muhammad Yazbak as his religious deputies, the one-fifth tithe (khums) imposed on those Lebanese Shi’a who follow Khamenei as their marja’, as well as their alms (zakat) and religious (shar’i) monies have poured directly into Hizballah coffers, instead of being channeled through Iran, as had been the case. Already before 1995, these monies had allowed Hizballah to found an efficient network of NGOs and social welfare institutions that are open to the public, irrespective of communal origin. These include the Institution of the Good Loan, the Association of Islamic Health, the Institution of Construction and Development, the Association of the Relief Committees of Imam Khomeini and the Educational Foundation, all established over the period 1982–1991. In addition, Hizballah boasts its own media and research institutions. Its weekly mouthpiece al-’Abd, established in 1984, was renamed al-’Intiqad in 2001. Its think tank, the Consultative Center for Studies and Documentation, and its al-Nur satellite radio station were both founded in 1988. The flagship al-Manar satellite TV channel, the only channel belonging to an Islamist movement in the Middle East, was watched by 10 million people in 2004.

These resources notwithstanding, Hizballah has systematically affirmed that it is not “a state within a state,” as Aoun and others have alleged. In the pre-Ta’if era, Nasrallah said: “Muslims have no right whatsoever to entertain the idea of a Muslim canton or a Shi’i canton or a Sunni canton…. Talking about cantons annihilates the Muslims, destroys their potential power and leads them from one internal war to another.”13 In Hizballah’s case, founding a Shi’i canton in the areas under its control would imply establishing an Islamic state in miniature. In response to comments like Aoun’s, Nasrallah and Muhammad Raad have said that they have never imposed their ideology or political program on anyone; on the contrary, Hizballah always respected the opinions, beliefs and ideas of others. Nasrallah adds that the party views the existence of 18 ethno-confessional communities in Lebanon as an asset, and that the party aspires to openness and dialogue among all Lebanese. Hizballah has repeatedly refused to be a social, political or security alternative to the Lebanese state and its institutions.15 If nothing else, said Hajj Imad Faqih, a mid-ranking cadre, assuming functions of the state would eventually dirty the party’s hands, which Hizballah cannot afford, having spent years nurturing a reputation for probity.16 So it would appear that the logic of operating within the bounds of the Lebanese state has prevailed over the logic of revolution.

Achieving the Ordinary

As a mainstream political party, Hizballah operates according to realpolitik calculations of political expediency, benefit and interest. The party’s move ever closer to being a full participant in “normal” Lebanese politics, with the limitations that implies, begs the question of how much it is willing to be coopted into the Lebanese political system and state institutions. Hizballah’s political victories in 2005 illustrated the patriotic-nationalistic character of a party that is supported not only by its major Shi’i constituency, but also by many Sunnis, Druze and Christians. Based on its following, Hizballah aims to portray itself as the biggest political force in Lebanon. Although Hizballah denies it, its success at balancing its nationalist political commitments and its Islamist background came at the price of compromise (even on some doctrinal issues). Through arguing for civil peace, public freedoms and a functioning civil society, Hizballah attempted to preserve its Islamic identity while working within the domain of the Lebanese state’s sovereignty and inside the confines of a non-Islamic state and a multi-confessional polity. On these grounds, Hizballah conferred de facto recognition upon the Lebanese state, and its supporters know this. Thus, Hizballah cannot go beyond being an “ordinary” political party.

One should be careful not to read too much into the elections and Hizballah’s decision to join the cabinet. It is interesting to note, here, that since the cabinet reflects the power balances in the parliament, it is obvious that any popular dismay with the parliament will be extended to the cabinet, and vice versa. However, Hizballah’s electoral success suggests that the party has been able to win the “hearts and minds” of many Lebanese voters, especially in its major Shi’i constituencies, thus confirming the efficacy of its “opening up” (infiqah) to pluralist politics, while continuing to earn a reputation for integrity in its socio-economic work. Through its NGOs, Hizballah has triumphantly portrayed itself as a Lebanese nationalist political party working in favor of the “wretched of the earth,” without confessional fear or favor. Rafiq al-Hariri’s assassination, along with the Syrian withdrawal and its aftermath, accelerated the political changes within Hizballah. It may be that disarming and becoming an “ordinary” political party, far from causing the party’s demise, would boost its domestic political power even further.

Endnotes
1 Daily Star, June 18, 2005.
2 Al-Safir, June 7, 2005.
3 Al-Safir, July 29, 2005.
4 Al-Safir, August 17, 2005.
5 Interview with al-Safir, July 29, 2005.
6 See, for example, the interview with Qasim in al-’Intiqad, April 26, 2005.
8 Al-Nahar, July 21, 2005.
9 Al-Safir, September 3, 2005.
10 Hamada has also repeatedly met with Jeffrey Feldman, the US ambassador to Lebanon. Al-Safir, July 19, 2005.
11 Al-Safir, July 11, 2005.
12 Interview with al-Raf’i al-’Anun [Kuwair], August 26, 2005.
13 The Ministry of Interior figures were viewed by the author in Beirut in October 2005.
14 Al-Mad, April 18, 1986.
15 Al-Safir, July 11, 2005.
16 Interview with the author, November 2, 2004.
‘Ajamis in Lebanon
The Non-Arab Arabs?
Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr

It is Muharram, the month of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, and the female-run husseiniyya in West Beirut is packed with women dressed in black. As the sounds of Lebanese and Iraqi Arabic dialects, as well as Persian, fill the hallways of this Shi‘i community center, the female religious performer (qari‘a) signals that the ritual program (majlis) will begin shortly. She is an Iraqi, and while she reads from her thick notebook, a woman standing next to her reads the same text in Persian for those in the audience who do not understand Arabic. Some of these women are Iranians who have married into Iraqi Shi‘i families of Persian descent who settled in Lebanon after being expelled from Iraq by the deposed Baathist regime.

Under the pretext of purging Iraq of disloyal citizens, the regime expelled large numbers of Iraqi Shi‘a during three periods since 1975. At the time of border disputes with Iran in 1975, at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 and again in 1990–1991 during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Shi‘i uprising in southern Iraq, Saddam Hussein’s government forced Shi‘a out of Iraq, mainly to Iran, Syria, Jordan and the Gulf states. The displaced of 1975 and 1980 included those Iraqi Shi‘a of Persian origin commonly referred to as ‘Ajamis. Many of them wound up in Lebanon, where they have constructed a distinct Iraqi Shi‘i identity that sets them apart from both the Lebanese Shi‘a who comprise roughly 40 percent of the population and the Iranians who serve in the Islamic Republic’s outreach institutions.

The Baathist regime labeled the ‘Ajamis as spies for Iran, excluding them by definition from mainstream, Sunni Arab-dominated Iraqi nationalism. The exiled Iraqi Shi‘a, however, have constructed alternative visions of Iraqi nationalism that downplay differences between Sunnis and Shi‘is, as well as those between Iraqi Shi‘a claiming local Arab descent and those of Persian background. They take pride in the fact that they are Shi‘is from Iraq, bearers of the Iraqi Shi‘i rituals and traditions that they consider most authentic, pertaining in their view to the land of the most sacred Shi‘i holy sites, where the key events in early Islamic history leading to the emergence of Shi‘ism unfolded.

In Arabic, the term ‘ajam refers to people who do not speak Arabic or whose first language is not Arabic, in particular Persian speakers. At the same time, ‘Ajami is a designation used to refer to people of Persian descent. Among Arabs, the word can be derogatory, referring to those who speak Arabic in a manner evaluated as incorrect, and by extension labeling them as foreigners, assimilating them to Persians as a historical “other” of Arabs. Nevertheless, ‘Ajami is also the self-description of a Persian-speaking Shi‘i merchant community that migrated from Safavid Persia to Baghdad, which was held by the Safavids from 1508–1533 and 1622–1638. The Persian ‘ulama and religious students who moved from Qajar Iran to Karbala’ and Najaf in the eighteenth century are also considered part of this ‘Ajami community. In fact, at the turn of the twentieth century, approximately 75 percent of the inhabitants of Karbala’ were of Persian origin and spoke Persian. After the creation of modern Iraq in 1921, many continued to live in Baghdad, Karbala’ and Najaf, and even spread to other regions in Iraq. In 1924, the Iraqi Nationality Law was introduced, obliging these ‘Ajamis to either accept Iraqi nationality or leave the country.

Hostility towards Iraqis of Persian descent increased, so that by the end of the Iraqi monarchy in 1957, only 12 percent of the population of Karbala’ were known to be of Persian origin. The identity and rights of these Persian migrants and their descendants remained a bone of contention between Iran and Iraq for most of the twentieth century. However, with the exception of one episode in 1975, it was not until the beginning of the Iraq-Iran War in 1980 that large numbers of ‘Ajamis were expelled in an organized manner from Iraq. They were forced to depart within days, without their belongings.

