

Who Wants Civil and Religious War in Iraq?

by Hussein Askary

The August 29 car-bomb attack on the Shrine of Imam Ali in the holy city of Al-Najaf, claiming the lives of more than a hundred mosque-goers including the leader of the Shi'ite Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, was a terrorist crime unprecedented in the modern history of Iraq. Although the real perpetrators of this crime are not yet known, the clear purpose of the attack was to shift the attention from the growing recognition of the total failure of the U.S.-British neo-cons' war and occupation policy for Iraq. It also aims at directing the rage of the Iraqi population towards a new enemy wrapped in an ethnic and sectarian cloak.

Unless urgent measures are undertaken internationally and regionally to bring order and security to the country, by transferring power to the Iraqi people in cooperation with the United Nations, outbreaks of chaos and violence will be inevitable. This would mean an outbreak of sectarian-ethnic violence, combined with an armed uprising against the occupation forces.

The fact that rumors were spread a few hours after the bombing in Al-Najaf, about the arrest of Saudi "Wahhabi" fanatics and Iraqi "Sunni" terrorists in the city, was an indication of the intention behind the bombing. Shi'a and Sunni Islam are the two main currents of Islamic faith. Iraq is divided geographically between these two sects, with the Shi'a being the majority in the South and in Baghdad. There are also Shi'a-Sunni combinations in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Lebanon, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. But there has not been any record of sectarian violence of any significant scale.

In Iraq itself, the religious leaders of both the Sunni and Shi'a groups, including Al-Hakim, have been warning against attempts to create this schism. Only a "third party" would be interested and capable of provoking such a catastrophic outcome, and such a disgusting act against one of the holiest sites of Islam. In addition, car-bombing techniques—starting with the bombing of the Jordanian Embassy and the UN headquarters in early August—are completely unheard of in Iraq. It is an imported mode of operation.

Shi'ite Restraint Near Breaking Point

The real issue in Iraq, which was addressed by Al-Hakim himself minutes before his assassination, is the failure of the

U.S.-British policy. Al-Hakim, whose group SCIRI, through his brother, is represented in the U.S.-controlled Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), had himself warned that unless the U.S. occupation administration in Iraq does what the Bush Administration had promised—in terms of restoring normal living conditions and transfer of power to representatives of the Iraqi people within a clear timetable—civil disobedience and resistance against the occupation forces would be legitimate acts.

The attack on Aug. 29 took place within the context of growing frustration in southern Iraq, leading to riots and armed attacks against British and U.S. forces in the predominantly Shi'ite, southern cities of Basrah and Imara. The occupation forces usually claim that the armed attacks against the U.S. troops in Baghdad and the North are committed by "Sunni" supporters of the former regime of Saddam Hussein. This claim does not fly in the South. The restraint called for by the Shi'ite religious leaders there, has reached its breaking point.

In that atmosphere, sectarian-ethnic provocations were launched. It started with attacks and counter-attacks between "Shi'ite" Turkmen and "Sunni" Kurds in the northern cities of Tuz Khurmatu and Kirkuk in the third week of August. This was followed by an assassination attempt on Aug. 24 against one of the most important Shi'ite clerics in Al-Najaf, Ayatollah Mohammed Saeed Al-Hakim, uncle of the slain SCIRI leader Mohammed Baqir Al-Hakim. Ayatollah Al-Hakim survived the attack, but two bodyguards and a staff officer were killed when a bomb inside a gas cylinder exploded outside his office. Ten passersby were also wounded. SCIRI spokesman Adel Abdel Mehdi said: "We think this is an attack done by remnants of the ex-regime." Although no evidence was provided for this claim, he indicated that "it has the same aims and the same goals as the attack that took place against the UN headquarters." Mehdi said that SCIRI had been demanding more protection for Hakim and other senior ayatollahs.

Another theory had it that "other Shi'ite rivals, who oppose their [the Al-Hakims'] collaboration with the U.S." are behind the attacks. At the demonstrations after the Aug. 24 attack, some reportedly accused Moqtada al-Sadr, another Shi'ite leader. Al-Sadr is a shady character, fanatically opposed to the Iraqi Governing Council. It is rumored that he is "controlled" by the Iranian supreme religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and by Ayatollah Al-Ha'iri, an Iraqi religious leader based in the holy city of Qom, Iran. This theory is supported and propagated by such supporters of the U.S. neo-conservative cabal as Amir Taheri, an Iranian exile living in London. Following the later attack on the mosque, Taheri wrote in the *New York Post* that Iran's "Khomeinists" may have done it as a warning not to collaborate. Taheri says the Iranians had warned Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim not to join the Governing Council; and he points to Iran-backed Hezbollah as a group capable of

such a car-bombing.

Khamenei himself condemned the attack: "Such criminal acts risk giving a pretext to the occupying forces to impose their suppressive policies on the defenseless people of Iraq and will lead to insecurity in the war-torn country, at a time when the Iraqi people are in dire need of unity and solidarity."

