

# Who benefits from the Karbala and Baghdad bombings?

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Tuesday's suicide-bombings against Shiite worshippers in Karbala and Baghdad are atrocities that in no way contribute to the struggle against US militarism and its occupation of Iraq. Hundreds of Iraqis are dead and more have been maimed for no other apparent reason than their religious beliefs. Whoever is responsible, the only possible purpose for these indiscriminate attacks is to foment sectarian and ethnic tensions within Iraq.

Those killed were religious pilgrims from Iraq and Iran, including dozens of children. In Karbala, tens of thousands had gathered around the Iman Hussein shrine—one of the holiest sites of the Shiite faith and a focus for the conclusion of the main Shiite Ashura festival. At around 10 a.m., a suicide bomber standing in the crowd is believed to have detonated grenades and other explosives strapped to his body. Within minutes, as many as 10 more explosions ripped through the streets leading to the shrine.

The Iraqi judge investigating the attack told Agence France Presse at least four of the other explosions were also caused by suicide bombers. The US military claims the other blasts were caused by bombs rigged inside pushcarts and left by the side of the road, as well as mortar rounds fired indiscriminately into the city. The streets of the city were filled with blood, body parts, the dying and the wounded. According to reports on Tuesday, Karbala hospital estimated it had received at least 112 bodies—though many were so badly dismembered an accurate count was impossible—and had treated some 210 injured.

At roughly the same time as the attack in Karbala, a suicide bomber exploded at the main gates into the Shiite Al-Kadhimiya mosque in Baghdad. Another triggered explosives inside the mosque, while a third waited until panicked worshippers rushed into the courtyard. A caretaker told the *New York Times* he had watched as the bomber walked into the crowd and detonated himself: "It was terrifying. There was flesh flying and there were bodies flying". Initial reports estimated 70 dead, with another 321 injured.

On Wednesday, after some of the wounded succumbed to their injuries in overwhelmed hospitals, an official of the US-installed Iraqi Governing Council revised the estimated death toll to 271 dead and 393 injured in the two cities. The US military announced that 181 had died and 573 were injured.

No one has claimed responsibility for the attacks and there

are a number of possible suspects and motives. However, US officials, led by Vice President Cheney, immediately declared that Al Qaeda and the Jordanian-born Islamic extremist Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi were the prime suspects. No evidence to substantiate this charge has been produced except for references to the so-called "Zarqawi memo".

Since February 10, the US Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) has blanketed Iraq with the contents of a memo, allegedly authored by Zarqawi, which called for Al Qaeda's assistance in carrying out indiscriminate attacks against Shiite communities. The objective of the terror outlined in the document was to provoke Shiites into carrying out reprisals against Sunni Muslims and plunging Iraq into a civil war.

A bloody sectarian conflict, the memo postulated, would create the best conditions for the fundamentalists connected to Al Qaeda—who are mainly adherents of the Saudi-based Sunni Wahhabist sect and view the Shia interpretation of Islam as heresy—to win a following they currently do not have among the predominantly secular and nationalist Iraqi Sunnis. It also postulated the US, in order to keep control of Iraq, would be forced into a "second war" to suppress the Shiites.

The coincidence between the perspective spelt out in the alleged Zarqawi memo and Tuesday's attacks is obvious. It is entirely possible that the US decision to publicise its contents across Iraq, just weeks before the main Shiite holy days, facilitated some organisation to recruit the suicide bombers who carried out the atrocities. The effect of the letter on Sunni extremists would have been to give them the apparent endorsement of Al Qaeda's jihad.

For its part, Al Qaeda has fervently denied any association with Tuesday's events. A statement claiming to be from Al Qaeda was sent on Wednesday to the London-based *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* newspaper and the Egyptian offices of Associated Press. The organisation has no history of sectarian attacks on Shiites. Questions have been raised in many quarters as to whether it even has a presence in Iraq.

Regardless of who perpetrated the attacks, the political responsibility lies entirely with US imperialism. The disintegration of Iraq into a social and economic morass is the direct outcome of a 13-year US vendetta to bring the country to its knees, seize control of its oil fields and turn it into an

American base in the Middle East.