Some ‘Ajamis who came to Lebanon as refugees in the 1980s and 1990s did so because of their ties to ‘Ajami traders who had settled in Lebanon in the 1950s and 1960s. Others, just like other Iraqi Shi‘a, came to Lebanon to seek asylum through the UN, and saw Lebanon as a transit point to a Western country. As of 2001, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported 1,828 Iraqi refugees in Lebanon, most of them Shi‘a. These numbers reflect only those who applied for UN refugee status and not those staying illegally in the country. After the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, according to the Beirut daily al-Safir, the number of Iraqis in Lebanon rose to about 40,000. The Lebanese state has often arrested and detained these refugees under a law preventing foreigners from illegally entering Lebanese territory. In December 2001, Lebanese authorities even deported about 300 UNHCR-registered Iraqi refugees to Syria, whose authorities in turn deported them to Iraq, thereby violating Article 31 of the UN Refugee Convention, which holds that states should not penalize asylum seekers for illegal entry.

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In order to protect these ‘Ajamis and other Iraqi Shi’i asylum seekers and refugees, a team of Lebanese human rights activists calling themselves the Ad Hoc Committee for the Support of Non-Palestinian Refugees and Asylum Seekers was founded in September 2000. They seek an end to the arbitrary arrest, detention and deportation of these refugees, who often hide in the southern suburbs of Beirut and in the Palestinian refugee camps. Samira Trad, a London-trained Lebanese lawyer and a member of the committee, has repeatedly been arrested by Lebanese security for supporting these Iraqis and for voicing her concerns about human rights violations in Lebanon.

Among the Iraqi Shi’is and ‘Ajamis I came to know, there existed a sense of estrangement from both Iranian official institutions in Lebanon and from Lebanese Shi’a, for different reasons. While some of the older ‘Ajamis families have maintained commercial ties to Iran, as well as links to the Iranian government and the Iranian religious elite in the field of Islamic publishing, most ‘Ajamis are disappointed in how little Iranian institutions in Lebanon, with their vast financial resources, care about their fate. Most of the ‘Ajamis I met think of Iraq as their homeland, and none ever mentioned Iran as an eventual place of return, despite their Persian origins. It is worth noting that lower and mid-ranking ‘Ajamis mullahs officiate as preachers during Muharram and other special occasions in Iranian-influenced mosques and husseiniyyas in Lebanon. Speaking Arabic in an Iraqi dialect, which many Lebanese Shi’a consider to be most authentic and appropriate for these occasions, these ‘Ajamis mullahs also stand for Iranian interests in the Arab world for many Lebanese Shi’a.

For their part, ‘Ajamis and other Iraqi Shi’is feel a certain moral superiority over Lebanese Shi’a. One ‘Ajamis woman recalled her shock, upon arriving in Lebanon in the 1960s, at being confronted with so many “ignorant” Shi’a. A Lebanese Shi’i woman, knowing that this ‘Ajamis woman had come from Karbala’, asked her to teach her a bit about “Muhammad and Fatima.” The ‘Ajamis woman was taken aback at the disrespect this Lebanese woman showed for the Prophet and his family, not using honorifics, but speaking “as if the Prophet Muhammad and Fatima al-Zahra’ were her next-door neighbors!”

Believing that their rituals and beliefs are more authentic than those of Lebanese, because, as they put it, Iraqis “have drunk the water of Karbala’,” Iraqi Shi’is are doubly disappointed by what they view as the lack of respect and attention from Lebanese parties and institutions. De facto, the social and charitable organizations of Hizballah or the party’s former spiritual head Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah are open only to those who follow the party line or are the followers (muqallids) of Fadlallah. In the eyes of many ‘Ajamis and other Iraqi Shi’is, while their Lebanese co-religionists speak of pan-Shi’i solidarity, in reality there is no concern for the plight of Iraqi Shi’s resident in Lebanon. The Iraqis mainly consider Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani their marja’, the learned cleric from whom they accept guidance on spiritual and other matters, but they receive only modest monetary and in-kind support from Sistani’s office in Beirut. Sistani does not maintain schools and hospitals in Beirut, and his followers can make use neither of Hizballah’s facilities nor of Fadlallah’s. One ‘Ajamis woman whose husband urgently needed an operation recalls how she went to Fadlallah’s office only to be rebuffed empty-handed, even though she saw his attaché “holding bundles of $100 bills in his hands on a Friday afternoon.” Her husband eventually died.

Faced with these difficulties, ‘Ajamis and other Iraqis in Lebanon have built their own social networks, of which the West Beirut husseiniyya is one locus. Commemorations of the birthdays of the Prophet Muhammad and members of his family take place here, as do celebrations of weddings. Along with the institutionalized meetings at the husseiniyya, which they share with Lebanese and Iranians, ‘Ajamis women meet on a regular basis in the home of one of their number for Qur’an readings and commemorative performances.

Another important institution for ‘Ajamis is a tiny restaurant in Bir al-‘Abid, a heavily Lebanese Shi’i neighborhood in the southern suburbs of Beirut. The owner is an ‘Ajamis woman who had lived in Karbala’ for 18 years before being expelled in 1981. While she caters for the husseiniyya, the Iranian Cultural Center in Beirut and other Shi’i-run institutions, she considers her main work in the restaurant and the mission of her life to be helping the Iraqi Shi’i poor. In a way, her establishment functions as a one-person NGO, a multi-purpose social and ritual center.

It is a place where old clothes are collected to be distributed among the disadvantaged, whose grievances are regularly given a hearing, and money for relatives still in Iraq is collected. She also accepts monetary contributions, which she then doles out according to her own assessment of recipients’ needs. She is known for matchmaking between Iraqi Shi’i men and Lebanese Shi’i women, an undesirable arrangement for many Lebanese families, as according to Lebanese law neither the husband nor the children of such marriages will be eligible for Lebanese citizenship. The restaurant is a regular meeting point for many ‘Ajamis and other Iraqi Shi’a.

‘Ajamis’ Shi’i identity, precisely Saddam’s justification for their figurative and literal expulsion from “Arab” Iraq, is for them the proof of their Iraqiness. Iraq, for the ‘Ajamis, is another way to refer to the chief holy sites of Shi’ism. In their eyes, as well, being Iraqi gives them a privileged position in the Shi’i world. Many Iraqi Shi’a I met compared pre-invasion Iraqi society positively to the multi-confessional society of Lebanon, pointing to Sunni-Shi’i intermarriage as an example of how everyday sectarian differences in Iraq are much less evident. They blamed Saddam Hussein’s regime for sowing sectarian and ethnic dissension. The ways in which ‘Ajamis have created an Iraqi identity oppose the dominant trend in Saddam’s Iraq to define the country as exclusively Arab. The example of ‘Ajamis shows, in fact, how ethnic categories such as Arab or Persian are categories of political practice and are not necessarily useful as analytical tools.
Iran is not a Persian monolith, as it is often portrayed. Owing to waves of migration and foreign invasion over its long history, the Iranian plateau has become home to a diverse assortment of people speaking a range of languages and adhering to numerous creeds. The “Iranian” languages spoken in Iran include Persian, Kurdish, Luri, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Tat and Talish. But there are also Turkic languages such as Azeri and Turkmen, and Semitic languages such as Arabic, Hebrew and Assyrian. Likewise, Iranian citizens profess many different religious beliefs, including the dominant Shi’i Islam, but also Sunni Islam and several kinds of Christianity.

Out of this mix of linguistic and religious groups, however, only a few have been designated as “minority” or “ethnic.” These are the Azeris, the Turkish-speaking Shi’a in the northwestern province of Azerbaijan; the Sunni Turkmen of the northeast; the mostly Sunni Kurds; the Arabs of Khuzestan; and the Baluch of the southeastern province of Sistan and Baluchistan. The diversity of the rest of the Iranian population is usually ignored in “ethnic” inventories of the country. Apart from a few tribal groups, everyone else is lumped together in the vague category of “Persian.”

In comparison with other multi-ethnic states in the region, however, Iran’s national identity has been coherent and stable. Through British and Russian occupation, the Shah’s...
authoritarian rule and the tumult of the 1979 revolution, there have been revolts organized along ethnic lines, but these have not bedeviled the state as much as their counterparts in Turkey and Iraq. That history, along with the essentially non-ethnic character of many "ethnic" grievances under the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic, might tempt one to conclude that Iran does not face an ethnic problem. This is not exactly right.

Under the Islamic Republic, and particularly in recent years, ethnic politics have gained a new salience. The Islamic universalism of the revolutionaries undercut the dominance of Iranian nationalism. More recently, the greater press freedoms permitted at the height of Iran's reformist moment of 1997–2004 allowed for more public expression of ethnic identities and demands. How these demands will fare today, with the indefinite suspension of reform under the hardline presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and with Iran's increased international isolation, is an open and worrisome question.

