

Iraq: a reactionary call for “war” on Shiites

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A recent audio statement in which Al Qaeda declared “an all-out war” against Iraq’s majority Shiite population graphically illustrates both the reactionary character of Islamic fundamentalism and the living hell that the US occupation has inflicted on the Iraqi people.

The declaration was issued just hours after the horrific suicide bombing on September 14 in Aruba Square, in Baghdad’s Shiite district of Kadhimiyah. At least 114 men were killed and over 160 wounded when a man detonated a massive explosion inside a minivan.

The casualties were labourers, some of the 1,500 poor Shiites from across Iraq who had assembled in the square in the hope of getting a day’s work and some money to support their families. Witnesses said the bomber sought to inflict the greatest harm by posing as a contractor about to begin hiring and calling out to the workers to gather around his vehicle.

Distraught people who rushed to Aruba Square reportedly shouted “Why? Why?” Apart from being innocent civilians, the people murdered by the Al Qaeda fanatic probably included many opponents of the US occupation of Iraq.

The Shiite urban poor in areas such as Kadhimiyah and Sadr City in Baghdad overwhelmingly oppose the US presence in Iraq. In the past few weeks, tens of thousands have taken part in protests against the draft constitution to be put to a referendum on October 15, denouncing it as a US-backed attempt to partition Iraq along sectarian and communal lines so as to better plunder the country’s oil wealth.

The callous murder of Shiite civilians undermines unified resistance to the US occupation and has provoked condemnations. A statement sent to the Iraqi newspaper *Al Zaman* by five of the main Sunni-based guerrilla organisations fighting US and Iraqi government forces declared: “The call for murdering all Shiites is a fire that would burn all Iraqis—Sunni and Shiite... The main objective is liberating Iraq from the occupiers and establishing a national free regime... The resistance does not target any Iraqi, regardless of their sectarian or racial loyalties, unless they are connected with the occupier”.

A leading spokesman for the Shiite movement loyal to

cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which took up arms against the US military twice last year and has its main base of support among the poor of Baghdad, called on the Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS) to issue a religious ruling against Al Qaeda, “forbidding Muslims from joining these groups that deem others infidels”. The AMS, the umbrella political organisation of over 3,000 Sunni clerics, responded with a call for Al Qaeda to repudiate the call for sectarian war.

Al Qaeda, however, has no interest in a unified movement of the Iraqi people. It derives its ideology from the Sunni Muslim Wahhabist sect that considers Shiites as apostates and has a long history of attacks on followers of the rival branch of Islam. In Iraq, where it had no presence before the US invasion, it is appealing to a demoralised section of the Sunni elites with promises that a Wahhabist state can restore the privileged position they held under the former Baathist regime.

Al Qaeda’s actions stem from its deep hostility and contempt for the working class. It is not seeking to end capitalist oppression, but to become the instrument through which a dissident faction of the ruling elite can establish its rule. Al Qaeda’s perspective is to pressure Washington to withdraw its military from the region as part of a new accommodation with the imperialist powers in the Middle East.

Internationally Al Qaeda represents the interests of an embittered layer of the upper and middle classes who resent the political and economic domination of the Middle East by the major powers. It emerged out of the network of Islamic extremists recruited from around the world to fight in the CIA-backed “holy war” in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda only turned against their American supporters after the US “defiled” the Islamic holy places of Mecca and Medina by stationing troops in Saudi Arabia during the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War.

Having been willing agents of imperialism, Al Qaeda now uses Washington’s crimes to justify its own. The pretext offered for the sectarian massacre in Iraq is a case in point. Al Qaeda claimed the September 14 bombing and its call for war on Shiites was “revenge for the Sunni people of Tal

Afar”—a city in north-western Iraq that has been under US attack since the beginning of the month.

