Religion and Conflict Case Study Series

Iraq: Buttressing Peace with the Iraqi Inter-Religious Congress

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Abstract
This case study shines a light on the sectarian violence that overtook Iraq after the 2003 US-led invasion that overthrew Saddam Hussein, and how religious leaders gradually gained recognition as resources for the promotion of peace. This overview of the conflict addresses five main questions: What religious factors contributed to insecurity in post-2003 Iraq? How did Coalition forces approach religious actors prior to 2006? How did governments interface with faith-based NGOs in pursuit of peace? What role did socioeconomic factors play in exacerbating conflict? How did religious engagement intersect with the Sunni Awakening and the surge of Coalition troops in 2007? The case study includes a core text, a timeline of key events, a guide to relevant religious organizations, and a list of further readings.

About this Case Study
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While the US invasion of Iraq—and the insurgency that followed—touches on many aspects of religion’s role in conflict, one of the most significant but poorly understood is how outreach to religious leaders contributed to constraining sectarian violence. Following the 2003 invasion, the United States initially relied on secular Iraqi exiles like Ahmed Chalabi for political leadership, who were marginalized and undermined by indigenous religious forces and violent transnational networks. The Iraqi leadership that emerged over time did not include Sunni representation and was unable to contain Shi’a militias carrying out sectarian violence. Moreover, it had a shaky relationship with the United States. An analysis of US and Coalition actions following the invasion of Iraq indicates the significance of both domestic and international religious factors, ranging from concerns over Iranian influence and Al-Qaeda’s attempted mobilization of Sunnis to American myopia regarding local inter- and intrasectarian competition and violence. This case study looks at the violent context of Iraq in 2007 and the important role that religious authorities, including a faith-based NGO, and senior Iraqi clerics in the Iraqi Inter-Religious Congress, played in diminishing religiously inspired conflict.

Introduction

American soldiers guard a check point in Maxmur
While Iraq has been a center of Islamic civilization since medieval times, its existence as an independent political entity began in the early twentieth century. The area now known as Iraq included three primary groups, the majority Shi’a Arabs, Kurds (who make up about a third of the country) and minority Sunni Arabs. The area contains many important Shi’a religious sites, but Baghdad was also the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate and thus has a degree of salience to both Sunnis and Shi’as. Tensions between Sunnis and Shi’as date back to the early days of Islam, but the two communities lived in relative peace through much of modern history, albeit with some Sunni discrimination against the Shi’as.

The tenure of President Saddam Hussein (1979-2003) and his Ba’ath Party was characterized by the emergence of a repressive police state consciously modeled on that of Joseph Stalin. Following failed invasions of his neighbors Iran (Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988) and Kuwait (Gulf War, 1990-1991), Hussein stepped up his repressive domestic activities in the 1990s, especially against the majority Shi’as and non-Arab Kurds, which led the international community to institute no-fly zones in Iraq to limit the reach of Hussein’s military. In this context, Hussein began to explicitly appeal to religious legitimacy in the 1990s, tying his rule to the legacy of the Crusade-era hero Saladin. This included greater permissiveness regarding Shi’a religious activities. His rule ended in 2003, with a US-led invasion that led to sectarian violence and a persistent insurgency in addition to the formal establishment of a parliamentary democracy by 2005.

In the lead-up to the US-led invasion in 2003, the United States worked closely with Iraqi exiles in the hopes of developing a secular political force able to catalyze democratization in the country. The Iraqi National Congress (INC), an exile group with ties to the White House, provided some information to the United States in the run-up to the war. One of its leaders, Ahmad Chalabi, was particularly involved in talks with US policymakers, and some US politicians hoped to place Chalabi in a leadership role in Iraq after the invasion. Chalabi helped to start the INC in 1992, and subsequently established close ties with several US political figures, especially Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of defense under George W. Bush. Chalabi was often touted as a key pro-democracy force in a post-Hussein Iraq. The United States was also working with the two key Kurdish parties—the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—continuing a relationship that had been formed during US support for the no-fly zone over the Kurdish territory in the 1990s.