**Border Politics**

The torrent of separatist nationalist aspirations unleashed by World War I did not affect Iran nearly as much as it did the Ottoman Empire and Czarist Russia. With its long tradition of statehood and deeply rooted sense of national identity, Iran managed to preserve its territorial integrity. Arabs, Kurds, Azeris, Turkmen and Baluch were not indifferent to the new ethno-nationalist movements across Iran's borders, but they did not take root at this time.

Nationalist agitation among the Kurdish tribes of the former Ottoman Empire grew up in opposition to the creation of a republic in Turkey strongly identified with Turkish nationalism. In the southern parts of the Kurdish region, the efforts of British officials to fashion a purely Arab entity in Mesopotamia lent a nationalist disposition to the Kurdish resistance in Iraq and contributed to a sense of Kurdishness.1 "Azeri" identity originated in the attempts of a number of Caucasian Muslim intellectuals to formulate a concept of national identity. Assisted by decisive ideological and military support from the Young Turks, by the end of World War I these efforts bore fruit and a new state called Azerbaijan was established in the Caucasus.2

On the other side of the hill, so to speak, the Kurdish parts of Iran and the Turkish-speaking province of Azerbaijan did not go through this process of ethnic or national identity formation. The creation of a modern, highly centralized state by Reza Shah Pahlavi did encounter widespread resistance from traditional leaders in the provinces, almost all of whom had their power base among the "ethnic" groups. But none of these conflicts assumed a distinct ethnic expression.3 The Kurdish tribal leaders of Iran were aware of developments abroad, especially in Iraqi Kurdistan, and a handful of Kurdish activists tried to promote a trans-tribal solidarity, but to little avail.4 The tribal nature of Kurdish identity held fast. The fate of Azeri identity in Iran was no different. The swift reincorporation of the Republic of Azerbaijan into the Soviet orbit by the Bolsheviks in the early 1920s curtailed the further development of nationalism there, and there had been little time for it to reverberate in Iranian Azerbaijan.5

World War II brought upheavals. Reza Shah was deposed and exiled by invading British and Soviet forces in 1941, leaving the country seething with resentment. While poverty, famine and Reza Shah's arbitrary rule were the main cause, some provincial elites also resented the previous regime's promotion of a narrowly defined Iranian identity that neglected the country's ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity.6 But the formation of ethnic identity still required an external stimulus.

The end of World War II provided it, as the Leninist concept of the "right of nations to self-determination" came to guide Moscow's foreign policy. The Red Army, which occupied the northern half of Iran, imported a large mission of experts from Soviet Azerbaijan and started to promote a sense of Azeri nationalism.7 A similar strategy—though on a much smaller scale—was initiated in the Kurdish areas of occupied Iran.8 This policy climaxed in the creation of autonomous governments in Kurdistan and Azerbaijan in 1945, under the guise of "liberating the Kurds and the Azeris from the oppression of the Persians." After extensive
The Soviet Union, the traditional patron, was pursuing its Arabs and the Turks as its main adversaries. After its 1958 1930s, Iran, Iraq and Turkey came to a general agreement to encourage ethnic identity. In view of the decisive role of external support for such movements, pre-revolutionary Iran normally sought a “diplomatic” solution for occasional ethnic problems. In the early 1930s, Iran, Iraq and Turkey came to a general agreement to refrain from manipulating ethnic and tribal groups against each other. As a result, the Turkish government reined in pan-Turkish agitation, while the Iranian did their best to contain Kurdish nationalism, which had designated the Arabs and the Turks as its main adversaries. After its 1938 coup, Iraq adopted a more radical attitude toward its eastern neighbor, promoting pan-Arab sentiment among the Arabs of Khuzestan, leading Tehran to support the rebellion of the Barzani Kurds in Iraq. But Iran and Turkey upheld this accord until the end of the Cold War.

Ethnic Resurgence

In the turmoil of the Islamic Revolution, there were more serious, but unavailing attempts to stir up ethnic politics. The Soviet Union, the traditional patron, was pursuing its policies through other means and those Iranian leftist groups that were eager to play on ethnicity to weaken the Islamic Republic were not strong enough to do so. Only as the Iranian relations with Iraq deteriorated toward war were ethnic issues set aflame. In Khuzestan, where the Iraqis propped up a number of separatist groups, and in Kurdistan, where some opponents of the Islamic Republic sought the backing of Baghdad, Iraq tried to follow in the Soviets’ footsteps. Although the Islamic Republic managed to suppress most of the “non-Islamic” forces driving the revolution, at the same time, and probably inadvertently, it laid the groundwork for the eventual resurgence of ethnic politics on a much more solid base later on. The new regime’s attempts to promote Islamic universalism dealt a heavy blow to bulwarks of Iranian identity—particularly Iranian nationalism. Besides symbolic acts such as dropping the Iranian national insignia of the lion and the sun, and attempts by hardliners to destroy such historical sites as Persepolis, the new regime also undertook a general revision of Iranian history. The history of Iran, particularly the pre-Islamic era, was condemned as an unending cycle of repression and subjugation, while building blocks of modern Iranian nationalism such as secular education were denounced as “Pahlavi ploys.” In the process, the idea of Persian as a “national” language binding together the different ethnic groups of Iran was also branded a “Pahlavi ploy,” and came under sustained criticism from ethnic activists. As a result, it was not only a new set of Islamic values that vied to replace Iranian nationalism, but a multitude of local and ethnic identities as well. A number of external developments have hastened this process: the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, the reemergence of an independent Republic of Azerbaijan, and the creation of a Kurdish safe haven in Iraq, particularly in the aftermath of the US-led invasion.

Another inadvertent consequence of the Islamic Republic’s promotion of an ardent Shi’i identity was a backlash in the Sunni areas of Iran. In Azerbaijan, and among Shi’i Arabs of Khuzestan and the Shi’i Kurds of Kermanshah, Bijar and Qorveh, this new emphasis did serve to strengthen a sense of communal unity, but at the same time it alienated the Sunni Kurds, Baluch and Turkmen. Alongside the increasing pull toward Iraqi Kurdistan among the Sunni Kurds, in regions such as Baluchistan, this resentment has provided a breeding ground for Sunni fundamentalism with clear links to the “Wahhabi” madrasas of Pakistan.

“Fars”

Although the mounting prominence of ethnic politics dates to the early years of the Islamic Republic, it was only after the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and the slow liberalization of society that ethnic politics found a relatively open and clear manifestation. The main carriers of these ideas were the array of local newspapers that appeared in the provinces, especially newspapers and magazines published at universities, which are usually exempt from the regulations that bind the mainstream press. Most of these newspapers adopted a distinct ethnic stance. Their coverage blamed an omnipresent, oppressive center—a Persian-speaking entity, “Fars”—for grievances such as pervasive poverty and economic underdevelopment, negligible local participation in administration, and the restrictions imposed on local languages. The press found an ideological complement in the plethora of local histories, literary studies and folkloric studies based on local languages and costumes that were also published in the years after 1997.
Gradually, Iranian ethnic groups began to raise a number of common demands upon the state. One of the most important was the protection of local languages and cultures, especially in school curricula. Other grievances concerned lack of equal opportunities in employment and career advancement, the excessive centralization of administrative power, and the share of national revenue allocated to the provinces.\[14\]

It is mostly during election season that these grievances get a proper hearing. Ethnic advocacy groups or the members of Parliament for the affected regions form ad hoc alliances to put their demands forward, though the life span of these alliances is short. Recent elections indicate perceptible voting patterns based on ethnic identity. During presidential races, for example, the Sunni regions of Kurdistan cast an overwhelming vote for Ahmad Tavakoli, a relatively obscure rival of President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, in 1993, then voted heavily for Khatami in 1997 and 2001, before abstaining in large numbers in 2005. A similar cohesion can be perceived in the mainly Sunni Sistan and Baluchestan, where in 2005 voters favored the reformist candidate Mustafa Moin at the behest of their religious leaders. But as the case of Mohsen Mehralizadeh in the 2005 election indicates, adopting a noticeably ethnic stance does not necessarily ensure electoral success. He emphasized a sense of “Azeriness” in his campaign, winning many votes in heavily Azeri provinces, but failing to break through on the national level.

As the question of ethnicity has not yet attained its proper position in the mainstream of national politics, it has found most vocal expression in a host of insignificant, but radical opposition groups, usually based abroad and therefore of uncertain political standing in Iran.

### Price of Stalled Reform

Contemporary ethnic politics in Iran is, in a sense, the offspring of the Islamic Republic. The constitution of the Islamic Republic has specific provisions guaranteeing equal rights to minority groups, such as the rights to practice minority religions and use minority languages in schools and the media and education. Hence most ethnic advocates have believed that concerted activism within the system will suffice for the eventual realization of their demands. The frequent rhetoric of the authorities criticizing Iranian nationalism, and stressing the fundamental equality of all Muslims regardless of ethnicity and race, was also very heartening. During their 1997–2004 ascendancy, many reformists in Parliament were willing to endorse ethnic demands. But the slackening, if not total blockage, of the pace of reform, crystallized in the defeat of the reformists in the June 2005 presidential election, means that prospects for pursuing resolution of the ethnic question through parliamentary means are not that bright. The Iranian authorities, indeed, could revert to policies of old, whereby ethnic grievances were resolved through a combination of diplomacy and police action.

