

British Promote Religious War in Iraq

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The Feb. 22 bombing of the Imam al-Askari mosque in Samarra immediately raised the specter of civil war in Iraq. To be more precise, what is threatened is civil war along sectarian lines—full-fledged religious warfare, in the infamous tradition of the Crusades, the religious wars which wracked Europe from the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, and, in modern times, the Lebanese civil war and so on. Like those wars, the threatened conflict in Iraq is “an imperial tactic,” as Lyndon LaRouche put it in his Feb. 23 webcast, to wit, a British imperial tactic aimed at wreaking chaos in the entire region. The name of the new wars of religion, is the “War Against Islam,” a new Crusade as conceptualized by Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and the like. If the chaos scenario is to be defused, the British imperialist gameplan must be exposed, denounced, and defeated, through measures to end the nightmarish occupation of Iraq, and give that country’s legitimate political and religious forces the chance to save the unity of the nation.

The ostensible trigger for the Sunni vs. Shi’a violence which is ripping through Iraq, claiming officially 130 lives as of this writing, was, as noted, the early morning bombing of the 1,200-year-old Imam al-Askari mosque, a holy shrine to Shi’ites worldwide. But the trigger for attack on the mosque, was the intervention of U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad, one day earlier. Khalilzad, who has taken over as proconsul for the Cheney war party in Washington, delivered his imperial dictates to the Iraqis regarding the kind of government they should form.

Speaking at a press conference in Baghdad, he stated: “I have said to Iraqis that we do not seek to impose our differences with Iran on them. But we do not want Iranian interference in Iraq.” To clarify what this meant, he dictated what kind of government the Iraqis must form: “The ministers of Interior, Defense, National Intelligence, the National Security Advisor, have to be people who are non-sectarian, broadly acceptable, non-militia related [persons] that will work for all Iraqis.” If not, “We are not going to invest the resources of the American people to build forces run by people who are sectarian.”

British Foreign Minister Jack Straw, also in Baghdad, delivered the same message, saying, “The international com-

munity, particularly those of us who played a part in liberating Iraq, obviously have an interest in a prosperous and stable and democratic Iraq, where no party, no ethnic or religious grouping, can dominate the government.” Straw also discussed the inflammatory videotape which had been released, showing British soldiers beating two Iraqi teenagers in Basra. Khalilzad had earlier attacked Iran for demanding that the British leave Basra—a Shi’ite province near the Iran border—calling it “none of their business.”

The net effect, and underlying intention, of the outrageous statements by Khalilzad and Straw were clear: They set the stage for violence against what they dubbed the “sectarian . . . militia-related” forces in Iraq, by which they meant the Shi’ite majority. And the attack came, on cue. The following day, bright and early in the morning, armed men entered the mosque, and deposited bombs which ripped through the building, destroying the golden dome, and large parts of the structure.

The message was not lost on the leading religious and political figures in Iraq, who, having lived under Anglo-American occupation for the last three years, have become familiar with their methods of social control and subversion. The strongest reaction came from Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, the leader of the most powerful Iraqi Shi’a faction, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), who said: “The statements by the U.S. Ambassador were an irresponsible statement. They increased the pressure and gave the green light to terrorists to conduct such crimes in Iraq.” The leading Sunni organization, the Association of Muslim Scholars, issued a statement condemning the attack, and holding the U.S. occupation forces responsible for the whole affair.

Recipe for Violence

Yet, despite these and other denunciations, the attack had its intended effect: Shi’ites, who assumed the perpetrators to have been Sunnis, took to revenge acts, including burning and attacking Sunni mosques. According to the Association of Muslim Scholars, 168 Sunni mosques had been hit, 50 in Baghdad alone, 10 imams had been killed and 15 kidnapped, as of Feb. 24.

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest religious authority for Shi’ites worldwide, condemned the attack, and called for calm. He announced a seven-day mourning period, and endorsed protest demonstrations, specifying they must be peaceful. However, in the enflamed atmosphere and violence which followed, critical words were addressed to him by the Association of Muslim Scholars, whose spokesman Sheikh Abdul Salam al-Qubaisi said the group “points the finger of blame at certain Shi’ite religious authorities for calling for demonstrations.”

One religious leader who stepped into the trap of religious warfare completely was Moqtadar al-Sadr, the independent radical Shi’ite leader of the Mahdi militia. Al-Sadr’s position

was announced by a spokesman, Abdel Hadi al-Darajee: “We will not only condemn and protest but we will act against those militants” responsible for the mosque attack. Saheb al-Amiri, another spokesman, told AFP news service, “Sadr has ordered the Mahdi Army to protect Sunni mosques and religious places in Basra and other regions”—i.e., take the security responsibility into their own hands. Reportedly, dozens of his militiamen took to the streets in Sadr City, his fiefdom in Baghdad, armed with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades.

