Getting Religion Wrong: Three Decades of Misreporting Iran and Iraq

By Michael Rubin[1]

War is always a hot story for journalists. Walter Cronkite, Morley Safer, and Christiane Amanpour rose to national prominence as war correspondents. First in 1991 and again in 2003, hundreds of journalists flooded into Kuwait and Iraq to cover the U.S. military. For many, war was a sexy story; religion was not. Ignoring religion, though, is a mistake. In the Middle East, war, politics and religion can often be so intertwined as to be inseparable. As in any story, the devil is often in the details. As journalists rush to fill 700-word copy, they can seldom address theology in detail. Failure to understand the nuances of religion, though, can lead them to misanalysis and an artificial emphasis on political and diplomatic motivations.

It would be an exaggeration to say that correspondents in the Middle East always ignore religion. Few miss the religious angle to the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). Journalists described the sectarian nature of protests against the Sunni ruling family in majority Shi‘ite Bahrain in 1995-1996, although only after years of ignoring such tension. The general rule for Western correspondents in the Muslim world, though, is to report violence and political intrigue, but ignore underlying religious tension, especially when disagreements involve doctrinal disputes within sects rather than fighting between sects or religions. As a result, the Western media often gets the Middle East wrong.

Ignoring Theological Debate: Getting the Islamic Revolution Wrong

No where has the media’s disregard for Islamic doctrinal dispute eroded the accuracy of its coverage more than in its reporting of Iran and Iraq, the two countries with the largest Shi‘ite populations in the Middle East. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran surprised Western correspondents. They had chronicled the rise and victory of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini but, while they had followed his fight against the Shah and the subsequent seizure of the U.S. embassy, few paid attention to his doctrinal heterodoxy which culminated in a system not in the Islamic democracy about which he often spoke, but rather of clerical rule. A quarter-century later, the problem is reversed: Having witnessed revolution and the imposition of a Shi‘ite-inspired theocracy, most journalists, commentators, and even government officials now accept the Iranian experience as both normal and representative of mainstream Shi‘ism. It is not. As a result of misunderstanding Shi‘ite doctrine, the Western press misreads Iraqi politics.

Doctrinal debates within Islam often have their roots in early Muslim history. The dispute among Shi‘ite thinkers is no different and relates to the succession dispute which followed the death of the Prophet Muhammad (569-632). While leadership of the Muslim community passed to Abu Bakr (573-634), a companion of the Prophet, one faction—which would later become the Shi‘ites—believed that leadership belonged in the hands of ‘Ali Abu Talib (600-661), the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law. The term Shi‘ite derives from the Arabic phrase *shi‘at ‘Ali*, literally, partisans of ‘Ali

Understanding early Islamic history is important because Islamic practice rests not only upon the Qu’ran, which Muslims believe to be the immutable word of God, but also upon the *hadith*, examples from the Prophet’s life. Because of the importance of precedent in religious debate, these differences have magnified over time to influence theology well beyond questions of the Prophet’s succession. Take for example Sunnis and Shi‘ites: Today their differences are many, and play out politically across the Middle East. But, when layers of distrust and dispute are peeled away, the two sects differ over the veracity of certain *hadith*.

‘Ali eventually did become caliph, although an assassin’s knife cut short his stewardship. His death worsened the schism within the Islamic world. The Shi‘ites believed that members of the Prophet’s family should hold the mantle of leadership. Those who became Shi‘ites placed their allegiance in a line of *imam*s whom they traced from ‘Ali through several generations to Muhammad al-Mahdi (b. 868), the twelfth Imam, whom believers say did not die, but rather went into occultation. Some journalists have described imams as saints, an analogy resented by many Shi‘ites because of the prohibition of saint-worship in Islam.[2] In contrast, those who became the Sunnis accepted the leadership of the Umayyad caliphs who were descended from an elite tribe of pre-Islamic Mecca.

The ‘Hidden Imam’ or Mahdi, plays a key role in Shi‘ite doctrine as a messianic figure. Shi‘ites believe that upon his return, he will rid the world of evil and injustice. By extension, therefore, traditional Shi‘ism teaches that any temporal authority prior to the return of the Mahdi is to some degree unjust and corrupt. Such a belief has become the basis of a loose separation between mosque and state in Shi‘ite societies. Religious authorities might advise kings and pashas or issue *fatwa*s—religious rulings—when rulers pursued policies that contravened religious sensibilities. This most famously occurred during the 1891-1892 Tobacco Protests in Iran when the religious clergy objected to the Shah’s decision to grant a monopoly over an important industry to foreigners.[3] Riots accompanied the political fireworks but, once the Shah backed down, clerics would eschew involvement in daily governance and fade into the background.

While Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1901-1989) accepted Shi‘ism’s traditional separation between spiritual and temporal rule in his early years, his views shifted with time. Journalists, academics, and diplomats got Khomeini wrong by failing to understand how heterodox his theological interpretations had become. Initially, he adhered to the separation doctrine. “We do not say the government must be in the hands of the *faqih* [jurisprudent],” he argued in 1943, “rather we say the government must be run in accordance with God’s rule.”[4] In the 1960s, as the Shah accelerated his modernization program, antagonizing more traditional segments of Iranian society. Khomeini became a figurehead for opposition, culminating in his arrest and exile. In 1970, six years into his Iraqi exile, Khomeini delivered a series of lectures. These were published the following year in a book, *Hukumat-i Islami* (*Islamic Government*),[5] which outlined his concept of *vilayat-i faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurisprudent), in practice, the theocratic rule of clerics.

While *Hukumat-i Islami* was a bit vague in its practicalities, Khomeini’s subsequent declarations hinted at his ultimate goals. “How is it that now, when it is the turn of the present generation of religious scholars to speak out, we invest excuses and say that it is ‘incompatible’ with our status to speak out?” he asked in 1971.[6] The following year, he exhorted students to “Devote greater attention to planning the foundations of an Islamic state and studying the problems involved.”[7]

In February 1978, Khomeini preached that Qom—a religious seminary town in Iran—would supplant the traditional holy city of Najaf, in southern Iraq, as the center for Shi‘ite thought.[8] Such a pronouncement was symbolically important, for it signaled that an end to the theological supremacy of Najaf, whose resident ayatollahs supported the traditional separation of religious and temporal authority.

