

Iraqi Violence: Shi'i-Sunni Collision or Collusion?

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Brief Analysis

On April 5, Iraqi gunmen attacking U.S. forces in Baghdad's predominantly Sunni al-Azamiya neighborhood were joined by members of radical Shi'i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's militia, Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army). Soon thereafter, posters of al-Sadr, along with graffiti praising the cleric's "valiant uprising" appeared in the Sunni-dominated city of Ramadi. On April 8, as violence raged in Fallujah, another Sunni city, announcements erupted from both Shi'i and Sunni mosques in the Baghdad area, calling on all Iraqis to donate blood, money, and medical supplies for "your brothers and sons in Fallujah." A donation tent in the Shi'i-dominated Kadhimiya neighborhood urged individuals to "prevent the killing of innocents in Fallujah by all means available." That night, thousands of Shi'i and Sunni demonstrators marched to Fallujah from Baghdad in a display of solidarity. On April 9, in the mixed town of Baquba, Shi'is and Sunnis joined forces to attack a U.S. military base, damaging both government and police buildings.

The collusion between Iraqi Shi'i and Sunni elements took many by surprise. After all, dominance by the minority Sunnis over the majority, downtrodden Shi'i population has generated mistrust and hatred for almost a century. A recently intercepted memo from al-Qaeda associate Abu Musab al-Zarqawi even revealed plans to exploit this historical friction by prompting internecine conflict between the two communities. While the most recent example of Shi'i-Sunni collusion against U.S. forces in Iraq was brief, the situation will require careful monitoring. A historical precedent of significant Shi'i-Sunni cooperation does exist both in Iraq and in other parts of the region.

The Iraqi Precedent

Elements of Iraq's Shi'i and Sunni religious communities have, in the past, joined forces to face a common enemy.

The Iraqi revolt. The April 1920 announcement of Britain's mandate in Iraq sparked a nationalist insurrection. As anti-British sentiment rose among Shi'i religious leaders and disaffected mid-Euphrates tribal heads, Shi'is and Sunnis sat together in mosques for anti-British gatherings. This symbolic cooperation in the name of Iraqi nationalism, however, soon crumbled. The British used the predominantly Sunni military to crush the insurgent Shi'is.

The Iran-Iraq War. Despite years of enmity between Iraq's minority Sunni and majority Shi'i populations, both communities were able to temporarily set aside their differences in confronting a common enemy: Iran. During the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, a temporarily strong nationalist sentiment among the Shi'is overrode their shared

sectarian identity with Iran, as well as their discontent with the oppressive Sunni Ba'athist regime in Baghdad. Indeed, Shi'is comprised the Iraqi infantry's majority rank and file, and the predominantly Shi'i south sustained the most amount of damage from Iranian attacks. After the war, however, sectarian tensions reemerged.

Other Regional Precedents

Examples from other Middle East arenas demonstrate the willingness of Shi'i and Sunni elements to cooperate in the face of a shared, nationalist threat.

Saudi Arabia and Yemen's Zaydi tribes. During Yemen's revolutionary phase, the country was host to a proxy war between republicans, backed by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, and royalists, backed by Saudi Arabia. The staunchly Sunni House of Saud provided a number of Zaydi (Shi'i) tribes in Yemen with war materials and money to fight the Egyptians. The proxy battle lasted from 1962 to 1967, when the Six Day War with Israel drained Egypt's military resources. A defeated Nasser soon withdrew under cover of an Arab summit agreement, while Saudi Arabia agreed to halt support to the royalists.

Ansar al-Islam and Iran. Recently, Iran has provided significant logistical support to Ansar al-Islam, a radical Sunni Islamist faction based in northern Iraq, by facilitating the flow of goods and weapons from Iran proper, and by providing safe haven in Iranian territory just behind Ansar al-Islam's mountain enclave. After the U.S.-led assault on the group in March, Ansar's top leaders retreated to Iran, with the direct knowledge and facilitation of Iran's Revolutionary Guards. According to Ansar al-Islam prisoners held by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in Sulaymaniyah, this Kurdish al-Qaeda affiliate still uses Iran as a base from which to plan operations against U.S. forces in Iraq. (Other reports allege that Iran is sheltering several senior al-Qaeda operatives, including al-Qaeda mastermind al-Zarqawi.)

Hizballah and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. According to Israeli intelligence sources and a flurry of media reports, Hizballah -- a radical Shi'i terrorist organization based in Lebanon -- has assumed the role of financial patron for a large number of terrorist cells belonging to the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, the radical arm of Yasir Arafat's predominantly Sunni Fatah movement. After Israel's May 2000 withdrawal from Lebanon, Hizballah moved some of its operations to the Palestinian territories, providing guidance and funding for the financially drained Brigades. Just before the March 14 bombing at the Israeli port of Ashdod that left ten dead, Hizballah transferred approximately \$3,300 to a Brigade militant for the attack. In the inter-Arab alliance against Israel, Hizballah cooperation with the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, as well as with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, can be expected to continue.

Prospects and Policy

Despite strong differences in the interpretation of Islamic tradition that have led to historical inter-Muslim conflicts, Shi'i and Sunni communities throughout the Middle East have cooperated in recent years in modern history when faced with a common enemy. The prospect of growing collusion between militant Iraqi Shi'i and Sunni groups against U.S. forces, therefore, is a troubling prospect requiring the vigilance of U.S. decisionmakers.

Current fears of Shi'i-Sunni collusion leading to a full-blown conflict in Iraq, however, have been drastically overstated. These Iraqi religious communities are far from monolithic. Rather, they are wrought with divisions. For example, on February 28, eight of the thirteen Shi'i Iraqi Governing Council members walked out in protest after a majority voted to reject the institution of shari'a, or Islamic religious law, in Iraq. In other words, five Shi'i leaders took a staunchly secular position on this issue. More recently, al-Sadr's failure to ignite a broad-based Shi'i revolt exposed fault lines among religious Shi'is. The deployment of al-Sadr's militia was not well received in many Shi'i towns, and was challenged by Iraq's top Shi'i leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali Husayn al-Sistani. Other Shi'i intellectuals, particularly in Najaf, have also staunchly opposed al-Sadr's dangerous confrontation with U.S. forces.

Similarly, Iraq's Sunni community is far from homogenous. While U.S. forces have come under fire from militants in

the Sunni triangle, several Sunni municipal council members have served as crucial allies to the Coalition Provisional Authority. According to one former U.S. official, these local leaders may be the reason why some Sunni towns have remained cooperative with U.S. forces.

Getting a majority of Shi'is or Sunnis to agree on anything within their respective communities can be difficult. Getting a majority of Shi'is and Sunnis to work together against the U.S. occupation, while not impossible, would likely pose even greater challenges. Nevertheless, Shi'i-Sunni cooperation is not unprecedented, and collusion between extremists could do great harm to Iraq's reconstruction and political transition. It will therefore be important to monitor Shi'i-Sunni collaborative activity in the weeks and months to come. Meanwhile, success and stability on the ground in Iraq is likely the best way to prevent collusion. Indeed, the worse things appear on the ground in Iraq, the more inclined Iraqis may be to band together in an uprising against the coalition.

Jonathan Schanzer is a Soref fellow and Ryan Phillips is a research assistant at The Washington Institute. Both recently participated in a twelve-day Institute fact-finding mission in Iraq.

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