There are indeed faction fights going on among Shi'ite leaders in Iraq, regarding various questions: the role of the IGC; whether or not the Hawza (Shi'ite theological school/authority) should enter politics; and so forth. However, these disputes are generally settled through discussion, not violence.

United States Blamed

At the funeral of Al-Hakim, his brother Abdel-Aziz al-Hakim, a member of the U.S.-picked IGC, spoke to 400,000 mourners. He charged that the occupation is responsible for this tragedy. "The occupation force . . . is ultimately responsible for achieving security and stability. They are responsible for all the blood that is shed in every part of Iraq. Iraq must not remain occupied, and the occupation must leave so that we can build Iraq as God wants us to do." The mourners walking along behind the cleric's coffin chanted, "No, no to America."

Meanwhile, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, supreme spiritual leader of the Iraqi Shi'ites based in Al-Najaf, issued a strong statement warning the Iraqi people against provocative propaganda trying to sow the seeds of sectarian conflict. Al-Sistani said: "This barbaric crime and the recent crimes committed in holy Al-Najaf and other parts of Iraq, are being perpetrated by those who don't wish security and peace to return to this wounded country. . . . However, we are confident, that the Iraqi people realize this truth, and will stand in one line against the intentions of the enemies, and shall overcome the current calamity." Pointing the finger of blame at the occupation authorities, al-Sistani said: "While denouncing these disgusting acts, we believe that the occupation forces bear the responsibility for the chaotic security situation in Iraq and the increase of criminal actions. We once more call for supporting the Iraqi national security forces and enabling them to provide security and stability."

Al-Sistani's words, and those of many other Shi'ite clerics who called on all Iraqis to practice restraint, were answered by the population. Al-Sistani, who opposes the occupation but does not support violent resistance, rejected an offer to meet U.S. civilian administrator Paul Bremer a few days before the attack. A famous religious cleric in Baghdad, Sheikh Jala Al-din Al-Saqir, imam of Bratha mosque, said, "Bremer had gone to Najaf to meet Ayatollah Sistani, but he didn't accept the invitation." al-Saqir stressed, "Before the explosion in UN headquarters in Baghdad, Mr. Sistani had accepted the meeting invitation of Sergio Viera De Mello, and it means that Shi'ite authorities want a more active role by the UN

in Iraq."

On the other hand, the leading Sunni cleric Dr. Ahmed al-Kubaisi responded to the statement by al-Sistani with one of his own. Al-Kubaisi, who is chairman of the Board of Islamic Clergymen of the Sunni denomination, ruled out that such internal struggle would take place, because both Sunni and Shi'ite leaders are acting "with reason and moderation." He emphasized that his Board is keen on "preventing the shedding of even a single drop of blood of either a Shi'a or a Sunni Muslim, because they don't want enemy to have such an opportunity." Al-Kubaisi charged, "It is the U.S. policy to divide Iraq along sectarian and ethnic lines." While al-Kubaisi criticized some of the hard-line Shi'a leaders in Iraq and Iran, he had much praise for al-Sistani, the Iranian Foreign Ministry, and Iran's President Mohammed Khatami, who, he said, "had reasonable and moral stances."

President Khatami himself issued a statement in which he pointed to "foreign powers" as responsible. "I expect that criminal foreign elements could be involved in the acts to eliminate such leaders as Al-Hakim," Khatami told *Al-Hayat* after the bombing. "I don't believe that these acts are conducted by normal groups. It must be a state or a group of states that have such powerful capabilities and organized groups." Khatami suggested that Israel is the party which benefits most from such acts.

No Solution in Iraq Without the UN

Taking the issue from a higher reference point, the solution to the situation in Iraq must come from the international community, in order to prevent a total disaster. In the words of Gen. Anthony Zinni, former Commander of the U.S. Central Command, the situation in occupied Iraq is only "weeks away from chaos." The Bush Administration is now looking for collaboration in Europe, Asia, and among Muslim states, in order to stabilize "post-war" Iraq. Russia, France, China, Germany, Turkey, and many Muslim states, now being urged to assist America and Britain, firmly opposed the Iraq war. Russia and France insist that a concerted international effort must be made to find a way out of the current mess in Iraq. However, this could occur only under the mandate of the UN Security Council, and with a clear time-table for Iraq regaining its sovereignty.

In a statement issued Aug. 31, Lyndon LaRouche, Democratic Presidential pre-candidate, emphasized that only through the United Nations is a solution for Iraq possible. "The U.S.A.'s submission to a UNO role is the only realistic course of action presently available," wrote LaRouche, stating what no other political figure in the United States has dared to say—at least not in public. "At the present, the degenerated state of affairs produced by the war and the lunatic practice of the U.S. occupation, peace in Iraq can no longer be an Iraq issue. Peace requires the voluntary, active cooperation among the nations of the region of Southwest Asia" (see *International*).