A newspaper article or 60 second television report is no place to get into the vagaries of Shi‘ite jurisprudence. It may not be the job of Western journalists to report on theological debate, but it is their job to be familiar enough with it in order to report news accurately. In the run-up to the Islamic Revolution, though, too many Western journalists ignored religion. They spoke of the Ayatollah’s agitation, but failed to mention his philosophy toward Islamic government. In 1978, after having moved to France from Iraq, Khomeini granted a number of interviews to the press. He denied any personal political ambition. “Personally, I can’t accept any special role or responsibility [for governance],"[9] he told *Le Journal*. To *Le Monde*, he declared, "I will not become a president nor accept any other leadership role."[10] Journalists accepted his statements at face value. With few exceptions, they failed to mention the Shi'ite concept of *taqiya* (dissimulation), which allows figures to lie to those they deem enemies.[11] By getting religion wrong, journalists became less chroniclers of news and more vessels of Khomeini's propaganda.

In December 1978, as Khomeini commanded the masses to rise, *The Washington Post* suggested that Khomeini's "Islamic democracy" might resemble "parliamentary democracy along Western lines."[12] A few days later, its editorial page featured a commentary by an American University professor who wrote "Iran is hardly prone to turn toward Islamic revival…or to reject an alignment with the West."[13] Steven Erlanger, at the time an assistant national editor at the *Boston Globe*—he is now a Middle East correspondence for *The New York Times*—predicted at the height of the Islamic Revolution that clerical rule could not last.[14] Had Western commentators traced Khomeini's evolution, they might not have downplayed the import of the ayatollah's actions. The rest is history.

On February 1, 1979, Khomeini arrived triumphant in Tehran after 15 years of exile. Alluding to the mystical Mahdi, Iranian newspaper headlines announced *Imam Amad*, 'The Imam Came.'[15] Once in Iran, Khomeini maneuvered to eliminate rivals and consolidate autocratic control. The Islamic Revolution redefined concepts of political evolution and modernity.

Misunderstanding the Leadership Struggle: Getting Iraq Wrong

Twenty-five years later, the Shi'ite debates about the role of the clergy in politics continue. When the U.S. military poured into Iraq, several hundred journalists accompanied the troops.[16] Few knew much about Iraq, and fewer still about Shi'ism. *The Washington Post*, for example, sought volunteers from its metro-beat bureau. Many of the journalists were in their 30s and 40s. They grew up with images of Iranian hostage-takers seizing the American embassy in Tehran. A generation of Americans saw televised images of Khomeini's ally, Ayatollah Sadiq Khalkhali, the hanging judge of the Islamic Revolution, abusing the corpses of American servicemen killed in the aborted hostage rescue attempt of 1980.[17] Such images transformed Shi'ism in the American mindset. Political cartoonists adopted the scowling, turbaned and bearded Khomeini as the symbol of Islamist challenge.[18] His caricature expanded in the public mind to encompass all Shi'ites.

On April 4, 2003, as more than a hundred thousand Coalition troops converged on Baghdad, *The New York Times* made its first mention of Grand

Ayatollah ‘Ali Sistani, the most influential Shi‘ite cleric in Iraq.[19] Sistani’s existence was a revelation for the paper’s audience. For months prior to the war, the paper had ignored the theological schisms within mainstream Shi‘ism.[20] In one example, Tehran-based correspondent Nazila Fathi published a profile of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, the leader of the pro-clerical rule Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, reporting simply, “The Ayatollah, 63, is popular in Iraq.”[21] She might have tried to gauge his popularity by, for example, questioning religious Iraqis about to which Ayatollahs they paid their religious alms. She did not, though, either out of ignorance of the question or because she deemed the topic too sensitive for the Islamic Revolution. Either way, she dropped the ball by accepting blindly the word of Iranian authorities who had an interest in promoting a pro-clerical rule ayatollah over the mainstream, anti-clerical rule ayatollahs dominant in Iraq. The subsequent subordination of Hakim to Sistani indicated the failure of *The New York Times* and other newspapers to understand let alone explain the nature of Shi‘ite leadership and the contrasting claims to leadership.

By conflating political and religious popularity, *The New York Times* underlined their confusion about the intra-Shi‘ite dispute regarding the political role of the clergy. For traditional Shi‘ite clerics, such as those that predominate in Iraq, political popularity is irrelevant. What matters is who Shi‘ites follow as their *marja‘ at-taqlid* (source of emulation). The Shi‘ite clergy are hierarchical but, unlike Catholicism where the Pope is elected by the College of Cardinals and accepted as the undisputed head of the Catholic Church, Shi‘ism does not require universal recognition of leadership. Local mosques may have mullahs, many with little more than a rudimentary education. A *mujtahid* or *‘alim* who continues his studies in a religious seminary in Najaf, Karbala, or Qom may become a *hojjat ol-Islam* (proof of Islam), *ayatollah* (sign of God) or, after decades of research and teaching, an *ayatollah al-uzma* (grand ayatollah).[22] Individual Shi‘ites adhere to the teachings of a living *marja‘ at-taqlid*, but may choose which individual source of emulation is best for them. They might study their source of emulation’s tracts, and even address questions to him but, ultimately, their allegiance to any particular religious figure is voluntary. The figure to whom most Iraqi Shi‘ites turn is Sistani, but he is by no means the only *marja‘ at-taqlid*. There are approximately a dozen Grand Ayatollahs alive today, all of whom have their own followings.

