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Why the 'Surprising' Rise Of Shi'ite Power in Iraq?

by Hussein Askary

The April 22-23 pilgrimage of 2 million Iraqis to Karbala in south central Iraq, commemorated the martyrdom of Imam Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Mohammed, who was killed in 680 and regarded by Shi'ites worldwide as the ultimate symbol of martyrdom and selfless struggle against tyranny. Because it is both a religious ceremony and a political expression of grievances, the pilgrimage was banned by Saddam Hussein's regime for over 25 years. The huge, completely peaceful gathering, in a relatively small city, showed a high degree of organizing and discipline by the religious authorities in Karbala and Najaf, internationally known as the Hawza, or the Islamic Seminary. Food, water, and medical care were provided to this huge crowd of pilgrims, in spite of the enormous pressure caused by weeks of war and lack of basic supplies. The Hawza is emerging as the new civilian Iraqi authority in areas of Shi'ite majorities—i.e., southern Iraq and large parts of Baghdad. They make up 60-65% of the country.

The religious ceremony turned political, with large demonstrations headed by the clergymen, calling for an end to the American-British military occupation, and establishing a united Iraqi government. The dominant chants were those rejecting the occupation, and "No, no, to all the Chalabis," in a reference the U.S.-backed politicians such as Ahmed Chalabi, the darling of the U.S. neo-conservative chickenhawks. The demonstrators also chanted that they don't want a Shi'ite or Sunni state, but national unity.

Stupidity or Imperial Arrogance

Washington Post coverage that day was headlined, "U.S. Planners Surprised by Strength of Iraqi Shi'ites." Bush Administration officials acknowledged to the press that they had underestimated the Shi'ites' organizational strength, and are unprepared to try to prevent the rise of a fundamentalist, anti-American government in Iraq. The officials were cited saying that "the U.S. has no diplomatic relations with [predominantly Shi'ite] Iran, and thus no window into what Iran is doing in Iraq." In truth, this "surprise" was caused by the pack of lies promoted by the civilian war-hawks in the Pentagon through discredited Iraqi National Conference chairman Chalabi. Some Administration officials were "dazzled" by the exile Chalabi, the *Post* noted; Pentagon policymakers had convinced themselves that he was a Shi'ite who could lead other Shi'ites.

But the *Post* wrongly forecast the prospect of an Iran-modelled "Islamic fundamentalist state" in Iraq. This assessment is meant to focus attention on Iran, both as a next target of the imperial war, and also as a scapegoat for U.S. policy failures in Iraq.

In a front-page story on April 23, the *New York Times* said that Iran is sending its agents into southern Iraq, working in Najaf, Karbala, and Basra, including members of the Badr Brigade, and perhaps also Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Lord Conrad Black's *New York Sun* ran an editorial, "Beware of Tehran," claiming that "Iran's tyrants see an opportunity to extend their influence—and they are doing so." White House spokesman Ari Fleischer and hawkish Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) issued threats to Iran.

What raises more question marks on the targetting of Iran, was the announcement in April 22 by the U.S. Central Command (Centcom) in Qatar, of a "cease-fire" agreement between U.S. forces in Iraq and the Iranian terrorist group Mujahideen-e Khalq Organization (MKO), one of the groups on the State Department's list of international terrorist organizations, which was supported by Saddam Hussein against Iran. MKO leaders immediately expressed their willingness to continue their activities against Iran, but in collaboration with the United States. The MKO base northeast of Baghdad was not

targetted during the recent bombing campaign.

The danger here is twofold. First, there are probably people in the "war party" in Washington who would like to see Iraq descending into chaos and sectarian and ethnic war. Second, if the United States and Britain continue to insist on running Iraq as a colony and a base to target other nations in the region, such as Iran and Syria, the *Post*'s prophecy might become self-fulfilling. Both real and false-flag anti-American "armed resistance" groups may emerge, supported by foreign powers.

