

## MIDDLE EAST **AMIN SAIKAL**

The American policy in Iraq has failed to produce the fully democratic state once talked about. So could the present chaos play into the hands of a different type of policy approach in Washington, setting Iraqi against Iraqis, Arabs against Iranians, Palestinians against Palestinians and Shi'ites against Sunnis to contain and neutralise each other?

**A**MERICAN POLICY IN IRAQ HAS SUBSTANTIALLY contributed to deepening and widening sectarian divisions in the region. This is an unintended consequence, but now it has materialised, it may be welcome to some neo-conservatives and their allies in President George Bush's administration as compensation for Washington's failures on other fronts.

It is not just Iraq that is in the grip of bloody sectarian disorder, with no hopeful signs in sight. The Gulf, and for that matter some other parts of the Muslim world, are polarised more than ever before along broad Sunni-Shi'a sectarian lines. This has enabled critics of Iran to claim that a powerful Iranian-led regional Shi'a strategic entity has emerged, giving rise to a fear in the many Sunni-dominated Arab states about what this might mean for them.

It is claimed that this influence stretches from western Afghanistan, where Iran has made substantial financial and infrastructural investment, with a sectarian inroad into some of the country's fifteen to twenty percent Shi'ite population, to Lebanon, where Iran has backed Hizbollah as a force to be reckoned with, not only internally, but also in the region.

The US push for democratisation in Iraq and its consequent empowerment of the country's Shi'a majority forms the central core. Although a majority of Iraqi Shi'ites are Arabs and Iraq has historically had an Arab national identity, the political and social landscape of the country has changed so much under the US-led occupation that no amount of American effort can now easily alter the new realities.

Despite a proclaimed resolve on the part of Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki to govern for all Iraqis and deal with Sunni and Shi'a militias on equal terms, the government has ultimately proved ill-equipped to manage the new dynamics and bring about national sectarian and ethnic reconciliation. Actions have so far been more



symbolic than substantive, primarily aimed at maintaining the support of the Bush administration. It has made little progress in addressing the Shi'a-Sunni faultline that has become a major source of anxiety externally.

Iran remains at loggerheads with the US on a range of issues, including, most importantly, its nuclear programme, but it has not tried to disrupt Baghdad's patron-client relationship with Washington. Even so, Iran is constantly accused of obstruction in Iraq, contrary to the evidence that most of the problems there stem from internal conditions, largely resulting from national leadership deficiencies and the inappropriate policies of foreign forces.

## **THREAT TO UNITY**

Arab states in the Gulf and beyond are alarmed by the rapid change in the sectarian equation and the regional strategic balance. Many followers of Sunni Islam have become concerned – rightly or wrongly – about how the changes could affect Muslim unity just when it is needed most. Some feel that a perception of Iran as quietly revelling in its new strategic gains, despite its rejection of any accusation that it is working deliberately to expand its regional influence, could widen sectarian rifts.

Saudi leaders have summed up the position of many Arabs by calling for open assistance to Iraqi Sunnis, with a view to containing and possibly reversing the emerging sectarian and strategic imbalance. This implies that what is transpiring in Iraq, on the top of resistance to occupation and sectarian violence, is a kind of Iranian-Arab conflict by proxy with major consequences for many other parts of the region.

Groups on both sides of the Sunni-Shi'a divide can take solace from this. For example, neither the Taliban and their supporters, nor Al Qaeda and its associates, will be disappointed at Sunni-Shi'a polarisation in terms of their own interests.

If the conflicts from Afghanistan to Palestine find wider regional bases, there is little prospect for the Muslim world to avoid sinking deeper into internal disunity and conflict. This is not what the architects of the 'war' on terror originally planned,

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