Contemporary theological disputes have made consensus on a single source of emulation impossible.[23] While most Iraqis pledge their religious allegiance to Sistani, other Iraqis follow Ayatollah Sayyid Taqi al-Modarresi or Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Sadiq Husayni Shirazi. National boundaries do not necessarily correlate to religious loyalty. A small number of Iraqi Shi‘ites follow the Iranian-based cleric, Grand Ayatollah Kazim al-Haeri, and some may even follow Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamene‘i, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. A minority influenced by Lebanese Hizbullah pay heed to Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadhlullah, that movement’s spiritual leader. There has always been a component of Najaf-Karbala rivalry between some religious figures resident in Iraq, with a resurgent Qom complicating matters further. While the State Department and the Pentagon scrambled to reach out to various Shi‘ite religious leaders influential if not resident in Iraq, the Western media only became aware of some of the more serious rivalries shortly after allied forces occupied Baghdad when followers of Muqtada al-Sadr, a follower of pro-clerical rule Haeri, hacked to death Abdul Majid al-Khoei, a well-respected traditional cleric and son of the late Grand Ayatollah Abulqasim al-Khoei.[24] Again, it might not be the job of journalists to report the nitty-gritty of internal Shi‘ite religious differences, but their belated attention to the very subject increased the chasm between pre-war reportage and pre-war planning, a gap which journalist-turned-authors like *New Yorker* correspondent George Packer and *Washington Post* reporter Thomas Ricks preserved in their attempt to write a first draft to history.[25]

While Shi‘ite history is replete with leadership disputes, Khomeini’s introduction of the concept of clerical rule into the mix complicated the debate. While traditional ayatollahs like Sistani and Shirazi welcomed differences of interpretation, political clerics who have followed Khomeini’s line shun them. When ayatollahs are not only religious models but also political leaders, any alternate source of authority undermines their legitimacy. Because Khomeini and, subsequently, Khamene‘i claimed ultimate authority in Iran, any sign that Iranians followed other clerics became not a sign of traditional doctrinal diversity, but rather outright insubordination. The presence of rival sources of emulation, like Sistani in Iraq, continues to strain the Iranian social fabric today. Iranian authorities have sought to silence potential religious rivals on their own territory keeping, for example, Grand Ayatollah Husayn ‘Ali Montazeri under house arrest and banning publication of his memoirs.[26] They have not, however, been able to impose their will on rival religious figures in Iraq.

They have tried, though. In 1994, Grand Ayatollah ‘Ali Araki died in Tehran, reputedly at the age of 105 or 106. Araki had been a traditional cleric who wielded great influence on theological questions but had remained aloof from politics despite the Islamic revolution.[27] Many

Shi‘ites, both inside and outside Iran, looked to Araki as their spiritual guide. However, according to the tenets of Shi‘ism, they would need to shift their allegiance to a living guide. Araki's death was the moment for which Iran's revolutionary ayatollahs had been waiting. The Iranian government argued that its Supreme Leader, Khamene‘i, who had acceded to the Islamic Republic's top position following Khomeini's 1989 death, should be "the first *marja'* of the Shi‘ite world."[28] The Iranian attempt to assert its political authority upon the Shi‘ite world fell flat, though. Simply put, to the majority of the Shi‘ite world, Khamene‘i had neither the learning nor charisma to be their spiritual guide. The rejection of Khamene‘i's claim highlighted legitimacy problem which continues to be the Islamic Republic's Achilles' heel.[29] The vulnerability of the Iranian hierarchy was mitigated by the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein which kept Iraq's population under tight control.

For years, this tension was not apparent to the Western audience, in part because of the failure of journalists to engage in such religious issues. Iraqi President Saddam Husayn kept a tight lid on the Iraq-based clergy, effectively silencing those who most opposed Khomeini's theological deviation.[30] At the same time, the Iranian regime limited access to any Western journalists who might give a spotlight to dissident voices who opposed the clerical regime. In February 2001, for example, Reuters bureau chief Jonathan Lyons and his wife, *International Herald Tribune* correspondent Genieve Abdo both left Iran involuntarily after they covered subjects which displeased the regime.[31] Particularly infuriating to the Islamic regime was a January 31 interview Lyons conducted with a disaffected former Iranian intelligence official who had exposed the Iranian government's domestic death squads.

The New York Times decision to suggest a close ideological relationship between the traditional Shi‘ism espoused by Sistani and the theocracy promoted by Khomeini and his successors was inaccurate and ahistorical.[32] As late as July 2004, the paper implied unity between Iraqi Shi‘ites and the Iranian theocracy. Correspondent Edward Wong explained, "Iraqis are torn between religious and national loyalties. Just how much saw Iran will exert over a new Iraq is far from clear. But some warn that Iran, the world's dominant seat of Shiite Islam, could be the silent power broker…."[33] The reality was that Iraqis who expressed Shi‘ism as their paramount identity still voiced disdain for Iranians whom many Iraqis see as arrogant and others distrust for their pre-Islamic legacy and their non-Arab ethnicity. A common quip among Iraqi Shi‘ites is that "If you break the bones of an Iranian, shit oozes out."

By assigning the Islamic Republic of Iran as representative of Shi‘ite orthodoxy, the Western press got the story reversed. It was not Khamene‘i that threatened the allegiance of Iraqi Shi‘ites, but rather Iraqi clerics which undermined the loyalty of their Iranian counterparts. This was encapsulated by an episode ignored by the Western press, but which had profound consequences in Iran:[34] Islamic months begin with the sighting of the new moon. Because Khamene’i claims ultimate political and spiritual authority in Iran, he reserves the right to make the final decision on when months begin and end. In order to exert authority and highlight religious differences, he often declares months to begin the day after religious authorities in other countries do. In 2003, most Shi‘ite clerics declared the end of Ramadan to be on November 25. Khamene‘i decreed its end to be the following day. The problem was, though, that Iranian journalists had already interviewed Sistani and published his answer. While innocuous to the Western audience, Sistani’s direct contradiction to Khamene‘i shook the political establishment in Iran. How could Khamene‘i be the Supreme Leader if many Iranians looked toward Sistani for guidance? Belying their authoritarian nature and insecurity, the Iranian government responded with a crackdown on the journalists. Only in the aftermath of Iraq’s first democratic elections did the Western press gain widespread realization of the Islamic Republic’s vulnerability.[35] Perhaps, even in retrospect, many editors question the significance of such episodes. Their importance is not encapsulated in a single episode, though, but rather in how they reflect thinking which impacts policy on a far broader level. The Iranian leadership’s awareness of its theological vulnerability shapes its strategy in Iraq. The Iranian government supports several militias. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has provided training and logistical support for armed groups such as the Badr Corps and the *Jaysh al-Mahdi*. Militias exist to impose through force of arms values to which society might not adhere. By supporting militias in Iraq, Tehran hopes to intimidate and silence independent-minded Shi‘ite clergy. Journalists may describe the symptoms, but they miss the cause.

