From Coexistence to Cleansing: The Rise of Sectarian Violence in Baghdad, 2003-2007

Ches Thurber

Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the nature of violent conflict in Iraq evolved from an insurgency against the interim U.S.-supported government into a sectarian civil war, pitting the country's minority Sunni population against the majority Shia. By the summer of 2006, Iraqi on Iraqi violence had reached epic proportions. On most mornings, dozens of bodies could be found floating along the Tigris River. Iraqi men were executed for no reason other than having the name "Omar," and militias set up checkpoints to verify the identity of all those out in the streets. According to Iraq Body Count, 3,182 civilians were killed in July 2006 and over 2,000 civilian casualties were reported each month through August 2007.[1] Over this same period of time, the city of Baghdad was separated into distinct homogeneous neighborhoods based on sectarian identity.[2]

The tension between the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam dates back centuries, almost to the founding of Islam itself. The two sects fought major battles over who would lead the Islamic faith following the death of Mohammed.

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More recently, Iraq's Shia have been struggling over the course of the twentieth century for power and representation commensurate with their demographic majority. Saddam Hussein, Iraq's Sunni dictator from 1979 to 2003 was particularly brutal in his repression of Iraq's Shia population.

Yet behind these historic antagonisms lies a powerful current of tolerance and coexistence at the personal level. Even under the worst days of Saddam's Baathist rule, residents of Baghdad lived together in mixed neighborhoods. Sunnis and Shia intermarried, and sectarian identity was even considered by some to be a crude and impolite matter to discuss. Everyday residents of Baghdad were focused on their jobs and their families, not on clashing over a centuries-old dispute.

For example, a young Iraqi woman, using the pseudonym "Riverbend," writes on her online blog:

> I remember Baghdad before the war—one could live anywhere. We didn't know what our neighbors were—we didn't care. No one asked about religion or sect. No one bothered with what was considered a trivial topic: are you Sunni or Shia? You only asked

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something like that if you were uncouth or backward. Our lives revolve around it now. Our existence depends on hiding it or highlighting it—depending on the group of masked men who stop you or raid your home in the middle of the night.[3]

How did this devolution from apparent tolerance and coexistence to all-out ethnic civil war happen so suddenly? In numerous accounts of the violence in Iraq published by the academic and policy communities, relatively little attention has been given to the voices of Iraqis directly involved in the conflict. . This article will therefore draw on first-person accounts gathered from journalists, non-governmental organizations, blogs and interviews to argue that sectarian violence in Baghdad appears to be less a result of an inherent interreligious animus than a collective defensive reaction to the fear and vulnerability created in a time of war and political upheaval. Furthermore, it illustrates how the actions of two outside actors—the United States and Jordanian-born terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi—were instrumental in exacerbating feelings of vulnerability and sparking a chain reaction of violence.

ORIGINS OF THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE

The conflict between Sunni and Shia Islam stems from a succession dispute after the death of the Prophet Mohammed in 632 CE. While one faction supported Abu Bakr, a close follower and friend of Mohammed, another supported Ali, the Prophet's first cousin and son-in-law, due to his direct familial relationship to Mohammed. This latter group became known as the Shia, literally "followers" of Ali.   While Ali accepted Abu Bakr's rule as caliph, tension between the two groups continued. Civil war erupted in 656 when Ali finally became caliph following the assassination of Uthman. Ali was assassinated in 661 and his sons Hasan and Husays were each killed in their attempts to inherit the caliphate.

The initial conflicts over the Islamic Caliphate took place within the area encompassing contemporary Iraq. Ali himself is buried in the Iraqi city of Najaf and Hussein's tomb remains in Karbala. These two Iraqi cities have become key religious centers for the Shia faith, and just as the initial Sunni-Shia split was essentially a political battle over who would lead the caliphate, sectarianism has remained closely tied to politics and war throughout Iraq's history. The rise of Shiism in Iraq was largely a result of a campaign by the leaders of the south's holy cities in the late nineteenth century to convert the local nomadic tribes to Shiism as a way to ensure their alliance in battles against the Ottoman rulers in Baghdad.[4]   Today, it is estimated that Shia represent between 60 and 65 percent of Iraq's population.[5] Yet just as the Shia were never able to regain control of the caliphate, Shia have never enjoyed political control of Iraq either. While Britain lured Iraqi Shia support in World War I through the prospect of freedom from Sunni Ottoman rule, after the war, the British instead installed Faisal, a Sunni Hashemite prince from the Hijaz region of the Arabian Peninsula to be Iraq's king.[6] Though Iraq experienced several revolts and coups over the course of the twentieth century, national leadership had always previously remained in Sunni hands, culminating in the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

