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Seeing Specters - II ^[1]

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Historically, the United States has favored a Sunni-run Iraq. In part, this represented a status quo with which we were familiar and comfortable. More recently Iraq's ruling Sunnis (led by Saddam) pitched themselves to Western governments as a bulwark against the menace of post-revolutionary Iran. On top of this, our friends in the region are mostly Sunni-ruled and all of them were scared after the 1979 Islamic revolution.

But why were they scared? In some cases the reasons were less than pretty. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait both have large Shiite minorities who they have not, historically, treated well. Bahrain actually has an overwhelming (around 75%) Shiite majority, but it is run by Sunnis. When the Saudis say they are worried about a Shiite run Iraq they are less afraid of Iranian influence spreading to their borders than they are of seeing a strong, independent Shiite-run Arab state arise anywhere in the Middle East.

Other regional leaders have played on these fears as well. Jordan's King Abdullah, for example, recently warned of a "crescent" of Shia movements stretching from Iran to Syria and Lebanon. What is happening here is that our Arab friends, pretty much all of whom are Sunnis, are playing on the United States' deep-seated distrust of Iran to promote their own sectarian agendas.

A lot of Sunnis view Shiites with the same mixture of puzzlement, contempt and fear that Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants reserve for Mormons. Many Sunnis regard Shiites as, at best, dodgy. Others (including some fairly prominent religious figures in Saudi Arabia and Egypt) openly declare that Shiites are not Muslims at all and referring to them as heretics or apostates. For such people the notion of Shiites running a major Arab country is simply beyond the pale. Several western journalists with long experience in the Middle East have recently told me they have been appalled at some of the things they are now hearing. Well-educated, broad-minded, seemingly liberal Arabs – some of them senior government officials – have been saying things about Shiites, at least in private, that a western listener can only call racist.

The challenge for the US at this moment is to look at our own interest with clear eyes. Does the rise of a Shiite-dominated state in Iraq pose a real, fundamental threat to American interests? Only if we force it to do so. We have an opportunity at this moment in time to become an enabling force for Shiites around the region. We also run the risk of alienating people who might be our friends by giving in to our own prejudices and those of some of our allies.

The Jordanians and Saudis may not like the idea of a Shiite-run Iraq. We can and should give them security guarantees – assuring their governments that a new Iraq will not be a base for undermining their regimes. But we should not stifle the legitimate aspirations of some 15

million Iraqi Shiites because small-minded leaders in neighboring countries have a problem with Shiism itself.

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