The January 30, 2005 Iraqi elections underlined the theological differences between Sistani and Khamene‘i. Despite some media alarmism about clerical interference, Sistani remained aloof from the political process. While he urged his followers to vote and called for Shi‘ite unity, he neither explicitly told his supporters for whom to vote, nor did he become involved in the pre-election campaign, nor in the post-election jockeying for position.[36]

The experience of the Islamic Republic of Iran stands in sharp contrast. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic restricts candidacy to those who believe in “the system of the Islamic Republic,”[37] thereby mandating belief in clerical dominance in politics and excluding the vast majority of traditional Shi‘ites. An unelected Guardian Council, half of which is selected by the Supreme Leader,[38] vets candidates to eliminate those deemed too liberal or whose views diverge from the Supreme Leader’s. The resulting parliament, itself representative of only a tiny segment of the population, selects the other half of the Governing Council, thereby completing the clerical grip on power. The Governing Council has not hesitated to wield its power. While the media celebrated the so-called reformist Muhammad Khatami’s 1997 election victory, with headlines such as “A New Chapter,”[39] and “Iranian Youth Celebrate Khatami’s Clear Mandate for Social Change,”[40] few journalists noted that the Guardian Council disqualified 234 out of 238 candidates. In 2005, the Guardian Council’s slash-and-burn against potential candidates went farther: Only eight of more than 1,000 passed muster. Far from remaining aloof from politics, Khamene‘i has sought to harness all levers at his disposal in order to constrain it.

Contrary to the earlier musings of journalists, the tension between Iran and Iraq has become one of the dominant features of post-Saddam Iraqi politics. But, by recasting the tension in terms of religiosity, the Western media showed an anti-religious bias which conflated fervor with radicalism. Shi‘ites commemorate both the martyrdom of Husayn, the third Imam and *arba‘in*, the anniversary of the fortieth day after his death which marks the end of the traditional period of mourning.

On the first *arba‘in* after Saddam’s fall, major newspapers suggested that Shi‘ites might use the commemoration’s traditional processions—long banned under Saddam—to push for Iranian-style theocratic rule.[41] The analysis belied their conflation of the Shi‘ism espoused by officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran, with that practiced by most Iraqis. Journalists may claim neutrality, but many use man-on-the-street quotes to shape articles according to their biases. In one extreme example, a journalist for *The Guardian* a leading left-of-center British broadsheet wrote stories first and then sent an Iraqi assistant out to find quotes to fit. Knight-Ridder newspaper correspondents, whose work is published in newspapers like *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Miami Herald,* did likewise.

In the run-up to *arba‘in,* pro-Iranian Shi‘ite firebrands in Karbala had little trouble swaying *The San Francisco Chronicle,* whose staff had already taken an editorial stance against the U.S. invasion of Iraq, to an alarmist interpretation. Its Iraq correspondent Robert Collier demonstrated both ignorance and anti-religious bias when he warned ominously of a "groundswell" in support of an Iranian-style Islamic Republic. "The Shi'ite sect has inspired resistance movements for centuries," he explained. "The 1979 Iranian Revolution created a Shi'ite theocracy in that country, and the Hizbullah organization has institutionalized Shi'ite militancy in Lebanon."[42] Collier's explanations are inaccurate for several reasons. Firstly, they ignore the majority quietest strain in Shi'ism. Hizbullah may have institutionalized militancy among some in Lebanon, but the organization's roots have been far from spontaneous, but are rather than product of direct Iranian aid and assistance. More seriously, the statement that Shi'ism had contributed more to modern Middle Eastern resistance than Sunnism is simply untrue. The basis of far bloodier resistance and terrorism in both Egypt and Algeria was Sunni, as are Islamist movements operating in the Palestinian territories. Al-Qa'ida, which stylizes itself as a movement resisting foreign influences in the Islamic world, is also Sunni. In sharp contrast to Collier's alarmism, Sunni Arabs have become the base of the insurgency in Iraq while the Shi'ite leaders were the driving force for elections. Likewise, despite media alarmism about Shi'ite radicalism, Sunni groups long were the driving anti-secular, anti-liberal force in Iraq, not their Shi'ite counterparts.

Collier was not alone in conflating Shi'ism with Iran. The newfound religiosity of some Iraqi Shi'ites was a shot across the bow of the Iranian leadership. While the millions commemorating *arba'in* were Iraqi, many of the ayatollahs resident in Najaf and Karbala are Iranian. This is not a new phenomenon. Meir Litvak, the leading historian of the Iraqi shrine cities, has documented the migration of Iranian scholars into Najaf. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Iranian migrants outnumbered native scholars four to one.[43] The continuation of this pattern has underlined Iran's vulnerability. That the holiest Shi'ite shrines—those containing the tombs of the Imam 'Ali and his son Husayn—fall under political control independent of the Iranian Supreme Leader weakens the Islamic Republic's claim to represent Shi'a worldwide.

With the exception of the Ba'athist interlude, Iranian clerics have always used their presence in Najaf and Karbala to maintain independence from Iranian despots. During the nineteenth century, Iranian scholars used their relative freedom in the shrine cities, then in Ottoman territory, as a safe-haven from which to criticize the Iranian Shah's policies. In the early twentieth century, they used their base in Najaf and Karbala to encourage constitutionalists fighting to end the absolute and spurious quality of Iran's monarchy. In the 1960s and 1970s, Khomeini used his time in Najaf to agitate against the Shah, just as quietest clerics now use their Iraqi safe-haven to undermine the dictatorship that Khomeini ushered into their homeland.