In fact, the nearly 24 years under Saddam's rule were some of the most violent and oppressive for Iraq's Shia. Fearful that the 1979 Iranian Revolution could spread across the border and incite a rebellion by Iraqi Shia, Saddam launched a wave of sectarian attacks, executing many of the most prominent Shia religious and political figures. When numerous Iraqi Shia joined the uprising following the 1991 Gulf War, Saddam responded again with force, killing thousands.[7]

Given this long history of repression and disenfranchisement, it is tempting to view Iraq's sectarian violence as a natural and perhaps inevitable result of fossilized identities and ancient hatreds. For some scholars, this is the most persuasive explanation of ethnic conflict generally.[8] Journalist Robert Kaplan, for example, traces the origins of ethnic conflict in the Balkans between Bosnian Muslims, Orthodox Serbs, and Catholic Croats back to centuries of intractable intergroup feuds.[9] Kaplan argues that through centuries of conflict, ethnic hatreds had become so fossilized that the region would be inevitably plagued by warfare between these groups.

Under Kaplan's logic, the long history of Sunni-Shia fighting should make ethnic conflict in Iraq similarly unavoidable. In fact, political scientist Vali Nasr makes this exact argument in his book *The Shia Revival.* Nasr argues that sect is a fundamental element of Muslim identity that shapes the social and political dynamics of the region. "It is not just a hoary religious dispute," he states, "…but a contemporary clash of identities."[10] According to Nasr, "…the primordial or near-primordial ties of race, language, ethnicity, and religion make their presence felt with dogged determination. This is the reality of our time and the Muslim world cannot escape it."[11] Just as it was impossible for the new Balkan states to move beyond their ancient hatreds in the 1990s, Nasr believes that it would be impossible for post-Saddam Iraq to avoid the centuries-old legacy of sectarian conflict.

However, even if the conflict between Sunnis and Shia existed over centuries and was exacerbated by Saddam's brutal suppression, the nature, timing, and degree of the violence that occurred between 2003 and 2007 still remains puzzling. The narrative of continual conflict overlooks the high levels of coexistence and tolerance that existed among Baghdad's middle-class communities. Nonetheless, these communities suffered the most excruciating sectarian bloodshed. Intersectarian tolerance persevered after the fall of Saddam, and it was not until 2005 that violence took on a decidedly sectarian pattern. Finally, while most of the twentieth century sectarian violence in Iraq had pitted the Shia against the forces of the state, the violence following the overthrow of Saddam is remarkable for its indiscriminate nature where civilians were targeted for no reason other than their sectarian identity.

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As sociologist Rogers Brubaker and political scientist David Laitin argue, "Even where violence is clearly rooted in preexisting conflict, it should not be treated as a natural, self-explanatory outgrowth of such conflict." In other words, simply noting an extended history of sectarian tensions between Iraq's Sunni and Shia communities is insufficient to explain why these underlying tensions erupted into such brutal warfare after the American invasion. Brubaker and Laitin continue to say that "…Violence is not a quantitative degree of conflict but a qualitative form of conflict, with its own dynamics. The shift from nonviolent to violent modes of conflict is a phase shift that requires particular theoretical attention."[12] The remainder of this article will attempt to elucidate exactly how this shift occurred in Iraq between 2003 and 2007.