There was some outreach to exile Shi’a leaders as well, including both secular figures like Iyad Allawi and religious ones like Abdul Majid al-Khoei. Allawi was a member of the Ba’ath Party who knew Saddam Hussein in the 1960s and 1970s, but broke with the party in the late 1970s and fled the country. He formed the Iraqi National Accord, an exile group, which provided intelligence to Great Britain before the 2003 invasion. Al-Khoei, also an exile, son of Ayatollah Sayyid Abul Qasim Khoel—the supreme leader of Iraqi Shi’a in the 1990s—lived in London since the Gulf War. He spent his time in exile focused on his charitable foundation but maintained contacts with the United States. He was convinced to return to Iraq after the invasion, and established a base in the Shi’a holy city of Najaf, but was killed shortly after returning. Many believe that followers of rival Shi’a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr—the son of a famous Shi’a leader assassinated by Saddam Hussein—were responsible.

The provisional and interim Iraqi governments reflected this exile-oriented, generally secularist outreach. The US-run
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Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) set up a Governing Council made up of Iraqis. The council contained Shi’as, Sunni, and Kurdish representatives, but the United States chose the members, many of whom were exiles during the reign of Saddam Hussein. Under pressure from Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani—the top scholar in the Najaf hawza, or Shi’a religious seminary—the CPA transferred power to an interim Iraqi government in 2004, which was set up under the auspices of the United Nations. This interim government, which restored Iraqi sovereignty, was intended to establish political institutions until parliamentary elections could be held. Although this was semi-direct rule by Iraqis, its leadership again reflected the importance of Iraqi exiles in this period, with Allawi serving as prime minister.

These initial attempts at instituting political order in Iraq, however, failed to gain widespread support, and corresponded with the rise of several insurgent groups among both the Sunnis and Shi’as, many of which used expressly religious themes and symbols, or aligned (in the Sunni case) with foreign fighters of the Al-Qaeda network. While many of the Sunnis opposed to the government only refused to participate in the political process or accept its legitimacy, a good number of them joined the various Sunni insurgent groups and carried out attacks against Coalition forces and the Iraqi government. There were also prominent attacks conducted against Shi’a targets—both civilian communities and religious or political leaders—which were mainly perpetrated by elements tied to Al-Qaeda. The most significant of these groups was Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)—led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi—which drew on a Salafi-jihadi religious ethos to incite violence against Shi’a and Coalition targets (for more see International Factors below). The most detrimental of these attacks was the February 2006 destruction of the golden-domed Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra—one of Shi’a Islam’s most holy sites—which essentially ignited a civil war between Sunnis and Shi’as.

A similar dynamic arose in the Shi’a community. Shi’a religious leaders were included in the US-appointed Governing Council, but many of them were hostile to the idea of sharing power with Sunnis and Kurds under a federal structure. This ambivalence towards the political process continued under Allawi’s administration, with some Shi’a groups maintaining armed militias that operated independently of government control. There was an ongoing competition for leadership over the Iraqi Shi’a community among various groups. One was the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, now known as the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq), an Islamist group tied to Iran that is headed by Abdelaziz al-Hakim; another is the Islamic Dawa Party, which was supported by Iran and moved to that country after earlier repression under Hussein. Despite their Iranian ties, it attempted to distance itself from Iranian-style religious governance after the US invasion. Followers of al-Sistani also organized as a political grouping, as did those of Muqtada al-Sadr. Although he was not a high-ranking religious figure, he leveraged his father’s legacy to lead a populist revolt against both the established Shi’a groups and the Coalition-supported government. Sadr’s militia, the Mahdi Army, conducted many acts of violence against Coalition forces and Sunni communities.

In sum, the Coalition’s approach to a post-invasion Iraq was to demolish the structures of the Hussein era (military, Ba’ath Party), reach out to primarily secular exile groups, and create a secular, democratic government. The Coalition and the United States did not expect the complicated, violent, religiously-inspired conflicts that were to erupt across the country. Consequently, during its first years on the ground, the United States did very little to systematically engage religious actors, despite their widespread authority, as partners for peace and security. However, following a change of command in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2007, the US-led Multi-National Forces-Iraq (MNF-I) under General David Petraeus, pushed a new strategy embracing community-based counter-insurgency tactics within the Iraqi conflict. The Coalition began a series of desperate efforts to stabilize the security situation by boosting US troop levels and formally engaging with the religious and tribal elements of the insurgency. With the encouragement of several senior Department of Defense officials and with the blessing of General David Petraeus, the Pentagon funded a series of high-level engagements to bring together senior Iraqi religious leaders from the Sunni, Shi’a, and Christian communities. Under the aegis of the Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East (FRRME), a trusted British-based NGO working in Iraq, this process became known as the Iraqi Inter-Religious Congress (IIRC).