Many journalists missed this historic pattern when, in the months after liberation, they began to question Sistani's citizenship, implying that Iranian birth equated to advocacy for theocracy. One Associated Press reporter encapsulated the question when he asked, "How did someone gain such power even though he's an Iranian?"[44] While journalists focused on Iran, of the four Grand Ayatollahs resident in Najaf, only Sistani held Iranian citizenship. Muhammad Sa'id al-Hakim at-Tabataba'i was Iraqi, Muhammad Ishaq Fayadh was an Afghan, and Bashir Najafi carried a Pakistani passport. All were quietest; they did not mirror the politics of their countries of birth. *Washington Post* correspondent Anthony Shadid put facts in perspective. "Of Najaf's four grand ayatollahs," he wrote, "all are students of the most quiet tradition in Shi'ite Islam, which traditionally confines the role of clergy to spiritual [rather than political] matters."[45]

Once insurgent violence accelerated in Iraq, many journalists became trapped by the cycle of reporting various car bombs and explosions. Several, like Dan Murphy at the Christian Science Monitor, asked pundits like University of Michigan Professor Juan Cole to interpret the roots of violence. Cole, who had never been to Iraq, cast the violence through the lens of anti-colonialism: Bombs exploded because Iraqis disliked occupation.

Iraqis point to a more complex reality. On August 29, 2003, a car bomb killed Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim as he left the holiest Shi'ite shrine in Iraq. Many journalists suspected that Sunni insurgents or Sunni al-Qaeda members might be behind the car bombing[46] and, indeed several were detained in subsequent days. While Iraqis did not dispute that insurgents had planted the bomb, many speculated that Iranian authorities had reason either to kill the cleric, or lend support through proxies to those who carried out the operation. While al-Hakim had taken a line close to that espoused by Khomeini and Khamene'i during his exile in Iran, after returning to Iraq, his teachings shifted back to the quietest, anti-clerical rule positions espoused by most traditional Shi'ites. Politicians from al-Hakim's Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, have privately suggested that they believe Iranian intelligence knew in advance of the plot but chose to let it proceed, because of disappointment over Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim's growing theological and political independence; his brother, Abdul 'Aziz al-Hakim to whom the mantle of leadership passed followed the Iranian line much closer. There has never been evidence to support the conventional wisdom voiced in *The New York Times*[47] and elsewhere that Sunni Islamists in groups like al-Qa‘ida and Shi‘ite Iranians could not overcome sectarian differences to cooperate. Iranian authorities founded the Sunni terrorist group Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The 9-11 Commission subsequently traced Iranian cooperation with al-Qa‘ida.[48]

Getting Iraqi Politics Wrong by Misunderstanding Religion

Knowledge of religion is important to understand not only the big divides in Iraqi society, but also daily politics. Once Western journalists discovered Sistani, they sought to covey his opinions and bolster their stories with statements from his followers and associates, covering the elderly Grand Ayatollah as perhaps many journalists felt they should have treated Khomeini a quarter-century before. Many journalists covered Sistani’s representatives as if they were McSistani franchises, failing to understand the nature of the religious bureaucracy.

In December 2003, for example, Knight-Ridder’s Maureen Fan wrote that “Sistani’s agents have insisted that Iraq’s judges be drawn from the Hawza, the religious council of scholars over whom he presides.”[49] In March 2004, *The Chicago Tribune* ran a story citing Shaykh Abdul Mahdi al-Karbala‘i, “al-Sistani’s representative in Baghdad,” who declared the municipal council to be illegitimate “because it was the work of the occupation forces.”[50] In the wake of the Iraqi election, *The Christian Science Monitor*’s Dan Murphy quoted ‘Ali al-Wa‘idh, “Sistani’s representative in the Baghdad district of Khadimiya [*sic*],” as saying “The Koran should be the main basis for writing the constitution.”[51] When gunmen assassinated Sistani’s representative in the town of Salman Pak, *The Los Angeles Times* placed the story on page one.[52]

All of these stories fall short. They misrepresent the structure of Sistani’s office. The Grand Ayatollah maintains two types of representatives: *vakil al-‘ahm* (general representative) and *vakil al-hasbiyah* (certified representative). The former can represent Sistani on almost all matters, be they religious, policy, or financial. Sistani has only two general representatives, one in Qom and the other in Europe. In contrast, Sistani employs many certified representatives, each of whom is limited to specific functions. Most are financial agents, collecting religious taxes and alms. Their authority does not extend to policy. When Western journalists quoted Sistani’s representatives about policy, the representatives were speaking as individuals, not as Sistani’s spokesmen.[53] The analogy would be if Iraqi journalists visiting Washington treated Internal Revenue Service tax collectors as spokesmen for the White House.

The Western media's failure to understand the Shi'ite religious hierarchy's financial system has undercut their reporting of both Iraqi and Iranian politics. *The New York Times* raised alarm about transfers of money from Iran to Sistani's office.[54] There was nothing nefarious about individual donations, though. All Shi'ites are obligated religiously to pay religious taxes to their source of emulation. The fact that Iranians are donating money to Sistani rather than Khamene'i suggests that the religious claims of the Islamic Republic's hierarchy holds little legitimacy for ordinary Iranians.

Collection of religious taxes also played an important role in another post-war episode largely missed by the media. In both April 2004 and again four months later, Shi'ite irregulars and militiamen loyal to firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr rose up in rebellion. Muqtada al-Sadr was the fourth son of Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr who was, between 1992 and 1999, one of the most renowned scholars in Najaf, holding a position of public esteem not too different from that which Sistani enjoys today. Upon his father's death, Muqtada al-Sadr had to shift his religious loyalties to a living source of emulation. He turned to Ayatollah Haeri, who preached a line which conformed more toward the ideology of Khomeini than to the quietest tradition espoused by Sistani.