TOLERANCE AND COEXISTENCE

At an individual level, there are reasons to believe that sectarian identity in contemporary Iraq may not be as divisive an issue as the history of Sunni-Shia conflict would suggest. Iraqis in Baghdad often lived side by side with neighbors of the opposite sect, and intersectarian marriage was common.[13] Riverbend, the Iraqi blogger mentioned earlier, provides a vivid description of life in Baghdad during the war. From her entries, we learn that Riverbend grew up in Baghdad in a middle-class Sunni family that consisted of her two parents and younger brother. She is presumably well-educated, given her job as a computer software programmer and her fluid use of the English language on her blog.

Writing in August 2003, Riverbend describes the high levels of tolerance and coexistence in Baghdad before 2003: "We get along with each other—Sunnis and Shi'a, Muslims and Christians and Jews …. We intermarry, we mix and mingle, we live. We build our churches and mosques in the same areas, our children go to the same schools… it was never an issue."[14] Riverbend adds that it was actually considered socially taboo to ask someone if they were Sunni or Shia: "Most people simply didn't go around making friends or socializing with neighbors based on their sect. People didn't care—you could ask that question, but everyone would look at you like you were

silly and rude."[15] Riverbend's account of growing up in a family of mixed sects and of being taught religious tolerance seems to contradict the idea that sectarian animosities were deeply fossilized in Iraqi culture.

Perhaps as a middle-class Sunni making a decent living in Baghdad under Saddam's regime, Riverbend had the luxury of being able to ignore the issue of sect. Accounts from Iraqi Shia are certainly far more attentive to issues of sectarian divisions and discrimination. For example, Yasir, a Shia interviewed by the author who grew up in the middle-class Shaab neighborhood of northwest Baghdad, describes being quite aware of his sectarian identity. He recalled occasionally being asked in primary school by a curious Sunni classmate, "Don't you think you should be a Sunni?" But overall, his description of life in Baghdad bears a far greater resemblance to that of Riverbend than it does to the essentialist narrative of enduring and intractable religious enmity. "Most people," he added, "don't care about the religious difference."[16] A Shia resident of Baghdad's Zafaraniya neighborhood similarly told the International Crisis Group, "We used to live in harmony in the area, Shiites and Sunnis. We did not have any problems before the regime's ouster or immediately after."[17] Even Shia living in Baghdad before the U.S. invasion describe the overall nature of sectarian relations as peaceful. Equally important, the Zafaraniya resident notes that they remained so in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. invasion. Based on these Iraqis' accounts, it does not seem possible to trace the outbreak of sectarian violence back to long-held religious hatreds.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

While the Baghdad residents discussed above describe remarkable tolerance when describing everyday social relations between Sunnis and Shia, a different tone emerges when they begin to discuss the role of religion in the nation's politics. For example, soon after the invasion and well before the sectarian violence had begun, Riverbend begins to write disparaging entries about the Shia Dawa party, which had acquired new influence under the U.S.-led interim government, describing it as an extremist organization engaged in terrorist acts. Her venom toward the Shia political parties is striking and stands in marked contrast to her words about sectarian harmony, conveying a marked apprehension about the potential consequences of Shia assuming political power and the impact it might have on her way of life.

Another Iraqi blogger, using only his first name "Salam," describes similar apprehensions during a trip he took to southern Iraq in May 2003, just a month after U.S. forces captured Baghdad. Salam has a similar background to Riverbend. He was in his late twenties at his time of writing, came from a middle-class Sunni family in Baghdad, and had recently graduated with a degree in architecture.[18] On his trip, he mocks the new posters and billboards depicting Shia religious and political figures, comparing them to the images of Saddam that they replaced.

Salam also expresses his concern regarding the relationship between those Shia leaders and Iran and what it would mean for the future of Iraq. He writes, "I came back from the trip seriously worrying that we might become an Iran clone. If anyone went to the streets now and held an election,

> **"If anyone went to the streets now and held an election, we would end up with something scarier than Khomeini's Iran."**

we would end up with something scarier than Khomeini's Iran."[19] In fact, many Shia religious and political figures had fled from Iraq to Iran during Saddam Hussein's rule. With Iranian assistance, they formed a political party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and an armed militia, the Badr Brigade. SCIRI and Badr have been accused of assisting the Iranians during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and even participating in the torture of Iraqi prisoners of war in an effort to convert them in to the Badr Brigade.[20] Given SCIRI's history of close relations with the Iranian regime, Salam's fears offer a realistic portrayal of the anxieties within Sunni communities over the potential of an Iraq run by Shia political parties.