Unlike previous Iraqi reconciliation conferences, the IIRC focused upon linking key US and Iraqi military and govern-
ment officials with religious and tribal leaders to help restart
the formal reconciliation process. Key topics for discussion
included crucial local and national issues as well as the key
strategic objectives of the MNF-I military campaign plan
known as the “surge.” In planning for the event, the FR-
RME consulted with Ambassador Ryan Crocker and Com-
manding General Petraeus on the US side, and with Prime
Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Sunni Vice President Tariq
al-Hashimi on the Iraqi side to gain support and highlight
key issues for discussion within a religious context. To ac-
complish the delicate task of balancing US military objec-
tives and Iraqi concerns, the FRRME formed a small work-
ing group consisting of key staff, select senior Iraqi religious
leaders, and General Petraeus’ staff—led by the MNF-I
command chaplain. Working within the new counter-in-
surgency doctrine, the working group focused on identify-
ing influential religious leaders from the various regions of
Iraq and formulating discussion topics specific to the security
dynamic. The process gained momentum as Prime Minister
Maliki pledged to meet with delegates and Vice President
Hashimi threw in his full support, contributing his director
of media operations to help broadcast the conference across
the Arabic news network.

The first Iraqi Inter-Religious Congress opened on June 11,
2007 at the Al Rasheed Hotel in Baghdad, bringing together
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over fifty religious and tribal representatives from nearly every major region of the country including Baghdad, Basra, Tikrit, Sulaymaniyah, Ramadi, and Fallujah. Several days of intense meetings culminated in the signing of the Iraqi Inter-Religious Accords in the presence of the British, Danish, Italian, and US ambassadors. The agreement was the first to specifically address many of the key issues affecting the insurgency and received the personal endorsement of Prime Minister Maliki and his advisor on religious affairs, Dr. Fadel al-Sharah. The document was the first broad-based religious accord to recognize the government of Iraq, publicly renounce Al-Qaeda by name, and declare the spread of unauthorized weapons as a criminal act. Crucially, the document provided a way ahead for committed public action by religious leaders to denounce violence, deny terrorism, demonstrate support for democratic principles and the constitution, and display national unity.

The resolve of the participants was promptly tested the next day. On June 13, only hours before the closing press conference to announce the IIRC Accords, the Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra was bombed for the second time, destroying the two remaining minarets of one of the holiest shrines in Shi’i Islam. Iraqis braced themselves for another wave of sectarian violence similar to the reaction set off by the 2006 destruction of Al-Askari Mosque’s golden dome. The clergy attending the IIRC courageously released their declaration to the media—appearing together and speaking for over two hours on the necessity for nonviolence and urging unity between Shi’as, Sunnis, and the other religious minorities. As delegates returned to their communities, other religious leaders also simultaneously issued calls to resist reprisals, including the powerful Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

As a result of calls by clergy across the country to resist violence and a government-imposed security crackdown, widespread violence was drastically reduced in comparison to the massive sectarian killings sparked by the nearly-identical event only a year earlier. Although attacks did break out sporadically around the country, reprisal attacks were a remarkable 80 percent lower compared to those reported the previous year, and an uneasy peace held across the country. On June 15, a few days after the bombing, Prime Minister Maliki lifted the government-imposed curfew and General Petraeus sent a note of personal thanks to the FRRME.

Facilitated by the FRRME, the process of engagement slowly gained the support of important figures within both the senior and grassroots Iraqi religious establishment. With further US funding, the IIRC continued to meet and expand throughout 2007 and 2008. The fledgling gains of the IIRC conference gathered momentum as nationally respected leaders including Muqtada al-Sadr, Ayatollah Mohamed Yaqubi, and Grand Ayatollah Sistani sent representatives to work with FRRME and its religious partners. As the group gained prominence, the IIRC also drew in members from radical groups such as al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army, the Sunni Muslim Scholars Association, and influential expatriate Sunni and Shi’a high clergy, including strongly anti-American Sheikh Ahmed Al-Kubasi—the leading Iraqi Sunni voice in international media—and Sheikh Abdul Latif Humayeem—formerly Saddam Hussein’s personal imam. All these clergy came together with the goal of reducing religiously sanctioned violence—a remarkable feat in itself.

