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COMMENTARY: ROXANA SABERI

Iran's Shiites nervously eye Iraq

By Roxana Saberi | Cox News Service

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QOM, Iran -- The social and political ascent of Shiite Muslims in Iraq after decades of repression by Saddam Hussein could pose a threat to the Islamic regime in neighboring Iran, some analysts say.

Some Iranian clerics fear that a more liberal brand of their faith will emerge in a democratic, post-Saddam Iraq and possibly spread to Iran.

The two countries share a vast population of the Shiite branch of Islam. In Iran, about 90 percent of the population, or 68 million people, are Shiite Muslims, as are around 60 percent of Iraq's more than 24 million people.

Since Iran's Islamic Revolution swept clergy into power in 1979, many Shiites in Iraq living under the yoke of Saddam's regime looked to Iran as the spiritual center of their sect.

But some experts say Iran's theological authority is now threatened by Iraq, where many Shiite Muslim leaders have advocated a secular government, refraining from calls to establish an Iranian-like, religious-based rule.

Analysts say the spread of these ideas could threaten Iran, where nowadays many clerics are either openly questioning the mixture of politics with religion or saying they want a more democratic -- albeit still religious -- state.

About 90 miles southwest of Tehran sits the ancient holy city of Qom. Its seminaries and mosques attract thousands of students and pilgrims from all over the world. The city offers Internet cafes, parks and movie theaters, but the streetscape owes much to its 35,000 or so clerics and women mostly wearing the head-to-toe black chadors.

Qom rose to the forefront of Shiite learning under Saddam's rule in neighboring Iraq. The former Iraqi president, whose secular regime was dominated by Sunni Muslims, viewed the rival branch of Islam as a political threat.

His regime pushed the Iraqi holy city of Najaf, which had been a dominant Shiite center of learning, into the background as Iran's Qom gained in spiritual status. The leader of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, studied and taught in Qom for decades, and missionaries here spread the message of the revolution through the country's mosques.

Now that Saddam has been ousted, many non-Iranian Shiites hope Najaf will regain its position as the center of Shiite learning by attracting Muslims from all over the world.

Once security is established in Iraq, Shiite students from Iran will go there and experience a more liberal interpretation of the faith, says Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Javad Akbarein, an Iranian journalist and researcher at Qom's Seminary School.

"Iran's government does not like this subject because it is certain that these seminary students' way of thinking will change due to the new government of Iraq," he said.

Saddam's departure came as powerful hardline leaders in Iran have been accused of blocking efforts of the country's reformist clerics and politicians, including President Mohammad Khatami. Conservative clerics dominate key posts in Iranian government and society, including the judiciary and internal security. The country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei,

has the final say in domestic and foreign policies.

Washington has accused Tehran of interfering in Iraq by trying to create a clerical regime based on its own Islamic republic, which the United States has claimed supports terrorism and pursues nuclear weapons. Iran has denied these charges.

Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani recently told worshippers at Tehran's Friday prayers that the Iraqi people will make an "Iraqi revolution," like Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution. He also blamed Washington for the death of Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, an Iraqi leader who had spent exile in Iran and who was assassinated in late August in Najaf.

"They wanted to suppress the Islamic movement in Iraq by killing Hakim," Kashani said. "They did not achieve what they had plotted, and Hakim's assassination only reinforced the consolidation of the Iraqi people."

But Iraq's rebuilding effort, being overseen by the United States, is expected to result in a secular democratic political system, representing Iraq's various factions and with Shiites participating as the majority.

"The Iraqi Shiites, as far as their interests and devotion are concerned, they are more devoted to Arabism than to Shiism," said Davoud Hermidas Bavand, a political analyst in Tehran, adding that a future Iraqi political system will have to be satisfactory both to the people of Iraq and to foreign countries, such as the United States.

Bavand also noted that the majority of Iraqi Shiites remained loyal to Iraq during their country's eight-year war with Iran in the 1980s.

"Even if Shiites assume dominant power in Iraq, their honeymoon with Iran will be short," he added.

Whatever the future holds for Iran-Iraq relations, Iranians like Morteza Ashrafi, a student of political science at Qom's Mofid University, says what happens on the personal level matters most.

"People don't follow the governments only," the 21-year-old student said. "For example many people in Iran are eager to visit the Imams' tombs, and many pilgrims (from Iraq) go to Masshad (a holy city in Iran). Thus the relations between people will be strengthened because many will go on pilgrimage. The cultural relations will improve and they will affect one another."

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