As long as ethnic politics were driven more by external than internal causes, the policies of old could succeed. With Iraqi Kurdistan gaining near total autonomy from Baghdad and the new lease on life for Azeri nationalism after the collapse of the Soviet Union, external factors may again encourage ethnic politics in Iran. But the fact is that the ethnic question in Iran can no longer be considered as just an external phenomenon, and in any case Iran is now so isolated in international politics that diplomacy will be ineffective. The state can no longer get away with simply branding provincial disturbances as foreign plots that have to be dealt with by force. Yet that is what the state tried to do in response to riots that broke out in Khuzestan in April 2005 following the publication of a letter, attributed to former Vice President Ali Abtahi, that called for the forcible relocation of the local Arab population. A police crackdown was also the sole response to demonstrations that shook Kurdistan a few months later in protest of a police killing of a youth in Sanandaj, the center of Iranian Kurdistan.

For the US, therefore, the temptation to use the ethnic lever against the Islamic Republic might prove irresistible. Strangely enough, it is the neo-conservatives, formerly the most implacable enemies of the Soviet Union in Washington, who have shown the most interest in this old Soviet tactic. In October 2005, the American Enterprise Institute hosted a forum called “The Unknown Iran: Another Case for Federalism?” and featuring representatives from Kurdish, Azeri and Baluch opposition groups in exile. The danger is that the approaches of hardliners in Washington and Tehran will reinforce each other.

### Endnotes

9 Nisman, pp. 46–63.
14 For a collection of these demands, see Tribun [Sweden] 3–6 (Spring 1998–Winter 2001).
Crime and Punishment on Israel’s Demographic Frontier

Peter Lagerquist and Jonathan Cook

In the midst of the hubbub over Israel’s “disengagement” from Gaza, a deserted Israeli soldier shot dead four Palestinian citizens of Israel and wounded 12 others. The killings and their coverage in the Israeli media suggest that the distinction between Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and those who are Israeli citizens continues to erode.

On August 4, 2005, Natan Zada, 19, boarded an Egged bus at Haifa’s Hamifratz station, picked a seat in the back and rode it into Shafa ‘Amr, a mixed Druze, Muslim and Christian town in the heart of the Arab Galilee. Zada wore his Israel Defense Forces uniform and, as prescribed, carried with him his military-issued M-16 assault rifle, magazine primed in the slot. On any given day, Israel’s public transport system brims with young men like him, shuttling to and from military bases across the Israeli coastal plain and the occupied Golan Heights and West Bank. On this particular day, however, he was neither returning home nor reporting for duty. Several weeks earlier, he had deserted from the army in
protest at his government’s evacuation of 8,000 settlers from the occupied Gaza Strip as part of Israel’s self-styled “disengagement” from shards of the Occupied Territories. Zada himself had recently moved to the West Bank settlement of Tapuah, where, it was later reported, he had fallen in with the far-right Kach movement. Formally outlawed by the Israeli government, Kach expounds a virulently racist ideology demanding the removal of all non-Jews from the Land of Israel. Once his bus had arrived in Shafa ‘Amr, Zada set his M-16 on automatic and put his beliefs into practice. He killed the driver and three passengers, and wounded another 12, before being overpowered and then beaten to death by angry townspeople, who shunted aside a handful of policemen belatedly arriving at the scene to handcuff the killer. All of the victims were Palestinian citizens of Israel, often termed “Israeli Arabs” by Israeli Jews.

Deploying the kind of flanking public relations maneuver that has become his hallmark, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon moved quickly to contain the damage. To wide international acclaim, he branded Zada a “terrorist,” and-slotted the shootings into appropriate context. “This terrorist event was a deliberate attempt to harm the fabric of relations among all Israeli citizens,” his office explained. It was widely presumed that Zada wanted to provoke disturbances among Israel’s Arab minority—a fifth of the Israeli population, and mostly concentrated in the country’s north—and so force the government to divert a share of the 40,000 soldiers and police mobilized for the southern Gaza evacuations, thereby disrupting the “disengagement.” At the very least, he inspired Asher Weissgan, 38, from the West Bank settlement of Shvut Rahel, who on August 17 shot dead four West Bank Palestinians with whom he worked in a nearby settlement industrial zone, and wounded two others. The following day Weissgan told the Israeli press he had “no regrets” and that he hoped someone would kill Sharon. The Israeli premier dutifully condemned the attack as an “exceptionally grave Jewish act of terror,” and “instructed the security establishment to deal harshly with all attempts to harm innocent people,” Israel Radio reported. In contrast to Zada’s attack, Weissgan’s crime garnered few headlines in Israel, and none in the international media, which was mostly disengaged in Gaza. BBC World evening news showed the way by appending a one-line mention of the attack to a ten-minute panorama of tearful Gaza settlers jostling with Israeli soldiers.

That their lives are cheap came as no news to Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. To Palestinian citizens of Israel, however, Weissgan’s copycat rampage only deepened the sense that their own existence inside Israel is becoming similarly fraught, buffeted by obsessive Israeli demographic debates and hateful denigrations by senior politicians that reached a fever pitch in the run-up to disengagement, and in which “Israeli Arabs” figure as a national threat no less than their kin across the Green Line. In this respect, the government and media’s voluminous response to Zada’s attack did much less to reassure them than to remind them of how warped is the “fabric of relations” in which they are entangled.

News from Another Country

For Arab citizens attempting to follow events in Shafa ‘Amr on the evening of August 4, the most surreal spectacle was provided not by Natan Zada but by their national media. Following an hour of stumped silence, fragmentary reports began emerging on radio and television, hazarding at first, as transcribed by the Nazareth-based I’lam Media Center, that “a Druze soldier shot at the passengers in the bus.” Two and a half hours after the attack, Channel 2 reported a “conflict between the passengers and the soldier, who was drawn into it, with these results” and went on to note that among the victims “there are some people who are not Jewish.” On the rival Channel 10 news network, anchors Yiron London and Tzvi Yehezkeli “retained an easy, relaxed atmosphere,” observed I’lam. “At the top of the broadcast, [London] gave no acknowledgement to the headline newsflash of a ‘major event, with shooting and deaths,’ [instead] beginning his report with news on the Maccabi Haifa soccer team, reporting with more seriousness than he did for…Shafa ‘Amr. [Afterwards] Tzvi Yehezkeli joined London in the studio, also with [a] calm, serene face as if the murder of these four people was an imaginary event, involving the deaths of imaginary victims.”

Anxious Arab families were left to imagine the worst. There was no coverage of the dozen people Zada had wounded, notes I’lam: “No reports or interviews were made from the hospitals, no emergency numbers were broadcast and no psychologists assisting the families were interviewed…. Not one media outlet posed even one question about the wounded, in stark contrast to standard practice in similar incidents where the victims are Jews.” Coverage of Zada’s victims was largely crowded out by coverage of Zada himself, presented with a solemnity otherwise reserved for Jewish victims of Palestinian terror. His picture was shown on TV, captioned with his identity as an Israeli soldier, the dates of his birth and death, and the epitaph “God Bless His Soul.” The day after, Hebrew and English tabloids carried front-page pictures of Zada and his bruised corpse. Papers excavated the human story behind the killer and incessantly interviewed his stricken family—an interest they could not arouse for any of his victims. While framed by a wall-to-wall display of solemn condemnation that even recruited Israeli settler representatives for full, if also surreal effect, the coverage served only to remind Palestinian citizens that they are marginal in Israeli society in ways that even a Jewish extremist like Zada could never be. The contrast with the media’s parallel presentation of disengagement as a national trauma uniting Jewish settlers and soldiers in a patsche of grief was stark.

Like Zada’s attack, such media coverage sharpened the question of just where Israel’s Arab citizens belong. What was most disquieting about his rampage was that it enacted a belief
that they are as much enemies of their state as the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories—a presumption that Zada is far from alone in making, as the coverage infallibly demonstrated. Once the full story emerged, editorials and TV commentators predicted inevitable riots, muscleously anticipated by their government. In preparation for the funerals of Zada’s victims, Reuters reported, “Thousands of Israeli police were called to the north after alerts of potential riots,” ominously recalling that “forces shot dead 13 Israeli Arabs in October 2000 when they tried to quell a rally in support of a Palestinian uprising that had grown violent.” Such references to the “October Riots,” as they are known to most Israeli Jews, were ubiquitous in the press. Palestinian citizens of Israel had already registered the echo of an event they saw very differently—a debacle during which they had been open targets of a rhetoric and treatment akin to that meted out across the border.

