

### **Iraq Drama: Good Shi'ite – Bad Shi'ite, Kurds Lose Again**

It is a long-held belief in the Middle East that Iran strives to export Shi'ism and encourages the creation of fundamentalist governments throughout the Muslim world. The most valuable prize in this quest is Iraq, home of the holy cities Najaf and Karbala. Most in the Middle East are also convinced that Iran and Sistani will do everything in their power to win the prize, resorting to any tactics necessary. If it means more death and destruction - even of their own people - so be it.

In the past two years a pattern of “good Shi'ite – bad Shi'ite” has emerged which demonstrates the Iran/Sistani strategy to gain control of Iraq. When important decisions or defining moments regarding the future Iraqi government are approaching, al-Sadr (the bad Shi'ite) ups his violent campaign. This strategy not only wins the specific battle of the day but also accomplishes three goals: First, it demonstrates to the United States that Sistani is a “moderate”, second, that the Shi'ite are the only group in Iraq that need to be catered to in order to establish peace. And third is that the US should think twice about pushing the Iranian government too far on issues such as nuclear weapons and support for terrorism since they can make it very difficult for the US to control Iraq.

When the first drafts of the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) surfaced in the winter of 2003 and the United Nations Security Council made it public that it would support the law, Sistani was initially silent. He allowed for an escalation of violence before giving signals to silence the Shi'ite radicals in return for assurances that the TAL, which gave very limited rights to the Kurds, would never be implemented. He played the good guy, bringing back relative peace, all the while masterminding the violence using Al-Sadr-like tactics. In the end the US accepted Sistani's terms without any concessions from the Shi'ites on their plans for an Islamic government modeled after Iran. Sistani never had to criticize Al-Sadr, thus preserving Shi'ite unity and keeping Sistani in control of Iraq's destiny.

In the spring of 2004, when the UN was about to pass a resolution on the future of Iraq, the few rights accorded the Kurds in the TAL were wiped out by another series of maneuvers by Sistani

and al-Sadr. These were very similar to the events of the previous year. Al-Sadr, who by now had international recognition, initiated and escalated violent aggression towards anyone who opposed an autocratic Shi'ite regime in Iraq, including Iraqi defenders of the TAL, the UN, and the US. Sistani appeared to be the best alternative and the only viable leader who could keep Iraq from spiraling into total chaos. Throughout the violence Sistani never opposed Al-Sadr and instead focused on yet another political victory for Iran in the region. Once he was promised that the UN resolution would not make any mention of the TAL, a law that Kurds and other minorities in Iraq had put so much hope in, he called off the violence. Immediately after the signing of the UN resolution he met with Al-Sadr. This meeting was highly publicized by the Shi'ite public relations apparatus to remind their own people that Al-Sadr and Sistani are fundamentally alike and are working for the same goal.

The climax of violence in Najaf in the past couple of weeks is playing out in much the same way. Elections are planned for this year. Sistani and the Iranian government want direct "elections" in Iraq which undoubtedly puts them in complete power. A cartoon in *The Economist* printed last year best described Sistani's version of direct elections, which means that he will be elected and Kurds and Sunnis will be directed. Shi'ite clergy believe in "*welayat faghih*" which means that only Allah and not the people can grant power to a group or individual to rule on earth. It is the basis for the mullah's dictatorship in Iran and is fundamentally un-democratic. Governments based on this doctrine by definition enjoy absolute power bestowed on them by Allah. The stakes are high once again and it will be Sistani who will call Al-Sadr off at the end. He kept quiet while many lives were lost and much destruction has been forced on the very people that Sistani claims to protect and represent. But even more deaths of innocents and destruction of holy shrines will be worth the prize for Sistani and his Iranian patrons. Once the US bends to all his whims and agrees to "democracy" Iranian-style, Sistani will play the good guy again. In fact, we are seeing the signs of it already.

Kurds are not as sophisticated in their political strategy and do not have the backing of powerful neighbors like Iran. Kurds are threatened by Syria, Turkey, and Iran for insisting on federalism in Iraq. If the Kurdish leaders, who have only played the good guys so far, were to attempt anything like the Shi'ite leaders, they will probably be attacked from four sides - including from

the south. But with nothing to lose, it might be a viable option for some “bad” Kurd. The problem is that Kurds do not have a bad guy (at least at this time) and apparently the US and the UN will only deal and cater to bad guys. Any volunteers in Kurdistan?

It is unfortunate that United States rewards its allies by denying their human, political, and economic rights and rewards its enemies with absolute power. Isn't that the definition of losing a war? Haven't we lost in Iraq if we have to sacrifice democracy and the Kurds for stability once again?