

Sectarian violence engulfs Iraq following mosque bombing

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The bombing of the Al-Askariya mosque in the city of Samarra on Wednesday is a deliberate provocation that has immediately unleashed widespread sectarian violence and threatens to take US-occupied Iraq to a new level of savagery and barbarism.

No organisation has claimed responsibility, though Sunni extremists aligned with Al Qaeda are suspected. What is known is that a squad of men dressed in police uniforms entered the shrine in the early hours of the morning and overcame the mosque guards. At dawn, they detonated explosives that had been rigged in such a fashion as to collapse the entire building. The famous golden dome of the 1,000-year-old mosque—which was erected in 1905 and was one of the landmarks of modern Iraq—was reduced to rubble.

It was a particularly provocative act. Shiites regard Al-Askariya as one of the four holiest sites. Two ninth century Shiite saints are buried there. According to Shiite theology, it is where Mohammad al-Mahdi, the 12th and last imam, will return and restore justice after a time of great evil. The movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which has its base among Iraq's urban poor, calls its militia the "Mahdi Army" after the saint and preaches that his return is imminent.

The destruction of Al-Askariya has brought tens of thousands of Shiite youth onto the streets, vowing to exact retribution on Sunnis and the US-led occupation forces. The Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigade militia of the Shiite Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) have taken over entire suburbs of Baghdad, Basra, Amarra, Najaf, Karbala, Nasiriya and other southern Iraqi cities. Shiites have demonstrated across the country. In Najaf, a mass demonstration outside the home of leading Shiite cleric Ali al-Sistani repeatedly chanted: "Rise up Shiites. Take revenge!"

Shiite militias are terrorising the Sunni population. Over the past 48 hours, dozens of Sunni mosques across Iraq have been machine-gunned or desecrated in other ways. At least two were burnt to the ground in Baghdad. According to the Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), 168 Sunni mosques have been attacked, 10 Sunni clerics murdered and 15 others kidnapped since the bombing. In Basra, 10 Sunni prisoners suspected of attacks on Shiites were dragged from their cells and handed over to militiamen. Their bodies were found later in

various parts of the city. The overall death toll since Wednesday is at least 130.

US President George Bush has issued sanctimonious calls for an end to violence in Iraq. The fact is, however, that Washington is directly responsible for the extreme tensions that now threaten to plunge the Iraqi people into the nightmare of civil war.

Ever since the illegal invasion of Iraq, US occupation authorities have elevated explicitly sectarian formations. The various puppet governments since 2003 have been based on the Kurdish nationalists, who aspire to establish a separate state in the north, and Shiite fundamentalist parties such as SCIRI, which aspires to establish an Iranian-style Shiite theocracy over the traditionally secular population.

After Shiite parties assumed the dominant role in the Baghdad regime in April 2005, SCIRI has used its control over the US-trained Iraqi security forces to unleash death squads against former members of the Baath Party, Sunni political opponents, scientists, academics, women's rights advocates and critical journalists. This campaign of terror has been carried with the tacit approval of the US as one of the means for intimidating and silencing opponents of the occupation.

At the same time, the US military has waged its own brutal repression in Sunni areas where armed resistance to the US occupation has been concentrated. Thousands of Sunni men have been killed or detained in prisons such as Abu Ghraib, where they were subjected to torture and abuse. The inevitable rebellions in predominantly Sunni cities such as Fallujah, Ramadi, Samarra and Mosul have been mercilessly crushed.

The result is that the Sunni population is embittered and marginalised. Organisations such as Al Qaeda have been able to win an audience for their reactionary sectarian claims that all Shiites are collaborators with the US occupation, and recruit disaffected Sunnis to carry out horrific attacks on Shiite civilians and religious sites.

Now, after using the Shiite parties to assist in the repression of Sunnis, the Bush administration is attempting to substantially reduce their influence in the next government. Washington is steadily escalating tensions with Iran and does not want the armed forces of its puppet regime in Iraq to be directed by Shiite factions with close links to Tehran. The US ambassador

in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, repeated his demand on Monday that the defence and interior ministries had to be given to “non-sectarian” and “non-militia-related” individuals—a clear ultimatum that Shiite leaders were unacceptable.

