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## Playing The Shiite Card

By David Ignatius

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America is finally having its great debate over the Iraq war. In that debate, it's worth listening to a young Iraqi Shiite cleric named Ammar Hakim. He speaks for the people who arguably have gained the most from America's troubled mission in Iraq and, to a surprising extent, still believe in it.

Hakim, 34, is the oldest son of Abdul Aziz Hakim, the leader of the Iranian-backed Shiite party known as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which is probably the most potent political force in the country today. He now lives in Najaf, the Shiite equivalent of the Vatican, where he helps direct the party's social and charitable network. But he and his family lived 23 years in exile in Iran. To put it bluntly, Hakim represents what might be called the "Shiite card" in the Iraqi poker game.

I met Hakim a week ago during his first visit to the United States. He made quite a sight when he arrived for breakfast, dressed in his black turban and flowing clerical robes. Some of the other guests in the dining room of the Watergate Hotel seemed to back away a bit, as if they feared the visiting mullah might explode. I'm told he drew some stares when he toured the Pentagon dressed in the same garb.

Hakim is a remarkably articulate man, with the spark of curiosity in his eyes and a presence that we in the United States would call "star quality." Whoever had the good sense to invite him here -- where he met with officials at the State Department, Pentagon and National Security Council -- should get a pay raise.

Hakim had a clear message during his visit, and it's one worth mulling carefully as Americans ponder the new Iraqi constitution and the bitter Shiite-Sunni tensions that have surrounded its drafting. If I could sum up his theme in one sentence, it is that the United States should continue to bet on democracy in Iraq -- which of necessity means relying on Iraq's Shiite majority and the mullahs who speak for it. In essence, he was calling for a strategic alliance between Najaf and Washington.

I told Hakim through an interpreter that many Americans were close to despair about Iraq. We see continuing violence and few signs that Iraq's security forces will be strong enough to maintain order once American troops leave. Here's how Hakim responded: "The truth is, this is a grand plan, and any time you are engaged in a grand plan, you will face difficulties. But we will overcome them. We are now in the final quarter of these difficulties." I'm not sure I agree with him that the troubles are nearly over, but I must say that I was moved by his answer.

Hakim told me he had visited the Lincoln Memorial, and I asked what he had thought as he looked up at the face of the man who kept America together during its own brutally violent civil war. He said the American experience was a lesson for Iraqis "in pooling people of various ethnic backgrounds into one law and order." He added that he hoped future generations of Iraqis would look at their current leaders with the same gratitude that Americans feel when they regard Lincoln.

The young cleric says all the things this administration could want to hear. "President Bush is

playing a great role in giving Iraqis a chance to build a democratic process," he insists. The new constitution will create "a stable and balanced Iraq where all sects will be treated justly and equally." Iraqi federalism will allow regional self-government, as in the United States, but "the Shiites are a majority; they have no interest in disintegration."

Well, of course a leading Shiite cleric would say those things, a skeptic might respond. The Shiites have an interest in keeping American troops around as long as possible to fight their battles against the Sunni insurgency. And the fact that the new Iraqi constitution suits the interests of the Shiite mullahs in Najaf doesn't necessarily mean it serves American interests -- or even those of ordinary Iraqis.

But Americans should ponder the argument that Hakim made to U.S. officials. The way to contain Sunni terrorism and stabilize the Arab world is to develop a strategic relationship with Najaf. Powerful Shiite communities exist in all the region's hot spots: Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria and above all Iran. An American rapprochement with Iran is essential, he would argue, but the real fulcrum should be Najaf.

Without a measure of Sunni support for this strategy, it's a recipe for permanent religious warfare in the Middle East. But I suspect that even Sunni stalwarts in Saudi Arabia and Jordan might find Hakim's argument for a Shiite-led restabilization intriguing. In a world of bad choices, this one may be the least bad.

*[davidignatius@washpost.com](mailto:davidignatius@washpost.com)*

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