The conversations that their Jewish co-citizens conducted over their heads the following week did nothing to allay this sense of elision. On August 11, the liberal Israeli daily Ha’aretz demoted the disengagement preparations and the Shafa ’Amr fallout to lead with a piece of breaking census information. “For the First Time, Jews No Longer a Majority Between the Jordan and the Sea,” ran the headline. Nonetheless, the article reassured readers, by ditching Gaza and its 1.4 million Palestinians, Israel would buy itself Jewish demographic superiority for another 20 years. To Israel’s first citizens it was an overt plug for disengagement; to Palestinian citizens of Israel, it was a pointed reminder that the Jewish left-center lumps them with other Palestinians no less than did Zada. The inferred difference is that Kach begs the bigger question: after 20 years, then what?

Aply surmounting the day’s other headlines, the Ha’aretz census story provided a metatext for events in Gaza and Shafa ’Amr. As veteran commentator Akiva Eldar fruitlessly noted in the same paper: “Solid politicians and popular intellectuals who lend a hand—whether by commission or omission—to erasing the Green Line that, in the collective consciousness, distinguishes residents of the Triangle [the densest cluster of Arab towns in Israel], from their neighbors in the West Bank, are turning Israel’s Arabs into enemies.”

“Lynching” the Victims

The press, however, was already busy working the transformation. As I’lam observed, on the night of the attack, Channel 2 broadcast only one picture from the scene: the picture of the “angry mob.” It lingered in the ether well into the night, explained by comments like “the mob is still angry,” and signified by incessant references to the “riots” of October 2000. According to the version of the latter events then enshrined by the media, they were carried out by an armed Arab “mob” seeking to invade neighboring Jewish communities, egged on by the local Arab leadership. Evidence presented to a subsequent government-appointed inquiry, the Or Commission, showed this narrative to be patently false. Yet the myth prevailed, and it was now readily redeployed. Relentlessly interpolating “Israeli Arabs” as violent, irrational and easily “incited” pathogens within the body politic, the effect, as in the aftermath of October 2000, was to preposition them not as an aggrieved...
and threatened community but as a riot-in-the-making and to license, if necessary, their violent suppression. As Palestinian citizens mourned their dead, they were reminded that there might be more if they did not mourn quietly and that, as in 2000, those killed or executed would only have themselves to blame.

The “lynching” of Zada became a fulcrum for this discourse, the angle quickly adjusted by editorial headlines like “The Shame of the Jews—and Arabs.” International wire services and major networks like the BBC also peppered their online stories with the word “lynching.” In Israel, indeed, the killing of Zada became a story to rival his killings. On Channel 1, journalist Ayala Hason treated viewers to phrases like “they slaughtered him” and “they took their fury out on him.” These were carefully cultivated echoes of the lynching of two Israeli soldiers who had mysteriously become “lost” in Ramallah during the bloodiest phase of the Israeli army’s counterinsurgency in October 2000, so linking “Israeli Arab” behavior to that of the Palestinian enemy at large. Israelis didn’t fail to pick up on this. “Who knows what happened to him?” one neighbor of Zada’s family told the press. “Maybe the lynching of the soldiers in Ramallah affected him.” That the Israeli journalist dismissed this as a “delusional theory” did nothing to dampen the atmospheric resonance. The outrage was critically amplified by the fact that Zada was killed after the local police had boarded the bus and taken him into custody, effectively turning the affair into an Arab assault on Jewish authority. Sharon soon ordered a full investigation into the matter, stressing that everyone would be held accountable.

By taking Zada’s killers to task, the lynching narrative also burnished Israel’s self-image as a state committed to law and legality. Recouping its failure to uphold the law with respect to Jewish extremists, it thrust the spotlight back on its unruly Arab minority. Indeed, as the media waxed nervous about the redistribution of security forces necessitated by disengagement, it reinforced the notion that law only existed when Jews were there to enforce it. Arab Knesset members fed grist into this mill by calling for the government to suspend its inquiry into the lynching of Zada. “A Lynching Is a Lynching,” the right-leaning Jerusalem Post countered that “no country in which the law is properly enforced,” it might be more if they did not mourn quietly and that, as in the course of extreme right-wing activities in the past,” noted Avnery. “And why didn’t the army act, in spite of the fact that the commanders of the murderer knew that he had deserted in protest against the disengagement, taking his rifle with him? Indeed, his mother, who foresaw what

Media coverage of the Zada incident sharpened the question of just where Israel’s Arab citizens belong.

From firsthand accounts it is possible to reconstruct the trail of events on August 4. As the bus entered a Druze neighborhood of Shafa ‘Amr and pulled up at a stop, Zada went to the front, leveled his M-16 at the Arab driver, Michel Bahous, 56, and shot him. He then moved down the aisles, firing in short bursts at the dozen passengers cowering in the back. One rider managed to jump out the open door. Zada killed Nadir Hayak, 55, and sisters Hazar and Dina Turki, aged 23 and 21 respectively, but ran out of bullets with the barrel leveled at the head of a pleading young woman. As he fumbled to change his clip, she shoved him. Other passengers saw their chance and rushed the assailant. They were quickly joined by Husam al-‘Ayan, an armed Druze security guard who was driving in his car behind the bus, and boarded through the open door. For five minutes the other men wrestled with and beat Zada, who clung to his weapon, according to al-‘Ayan. He was effectively under citizens’ arrest by the time a few policemen arrived to handcuff him. A mobile phone camera recording broadcast on Israeli TV showed that Zada was still alive at this time. Soon enough, however, a growing crowd overpowered the police and what remained of Zada’s life was beaten out of him.

Inferring that “he knew he would never get out alive,” Palestinian Knesset member Azmi Bishara dubbed Zada’s “a suicide operation” in Egypt’s al-Ahram Weekly. But Bishara was mistaken. As Zada confessed on the bus, he didn’t think for a moment that he would pay with his life for what he had done. “Do you know what you are doing?” one man asked the pinned-down soldier, according to al-‘Ayan. “There are soldiers and policemen living here.” The man was referring to...
the Druze, who have been encouraged by the state to foster an identity distinct from Arab Palestinians—and, unlike Muslims and Christians, must by law serve in Israel’s armed forces. “All I know is that this is an Arab town,” responded Zada. “Soon the police will come, and it will be OK.” His intended victims, now turned captors, knew he was right. “Punishment depends on himself had not used his gun, as he was trained to do against terrorists, and despite the fact that when he boarded the bus, Zada was still clutching his M-16. Al-‘Ayan is employed as a security guard by the Israeli government, serves in its armed forces and, in the absence of the police, boarded the bus as the state’s emissary. But the idea of an Arab killing a Jew, even when the Arab is defending life and the Jew threatening it, was too forbidding. Al-‘Ayan’s caution doubtless underscored to the local crowd that the arrival of the police meant not that Zada would be delivered unto justice, but that justice would be snatched from his victims. Told that he had treated them all as just Arabs, they returned the gesture. Over the ensuing days, it was commonly recounted in the neighborhood that there had been an additional 14 M-16 clips in a bag Zada had carried with him on the bus.

Equality before the law was not an issue for the killer alone. At the funeral of Zada’s victims, ‘Abd al-Rahman Salah, a Bedouin leader, demanded that “the Israeli government destroy the house of the man who did this. If they do it to a [Palestinian] terrorist they should do it here.” In the irony-free corridors of Israel’s government, however, collective responsibility does not extend to Israeli Jews: Zada’s parents were not rendered homeless. When equal treatment was afforded, meanwhile, it was so conspicuous as to beg more questions than it stilled, as Amira Hass again noted: “Shortly after the murders in Sfaram [as Shafa ‘Amr is rendered in Hebrew], it was reported that those wounded and the families of the murder victims would receive recognition as victims of terrorism, dealt with and compensated accordingly. And the question immediately arose, since when do you highlight as a news item something that is self-explanatory and common sense? Except that equality among Jews and Arabs in Israel is not something self-explanatory. Therefore the news item, which should never have been a news item, was appropriate.”

A ministerial committee later decided that it would not be possible to recognize Shafa ‘Amr’s dead and wounded as “victims of terror” because Zada was a soldier and could not under the law be identified as a “member of a hostile organization.”

Wanting to Believe

Zada’s choice of Shafa ‘Amr as the site for his attack exposed awkward ironies in the imagined Arab-Jewish equality in Israel. Though close to Nazareth, “capital” of Israel’s Arab Palestinian minority and home to many of its most prominent political and cultural figures, Shafa ‘Amr is widely viewed as a “pro-Israeli” Arab town by the government and praised as such by media commentators. During Israel’s 1948 war of independence its leadership openly cooperated with Jewish forces, with the result that its inhabitants were spared the forced evictions that accompanied the conquest and near emptying of Arab Palestine, executed with particular brutality in nearby villages like Tantura and Safsaf, where Zionist forces carried out a massacre of the civilian population. Tellingly, Shafa ‘Amr’s mayor served

A committee decided that Zada’s victims cannot be recognized as “victims of terror” because Zada was a soldier.

nationality,” Amira Hass reminded Ha’aretz readers afterwards. Among others, she recalled the example of Yoram Skolnik, who in 1993 “murdered an Arab who was bound hand and foot, and was given a life sentence. President Ezer Weizman twice reduced his sentence: first to 15 years, and then to 11 years and three months. He was ultimately released seven years after his arrest. Skolnik is part of a list of Jews who murdered Arabs and were released by the judicial system.”