The US intention is to install Sunni leaders and former Baathist officials into key government positions in the hope that sections of the insurgency will end their armed struggle. Khalilzad’s statement has simply heightened sectarian tensions. SCIRI immediately threatened to resist any return to power of individuals who had positions in Hussein’s regime or security apparatus.

First-hand reports published on blogs and news groups give some sense of the volatility and uncertainty that now exists in Iraq.

“Riverbend”, a young Sunni woman in Baghdad, wrote yesterday: “There has been gunfire all over Baghdad since morning... Extreme Shia are blaming extreme Sunnis and Iraq seems to be falling apart at the seams under foreign occupiers and local fanatics... No one went to work today... The situation isn’t good at all. I don’t think I remember things being this tense—everyone is just watching and waiting quietly... Several mosques have been taken over by the Mahdi militia and the Badr people seem to be everywhere. Tomorrow, no-one is going to work or college, or anywhere. People are scared and watchful. We can only pray.”

In an article in the British *Telegraph*, journalist Ahmad Ali described from Baghdad that his family had fled their home in a mixed Sunni-Shiite suburb due to fear of revenge attacks by Shiite fundamentalists.

He wrote: “The Shia are crazy about this [the mosque bombing]. I am Sunni and I am frightened that if I do not go somewhere to be surrounded by those who can protect me then they make take out their anger on me. We were not alone on the roads. There were many cars with families in them. Then even more surprisingly there was the sight of the black-shirted followers of Moqtada al-Sadr with their Kalashnikovs at many of the street corners. There were police out as well but they are standing with them... I have seen such a thing before in Najaf but never in Baghdad. It frightened my wife. ‘There is the smell of civil war everywhere,’ she said to me.”

With violence spreading across the country, the government Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari—himself a Shiite fundamentalist—declared an unprecedented day and night curfew yesterday. The announcement will do little to reassure Sunni communities. Most of the Iraqi soldiers and police are Shiite. The British *Times* reported, for example, that Iraqi troops had “cheered and waved” as militiamen raked a Sunni mosque with bullets. American troops have taken up positions in major Sunni suburbs and at key religious sites in Baghdad, just days after most of the capital was ceremoniously “handed-over” to a predominantly Shiite division of the new Iraqi military.

Other Shiite religious and political leaders have made

desperate appeals for calm. At the same time, however, they have felt compelled to solidarise themselves with the Shiite outrage which they have little ability to stem.

Sistani allowed himself to be filmed for the first time in a television appeal for an end to sectarian violence but issued a statement calling on “believers to express their protest through peaceful means”. In what has been interpreted as endorsement of the mobilisation of the Shiite militias, Sistani also declared that if the government could not defend Shiite holy sites, “then the faithful must be able to do it with the help of God”.

Moqtada al-Sadr cancelled a visit to Jordan and is attempting to regain control over his movement. In a statement yesterday, he declared the Mahdi Army—which is believed to have carried out many of the revenge attacks—would protect Sunni holy sites as well as Shiite. Reflecting broad hostility among ordinary Shiites to the US occupation, Sadrist spokesmen have blamed “Americans” and “Zionists” for the destruction of Al-Askariya.

In a similar vein, SCIRI leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim accused Zalmay Khalilzad, the US ambassador in Iraq, of fomenting the attack on the Shiite shrine. He described Khalilzad’s thinly-veined criticism of SCIRI control over the interior ministry as a “green light to terrorist groups” to attack Shiites. “Therefore”, Hakim declared, “he [Khalilzad] shares part of the responsibility” for the bombing of Al-Askariya.

Talks toward the formation of a new “national unity” government have already collapsed. Sunni parties withdrew yesterday, demanding that the Shiite alliance apologise for the attacks on Sunni mosques. The new Iraqi parliament was scheduled to convene this weekend for the first time since the December 15, 2005 ballot, with its first task being the election of the president and two vice-presidents who must nominate a prime minister. Amid the escalating sectarian violence, it is uncertain whether the session will even sit.



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