The political fallout from the outrage in Samarra has been immense. Prior to the provocations launched by Khalilzad and Straw, Iraq political leaders had been working painstakingly toward forming a government which would adequately represent the Sunni, Shi’a, and Kurdish forces that had won the Dec. 15, 2005 elections. The Sunni political groups in the talks had managed to strike an agreement with the Sunni insurgent groups, bringing them under their political umbrella, and to accept power sharing with the Shi’a and Kurds. The negotiations were in their final stages when Khalilzad lashed out with charges that the Shi’a were taking over the country, and that the Iranians were at the doorstep.

Following the Samarra bombing, and the cross-accusations launched by Sunnis and Shi’ites, the main Sunni political group, the National Concord Front, boycotted a meeting that had been called by President Jalal Talabani, for Feb. 23, to discuss the crisis. Whether this means that talks for the formation of a government will be interrupted, is not known.

Classic British Methods

The British hand behind the entire operation cannot be hidden. Not only did Jack Straw work in tandem with Khalilzad to precipitate the crisis, but British troops in Basra have been caught in the act as agents provocateurs. Back in September 2005, two British troops were arrested and jailed by Basra authorities, after they had opened fire on Iraqi police at a check-point, killing two. Like the infamous Lawrence of Arabia, they were disguised as Arabs, with head-dress and all, and they were travelling in a civilian car. The British Ministry of Defense confirmed that they were Brits, but did not say whether they were normal troops or Special Air Services (SAS) personnel, as other reports indicated. When the Iraqis refused to release the SAS agents, the Brits stormed the jail with tanks, broke down a wall, and freed them, leaving two Iraqi police dead.

Following the incident, the Basra authorities refused to have any dealings with the British occupying forces. Since then, repeatedly Iraqis have demonstrated against the British presence. After the latest Samarra attack, demonstrators in Basra took to the streets, accusing British intelligence of having instigated it. Recently, the Iranians called on the British to leave the zone, as they constituted a “destabilizing” element. In Iran itself, the British have also been caught in the

act of stirring up ethnic conflict, pitting ethnic Arabs against Iranians in Khuzestan province.

If the British have been directly involved in provoking religious/ethnic conflict, the stage for such was set politically by the *policy* pursued by the Anglo-American occupation forces after the invasion. That policy was characterized by what Iraq expert Aziz Alkazaz, in Germany, has often referred to as “ethnicization”: that is, the occupying powers immediately introduced ethnic/religious/sectarian criteria to define the political process, something which was totally alien to the Iraqi national identity, and indeed a challenge to it. Former U.S. administrator Paul Bremer’s decision to impose de-Baathification—i.e., to ban anyone belonging to the Baath Party from any official functions (military or civil service)—constituted criminalization of the Sunni population. Lawfully, many Sunni Baathists joined the resistance.

At the same time, the occupying forces promoted the Shi’ites, who had been oppressed under Saddam Hussein. This nurtured resentments among the disinherited Sunnis, against the Shi’ites. The British carved out the southern Basra province, a Shi’ite area, as their zone of occupation, whereas the United States took the mainly Sunni areas in the center (with Baghdad as the capital), while the Kurds, who had enjoyed autonomy under Saddam Hussein, were left more or less to their own devices in the northern provinces. Britain and the United States officially endorsed an Iraqi government agreement with the Kurds, to expel Arabs from Kirkuk, which the Kurds consider the capital of “Kurdistan” (their dreamed-of state), and repatriate Kurds who had allegedly lived there before.

Through these measures, and the encouragement of political party organizations along ethnic/religious/sectarian lines, the occupiers created a new social chemistry, in which one had only to mix this with that, to create an explosion. For example: Blow up a Shi’ite mosque, and let it be blamed on the Sunnis. Or blow up a Sunni mosque and let it be blamed on the Shi’a.

Already, a holy Shi’ite shrine in Karbala had been attacked and leading Shi’ite figures, including the former leader of the SCIRI, killed. Now, the Askariya shrine in Samarra has been hit, which signifies a further escalation. The Imam al-Askari mosque is one of the most sacred Shi’ite sites. To bomb this mosque is to target the very heart of Shi’a.

Why are the British doing this to their erstwhile allies, the Shi’ites? one might ask. Anyone versed in British history in the region, knows that alliances they make are not worth the paper they are written on. As the saying goes, the British have no permanent allies, only permanent interests. At this point, their interests direct them to target neighboring Iran, using the pretext that the country is planning to produce nuclear weapons. In the process, Iran’s fellow Shi’ites in Iraq, earlier courted by the occupiers, are in the process of being dumped. All in the greater interest of fragmentation and chaos.