Shi'ite Leaders Rebuke Reports

Following the Karbala pilgrimage, press conferences were held in both Karbala and Tehran by Shi'ite leaders. Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim spoke to the press in Karbala; he is the spokesman and deputy chairman of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and had just returned from exile in Iran. He is also the brother of Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, chairman of the Iran-based SCIRI, who held the other press conference there. SCIRI is the most influential Iraqi opposition group. According to Reuters, Ayatollah Al-Hakim stated: "There is no doubt we are going to cooperate with all sides and forces that have relations with the Iraqi issue. . . . Among these sides are America, Britain, the United Nations, the European Union, Arab and Islamic states. . . . We cannot make a comparison between the Iraqi and the Iranian people. . . . We should not make a copy of the Iranian revolution and establish it in Iraq." Al-Hakim said there could be a separation of church and state in Iraq, unlike in his host country Iran. "Religious leaders are from the people and they must carry out their responsibilities," he said. But "it is not very necessary for the Iraqi regime to be in the hands of religious people. It all depends on the will of the Iraqi people."

On the demonstrations in Karbala, Ayatollah al-Hakim said: "In these marches the Iraqi people want to say they are able to manage their affairs themselves." Asked if U.S. troops should immediately leave Iraq, he said: "The Iraqi people must start to establish their national government and take responsibility to manage their affairs. There is no necessity for any foreign domination in Iraq. The Americans say they will remain in Iraq only for a very limited period, but I don't know how long that will last." Ayatollah al-Hakim is expected to leave Iran soon, after more than 20 years in exile.

At the Karbala press conference, the presence of Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim was a sign of the Hawza's choice of its political spokesman. And he said that the Hawza "has performed a role in the current ceremonies ranking above any political or civilian administration. [This] shows that the Iraqi people are capable of running their own affairs." Al-Hakim said that a meeting of all the Iraqi groups that opposed Saddam Hussein's rule would be convened in Baghdad soon, to establish a democratic and united government. He emphasized that "the whole world regards the presence of U.S. and British troops in the country as an occupation," but that it would be resisted peacefully.

The first meeting of opposition groups inside Iraq was organized by the U.S. military command in April 16, under the chairmanship of American "administrator of Iraq," Gen. Jay Garner (ret.). That meeting was boycotted by SCIRI and other major Shi'ite groups. They will attend the next one, now that the have made a tremendous demonstration of political power in Karbala.

LaRouche's Work Invoked

The U.S. occupation army is not making things easier, as some believe it is trying to provoke peaceful demonstrators. In April 22, the U.S. Army in Baghdad was forced to release a religious leader arrested the day before, when thousands of angry protesters issued an ultimatum to the U.S. commanders at the Palestine Hotel. The protesters demanded the immediate release of Sheikh Muhammad al-Fartusi, representative in Baghdad of the powerful Hawza of Najaf. Sheikh Hussein al-Assadi, a member of the Hawza council, who described himself as a student of Sheikh Fartusi, warned during the protest that U.S. forces in Iraq should be aware of Muslim sensitivities, "otherwise there will be an explosion."

Only one day later, U.S. forces in Baghdad arrested Stam al-Gu'oud, chairman of the United Federation of Iraqi Intellectuals. The reason given was his alleged possession of arms. This pretext was ridiculed in a country where almost everyone has a gun. Al-Gu'oud is an outspoken critic of the U.S.-British occupation, and a political leader who is not part of the "imported" opposition. He appeared in an interview with Abu Dhabi Television on April 21, describing what is happening in Iraq in the context of the neo-conservatives' now well-known "Clean Break" strategy. This is probably a more credible reason for his arrest. His group is opposed to the division of Iraq along ethnic and sectarian lines.

There are dangerous attempts to put emphasis only on the Shi'ite factor in Iraq. In Iraq's modern history, there has been no known sectarian strife. Shi'ites and Sunnis, Iraq's second largest Islamic denomination, have united in the face of foreign threats, as in the 1919-20 revolt against British occupation. Saddam Hussein's regime tried to survive politically by playing on differences between the sects and tribes of Iraq. The United States and Britain may try that too, but it is never the natural state of Iraqi society.

To prove that point, on April 17, Iraqi Sunnis organized massive Friday Prayer events, followed by demonstrations in Baghdad. The major event in Baghdad was the Friday Prayer sermon given by Sheikh Ahmed al-Kubaisi in Imam Abu Hanifa Mosque. Al-Kubaisi, one of the most revered Islamic scholars in the Arab world, did not call for an Islamic state, as English-language media reported. He called for establishing a "Committee of Wise Men," which would monitor the activities of whatever civil administration were established; and for civil disobedience, on the model of Mahatma Gandhi, whenever that administration acts against Iraqis' welfare.