Although not the sole cause of reduced sectarian violence, the IIRC is a striking example of how acknowledging the religious dynamics of the Iraqi conflict helped foster an effective working relationship between US and Iraqi government partners and religious and tribal leaders. Notably, the IIRC marked the first significant official US effort to work on the security situation by addressing the religious actors in the Sunni-Shi’a sectarian divide. The IIRC also helped begin the process of repairing the image of the US military as a working partner in the eyes of Iraqi religious leaders—particularly the Sunnis. In fact, many of the breakthroughs in counter-insurgency occurred through religious venues: the rise of the anti-insurgency Sunni Awakening under religious and tribal leaders, the local reconstruction successes of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), and the ceasefire declared and held by the Mahdi Army under al-Sadr. Partly as a result of the US military’s embrace of the religious nature of the conflict, vital avenues for action opened during a critical period at the peak of the insurgency, helping to shift momentum from sectarian conflict to reconciliation and turn the tide against violence in the Iraq.
Domestic Factors

One of the primary domestic factors affecting US outreach after the invasion was the sectarian divisions in Iraq. The country contains three main groups: Shi’a Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds. Despite the shared Arab ethnicity between many Sunnis and Shi’as, each group’s religion served primarily as an identity marker for sectarian tension. Repression and persecution against the majority Shi’a under Saddam Hussein had led to an increase in Shi’a solidarity and political awareness, as well as heightened religiosity. This had several effects on Shi’a political and religious activity after the invasion. First, it created a strong sense of grievance among the Shi’a population toward the Sunnis, and a desire to ensure they would be protected from further Sunni aggression. This contributed to popular support for al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army and other anti-Sunni militias. Second, and related to the first, it increased Shi’a desire to gain unilateral control over Iraq, which empowered forces that rejected cooperation with Sunnis and complicated efforts to create a broadly representative government. Finally, it strengthened the hand of religious forces, enabling a great degree of political mobilization by these groups and their domination of the parliament at the expense of more secular forces. More specifically, Shi’a religious leaders were empowered in post-invasion Iraq due to their role as community leaders providing much-needed social services.

Sunni positions also undermined US efforts following the invasion. The disproportionate political power wielded by Sunnis since Ottoman times and their outright dominance under Hussein produced both a desire to maintain their position after the invasion and a fear of Shi’a reprisals. CPA administrator Paul Bremer’s decision to disband the Iraqi Army coupled with the de-Ba’athification program—barring members of Hussein’s Ba’ath Party from holding power—left the Sunni-dominated national army and former bureaucracy on the street. This resulted in several consequences: a decimated Iraqi ability for self-government, as those with technocratic and military experience were forbidden employment; high unemployment and anti-US resentment; and a highly trained military force looking for purpose and payment. It also resulted in the rejection of the political process by many Sunnis due to its predominant control by Shi’as, which undermined Sunni representation in parliament; and the development of Sunni militias out of concern over Shi’a reprisals for Hussein-era injustices, leading to attacks against Shi’a targets and a further strain on the prospects of Sunni political participation. Furthermore, US efforts to reach out to an increasingly sectarian and religiously motivated Sunni community were complicated by lack of a clear leader and a decentralized Sunni religious structure. Unlike the Shi’as, who could be represented by al-Sistani, the Sunnis had no universally respected leader that could be approached by the United States.