The most poignant comparison, however, evaded even Hass. In 1984, in what came to be known as the “Bus 300 Affair,” operatives from the Shin Bet—the same agency charged with investigating the killing of Zada—stormed an Egged bus hijacked by four Palestinian militants from Gaza. Two gunmen and a passenger were killed. The two remaining Palestinians were removed in handcuffs, as captured on film by Israeli journalists, and were soon executed on the orders of the agency’s director, Avraham Shalom. The government claimed they died on the way to hospital. Despite a lengthy and murky investigation involving internal disciplinary hearings, no was ever jailed over the killings. When the attorney general threatened to indict the involved, he was sacked. To forestall any other legal challenges, Israeli President Chaim Herzog awarded the Shin Bet agents an amnesty in 1986, a decision subsequently backed by the Supreme Court. Ten years later, on his retirement from the Shin Bet, Ehud Yatom admitted to an Israeli newspaper that he had crushed his two captives’ skulls with a stone, adding that such extrajudicial killings were routine during Shin Bet operations. Yatom’s handiness did not much impede his career. In June 2001, Ariel Sharon sought to appoint him as a special “counter-terrorism” advisor but was forced to back down after the courts intervened. Today Yatom is a member of the Knesset for Sharon’s Likud party.

Such stories are familiar to Israel’s Palestinian citizens. As one witness to the attack told the Jerusalem Post: “If this attack had occurred in a Jewish neighborhood and the attacker was Arab, he would have been killed immediately. The police came and they didn’t do anything!” It was notable that al-‘Ayan...
an uninterrupted term from the late 1930s through the 1960s, just after the Israeli government suspended the application of martial law to its Arab minority. Unusually, the present mayor is a member of the Likud. The spoils of such loyalty are evident in a gleaming glass-and-chrome cultural center on the outskirts of town, and in a relative prosperity that, while a pale shadow of the Galilee’s self-consciously “colonizing” Jewish communities, contrasts favorably with the crowded ghetto-like conditions of Arab towns like Nazareth, Acre and Sakhnin.

In this arrangement, Shafa ’Amr’s Druze community, of which Husam al-’Ayan is a typically upstanding member, occupies a marginally more privileged tier. Like him, Druze men serve in the Israeli security forces, one of the few employment advantages afforded them over other Arabs in Israel. Yet it is telling that, as a member of a community distinct from Israel’s Jewish citizens, al-’Ayan’s exemplary conduct during the attack was not highlighted. In reporting by Ha’aretz he was identified only as a “security guard,” from which many readers would infer that he is Jewish. In the Arab mob tableau, he did not fit the picture. Indeed, a day before the expiration of the first deadline set by Sharon for the Shin Bet’s Shafa ’Amr investigation, al-’Ayan had not yet been interviewed by a single official, though he was an ideal witness for the state.

Though none of Zada’s victims were Druze, his attack in Shafa ’Amr’s Druze neighborhood opened minor cracks in the community’s relations with the government. Shamil Ibrahim, the owner of a kiosk across the street from where the shooting took place, was among the first Druze locals to board the bus. A lean man with a crew cut, he is also a member of the Israeli army’s crack Golani brigade, with a tour of duty in Lebanon on his record, and had just been called up to serve as part of the army’s disengagement mobilization. The day after the attack, however, he tore up his summons. “After what I saw, I can’t wear this uniform,” he explained with a hard stare. Knowing the importance of the Druze to Israel’s armed forces, Zada’s calculation may indeed have been to provoke precisely this kind of response. But Shamil is in a minority. Al-’Ayan heeded his own call-up order that same week. Despite loud complaints from the police that nine officers had been injured in scuffles with the crowd, officers on the scene relied on local residents for cups of coffee and food as they entered a long standoff with the crowd for control of the bus. In the immediate wake of Zada’s rampage, Israeli flags still fluttered from several houses in Shafa ’Amr’s Druze neighborhood. Such a sight is rare in Arab towns in Israel, even in less aggrieved circumstances.

Many of Shafa ’Amr’s residents belong to the always small and now further shrinking segment of Israel’s Arab (and less self-consciously Palestinian) population struggling to believe in the “fabric of relations,” tested though they may be by their government. A friend of Shamil’s, Jabbour Jabbour, a local travel agent and the son of Shafa ’Amr’s Christian deputy mayor, proudly recounted that in the late 1990s he had made national and international news by trying to become the first Arab flight attendant on El Al airlines. He was declined three times by the hiring board and then took his case public, in what proved to be a major international embarrassment for Israel’s national carrier. Finally vindicated, he became a poster boy for how, purportedly, Arab citizens can combat prejudice within the parameters, and indeed with the help, of Israeli law. Though he never accepted his belated job offer,
he feels his case opened the door to a few Arab individuals who later did, but he admits that such victories may still be token. He sustains no illusions in matters such as the Zada attack. “The problem was that people were afraid that if the police took him away he would be judged as crazy and freed after three to five years. He would be released a hero,” he said unhesitatingly.

“Not an Isolated Incident”

Jabbour’s fears were justified. Zada had acted “in a fit of insanity,” according to a typical Israeli editorial in the wake of the attack. “We will not allow crazy men and terrorists to harm your life here,” echoed Israeli Vice Premier Shimon Peres as he visited the victims’ families two days later. Not incidentally, insanity was also the plea quickly adopted by Asher Weissgan’s lawyer in defense of his client. “A sane and balanced person would not have said what he said,” he argued, prompting the Petah Tikvah Magistrate’s Court to order a psychiatric evaluation. Though calls for Sharon’s head were hardly an aberration among the settler community in the run-up to disengagement, this rationalization found frequent purchase. Allowing Israeli society to selectively distance itself from Zada, the moniker of the Bad Apple from Tapuah (“apple” in Hebrew) rapidly gained currency in the press.

Importantly, this pathological subtext also denied any equating of Jewish and Arab terror, Sharon’s condemnations notwithstanding. Zada was a sick human being, but a human being nonetheless. Arabs, by implicit converse, are merely sickly inhuman: unlike Jews, degeneracy is innate in their nature. Such inferences could not but be drawn by Palestinian citizens habitually characterized by Jewish politicians and religious leaders as a disease or vermin. The most frank exponents of such language are the Moledet and Yisrael Beiteinu parties, which campaign openly for the Arab population’s transfer from the country. Moledet sat in a coalition government with Sharon’s Likud from 2001 until 2004 and, like Yisrael Beiteinu, mines a deep vein of public sympathy. Support for transfer—expulsion—has always been high in Israel and is showing no signs of abating; a 2005 Democracy Index survey shows that 57 percent of Jews support the idea, either as implemented through “incentives” or by force. Not surprisingly, Peres’ assurances to Zada’s victims that “your pain is the pain of the entire State of Israel” were hard for most Palestinian citizens to swallow.

As Arab communities across Israel observed a one-day strike, Sheikh Ra’id Salah, the formerly imprisoned head of the Islamic Movement in Israel, echoed the rest of the Arab leadership in his response: “This is not an isolated incident. It is the outcome of the Israeli discriminatory policy against the Arab residents of Israel,” he noted at the Shafa ‘Amr funerals. “Israel officially incites against the Arabs in the country. Senior officials repeatedly state that we are considered a demographic danger, and describe us as cancer cells which should be removed.” State policy reflects such rhetoric, tightly constraining the development of Arab communities through rolling land confiscations, strict limits on new construction, house demolitions, discriminatory social budgeting and encystment by rings of Jewish development. That the Arab minority is socially disadvantaged is widely acknowledged by the Israeli media. As a rule, however, the effects of structural state violence are mystified by references to Arab primitiveness and anomie. Redress is at best indefinitely deferred, at worst openly acknowledged as a non-issue for a state whose primary responsibility is to its Jewish citizens. When Israel’s National Insurance Institute published a report five days after Zada’s attack showing that poverty in Israel has reached historic highs, a Ministry of Finance spokesman could accordingly hasten to add that more than two thirds of those poor were Arab and ultra-Orthodox (non-Zionist Jews). Critically, acknowledgment of discrimination never licenses Arab protest, a lack of empathy that conspicuously contrasts with the media’s coverage of the Zada family’s life on the down-and-out margins of the middle-class town of Rishon Letzion. “They have put us into a ghetto,” complained Zada’s father, Yitzhak. “How is it possible to live this way?”