The Iraqi people have been reduced to a desperate daily struggle for existence by the 1991 Gulf War, years of UN-imposed economic sanctions and, finally, last year's invasion. Large sections of the population have been left traumatised by the death or injury of their loved ones, the destruction of their possessions or the uprooting of their families.

In the absence of a socialist working class movement capable of unifying the masses, regardless of their ethnicity and religion, against the US occupation, the widespread hostility and anger can be diverted into the dead end of sectarian and communal conflict. These are the conditions in which people can be enlisted to fight and die for retrograde ethnic and religious-based objectives.

Having created the conditions for sectarian violence, the US is also the main beneficiary. The Karbala and Baghdad bombings have been immediately seized upon to justify an ongoing US military presence in Iraq to prevent the country falling into anarchy. Britain's representative to Iraq, Jeremy Greenstock, has already used Tuesday's events to announce that British troops will remain in Iraq for "at least two years and perhaps more". He told the BBC: "As in the Balkans, we will need to be around for longer than we originally planned. I think Britons and Americans need to realise that."

The reaction of many Iraqi people over the past several days has demonstrated they understand quite well that the bombings and sectarianism serve US interests.

Grief-stricken survivors of the Baghdad blasts immediately surrounded and threw stones at the US military vehicles sent to help transport the dead and injured to hospitals. Western journalists believed to be Americans were beaten, even by the security guards at their own hotels. A crowd numbering in the thousands later marched on the nearest US base, hurling rocks and chanting anti-American slogans.

Wednesday's funeral processions in Karbala, for the only 12 victims who could be positively identified, were dominated by the chants of "God is greatest, America is the enemy of God" and "No, no America. No, no terrorism". Mourners at the Kadhimiya mosque chanted: "We are brothers, Sunni and Shiites, and we will not sell our country to foreigners".

Shiite clerics, responding to the sentiment in the streets, issued denunciations of Washington. Sayyed Ahmed Saffi, the spokesman for leading Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, declared: "We put the responsibility on the occupation forces directly and indirectly... The existence of the occupation encourages such attacks."

Grand Ayatollah Bashir Najaffi in Najaf, the holiest city of the Shiite faith, declared in his statement: "We put responsibility of ensuring security in our country and of protecting sacred Shiite sites on the occupation forces because they have left our country open to infiltrators... In the meantime, these forces have spent their time pillaging the riches of Iraq."

Sunni religious leaders also reacted to the atrocity with calls for unity with the Shiite population and accusations against the US. Moayad Naimi, the imam of the main Sunni mosque in Baghdad preached: "We are facing critical hours and dark days... so open your eyes against the plots of America and Israel to sow dissension. Iraq will only rise with both Sunnis and Shiites."

Suggestions have also been made that those who stand to gain the most from the continuing US occupation may have had a hand in actually carrying out the bombings. Veteran Middle East journalist Robert Fisk raised the issue in a column published in Wednesday's British *Independent* entitled "All this talk of civil war and now this carnage. Coincidence?"

Noting the contradictions surrounding the US claims of an Al Qaeda plot, Fisk wrote: "Somehow I don't believe it. No, I don't believe the Americans were behind yesterday's carnage despite the screams of accusation by the Iraqi survivors yesterday. But I do worry about the Iraqi exile groups who think their own actions might produce what the Americans want: a fear of civil war so intense that Iraqis will go along with any plan the United States produces for Mesopotamia.

"I think of the French OAS in Algeria in 1962, setting off bombs among France's Muslim Algerian community. I recall the desperate efforts of the French authorities to set Algerian Muslim against Algerian Muslim, which led to half a million dead souls. And I'm afraid I also think of Ireland and the bombings in Dublin and Monaghan in 1974, which, as the years go by, appear to have an ever closer link, via Protestant 'loyalist' paramilitaries, to elements of British military security..."

As the week draws to a close, the main consequence of Tuesday's attacks is calls by the pro-US Iraqi groups and Shiite clerics for the American military to do more to provide security, and for the militias connected to Shiite parties working with the Americans to be given semi-official status. If one considers who benefits, the possibility cannot be discounted that the bombings in Karbala and Baghdad were a provocation by pro-US forces intended to produce precisely these outcomes.



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