Finally, Kurdish political interests also complicated US efforts in some ways. The Kurds had gained some autonomy in the 1990s and were primarily interested in safeguarding this position. They also hoped to regain some territory lost under Hussein, who had attempted to “Arabize” Kurdish areas. This was particularly problematic in the case of mixed areas containing oil, such as the city of Kirkuk. While the Kurds for the most part did not engage in the sectarian violence seen among Sunnis and Shi’as, their desire for regional autonomy and control of oil resources threatened both Sunni and Shi’a positions, and complicated parliamentary debates on the formation of a constitution.
In addition to the sectarian divides that hobbled initial US efforts to establish a representative government, intra-bloc divisions also affected the political process. One of these involved splits between secular and religious forces. Secular political figures operated in both Sunni and Shi’a circles, such as the Sunni Ahmad Chalabi and the Shi’a Ayad Allawi, but most of these secular figures were exiles with ties to US policymakers. Religious forces on both sides—which rejected an Iran or Taliban-style theocracy, but nevertheless pursued religious social and political agendas—were also present. Additionally, despite a strong secular presence in the initial governments, religious forces ultimately proved more powerful electorally. This led to some divisions within both the Sunni and Shi’a camps, with early secular leaders facing strong opposition from more religious elements, and religion serving as a frame through which leaders justified actions and gained support.

Another division—which was primarily evident among the Shi’a—involved splits between establishment and populist figures. That is, religious and political figures who had long claimed authority among Iraqi Shi’as—such as SCIRI and al-Sistani—were challenged by younger figures for religio-political legitimacy. This was primarily evident in disputes between al-Sistani and al-Sadr. Al-Sadr’s rhetoric and militia activities put pressure on al-Sistani’s attempts to cooperate with Coalition forces. Also, al-Sistani at times had to intervene and challenge al-Sadr’s actions, such as the 2004 uprising in Najaf. This had two effects on the political process. First, it led to intra-sectarian tension, with followers of both men at times struggling against each other in addition to Sunnis. This included armed clashes between the Sadrist Mahdi Army and the SCIRI-aligned Badr Brigades, as these militias moved to secure control over areas heavily populated by Shi’as. Second, it complicated US outreach to Shi’as, as al-Sistani was limited in his ability to cooperate due to al-Sadr’s criticisms. While al-Sadr’s supporters eventually did participate in the political process, their opposition to the United States complicated parliamentary proceedings. This division, then, was also characterized by competing religious framings of issues in addition to the use of religion as an identity marker.

Mosque

The final intra-bloc division was primarily Sunni. On one side, AQI attempted to mobilize Iraqi Sunnis to oppose both Shi’a dominance and the US presence, and the group was successful in gaining some support. However, many Iraqi Sunnis remained committed to local causes—rather than the global scope of AQI—and tribal identifications. This led to some limitation in the appeal of AQI’s actions and rhetoric, especially as it began to conduct extremely violent attacks against Iraqi civilians. It also ultimately facilitated US outreach to Sunni tribal leaders, who organized militias to combat AQI in Sunni areas, in a process that became known as the “Sunni Awakening.”
International Factors

One of the primary international factors influencing US post-invasion outreach was concern among US policymakers about Iranian influence in Iraq. Several Shi’a religious leaders in Iraq had ties to Iran, as did various political groups. While al-Sistani is based in Iraq, he has followers among Iranian Shi’a; similarly, Muqtada al-Sadr fled to Iran in the early 1990s, returning only after the US invasion. Moreover, both the SCIRI and Dawa had strong ties to Iran, which persisted in part after their rise to power following the invasion. Because of geopolitical tensions between the United States and Iran, US policymakers were wary of empowering an Iraqi government that would side with Iran at the expense of US interests.

Another international factor involved the Al-Qaeda network. The group attempted to use the US invasion of Iraq as a rallying call to Muslims around the world in a bid to increase its popularity and mobilize followers. This resulted in the alliance with al-Zarqawi that produced AQI, and entailed leveraging its transnational networks to direct supplies and fighters to Iraq. While AQI ultimately failed to mobilize substantial indigenous Sunni support, the influx of non-Iraqi Al-Qaeda fighters contributed to the high level of violence in the country. Many suicide bombings targeted Iraqi civilians and infrastructure in an attempt to decrease public support for U.S. actions and the Iraqi government, and thus destabilize the country. The deadly provocations of Al-Qaeda in Iraq greatly complicated US efforts to reach out to local leaders and establish a functioning political process.