Many journalists and columnists missed the religious angle. They sought to portray Muqtada al-Sadr's uprising as having its roots in anti-Americanism or nationalist, anti-occupation sentiment. For example, Knight-Ridder described Sadr as having "built his following on armed resistance against the U.S.-led occupation and Iraqi government."[55] In an analysis of Muqtada al-Sadr, *USA Today* focused on his resistance to occupation and oppression.[56] In reality it had as much to do with the interplay of intra-Shi'ite religious disputes and a desire to control religious taxes. In each uprising, Muqtada al-Sadr sought to seize the shrines at the center of the lucrative pilgrim trade. Much of the internecine fighting between militias commanded by Muqtada al-Sadr and those loyal to Sistani was centered over control of the shrines in Najaf and Karbala to which Shi'ites donated money during pilgrimage. Control over pilgrimage income would translate into greater disbursement, patronage, and political power.[57]

Ignoring religious has also undercut the coverage of some Iraqi politicians. In the aftermath of the Iraq War, journalists and diplomats often reinforced each others' preconceived notions. By ignoring religion, they consistently misread the political scene. The most acute example has been with coverage of Ahmad Chalabi. The scion of a political family under Iraq's monarchy, Chalabi was the son of a former president of the Iraqi senate. The 1958 Revolution forced the Chalabi family into exile. Years past. Chalabi completed his education in Great Britain and Lebanon, and became a banker and businessman. He returned to Iraq in 1992 as head of the umbrella Iraqi National Congress. As an advocate for both regime change and democratization, he became a lightening rod for criticism and the subject of interdepartmental battles within the U.S. government. Angered with Chalabi's unwillingness to follow their orders strictly, both the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency turned on their former client. They badmouthed him to the press, which echoed U.S. government concerns about his political impotence. But, while journalists like *The Independent*'s Patrick Cockburn and *The Los Angeles Times*' Alissa Rubin labeled Chalabi "unpopular" among Iraqis, neither addressed his religious connections.[58]

Chalabi makes no claims to be a populist politician. But every U.S. government attempt to knock him out of contention has failed, largely because the U.S. officials underestimate his religious connections.[59] While secular in outlook, Chalabi has had more than a dozen audiences with Sistani and maintains close connections with a variety of other Shi'ite religious and political figures both inside Iraq and abroad. How could Chalabi be so unpopular and yet remain in the good graces of Iraq's highest religious authorities? The answer lies with his connections to the Kadhimayn Shrine in Baghdad. The resting place of both the seventh and ninth Imams, Kadhimayn is after Najaf and Karbala, the holiest pilgrimage site in Iraq. Its proximity to Baghdad—and eventual absorption into the city—made Kadhimayn a focal point of Shi'ite-Sunni sociopolitical and religious interaction.[60] The Chalabis had lived in Kadhimayn for generations, and the family had used their business and political connections to establish a powerful network of contacts.[61] Chalabi's father had financed Kadhimayn's renovation. Of the 25 Governing Council members, Chalabi was the only one to return to his family's property, a small villa near the shrine. Not only did this underline Chalabi's roots to Iraq despite years of exile, but it also signaled a continued connection to the shrine. Chalabi may not have enjoyed popular support—more than a decade of Iraqi state television vitriol took its toll on his reputation as did the abuse of power of many in his entourage—but his religious ties proved more important than effervescent political opinion.

Getting the Sunnis Wrong

It was not just Shi'ism which the media got wrong, but Sunnism as well. Despite its diversity, many journalists sought to portray Iraq's Sunni community as monolithic, often conflating Sunnism with Arabism. Knight-Ridder correspondents repeatedly failed to acknowledge that perhaps half of

Iraq’s Sunni community is non-Arab. Half of Iraq’s ethnic Turkmen and 90 percent of Iraqi Kurds are also Sunni. On February 14, 2005, for example, its correspondents wrote, “But as the Shiites and Kurds celebrated victories, the fifth of the nation that is Sunni Muslim faced the reality that only one predominantly Sunni ticket, that of interim President Ghazi al-Yawer, will have seats in the assembly.”[62]

Accentuating the problem has been the assumption that in Iraq sectarian identity was paramount. Former *New York Times* editor and Council on Foreign Relations president Leslie Gelb contributed to this perception.[63] Despite terrorist provocations such as the bombings of the Shi‘ite shrine in Samarra and a tendency by the Coalition Provisional Authority and the U.S. embassy to treat Iraqi politicians as representatives of specific ethnic or sectarian communities, Iraqis have not rallied so clearly among a unified ethnic standard. Both Sunni and Shi‘ites lack a cohesive political leadership. Take the insurgency: While many of the insurgents may be Sunnis, so too are their victims. That Sunnis are targeting other Sunnis suggest a political struggle within a community and, by extension, diversity of thought. Likewise, while Sistani might be the most prominent religious figure among Iraqi and, for that matter, Iranian Shi‘ites, Iraqi Shi‘ites have been unable to coalesce around a single political leadership. While Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq leader Abdul ‘Aziz Hakim proposed that Iraq’s southern nine provinces coalesce into a single Shi‘ite federal unit, political dissension and rivalry within this diverse region shelved his plans.

A tendency to simplify religious identity undercuts reporters’ accuracy in other ways. By highlighting and exaggerating sectarian polarization, few journalists noted that one-in-seven members of the “Sistani-endorsed”[64] United Iraqi Alliance were actually Arab Sunnis, a representation in proportion to the Arab Sunni component of the general population. *The Los Angeles Times* omitted mention of the United Iraqi Alliance’s Sunni component, even when discussing how “Members of the United Iraqi Alliance…are thinking about how to include some Sunnis in the government.”[65] *The New York Times* chose not to cover a January 9, 2005 United Iraqi Alliance rally in Najaf which featured Mudhar Shawkat and Sheikh Fawaz al-Gerba, two Arab Sunnis campaigning on the so-called Sistani list; correspondent Dexter Filkins visited the rally, but such sectarian cooperation did not fit into the convention narrative.