Arab leaders who posed the same question after Shafa ‘Amr, however, were quickly intimidated and promptly vilified as agents provocateurs in an overt throwback to Israel’s master narrative of October 2000. In the mandate subsequently laid down for the Or Commission by the government, incitement charges against Arab leaders were prescribed as a fact and the Commission dutifully sustained them in three cases. Resetting the stage after Shafa ‘Amr, the hawkish Jerusalem Post sought to shift the blame even further, complaining: “In its final report that commission chose to place emphasis on the long history of official discrimination against the Arabs rather than on the growing and vociferous identification of the Israeli Arab leadership with Arafat and the PLO.” As documented by the Arab Association for Human Rights in Nazareth, police brutality against Palestinian citizens has continued unabated since October 2000, subject to widespread impunity. Symptomatically, not a single policeman has been prosecuted in connection with the October 2000 shootings, even though strong evidence, pointing inter alia to point-blank executions of protesters, implicated several officers. An official line was drawn belatedly under these events in September 2005, when the Justice Ministry’s investigations unit, Mahash, published

Shimon Peres’ assurances to Zada’s victims that “your pain is the pain of the entire State of Israel” were hard for most Palestinian citizens to swallow.
a report after five years of mostly inactive inquiries in which it refused to indict a single police officer. But, whereas Israel’s attorney general has argued that incitement by Jewish anti-disengagement protesters, shading into death threats against Sharon, is merely part of lively public debate, Arab leaders who worked Zada’s actions into context were themselves immediately labeled as inciters.

With headlines like “Residents’ Restraint and Leaders’ Threats,” the media helped the government shift responsibility for any fallout onto Israel’s Arab leaders. “Most of the media (broadcast and print) did not hesitate to impose the task of ‘calming things down’ on the Arab members of the Knesset,” noted I’lam. “Channel 1’s Ayala Hason dedicated all of her post-attack interviews with Arab MKs…to this subject.” Editorializing on the center-left, Ha’aretz admonished that “Israel’s political leaders—Jewish and Arab—must work together as seldom before to ensure that, in contrast to the early days of this round of conflict in the fall of 2000, protests and anger in the Israeli Arab community do not explode into bitter violence.” On the right, the Jerusalem Post fulminated against those responsible “five years ago” for “widespread anti-Israel hostilities…in obvious coordination with the eruption of Yasser Arafat’s second murderous intifada in the territories.” Largely, the coverage singled out for censure the very same leaders targeted by the Or Commission as “inciters” and “organizers.” The Jerusalem Post was not above seeing such shadowy forces at work on the bus itself. “It may well be that Zada was killed in a more calculated fashion by extremist elements in what has been one of the most pro-Israel minority cities in Israel,” warned one editorial.

Afterthoughts on the Margins

The final narrative of Shafa ‘Amr came to rely heavily on the “extremist element.” Its ghost plainly gunned for Palestinian citizens as they grappled with the event. When the crowd sang “Biladi, Biladi,” the popular Palestinian national anthem, while mourning and protesting at the scene of the attack, TV reporters immediately seized upon this as a “call to extremism,” noted I’lam. Israeli viewers would have been even more alarmed by the funerals of Zada’s victims. In cars festooned with black antenna strips—contrasting with the orange strips adopted by Israeli Jewish anti-disengagement protesters—more than 10,000 Arabs from Shafa ‘Amr and the surrounding area gathered in town on August 5. Many joined a solemn procession conveying the coffins of sisters Hazar and Dina Turki to their graves, threaded with young men holding aloft a few Palestinian flags and shouting slogans like “With our blood and soul, we will sacrifice for you, o martyr.” Leading the procession, Shafa ‘Amr native and MK Muhammad Baraka spoke to the crowd of Israel’s history of violence against its Palestinian citizens.

More ambivalent dissent was voiced by the Arab Higher Follow-Up Committee, a moribund association dominated by mayors. Spokesman ‘Abid Anabtawi predicted the possibility of a “non-violent intifada” erupting in response to the killings. “A popular uprising against the fascism and negative treatment we receive is the most reasonable scenario,” he told Israeli Army Radio. Yet such rhetoric was immediately softened by committee chairman Shawqi Khatib, who said that the Israeli Arab leadership would continue “to act responsibly as it has in the past 57 years.” There were other signs of fabric mending at work: wreaths from the Israeli government deposited on the graves of victims that none of the protesters thought to remove, and the appearance of Rabbi Menachem Froman from the West Bank settlement of Tekoa at a prayer ceremony for Zada’s two Christian victims, condemning the soldier on behalf of Israel’s Sephardi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar. “Nothing will happen,” one despondent Arab activist commented during the funeral. “People will talk about it. It’s good, nice, to see people unite. The question is, what will we do Monday? We are still living with them [the Jews] as if nothing has happened.”

Yet in contrast to an Arab minority still struggling to organize dissent within the forbidding parameters laid down by their government, the Jewish “fringe” makes no attempt to “live with them as if nothing has happened.” In the wake of the attack, Jerusalem Post writer Josef Goell was content to reinvent common Israeli illusions of normalcy. “No segment of Israeli society has condoned this attack, much less cheered it,” he averred. “The contrast between these attitudes and the funerals of Palestinian terrorists is telling. No frenzied thousands are waiting to march with Zada’s coffin, to vow more bloodshed and glorify him as a heroic martyr.” The posturing at Hamas funerals is, however, the preserve of the weak. The militant settlers, one of whom told Ha’aretz at Zada’s funeral that Zada was “a righteous man and did what we are incapable of doing,” launch attacks on Palestinian villages from state-subsidized settlements with only very occasional penalty.

Sentiments like those voiced at Zada’s funeral, moreover, are more common than many Israelis would like to admit. A 1987 poll of Jewish youth conducted by the Van Leer Institute showed that one third “supported the ideas of Rabbi Kahane and his [Kach] movement.” A 2001 Haifa University survey found that 20 percent of Israelis would vote for Kach if permitted to do so. Ironically, legalization of the movement is no longer necessary, with Moledet and Yisrael Beiteinu channeling Kahane’s politics into more elliptical and therefore ostensibly permissible agendas. The latitude nevertheless afforded Jewish “extremists” contrasts starkly with the state’s obsessive concerns about Arab militancy, observes Uri Avnery. “The Kach group was officially declared a terrorist organization and outlawed some 12 years ago. This means that anyone belonging to it, supporting it or assisting it with money or in any other way, is legally considered a terrorist…. But for years now, the Kach people have been roving the country without hindrance and have committed numberless outrages against Israeli Arab citizens and inhabitants of the occupied Palestinian territories.”

Indeed, in attempting to distance themselves from Zada, Israeli Jews struggled to compartmentalize a “fringe” movement...
whose sensibilities increasingly ply the country’s political mainstream, rehabilitated by media coverage of the disengagement process. On the Israeli left, some commentators sought to attribute Zada’s attack to the zealotry incubated in the country’s settlements. Eliding the quiet repression of Israel’s own Arab citizens, this narrative also contended awkwardly with the fact that in the summer of 2005 no Israelis were at once presented as more human and more sacrificing for their nation and its ideals than these zealots. In the weeks following Zada’s attack, TV screens filled with children and tight nuclear families and gardens and houses and pets, everyone hugging and crying. The pathological Zada fitted poorly into this picture. More typically therefore he was described by one reporter for the Jerusalem Post as “unconsciously camouflaged by the thousands of the settlement movement’s entirely peaceful activists…. His newfound fanaticism fueled his hatred, and compelled him to do what the vast majority of settlers think unconscionable.”

That settler “activists” had on June 29 tried to stone to death a Palestinian youth by Gaza’s Gush Katif bloc had no bearing on such explications. Nor did a trail of killings in the West Bank—some perpetrated by prominent settler leaders like Pinhas Wallerstein—of which Weissgan’s was only the most recent. Instead, the spectacle of military officials demanding that settler leaders condemn Zada and Weissgan contributed to the re-edification of the “ethical” colonists, and displaced questions about the underlying politics that spawns their project. Chasing away from Zada’s grave “a few children with long side curls and big woolen skullcaps…[is] easier than dismantling Tapuah,” commented Tom Segev in Haaretz. In parsing the final ruckus over where Zada would be buried, Segev also noted that, though many settlers and ordinary Israelis might indeed shy away from emulating Zada, theirs would not be a judgment on killing Arabs, as much as the context of such killing. “Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz prohibited Natan Zada’s burial in a military cemetery,” noted Segev, “as though he had not been a soldier or had served in a different army. Mofaz, who is not exactly a moral authority, argued that the murderer of Arab passengers on a bus was ‘not worthy’ of a military grave. However, if we were to remove from the military cemeteries all the soldiers who are tainted with moral opprobrium, in some cases for illegal killing of Palestinian civilians, quite a bit of space would become available.”