The United States’ initial failure to pursue dialogue with religious leaders in favor of an ultimately ineffective focus on exile groups was largely due to the nature of US foreign policy, specifically its often-competing priorities and its juggling of dynamic geostrategic tensions. The antagonistic relationship between the United States and Iran factored greatly into US calculations, with US policymakers likely perceiving their options for political partners to be limited to those actors not amenable to Iranian influence. This ultimately hampered US outreach due to the prevalence of Iranian ties among Shi’a political and religious figures. Similarly, US relations with Kurdish groups formed an important aspect of its invasion and reconstruction plans, but Kurdish demands for continued and increased autonomy in return for its assistance to the United States prompted complaints from Turkey—another important US ally—due to the ongoing Kurdish separatist insurgency in that country. Regional tensions thus complicated US cooperation with indigenous Iraqi forces, indicating the complicated balance policymakers sought to achieve between competing interests.
Religion and Socioeconomic Factors

This overview of the domestic and international factors behind the initial failure of US outreach to religious leaders in Iraq suggests a few general explanations—some tied to domestic factors and others to US policy. The United States had little presence in the country prior to the invasion, and thus had minimal contact with local leaders. Consequently, it had to rely on Iraqi exiles that were often out of step with the Iraqi public and were largely ineffective in mobilizing support for US endeavors.

Another significant reason for this outcome has to do with the nature of Iraq. The demographic makeup of Iraq and its history of repression would have greatly complicated any political development efforts, even in the absence of a US invasion. Specifically, the deep cleavages in its society—partly as a result of ethnic and religious differences but primarily due to Hussein’s legacy—limits the extent of any leader’s legitimacy. Although Sunnis dominated the government structure, they were a minority of the population. While 97 percent of Iraqis are Muslim, 60 to 65 percent are Shi’a and only half of that number, 32 to 37 percent, are Sunni. Christians and other religious groups comprise about three percent of the population. A leader drawn from any of the three major social groups would have trouble gaining support outside of his demographic sphere, complicating the establishment of a central government. This enmeshed any attempt to balance the enfranchisement of the Shi’a majority with efforts to prevent Sunni defection from the political process. Moreover, the intra-bloc divisions further hindered any individual leader’s appeal.

From an economic standpoint, Shi’as had longstanding political and economic grievances due to their second-class status under Saddam Hussein. Following the 2003 invasion, as the Coalition floundered and failed to deliver basic services, many Shi’a religious leaders were empowered by their ability to provide food, clothing, and education. Meanwhile, CPA czar Paul Bremer’s decision to pursue de-Ba’athification and disband the Iraqi Army thrust many Sunnis into economic uncertainty. The immediate rise in unemployment among armed men of military age did little to promote peace, and strengthened those Sunni leaders that sought to undermine the political process. The Kurds, in turn, aimed to secure their still tenuous autonomy in the north while gaining control over contested areas like Kirkuk. In short, the three largest groups in Iraq had competing and overlapping social, political, and economic interests.

The religious forces in Iraqi society proved difficult for the United States to approach effectively due to the US hope for the establishment of a secular democracy. But this hope exposed a tension in US democracy promotion efforts. The United States intended to establish a functioning democratic process in Iraq, but also hoped for a secular system similar to the US model. Religious parties, however, dominated the Iraqi political scene, and secular figures had little appeal. The initial US outreach to secular leaders like Allawi and Chalabi was largely wasted as they and their allies ultimately lost to the Shi’a coalition United Iraqi Alliance (now the National Iraqi Alliance). The US desire for a secular democratic state was not in line with Iraqi social and political conditions, resulting in limited US effectiveness. This indicates that policymakers must make a choice when promoting democracy in countries such as Iraq: between secular systems that may not inspire public support, and more inclusive democratic systems that are likely to reject secularism.
The peoples of modern Iraq have long lived in conditions of insecurity, particularly under the oppression of Saddam Hussein. Long-existing dividing lines between ethnic (Kurd vs. Arab) and religious (Sunni vs. Shi’a) groups have hardened and come to seem non-negotiable. With the demise of the Hussein regime, religious actors—including Shi’a ayatollahs, younger Shi’a and Sunni clerics, and foreign voices like Al-Qaeda and Iran—competed for political and ideational ascendancy. The stakes were high: jobs, political power, and economic primacy. In this context, the United States and its coalition partners were poorly prepared for the sectarian violence that followed the 2003 invasion, and it took years for Western governments to begin to seriously comprehend the importance of religious dynamics. Ultimately, a unique partnership developed between a Western faith-based NGO—the FRRME—and key indigenous religious actors, which came to fruition in the IIRC. That event was a watershed moment, as senior religious leaders from across the spectrum renounced sectarian violence. The Congress was a key pillar for peace in 2007, in tandem with other political developments such as the Sunni Awakening and the military “surge,” and has continued to meet semi-annually as Iraqis continue to struggle along the uncertain path to peace and stability.
KEY EVENTS

April 25, 1920 Iraq is placed under British mandate.