Many reporters sought to artificially construct a Sunni hierarchy to compliment that of the Shi‘ites. For many journalists, the Association of Muslim Scholars fit the role. Founded soon after Iraqi liberation by Shaykh Ahmad al-Kubaysi, a radical cleric who spent his exile in the United Arab

Emirates, al-Kubaysi assembled the group with money supplied by wealthy Persian Gulf donors.[66] Rather than build a wide-ranging umbrella organization, he patched together a membership comprised of former regime officials and Salafists who practice a radical interpretation of Islam subsidized by Saudi authorities. Salafists aspire to recreate Islamic practice as they believe it existed at the time of Muhammad. Many seek to implement strict Islamic law and reject cultural imports from the West. While the Association of Muslim Scholars claimed to speak on behalf of Iraq's [Arab] Sunnis, in reality spoke only for the most radical fringe. Nevertheless, Associated Press writer Mariam Fam cited the group's spokesman for comments on behalf of Sunnis in a February 12, 2004 article examining disputes over election timing. *The New York Times* was slightly more careful when it described the group as "claim[ing] to speak for as many as 3,000 Sunni mosques," and later said that "it is increasingly understood here [in Baghdad] as the voice of the insurgency."[67] Analysis such as that which occurred in the *Financial Times* discussing competing Sunni trends was a rarity among the Western press.[68]

A byproduct of the Western media's tendency to consolidate communities into a single voice is the tendency to stereotype religious communities. Nowhere has this been more egregious than with Iraq's Sunni Arab community. There has been a tendency among journalists and editorialists to conflate religion with ideology by implying that Sunnis are naturally sympathetic to Baathism. For example, The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* blamed the Sunni insurgency on "vindictive fiats barring non-criminal Baathists from positions of power."[69] Not only is this factually wrong, but it also does not address the myriad of Sunni Arabs who have opposed both Baathism and the insurgency, nor the fact that within the senior ranks of the Baath Party were a number of Kurds, Turkmen, and Shi‘a. *The Chicago Tribune* likewise conflated Sunnism with Baathism.[70] *The Washington Post* also fell into this trap.[71]

The stereotyping of Iraqi Sunnis by the Western press undercut both the accuracy of their stories and the relevance of their analysis. The Association of Muslim Scholars promoted only one theological strain. Its Salafism is not representative of the Iraqi Sunni community, though. Not only does such radicalism emerge from a school of Islamic jurisprudence not dominant in Iraq, but it also does not take into account the influential Sufi presence that spans Iraq's ethnic mosaic. The Sufis embrace mystical and spiritual interpretation of the Qu'ran that directly challenges the literal approach of the Salafis. In some ways, the dichotomy between Salafi and Sufi implied a struggle within the Sunni community between foreigner and native, a phenomenon played out on the larger scale within the insurgency. As such, the Sufis became the chief targets of Salafist Sunnis. Long before the Western media reported the insurgents' seizure and decapitation of Western hostages, Islamist insurgents targeted Iraq's Sufi community.[72] Shortly after Baghdad's fall, Salafist gangs began a campaign of intimidation and murder against Sufi clerics, taking over by force neighborhood congregations in Baghdad.

While scores of journalists descended upon the restive city of Fallujah, only the *Financial Times* mentioned that the largely Sunni city had 100 Sufi lodges, in addition to 200 mosques. As its correspondent Nicolas Pelham posited, "Who wins this theological battle for the Sufi lodges will largely determine the US's future in Iraq." [73]

Perhaps no where is the moderation encouraged by Sufism more apparent than in Kirkuk, an oil-rich town in northern Iraq contested by Iraq's three major ethnic groups. Even before the war began, some journalists were highlighting Kirkuk, under Saddam's regime the site of a brutal ethnic cleansing campaign conducted by Arabs against Kurds and Turkmen, as a potential flashpoint.[74] *The New Republic*, for example, called the city, "the one Iraqi obstacle you haven't heard of."[75] In October 2003, more than six months after Coalition troops occupied the city, Agence France Presse described Kirkuk as "unstable."[76] In the wake of the 2005 Iraqi elections, *The Boston Globe* labeled the city "volatile."[77]

While Kirkuk has been tense, and there have occasional acts of violence and terrorism, the fact that the fabric of the city has held despite doomsday predictions is perhaps due to religion more than any other factor: Kirkuk is home to a number of Sufi *takiya*. Membership in these Sufi lodges spans ethnicity. As such, they provide institutions of unity in a city otherwise susceptible to the centripetal force of ethnic nationalism. Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen meet in Kirkuk's *takiya* to study, pray, talk, and socialize.

Many journalists have ignored the *takiya* and, indeed Coalition Provisional Authority political officers stationed in Kirkuk could not be bothered to visit the important sites. Without parallel institutions in their own lives, both journalists and diplomats remained largely unaware of their presence. Only Nibras Kazemi, himself an Iraqi Shi‘ite, wrote about the importance of Kirkuk's *takiya*s.[78] Much of the Western press is unaware that Jalal Talabani, the newly-appointed president of Iraq, originally derives his political legitimacy not only from his position as leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, but also his association with Kirkuk's Talabani *takiya*, where most of his ancestors are buried.

Conclusions

After Saddam's regime fell, reporters took over the Sheraton and Palestine Hotels in downtown Baghdad. Others rented mansions in posh neighborhoods adjacent to the house of Iraqi political leaders. *The Washington Post*, for example, established their bureau in a house down the street from Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's fortified compound. Few reporters left their secured compound.[79] Some Iraqis, taking advantage of their new freedom to watch foreign channels via satellite, joked that they should hang a banner on the 14th of Ramadan Mosque—across the street from the two hotels—urging reporters to find a new backdrop. Many journalists grew reliant on the same fixers to whom they were once assigned by Iraqi President Saddam Husayn's Ministry of Information.[80] These fixers—most of whom were Sunni Arabs who led privileged lives under Saddam's regime—relayed their ideological and sectarian biases, many of which became reflected in mainstream reporting. The general ignorance of religion among Western journalists caused many to miss the opportunity to ask pertinent questions, and others to be led by fixers who viewed them as gullible. As a result, even veteran journalists misinterpreted events, transmitted fault analysis, and generally undercut the quality of their reporting. Analysis absent awareness of religion will always be faulty.

Religion need not nor should be the central focus of reporting but, Middle East political and diplomatic reporting devoid of religious context is apt to be inaccurate. Many American and European journalists are decidedly secular. Reporters may have grown up in a society separating religion from politics, but accuracy demands they avoid projection. Journalists might separate religion from their daily life, but not all societies do so. Downplaying or ignoring religion in the Middle East sacrifices accuracy and understanding. To convey conflicts, politics, and diplomacy accurately, Western correspondents must steep themselves in religious debates, in order to understand the who, what, where, and why of the events they seek to describe. Theology need not infiltrate journalists' work, but then understanding of it should.

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[2] John F. Burns. "Iraqi Conference on Election Plan Sinks into Chaos." *The New York Times*. August 16, 2004.