More than 150,000 people from Tal Afar have been forced from their homes to escape the fighting or due to fear of reprisals by government troops. The government forces fighting alongside US troops are overwhelming former members of the Kurdish *peshmerga* militia or the militias of the Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate the parliament and the US puppet government—the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and Da’awa. Sunni leaders have repeatedly accused these security forces of carrying out extra-judicial killings, as well as arbitrarily detaining and torturing Sunni men in secret prisons.

The Shiite population of Iraq is no more responsible for the crimes of the US and its allies in Tal Afar and elsewhere than the American people. Moreover, such terrorist atrocities do not advance the struggle against imperialism and colonialism one iota. Al Qaeda’s attacks have served only to provide US imperialism with the pretext for its predatory foreign policies. The September 11, 2001 attacks were used by the Bush administration to carry out the long-planned US invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq under the fraudulent banner of a “war on terrorism”.

The sectarian bombings in Iraq also play into the hands of the Bush administration. In the lead-up to the referendum on the constitution, Al Qaeda’s actions threaten to divide the opposition to the US agenda in Iraq, while at the same time providing the US military with an excuse for a massive crackdown in Sunni areas of the country where the majority of the population is expected to vote “No”.

Offensives against the mainly Sunni cities of Ramadi and Samarra are being prepared with propaganda that Al Qaeda “terrorists” are sheltering there. The governor of Sala ad Din province, where Samarra is located, told *Al Hayat* this week that thousands of people had already begun to flee the city, fearing a US attack. “The timing of the operations,” he stated, “would deprive the city residents from voting”.

The current US plans for extending its hold over Iraq hinge on the ratification of the draft constitution on October 15. It will sanction a de-facto partition of the country into federal regions, with the oil-rich north and south controlled by the Kurdish nationalist and Shiite fundamentalist parties that have collaborated with the US occupation. The aim of the divide-and-rule strategy is to create the best conditions for the privatisation of the oil industry, the restructuring of the economy along radical free market lines and the establishment of permanent US military bases.

A two-thirds “No” vote in just three of Iraq’s 18 provinces is all that is formally required to defeat the constitution. Major Sunni organisations have called on their supporters to

register and vote against the constitution. If they were joined by the Sadrist Shiite movement, then the referendum faces defeat in least five provinces—Baghdad itself, the western Anbar province, Ninawa in the northwest, and the central provinces of Diyala and Sala ad Din.

Outrage over the attacks in Baghdad is being used to drive a wedge between Sunnis and Shiites. Hundreds of Sadrist Shiite militiamen temporarily joined with SCIRI militia, police and government troops to protect pilgrims marching to Karbala for an annual religious festival from attacks by Al Qaeda. There are an increasing number of reports of sectarian killings and intimidation.

US imperialism is directly responsible for laying the basis for civil war in Iraq. For more than a decade, Washington, in its efforts to destabilise and oust the secular Baathist regime, openly encouraged sectarian and separatist organisations.

In northern Iraq, Kurdish nationalist formations were encouraged after the 1991 Gulf War to exploit the “no-fly zones” to seize control and establish a pro-US ethnic canton. Throughout the 1990s, relations were built up with the Shiite fundamentalists in SCIRI and Da’awa, whose ambition was and remains to replace the Baathists with a Iranian-style theocracy based on a layer of the Shiite business and clerical elite.

Following its illegal invasion of the country in 2003, the Bush administration has relied more and more heavily on these organisations as the basis of its puppet regime in Baghdad. Confronting widespread popular opposition to the continued US presence and deteriorating social conditions, the Kurdish and Shiite fundamentalist parties have increasingly resorted to stirring up sectarianism to shore up their base of support. The Sunni population, which has been subjected to intense repression, has become increasingly alienated. The draft constitution entrenches these divisions and lays the basis for further ethnic and sectarian conflict.

The US invasion has created a disaster in Iraq. What is required is the ending of the occupation through the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all American and foreign forces from Iraq. The Iraqi people—Sunni and Shiite; Arab and Kurd—must be allowed to determine their own political future, free from great power machinations.



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