August 23, 1921 Faysal, son of Hussein Bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca, is crowned Iraq's first king.

October 3, 1932 Iraq becomes an independent state.

July 14, 1958 The monarchy is overthrown in a military coup led by Brig. Abd-al-Karim Qasim and Col. Abd-al-Salam Muhammad Arif. Iraq is declared a republic and Qasim becomes prime minister.

February 8, 1963 Qasim is ousted in a coup led by the Arab Socialist Baath Party (ASBP). Arif becomes president.

July 16, 1979 President Al-Bakr resigns and is succeeded by Saddam Hussein.

September 17, 1980 Iraq abrogates the 1975 treaty with Iran. Iran-Iraq war begins.

March 16, 1988 Iraq is said to have used chemical weapons against the Kurdish town of Halabjah.

August 20, 1988 A ceasefire comes into effect to be monitored by the UN Iran-Iraq Military Observer Group (Unimog).

August 2, 1990 Iraq invades Kuwait and is condemned by United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 660, which calls for full withdrawal.

January 16-17, 1991 The Gulf War starts when the coalition forces begin aerial bombing of Iraq (“Operation Desert Storm”).

February 28, 1991 The Gulf War ends with a coalition victory a day after Saddam Hussein ordered a full retreat of Iraqi forces from Kuwait after its liberation by the coalition.

Mid-March/early April 1991 Iraqi forces suppress rebellions in the south and the north of the country.

December 16-19, 1998 After UN staff is evacuated from Baghdad, the United States and UK launch a bombing campaign (“Operation Desert Fox”) to destroy Iraq’s nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs.

Downtown Baghdad
February 19, 1999 Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, spiritual leader of the Shi’a community, is assassinated in Najaf.

September 2002 US President George W. Bush tells skeptical world leaders at a UN General Assembly session to confront the “grave and gathering danger” of Iraq or stand aside as America acts. In the same month British Prime Minister Tony Blair publishes a dossier on Iraq’s military capability.

March 20, 2003 American missiles hit targets in Baghdad, marking the start of a US-led campaign to topple Saddam Hussein. In the following days US and British ground troops enter Iraq from the south.


July 2003 US-appointed Governing Council meets for first time. Commander of US forces says his troops face low-intensity guerrilla-style war. Saddam’s sons Uday and Qusay killed in gun battle in Mosul.


December 14, 2003 Saddam Hussein captured in Tikrit.

March 2004 Suicide bombers attack Shi’a festival-goers in Karbala and Baghdad, killing 140 people.

April-May 2004 Shi’a militias loyal to radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr take on coalition forces.

June 2004 United States hands sovereignty to interim government headed by Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. Saddam Hussein transferred to Iraqi legal custody.

August 2004 Fighting in Najaf between US forces and Shi’a militia of cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

November 2004 Major US-led offensive against insurgents in Fallujah.


April 2005 Amid escalating violence, parliament selects Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani as president. Ibrahim Jaafari, a Shi’a, is named as prime minister.

August 2005 Draft constitution is endorsed by Shi’a and Kurdish negotiators, but not by Sunni representatives. More than 1,000 people are killed during a stampede at a Shi’a ceremony in Baghdad.

October 2005 Saddam Hussein goes on trial on charges of crimes against humanity. Voters approve a new constitution, which aims to create an Islamic federal democracy.

December 15, 2005 Iraqis vote for the first, full-term government and parliament since the US-led invasion.

January 20, 2006 Shi’a-led United Iraqi Alliance emerges as the winner of December’s parliamentary elections, but fails to gain an absolute majority.