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[3] For an overview of the Tobacco Protests, see: Nikki Keddie. *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The Tobacco Protests of 1891-1892*. Belfast: W.&G. Baird, Ltd., 1966.

[4] Extract from *Kashf al-Asrar* (*Revelation of Secrets)*. Translation in: Imam Khomeini (Hamid Algar, trans.). *Islam and Revolution*. (London: Kegan Paul, 1981), 170.

[5] Ruhollah Khomeini. *Hukumat-i Islami*. Najaf: *Nahzat-i Islami*, 1391 [1971]; for an English translation, see: Imam Khomeini (Hamid Algar, trans.). *Islam and Revolution*. (London: Kegan Paul, 1981), 27-166.

[6] Khomeini. "The Incompatibility of Monarchy with Islam." October 31, 1971. In Algar, 204.

[7] Khomeini. "Message to the Muslim Students in North America." July 10, 1972. In Algar, 210-211.

[8] Khomeini. "In Commemoration of the First Martyrs of the Revolution." February 19, 1978. In Algar, 213.

[9] *Le Journal*. November 28, 1978.

[10] *Le Monde*. January 9, 1979.

[11] One exception, albeit too late, was in The Associated Press. March 31, 1980.

[12] Jonathan C. Randal. "Huge March in Tehran Is Peaceful." *The Washington Post*. December 11, 1978.

[13] Ira Klein. "The 70-Year Roots of Iran's Turmoil." *The Washington Post*. December 24, 1978.

[14] Steven Erlanger. "Iran's Shaky Theocracy." *The New Republic*, November 10, 1979. Pg. 12-13.

[15] *Ettela'at*. February 2, 1979.

[16] Joe Strupp. "Pentagon Releases Reports' Iraq Slots." *Editor&Publisher*. February 13, 2003.

[17] "Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkhali." *The Daily Telegraph*. November 28, 2003.

[18] See, for example, "Spiritual Leader," published April 8, 1979 in *The Washington Post*. www.loc.gov/rr/print/swann/herblock/one.html

[19] Patrick E. Tyler. "U.S. Forces at Edge of a Blacked-Out Baghdad." *The New York Times*.

[20] See, for example, James Dao and Eric Schmitt. "U.S. Taking Steps to Lay Foundation for Action in Iraq." *The New York Times*. November 18, 2002.

[21] Nazila Fathi. "Iraqi Cleric in Iran Welcomes Plans to Oust Hussein." *The New York Times*. August 4, 2002.

[22] For a good overview, see: Moojan Momem. *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 203-206. Moomen

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describes the historical evolution of the terms, the latter two of which are relatively recent innovations.

[23] For example, the pro-Islamic Republic “Ahl ul-Bayt Islamic Organization Official Website” (www.fabonline.com) lists eight “grand scholars alive in the Shi‘a world,” although most mainstream Shi‘ite would dispute the inclusion of Khamene‘i. *Washington Post* staff writer William Booth listed only four: Sistani; Muhammad Sa‘id Tabataba‘i al-Hakim; Ishaq Fayadh; and Bashir Najafi, although he arbitrarily limited his list to those resident in Najaf.

[24] Craig Smith. “A Long Simmering Power Struggle Preceded Killings at an Iraqi Holy Shrine.” *The New York Times*. April 13, 2004.

[25] George Packer. *Assassins’ Gate*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005; Thomas E. Ricks. *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*. New York: Penguin Press, 2006.

[26] Husayn ‘Ali Montazeri. *Matn-i kamil-i khatirat-i Ayatallah Husayn ‘Ali Muntaziri*. (Spånga, Sweden: Baran, 2001).

[27] Youssef M. Ibrahim. “Grand Ayatollah Ali Araki.” *The New York Times*. December 1, 2004.

[28] “Iran Intervenes, Names its Top Cleric Head of World’s Shiite Muslims.” *Chicago Tribune*. December 7, 1994.

[29] While many journalists misunderstood the nature Shi‘ism, editorial pages did publish contributors who offered greater nuance. See, for example, Frank Smyth. “Iraq’s Forgotten Majority.” *The New York Times*. October 3, 2002.

[30] Most analysts suspect that Saddam’s regime ordered the 1980 assassination of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, then the Shi‘i world’s most prominent *marja’ at-taqlid*. See: “Statement of Mr. Max Van Der Stoel,” special rapporteur of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in Iraq (New York: United Nations, 1999).

[31] “Reuters Bureau Chief; IHT correspondent in Tehran expelled.” Agence France Presse. February 4, 2001.

[32] Susan Sachs. “The World: Theocracy and Democracy.” *The New York Times*. January 18, 2004.

[33] Edward Wong. “Iran is in Strong Position to Steer Iraq’s Political Future.” *The New York Times*. July 3, 2004.

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appreciate the full ramifications of the controversy given the public dispute between Sistani and Khamene‘i.

[35] Cameron Khosrowshahi. “Iraqi Shiism could topple the mullahs.” *International Herald Tribune*. March 24, 2005.

[36] Anthony Shadid. “Shiite Clergy Push Vote in Iraq.” *Washington Post*. December 7, 2004.

[37] Article 100. Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. For an English translation, see: Hamid Algar, trans. *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980.

[38] Article 91, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

[39] *Daily News* (New York), May 27, 1997.

[40] *The Guardian* (London). May 26, 1997.

[41] Meg Laughlinby. “Shiites show strength through pilgrimage.” Knight-Ridder Foreign Service. April 22, 2003; “Clerics Ascend to Power.” *St.Petersburg Times*, April 22, 2003; John Daniszewski. “Shiites Get their Shot at Power.” *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 2003.

[42] Robert Collier. “Religious Frenzy and Anger on Once-Banned Pilgrimage.” *The San Francisco Chronicle*. April 23, 2003.

[43] Meir Litvak. *Shi‘i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 99.

[44] Hamza Hendawi. “Powerful Iraqi Shiite cleric al-Sistani’s Iranian citizenship slowly becoming an issue.” Associated Press. January 26, 2004.

[45] Anthony Shadid. “Shiite Clerics Emerge as Key Power Brokers.” *Washington Post*. December 1, 2003.

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