Al-Kubaisi, while denouncing the illegal war and occupa-

tion, invoked the "True America." "What we see today is not the great America, which we have known all the time. The America which we knew was the America of freedom and scientific progress, not the one we see today." He described in fascinating detail how President Eisenhower put an end to the British-Israeli-French attack on Egypt in the Suez War in 1956, as an example of great American leadership. Al-Kubaisi had referred to the ideas and work of American Presidential pre-candidate Lyndon LaRouche, in an address at the Zayed University in Abu Dhabi in November 2002.

On the other side of the river, Shi'ites were attending Friday Prayer in al-Kadhimiya, at the Shrine of Imams Jaafar Assadiq and Mousa al-Kadhim. They, too, went out to demonstrate against the occupation. They crossed the bridge and joined their Sunni compatriots in a display of national, non-sectarian unity. The slogan was "No Shi'ite, no Sunni will sell out this country."

The danger of sectarian division and strife in Iraq depends on the intentions and acts of the U.S. and British occupation and politicians in Washington. The continued deterioration of the Iraqi people's living standards and the political instability in the country, would create conditions for such a disastrous development. The intention of the "war party" in Washington, to "move to the next target," leaving Iraq a mess, is what could make such a development likely in the short term.

Oil Robbery Under Way In Occupied Iraq?

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The United States, having allegedly "won" the war in Iraq, now finds itself in an inextricable bind regarding its plan to exploit Iraq's massive raw materials resources. The misinformed view of Vice President Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Perle, et al., had been that, after a speedy coup d'état against Saddam Hussein, an American puppet regime would crank up oil production, expand exports, reap handsome revenues, and use them for "reconstruction" of the infrastructure that the combination of bombs, looting, and arson had destroyed. Contracts for "reconstruction" could be earmarked for faithful corporate war supporters, like Bechtel and Halliburton, while non-American companies would be excluded. Furthermore, to ensure total control over oil and the industry, the U.S.-sponsored regime would declare all Saddam-era contracts with other parties null and void. This would remove Russia, France, and others from the field of competitors.

That was the plan. Thus, as soon as Baghdad had "fallen," April 9, President Bush declared that the UN sanctions against Iraq should be immediately lifted, so that Iraqi oil could be exported, the economy reactivated, and reconstruction begun.

The American Pentagon's "Iraqi face," Ahmed al-Chalabi, returned to Iraq after nearly 50 years in Europe, wants to head its government and build a pipeline to bring its oil to Israel.

Tearing Up UN Resolutions

But this declaration is utterly illegal. The Russians and French objected, correctly, that the sanctions could not be lifted by fiat, or by American imperial decree. Sanctions had been imposed, in the wake of the 1990 Iraqi intervention in Kuwait, through a United Nations Security Council resolution, which specified that they could be lifted only after a UN inspections team had certified that Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction. Thus, diplomats from Paris and Moscow argued, the UN inspectors should return to Iraq and complete their task. If a clean bill of health were delivered, then the sanctions could be lifted. For his part, UN inspections chief Hans Blix confirmed on April 23, that his team could be back on the scene within two weeks.

Although the French, in a conciliatory gesture, offered a compromise formula—"suspension" of the sanctions, pending delivery of a report by a "mixed" team of inspectors (the UN official team along with the ad hoc group of inspectors which the United States had assembled) U.S. Ambassador to the UN John Negroponte maintained his hard line, rejecting any role for the UN inspectors. He said the United States saw no UN role "for the time being or the foreseeable future." Instead, he stressed that the U.S.-led coalition "has assumed responsibility for the disarming of Iraq." The handpicked, well-paid inspectors assembled by the United States would continue scouring the land, until they came up with, or contrived, some sign of weapons of mass destruction.

The significance of the French and Russian position, is that it stresses, rightly, that the UN must be the body which decides on the sanctions. It is the UN which has controlled Iraq's oil revenues through the Oil-for-Food program, and the Security Council decided on April 24 that this should remain so, until an independent Iraqi government comes into being. Furthermore, the recognition of a new Iraqi government, they both agree, is a responsibility of the UN.

One leading German expert on international law, Prof.