April 22, 2006 Newly re-elected President Talabani asks Shi’a compromise candidate Jawad al-Maliki to form a new government. The move ends four months of political deadlock.
Religious Groups

Sunni
“The Sunni Awakening”
This is the name used to describe the Sunni tribes organized by Coalition forces to combat AQI. US forces reached out to tribal leaders, providing resources and military supplies to encourage them to cease supporting AQI. The initiative succeeded in establishing an indigenous force that opposed AQI actions, limiting the group’s influence on the country. Concerns remain, however, over the tribes’ willingness to demilitarize and work within the Iraqi political process once the AQI threat is defeated.

Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq
http://heyetnet.org/eng/
This is a group of Sunni scholars of Islamic law, headed by Harith al Dhari in Iraq. The group formed shortly after the fall of Saddam Hussein to unify religious scholarly opinion in the country and provide guidance on interactions with Shi’a and Coalition forces. The group called for restraint in the face of sectarian tensions with the Shi’a in the country, but also encouraged Sunnis to reject participation in the US-sponsored political process.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq
Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) is a franchise of the transnational Al-Qaeda network that began operating in Iraq shortly after the US invasion. It developed through a merger between a local group and the core of Al-Qaeda. The local group was Jama’at al-Tawhid w’al-Jihad, or “Group for Monotheism and Jihad,” led by a Jordanian, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The group focused its attacks on Coalition forces, Iraqis cooperating with the Coalition, and Shi’a communities in an attempt to provoke sectarian strife and undermine the US position in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi’s brutal tactics alienated the Iraqi population, while his death and the Sunni tribal alliance with the United States undermined the group’s efforts. However, it continues to launch occasional devastating attacks.

Shia
Islamic Dawa Party
http://islamicdawaparty.org/
The Islamic Dawa Party is a powerful Shi’a political group. It began operating in the 1960s and allied with Ayatollah Khomeini’s regime in Iran after the 1979 revolution there. Dawa supported Iran throughout the 1980s, which led to its repression by Hussein’s regime. The party began operating in Iraq again after the US invasion, and has primarily worked through the political process. The group is part of the United Iraqi Alliance (along with SCIRI), which has performed well in parliamentary elections. The group’s leader is Nouri al-Maliki, also the current prime minister.

Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—as it was known in the time period covered in this study—is the other significant Shi’a political force in Iraq, and is now known as Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. SCIRI was established by Iran during the Iran-Iraq war and operated from Tehran until the US invasion of Iraq. The group advocated an Iranian-style theocracy, but has worked within the political process in Iraq, gaining a good number of parliamentary seats through the United Iraqi Alliance electoral list.
SCIRI maintains a militia, known as the Badr Brigades, which is active in the country. The group is currently headed by Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, brother of its founder Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, who was killed in 2003, likely by Sunni extremists.

**Mahdi Army**
The Mahdi Army is a militia formed by Muqtada al-Sadr in 2003. Al-Sadr drew on the religious legitimacy and networks of his father to launch a populist campaign against the Coalition and Iraqi Sunnis. The Mahdi Army contributed to several violent uprisings, which were followed either by truce agreements or crackdowns by government and Coalition forces. Al-Sadr has had a contentious relationship with the Shi’a government, but political groups tied to the Mahdi Army have participated in parliamentary elections and have emerged as a significant force capable of playing an important role in parliamentary procedures.

*Followers of Ali al-Sistani*
http://sistani.org/
Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is the highest Shi’a religious authority in Iraq. He does not have an organized political party but is very influential in the country’s political process. Al-Sistani’s fatwas on participation in parliamentary elections were an important factor in widespread Shi’a acceptance of the process. He also pushed for a quick transition to Iraqi rule after the US invasion, and has urged restraint on the part of Shi’as regarding their reactions to anti-Shi’a violence perpetrated by AQI.
Further Readings


“They Came to Bury Him, and Many to Praise Him.” *The Economist*, September 6, 2003.


**Discussion Questions**

1. What religious factors contributed to insecurity in post-2003 Iraq?

2. How did Coalition forces approach religious actors prior to 2006?

3. How did governments interface with faith-based NGOs in pursuit of peace?

4. What role did socioeconomic factors play in exacerbating conflict?

5. How did religious engagement intersect with the Sunni Awakening and the “surge” of Coalition troops in 2007?