A Matter of Time and Place

As much as Zada’s attack, Israeli discourse on it proved a disturbingly revealing installment in a running debate about the terms of Palestinian life both in and out of Israel. Though it cuts to the heart of the question of just who and where they should be, this is not a debate in which Palestinian are included and it remained that way after Shafa ‘Amr. As Yitzhak Laor characterized their enduring situation in Haaretz: “They are part of the demographic danger; their mothers’ wombs are a ticking bomb…. Because they constitute a ‘demographic danger’—and they must hear this every day, because they do make children—and if their children overcome the backwardness that is fostered from above and make it to university, here, too, they have to listen to learned discussions about the danger of their natural increase…. Who will now include the experts on the demographic danger among those responsible for incitement? As a rule, the Arabs are a danger, a matter of time. How much time? It’s not clear.”

If disengagement is a preemptive maneuver in the demographic battle Israel self-consciously wages against all the Palestinians under its rule, Zada bloodily reminded everyone of its final frontier. Currently demarcated inside Israel by a combination of disenfranchisement, discrimination and occasionally overt violence, this divide hardened further in Shafa ‘Amr. Unreflective acceptance of Israel’s terms of engagement with its Palestinian and Arab minority allowed most Jewish Israelis to cast Zada’s act as that of a crazed loner, and simultaneously use the opportunity to reinscribe limits to any Arab challenge of these terms. Israeli Palestinian reactions, on the other hand, could not but be filtered through their broader experiences within the threadbare “fabric of relations.” To them, the larger question remains whether Israel is disengaging not just from Gaza and slivers of the West Bank, but also from a future in which Palestinians might have a real and secure place anywhere in their own country.
The Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO), or the People’s Combatants Organization, was established in 1965 as an armed, underground group opposed to the Pahlavi regime and seeking to establish a “monotheistic classless society.” Fusing aspects of Marxism-Leninism and political Islam, the MKO played an important role in mobilizing urban, educated Iranians during the Islamic Revolution, yet quickly fell out with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his inner circle in the post-revolutionary period. Driven out of Iran, Masoud Rajavi and the Central Committee moved the MKO’s headquarters to Western Europe and then after 1986 to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Aside from its official history, little has been written in English about the inner workings of this highly secretive group.

The memoir of Masoud Banisadr, until 1996 a US and European representative of the National Council for Resistance (NCR), the MKO’s nominally independent political wing, helps present a picture of the organization as it functioned from the late 1970s. *Masoud* is especially timely, since the MKO, though deemed a “terrorist organization” by the State Department and several European governments, has been identified by neo-conservatives Daniel Pipes and Patrick Clawson as a candidate to bring “the tide of freedom” to Iran. The book seriously challenges such assumptions. In fact, Banisadr’s detailed life story corroborates a recent Human Rights Watch report, which describes the MKO’s systematic abuse and torture of members who challenge the Central Committee or seek to defect.

Banisadr, a cousin of the first popularly elected president of the Islamic Republic, and his wife were postgraduate students in Britain during the 1979 revolution. They became involved with the MKO and its affiliates after the fall of the Shah. A self-described “social democrat” at the time of the revolution, Banisadr was attracted to an ideology that “seemed indistinguishable from [Ali] Shariati’s,” the thinker he had read and admired while still in Iran. Interestingly, he acknowledges that many MKO supporters did not “know much about the Mojahedin ideology, especially as it differed from that of other Muslims and Marxists.” For him, “it was enough to know that they supported democracy, independence and progress.”

At almost 500 pages, *Masoud* is a meticulous, but often meandering and disjointed, book. Yet, for the patient reader, it is crammed with poignant details of how the MKO has maintained organizational unity despite external hostility and the many unsavory practices described by Banisadr. He tells us how the various “bases” scattered across Europe created a combination of complex, opaque hierarchy and communal living arrangements, how songs and military drills were used as rituals to develop a sense of solidarity among middle-class college graduates, and how in order to raise funds the MKO established businesses, such as a stand that “introduced the joys of kebabs” to Durham.

But what will receive the most attention are the disturbing psychological techniques employed to force members to relinquish all sense of individual identity, to monitor each other and to disavow feelings for all people other than the married couple who make up the ideological and spiritual leadership of the MKO, Masoud and Maryam Rajavi. From the outset, the MKO encouraged members to distance themselves from their families, unless they could support the cause monetarily or through activities in Iran. The detachment from greater society, however, reached new levels after 1985 when the Rajavis announced various stages of the “ideological revolution,” whereby the MKO sought to reposition itself against the more consolidated regime in Iran. This “revolution” was initiated by the “marriage of the century,” in which Rajavi wed Maryam Azodanlu, who had been married to another leading member until shortly beforehand. All MKO members were expected to go through their own “ideological revolutions” in order to become true Mojahedin and demonstrate their loyalty. This was done at regular group confessions (“cooking pots”) in which Mojahedin would admonish themselves and each other, as well as through writing reports on one’s weaknesses, burning “bourgeois” luxury items, limiting and even ending relations between the sexes, and divorcing one’s spouse to prevent “contradictions.” The latter step was said to remove the main “buffer” preventing true understanding of the revolution, embodied in “the ideological mother” Maryam Rajavi, the only bridge to her husband. The meetings, taped sermons by the Rajavis and limits on outside sources of information created what Banisadr calls the “mystical efficacy of drip-fed propaganda.”

This politico-theological apparatus surely helped to create some devoted followers, as demonstrated when several Mojahedin set themselves on fire when France briefly arrested Maryam Rajavi in 2003. Yet Banisadr describes how this psychologically abusive atmosphere, combined with growing doubts about the MKO’s military capability and political skill, led many other members to question the leadership and eventually quit. Banisadr’s suggestions and criticisms were met with indifference and public personal condemnation, so much so that he began to doubt his own character. Unlike others who ended up attempting suicide or in Abu Ghraib prison for their criticisms, Banisadr was able to leave with relative ease, because he spent much of his time abroad and still had an extended family, including his ex-wife, living in Britain. *Masoud* does not fully explain why Banisadr joined the MKO, as opposed to another political party, or why he left when he did. Nor does it offer an alternative politics to the one offered by the MKO. Like many autobiographies, it is too self-reflective to take these analytical steps or challenge the teleology of the narrative. Instead, Banisadr paints a picture of an organization that, over time, corrupted its members’ idealistic vigor and organizing acumen into a means for self-abnegation with the only relationship of any significance being that between the individual member and the two-headed Rajavi beloved. After reading *Masoud*, it is difficult to imagine, as Pipes and Clawson apparently do, that the MKO will be able to mobilize its small, psychologically fragile membership or recruit more Iranians in order to overthrow the Islamic Republic, let alone establish a transparent political regime and foster a pluralistic society.


Human Rights Watch. *A Face and a Name: Civilian Victims of Insurgent Groups in Iraq* (New York, October 2005).


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**LETTERS**

**Disturbing Image**

I have some questions about the photograph printed on page 18 of the last issue (appearing in Bassel Salloukh, “Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed,” *MER* 236). The caption and credit information read: “A man about to disclose the location of an arms cache to the invading Israeli army is quieted by his wife and children fearing retaliation, West Beirut, 1982. Micha Bar Am/Magnum.”

I was gripped by the photo’s inherent drama, but as I read the caption, I immediately wondered several things.

First, how do we know that the man in the photo was “about to disclose” some information? Who provided this interpretation for the caption? The man or his family? The photographer? The photo agency? And how was the information for the caption obtained—through observation? Conjecture? Or confession or interrogation?

Second, why would a man give information to an “invading” army in front of a crowd of people, instead of quietly and secretly, so as not to be cast as a collaborator? Who is outside the frame of the photo? What is the relationship (spatial and ideological) between the photographer and the man? Between the photographer and the “invading Israeli army”? How did this affect the photographer’s perspective?

If, in fact, this man was “about to disclose” information to an invading army, couldn’t the publication of this photo and caption endanger him?

I assume you chose the photo to show how people are caught in the crossfire of war in complex ways. I was disturbed by the image, partly because of the issues it “reveals,” but also because I felt the caption might be misleading.

Joan Mandell
Olive Branch Productions
Royal Oak, MI

We agree that the photo is disturbing. Rather than the usual, sometimes romanticized images of young fighters dashing around Beirut with guns, we looked for images that portray the terrible plight of civilians caught up in the war. In a photo on the previous page, civilians are depicted as victims of violence. With the photo in question, we hoped to convey a more complex sense of the war’s psychological trauma and the helplessness of individuals and communities caught between various warring parties.

The caption was supplied by the agency, Magnum Photos. The norm is for the photographer to deliver photos to the agency with captions, and we presume that this photographer wrote the caption based on his observations at the scene.

We did think twice before printing the image, knowing that it might be read as portraying the invading Israeli army as neutral or even as a liberating force. We decided to take this risk because of the photo’s extraordinarily vivid depiction of the horrible dilemma forced upon this family and neighborhood by a brutal war.

Since the photo is more than 20 years old, we do not think it will endanger anyone. As the man’s mouth is covered up, it would be hard to identify him.

Michelle Woodward
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