While neither Riverbend nor Salam show any contempt for Iraqi Shia individuals, they both

have serious apprehensions about mobilized Shia politics. The prospect of an Iraq led by fundamentalist Shia politicians threatened the secular, middle-class lifestyle that Riverbend and Salam had come to enjoy during the Baathist era, regardless of how they felt about Saddam Hussein's leadership. Riverbend attempts to reconcile this difference between how she views Shia as individuals and her view of Shia political movements by arguing that the political figures and parties do not actually enjoy all that much popular support from Iraq's Shia population. "The SCIRI," she says, "would like to give the impression that they have the full support of all Shia Muslims in Iraq. The truth is that many Shia Muslims are terrified of them and of the consequences of having them as a ruling power. [SCIRI leader Mohammad Baqer] al-Hakim was responsible for torturing and executing Iraqi POWs in Iran all through the Iran-Iraq war and after."[21]

However, on this count, Riverbend's views are inconsistent with those of most Iraqi Shia. More than just religious revivalism or political representation, these Shia social-political movements had long been a source of social and economic security for Iraqi Shia when the Baathist regime failed to provide adequate services. For example, under the U.S.-led sanctions regime of the 1990s, Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, a renowned Shia cleric and father of current Mahdi army militia leader Muqtada al-Sadr, built a sophisticated social network that sent emissaries to rural tribes, set up family religious courts and provided food delivery and medical aid to the poor.[22] He established a particularly strong base of support in Baghdad's "Saddam City" neighborhood, a poor slum filled with migrants from the South. The neighborhood was renamed after him as "Sadr City" following Saddam's removal in 2003.[23]

Yasir recounts that Sadeq al-Sadr's appeal extended to the Shia middle class as well. While not dependent on the Sadr social services network for material sustenance, middle-class Shia

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respected Sadeq-Sadr for his efforts to improve the lives of thousands of Iraqis who were suffering due to Saddam's repressive and discriminatory policies. His rhetoric of solidarity had a mesmerizing quality that particularly appealed to youth. Yasir describes, "I listened to my cousin and their friends, who were mostly middle class, talking about [Sadeq al-Sadr], and they would go to the mosque to do the Friday prayers. They liked him, they loved him, and they were ready to lose their lives for him. One time, I saw my cousin, Ali, listening to him on a tape; it was like looking at someone who is listening to music or to the words of a prophet."[24] Shia figures like Sadeq al-Sadr clearly commanded devotion among Iraq's Shia that was alien to Sunnis like Riverbend and Salam.

Likewise, while the Baath Party was the source of brutal repression and discrimination for the poor Shia of Iraq's south, for educated, middle-class Sunnis living in Baghdad, the Baath Party was at least a bulwark against what they viewed as extremist religious groups that threatened their economic and social position. This leads to contradicting attitudes described by journalist Patrick Cockburn:

> Shia friends complained to me that foreign journalists such as myself always exaggerated the extent of Sunni-Shia divisions in Iraq. They would say they had Sunni friends and relatives married to Sunnis, but then they would add all-important exclusion clauses to this supposed amity, such as saying that all former Bathists should be arrested. Sunni friends would likewise claim that sectarian strife was less than I had supposed, but then would go on to dismiss Sistani, Muqtada, and the Shia religious parties as pawns of Iran.[25]

Cockburn's quote depicts the same type of contradiction that we see in Riverbend and Salam's writings. While Iraq's Sunnis and Shia were capable of coexisting and tolerating each other at the individual level, their perceptions of their relative position in Iraqi society were

markedly different. Years of discrimination and repression by the Iraqi state had not solidified intractable religious hatred, but rather had structured political and economic interests in a way that put Sunnis and Shia into conflict.

INCITING COLLECTIVE FEAR

While both Sunnis and Shia were apprehensive of the other side's political movements—even as they exhibited remarkable tolerance and peaceful coexistence at the individual level—war exacerbated these tensions by precipitating a dramatic overturn of the status quo social and political order. Moreover, poor strategic decisions made by the U.S. government both before and after the invasion only worsened the situation by heightening the Sunnis' sense of vulnerability.

