

Al Qaeda's Deadly Gamble

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Tuesday's attacks against Shia targets in Baghdad and Karbala during Ashura, the holiest day in the Shia calendar, have all the markings of the simultaneous and co-ordinated attacks now associated with al-Qaeda. At first glance, it would appear that al-Qaeda is succeeding in its quest to destabilize Iraq. The attacks, however, may have been a dangerous gamble for the world's most dangerous terrorist network.

Tuesday's bloodshed was the first significant attack against a Shia target in Iraq's south since the August, 2003, car bombing in the holy city of Najaf. That attack killed Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim and more than 100 others as they emerged from Friday prayers. In retrospect, that bombing was likely not intended to spark internecine conflict. Rather, it was probably designed specifically to kill Mr. Hakim, whose co-operation with the United States labelled him a "collaborator" among those opposed to the U.S. occupation.

Tuesday's assault, by contrast, consisted of multiple suicide bombings designed to kill as many people as possible. The death toll from the attacks -- yesterday the Iraqi Governing Council placed its estimate at 271 dead, although U.S. estimates are lower -- marks the highest number of casualties in a single day since the start of the Iraq conflict. The fallout from this wanton bloodshed -- among Iraqis and Muslims across the Arab world -- is yet to be seen.

In recent history, al-Qaeda and its affiliates have alienated Middle East Muslims with grisly acts of violence. The carnage of the Luxor massacre of tourists in 1997, for example, pushed al-Qaeda affiliates to the fringes of Egyptian society.

Al-Qaeda cannot afford for this to happen in Iraq. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the man U.S. officials believe is co-ordinating much of Iraq's terrorist activity, recently admitted that attacking innocent Muslims could lead to a decline in tacit support for al-Qaeda, which is essential for the network's continued survival in the region. In a memo intercepted by U.S. intelligence last month, Mr. Zarqawi states that, "if we fight [the Shiites], that will be difficult because there will be a schism between us and the people of the region. How can we kill their cousins and sons and under what pretext?"

Even with the knowledge that this strategy could backfire, and in the absence of another viable strategy, Mr. Zarqawi and his associates appear to have settled on the Shiites as "the key to change. Targeting and striking their religious, political and military symbols will make them show their rage against the Sunnis and bear their inner vengeance."

Mr. Zarqawi's memo further details a plan to drag Iraq "into a sectarian war . . . because it is the only way to prolong the duration of the fight between the infidels [the United States] and us." Toward the end of his letter, the writer

states flatly, "We have to get to the zero-hour in order to openly begin controlling the land by night and after that by day, god willing. The zero-hour needs to be at least four months before the new government gets in place."

Approximately four months from now, of course, will mark the June 30 handover of sovereignty to the Iraqi people.

But even if Mr. Zarqawi's strategy is on schedule, it could backfire in other ways. While the attacks may have further soured Iraq's Shia population toward the Sunnis (playing upon a long-standing grudge), it is doubtful that even a significant minority of Shiites believes that violence against them stems from a monolithic Sunni offensive. Most Shia leaders, both religious and secular, understand that these attacks are largely perpetrated by outsiders wishing to foment unrest in a country that a Shia figure will likely soon lead.

The attackers also sought to drive a wedge between the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the Shia community, which responded by charging that CPA security is increasingly feckless and insufficient. Indeed, Shiites responded angrily to the attacks by chanting anti-American slogans and even throwing rocks at U.S. servicemen. However, Shia leaders recognize that the CPA will ultimately provide them the infrastructure for their new government. In short, Tuesday's attacks certainly reveal raw nerves, but are unlikely to have started a civil war.

In the end, the attacks certainly appear to adhere to the Zarqawi plan. But it is far from certain whether that strategy has the potential to succeed. In the highly unlikely event that Shia anger gives way to retribution against the Sunni population, the Shiites of Iraq will have played into the hands of Mr. Zarqawi and the al-Qaeda network. A more likely scenario is that Shia anger will give way to increased determination and tenacity, prompting al-Qaeda to push the envelope of violence and try again.

Jonathan Schanzer is a Soref Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He recently took part in a 10-day fact-finding mission to Iraq. ❖

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