Specifically, long before the 2003 invasion, the U.S. government developed a close working relationship with SCIRI, the Iran-based Shia political party about which Riverbend and Salam had expressed so much concern. In the mid-1990s, the Supreme Council joined the Iraqi National Congress, a group of Iraqi exiles who worked closely with the United States in preparation for the eventual downfall of Saddam Hussein. In 2002, representatives of the Supreme Council were even invited to Washington, DC to meet with U.S. officials and plan for a post-Saddam Iraqi state.[26] Thus, the Supreme Council had built a strong relationship with the Bush Administration to the extent that the U.S. would offer the Supreme Council a leading role in the new Iraqi state once Saddam was removed from power,. Indeed, the U.S. granted the Supreme Council a seat on the Iraqi Governing Council in the hope that it could produce substantial Shia support for the new American-led political order. Accordingly, this position granted the Supreme Council a prominent role in determining the organization and structure of Iraqi elections.

The nature of the U.S.-SCIRI relationship was well understood by Iraqi citizens and had frightening implications for those who were already suspicious of sectarian political parties. Salam expressed his fears that the U.S. decision to partner with the Shia parties would result in these groups obtaining disproportionate political influence. He worried that if religious leaders like Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the highest-ranking Shia cleric in Iraq, gained greater influence in the political process they would use that influence to impose their more conservative religious mores on the rest of Iraqi society. Salam comments:

> When the U.S. feared that the elections won't happen they turned to Shia religious leaders to get them on board and guarantee the support of the majority of Iraqis in the first post-Saddam elections. Ayatollah Sistani became a pivotal figure who would make or break the voting process. What they did not consider is that once you hang a picture of an Ayatollah on your wall it is much more difficult to bring him down again. And this where we are now. Religion rules.[27]

Salam argues that by turning to the Shia leaders for support during key political movements, the United States opened the door to allowing these religious groups to continue to play a dominant role in Iraqi politics. In fact, his fears were well founded. The electoral process designed by the United States with the blessing of Sistani and the Shia religious leadership helped sweep SCIRI party members into key positions of power in the first Iraqi elections in 2005.[28]

In addition to partnering with the Supreme Council, the United States made two additional decisions that exacerbated Sunni fear: it disbanded the Iraqi army and prohibited former Baathists from participating in the political process. In doing so, it took jobs away from thousands of Iraqi Sunnis, sparking feelings of defenselessness against the massive social change that posed a direct threat to their economic and personal security, leaving them at the mercy of extremist Shia political movements.

While U.S. policy decisions heightened Sunni anxiety about the future, the terrorist attacks committed by al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia inspired fear in Iraq's Shia communities. Led by Jordanian-born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the attacks were primarily motivated by an extremist religious intolerance for Shiism as well as a desire to spark a national conflagration that would keep the U.S. military tied down in Iraq for years on end. In service of both of these objectives, Zarqawi followed a deliberate strategy of

attempting to incite sectarian conflict by specifically targeting prominent Shia living in mixed Baghdad neighborhoods as well as majority Shia neighborhoods and symbolic Shia sites. His attacks began as early as August of 2003, when a car bomb killed Supreme Council leader Baqir al-Hakim. By 2005, he openly declared his intentions, calling for "comprehensive war against the rawafidh (Shia), across Iraq, wherever and whenever they are found."[29] By August 2005, Shia residents of Baghdad had become so afraid of Zarqawi's bombs that just the rumor of an imminent attack during a large religious procession resulted in a stampede that killed 951 people.[30]

Both Shia and Sunni tried to show restraint in the face of Zarqawi's brazen attacks. Shia clerics condemned the bombings but pleaded for their followers not to seek revenge.[31] A Shia shopkeeper living in Baghdad's Zafaraniya neighborhood told the International Crisis Group, for example, that "most of us offered protection to our Sunni neighbors, as they were very afraid."[32] Iraqis continued to display tremendous tolerance and a desire to maintain sectarian peace in the wake of these initial provocations.

But as the targeted bombings continued, Shia restraint began to erode. Yasir describes the frustration young Shia men felt as they were deterred from finding work with the new government or with U.S. forces out of fear that doing so would get them killed by Sunni insurgent groups. "They made us sit in our houses like widows," he said.[33] Young Iraqi men, especially, would not be willing to sit at home for long while attacks continued.

Mounting tensions soon led to suspicion, allegation, and denunciation. The Zafaraniya resident interviewed by the International Crisis Group recounts, "The calls against Sunnis started to get louder as the ferocity of suicide bombings and the number of casualties increased. Some Shiites started talking of the risks of having [Sunni] neighbors who might harbor suicide attackers, although this never happened."[34] Riverbend observes a similar shift in the attitudes of her Baghdad neighbors: "The real fear is the mentality of so many people lately—the rift that seems to have worked it's way through the very

heart of the country, dividing people. It's disheartening to talk to acquaintances— sophisticated, civilized people—and hear how Sunnis are like this, and Shia are like that…"[35] It was at this point that sectarian relations in Iraq began to truly deteriorate. While tolerance and coexistence had largely endured through both Saddam Hussein's brutal regime and the immediate aftermath of the U.S. invasion, it was Zarqawi's repeated attacks and the inability of Iraqi or coalition forces to stop them that drove Iraqi Sunni and Shia to indiscriminate sectarian warfare.

After an increasing number of incidents targeting the Shia community, the February 22, 2006 bombing of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra by Zarqawi and his operatives dealt the final blow to Shia restraint. As one of the holiest sites in Shi'ism, the mosque's destruction represented a tipping point in sectarian relations. Accordingly, when Yasir learned of the event, he recalled, "Even me, I was so pissed, I hated all Sunnis, even my friends."[36] As many as 1,500 Iraqis of both sects were killed in retaliatory violence in the days following the Samarra bombing. A militant in Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army recounts, "We were under orders to stay calm, but we couldn't control the angry crowds of young men… shouting 'Do Something! We want to go to Samarra! Give us guns!'"[37] Nearly three years after Saddam Hussein was toppled, Zarqawi had provoked enough frustration and anger in Iraq's Shia community to begin a brutal cycle of sectarian violence.

COLLECTIVE SELF-DEFENSE: TURNING TO MILITANT GROUPS

The militia groups that came to control Baghdad over the course of 2006 and 2007 were initially scorned by local residents. Though many Shia still revered the memory of his father, Muqtada al-Sadr and his militants were nonetheless viewed as extremists who threatened stability. They provoked violence, engaged in criminal activity, and enforced a fundamentalist doctrine at odds with the moderate views of most Baghdadi Shia. Journalist Patrick Cockburn explains that "Muqtada was feared and despised by the Shia shopkeepers, businessmen, and

professionals, just as the *sans-culottes* who manned the barricades during the French Revolution were regarded with visceral terror by the Paris bourgeois."[38] Similarly, Yasir claims that most Shia viewed the militias as being filled with drug addicts, criminals, and rapists, declaring "Muqtada al-Sadr is an idiot."[39] Everyday Iraqis clearly did not have an affinity for the sectarian militias.

Militias of both sects closed down liquor stores and brothels and other businesses that violated their interpretation of Islam. According to some reports, Sunni militants enforced bans on things as random as falafel, goatee-style beards, and mayonnaise.[40] Women were particularly affected; girls in neighborhoods controlled by the militias were prohibited from attending schools and women across Baghdad felt compelled to wear headscarves, often for the first time in their lives.

But the escalation of violence following the bombing of the Samarra mosque gave the militia groups the opportunity to move into neighborhoods where they had previously been unwelcome. Feeling at risk in the volatile security environment, Baghdadis who had once been unwilling to assist the militias now began to lend support and even to organize local posses to defend their neighborhoods. The Zafaraniya shopkeeper describes how "some people in the neighborhood began offering assistance to police, army and security forces. This provided them with acceptance among the wider local community, and they began to establish groups under the banner of SCIRI or [the] Badr [Brigade] that grew as more and more people offered their allegiance."[41] The militia groups seized the initiative to fill the vacuum created by the dysfunctional Iraqi state.

Cooperation with the militias took on varying degrees of involvement. Yasir remarked that assistance ranged from keeping quiet about the group's activities and not reporting militants to the U.S. forces to actively providing cover, money, or weapons, or even taking arms and fighting alongside the militia in defense of the

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neighborhood.[42] The militias were thus able to develop a strategy of using the population's sense of fear to make inroads and begin to claim control of large regions of Baghdad one region at a time. A member of Muqtada al-Sadr's militia told the International Crisis Group:

> The Mahdi Army's effort to conquer neighborhoods is highly sophisticated. It presents itself as protector of Shiites and recruits local residents to assist in this task. In so doing, it gains support from people who possess considerable information—on where the Sunnis and [Shia] are, on who backs and who opposes the Sadrists and so forth.[43]

In this way, external militants were able to infiltrate and establish constituencies in key neighborhoods of the capital.

Militia members were not always readily distinguishable to the observer's eye—some units actually wore the official uniform of state security forces. Beginning in 2005, the Ministry of the Interior was controlled by the Supreme Council, which recruited its members into the official Iraqi security forces. These units became known for their capricious use of violence and overt sectarian favoritism. Though performing the routine functions typically associated with policing during the day, at night, these units conducted extensive home invasions looking for arms and evidence of those who were believed to be collaborating with Zarqawi. As early as 2005, U.S. forces discovered a secret prison being run in the Ministry of Interior building where 175 (mostly Sunni) Iraqis were being held and tortured. Furthermore, these commando units were believed to be responsible for many of the bodies that were found floating in the Euphrates River each morning during the peak of the violence.[44] As could be imagined, Sunnis in Baghdad lived in fear of hearing a knock on the door in the middle of the night and seeing police cars outside their homes. Riverbend describes with terror the experience of having her home invaded and

searched by a commando unit in the middle of the night:

> One of them stood with the Kalashnikov pointed at us, and the other one began opening cabinets and checking behind doors. We were silent. The only sounds came from my aunt, who was praying in a tremulous whisper and little B., who was sucking away at his thumb, eyes wide with fear.[45]

Though no violence was inflicted on any member of her family, the unannounced intrusion into Riverbend's home is representative of the climate of fear created by the empowerment and incorporation of sectarian militias into the interim state structure.

To many Shia, however, these units were viewed as heroes, a source of protection in a time of extreme insecurity. A young Shia man named Ahmed Kanan told journalist Hannah Alam that "Every time I see them in the street, I feel safe, I feel that we have a country with a government."[46] The differing perceptions of the commando units thus contributed to furthering a sense of conflict between Sunnis and Shia. The idea that Sunnis and Shia could bond together to prevent violence seemed hopeless. Instead, the only feasible alternative seemed to be to move to a homogeneous neighborhood where one could seek the protection of a sectarian-specific militia.

Shia militias started by targeting specific individuals they believed to either have worked closely with the Saddam Hussein regime or who were currently supporting Zarqawi. However, after the Samarra bombing, the practice of targeted assassinations gave way to indiscriminate killing. The end result was that the militias would simply prey upon anyone who was of the opposite sect. At first, the groups often used some religious pretext, claiming that their target had broken some Islamic more.[47] But as the violence progressed, it became clear that the militas were simply clearing each neighborhood of anyone of the opposite sect. The devolution from actions based on reinforcing communal security to indiscriminate sectarian violence is further reinforced by Abu Kemael, a leader of a Shia commando unit, who admits:

> It was very simple, we were ethnically cleansing. Anyone Sunni was guilty. If you were called Omar, Uthman, Zayed, Sufian, or something like that, then you would be killed. These are Sunni names and you are killed according to identity…The Mahdi Army is supposed to kill only Baathists, Takfiris, those who cooperate with the occupation, and the occupation troops…It does not always happen like that though, and can turn into a mafia gang.[48]

Geared towards consolidating as much power as possible in the current vacuum, this mentality also gave way to violence motivated by nothing other than greed. The militias learned to finance themselves through their violent operations, either through extortion or by simply stealing from their victims. They would confiscate real estate and businesses and rent them out or in some cases even demand sums of money from victims' families for the return of their loved ones' remains.[49]

While the residents of Baghdad had little affinity with the sectarian militias that came to control their city, the cycle of fear and revenge compelled them to turn to the militias for protection. They would offer hiding, make fealty payments, and in some cases even sign up to join the local militia unit believing that living in a homogenous neighborhood under the protection of a militia was the only way to ensure security in the midst of chaotic violence.

Despite initially claiming to target only the perpetrators, the cycles of violence instigated by the militias proved incredibly difficult to stop. Ethnically cleansing neighborhoods block by block became the most efficient method for establishing control and eliminating the threat of rival groups. Moreover, as the militants were often able to turn a profit through their use of violence, they had a perverse incentive to keep the conflict going, expanding into new neighborhoods and recommencing the process of bloodshed and cleansing.

CONCLUSION

The voices of everyday Baghdad residents reveal that despite centuries-old antagonisms, Sunnis and Shia had been able to live side by side peacefully for many decades. Sectarian tolerance and coexistence were even upheld through the toppling of Saddam and the chaos of the first year and a half of American occupation. But regime change sparked insecurities, which were exacerbated by American policy decisions to support overtly sectarian Shia political parties on the one hand and to disband the Iraqi army and ban former Baathists from the government on the other. This heightened sense of fear was then exploited by Zarqawi and his fellow terrorists in a deliberate effort to ignite civil strife. Sadly, these efforts were successful. The case of Iraq reveals that while ethnic and sectarian conflict are not inevitable, cycles of identity-based violence can take hold quickly. Once they do, they are very difficult to stop, even among populations that were previously able to live in peace.

> **The case of Iraq reveals that identity-based violence is more the consequence than the cause of warfare, and that specific actions in the context of war can either exacerbate or mitigate the risk of communal bloodshed.**

Nonetheless, the experience of Baghdad should also provide some hope for the prevention of ethnic and religious conflict. Rather than an unpreventable cause of war, identity-based violence is a product of war that is shaped and driven by the surrounding conflict. As such, there are several lessons that the United States should be able to learn from the mistakes it made in Iraq. In retrospect, several of the political decisions the United States made both before and in the early days of the occupation clearly had the effect of aggravating Sunni fears of becoming politically and economically marginalized in the new Iraqi state.

Inviting overtly sectarian exiled groups, such as SCIRI, to play such a large role in the early stages of forming the constitution and political systems unnecessarily stoked Sunni fears. More egregiously, turning to religious leaders to build legitimacy and support for the electoral process meant that political organizing and campaigning took on a decidedly religious and consequently sectarian tone. While the political rhetoric itself did not necessarily serve to inflame sectarian tensions, organizing the ballot into "lists" or groups of parties, rather than allowing Iraqis to select individual candidates, made the electoral process a largely confessional exercise. Greater attention to the initial institutional processes of the young Iraqi democracy could have helped mitigate Sunni fears that the system was being rigged against them.

The decision by Coalition Provisional Authority Administrator Paul Bremer to disband the Iraqi Army has been widely criticized in hindsight, and rightfully so. This action left thousands of young, armed, male Sunnis frustrated and without work and thus created a receptive audience for Zarqawi's message of sectarian hatred.

Finally, had the United States been able to stop Zarqawi before the Samarra mosque bombing of February 2006, sectarian civil war could still likely have been averted. This failure was of course not due to lack of effort. But this moment was clearly a tipping point in the escalation of sectarian conflict. Scholars of ethnic warfare have highlighted the fact that certain individuals or groups often play an important role in inciting violence among the larger population.[50] The case of Zarqawi should therefore underscore the importance of neutralizing key instigators of violence before they are able to ignite a chain reaction.

While a large-scale occupation of a country like Iraq is unlikely to be repeated in America's near future, ethnic and religious conflicts will continue to challenge the international community. But such violence should not be deemed an inevitable outcome of historic animosities, nor should solutions be dismissed as impossible. The case of Iraq reveals that identity-based violence is more the consequence than the cause of warfare, and that specific actions in the context of war can either exacerbate or mitigate the risk of communal bloodshed.

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