

## The Absence of Shi`a Suicide Attacks in Iraq

By Babak Rahimi

IT IS WIDELY RECOGNIZED that the rise of suicide attacks in Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 has been predominately a Salafi-jihadi phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> While some suicide attacks are also strategically used by other insurgent factions (both Islamist and nationalist Iraqi groups), most of the known perpetrators are non-Iraqis who are globally recruited or voluntarily come from neighboring countries (such as Saudi Arabia) or other parts of the world.<sup>2</sup> Despite a decline of attacks since 2008—partly due to the U.S.-led “troop surge” and the bolstering of the state armed forces—Iraq remains a breeding ground for suicide operations. These operations are organized by either Sunni Iraqi groups (Islamists and nationalists) who use such military tactics against U.S. and Iraqi forces, or the global jihadist groups such as al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) that mainly target the Shi`a civilian population to weaken the Shi`a-dominated government in Baghdad by deliberately creating a sectarian or communal conflict.<sup>3</sup> In the context of the U.S.-led occupation and the ensuing sectarian violence, however, one question has remained largely ignored by analysts: Why has Iraq not experienced suicide violence on the part of the Shi`a?

Given the dearth of evidence regarding suicide attacks by Shi`a militants in Iraq, this article examines possible reasons for the strategic logic of Shi`a abstinence from suicide operations. Such preliminary analysis provides reflection on why Shi`a Iraqi militants have refrained from the use of suicide attacks against a perceived internal enemy (Sunnis or other rival Shi`a) or a foreign occupying force (the United States).

### Understanding the Lack of Shi`a Suicide Attacks

Unlike Sunni Islam, Shi`a theology is famous for promoting a cult of martyrdom—a discursive-mythical paradigm that is symbolically rooted in the multifaceted narrative of the self-sacrifice of the Prophet Muhammad’s beloved grandson, Husayn, who is believed to have died a “noble” death at the plains of Karbala at the hands of the “evil” army of Caliph Yazid in 680 AD. When Moqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army battled against the United States and, later, Iraqi forces between summer 2004 and spring 2008, “martyrdom operations,” known for their Shi`a Lebanese origins, played no role in the militia’s anti-occupation campaigns. Moreover, various militant Mahdist groups—some of which are offshoots of the Mahdi Army—vying for power over the Shi`a leadership between 2006 and 2008 abstained from the use of suicide attacks against other more powerful Shi`a militias such as the Badr Brigade or the Shi`a-dominated Iraqi armed forces. There are four explanations for the lack of Shi`a suicide attacks in Iraq.

First, the pivotal element of Shi`a militias’ strategy of confronting Baghdad and U.S. forces has remained and continues to be political. While forging alliances of convenience through party politics based in Baghdad, Shi`a militias have largely avoided military confrontation and, therefore, relied heavily on the political wing of their factions to advance their position within the state apparatus and the larger Iraqi society. With the fall of the Sunni-led Ba`athist regime and the subsequent rise of Shi`a politics since 2003, the militia branches of the political organizations have usually played an auxiliary role of reinforcing the political status of the movement in Baghdad and

within the Shi`a community—although competition between factions has, periodically, led to major outbreaks of violence since 2004. Moqtada al-Sadr’s militia, largely entrenched within the Shi`a community, and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim’s Badr Brigade have used their respective military organizations to advance their political position with their constituencies, rather than challenging the central state through insurgent activities.

Lesser known militant groups, such as the Mahdist groups based in Karbala and other southern cities, have played a peripheral role in Shi`a politics. This is primarily because of the clerical establishment’s dominant influence over the popular culture of the Shi`a community, which has successfully limited the growth of the cult of the Mahdi and its related apocalyptic tendencies toward warfare. Najaf has also contained the growth of splinter Mahdi Army factions, especially since al-Sadr has come under increasing influence of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani since 2007.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the Najaf-based clerical establishment has and continues to play a critical role in de-legitimizing suicide operations in post-Ba`athist Iraq. Unlike Sunni Islam, the relative hierarchical system of clerical authority among the Shi`a enjoys considerable sway over a believer’s correct response to problems of daily life, including how a certain military operation can be perceived to be morally justified in the context of changing circumstances. In this sense, major high-ranking clerics such as Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Qom-based cleric Ayatollah Kadhim Haeri, the successor to Ayatollah Sadeq al-Sadr, Moqtada’s father, have refrained

1 On the globalization of al-Qa`ida-led suicide attacks, see Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

2 For a quantitative study of suicide attacks in Iraq between 2003 and 2006, see Mohammed M. Hafez, “Suicide Terrorism in Iraq: A Preliminary Assessment of the Quantitative Data and Documentary Evidence,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29:6 (2006). For a more updated study, see Brian Fishman, *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

3 Although the wave of suicide attacks has recently shifted toward the Kurdistan region, especially the city of Mosul, many Shi`a-dominated urban regions have remained the main target of al-Qa`ida in Iraq. Sadr City in Baghdad and the shrine city of Samarra, a target of two major attacks in 2006 and later in 2008, have played a critical role in the sectarian conflict in the post-war period.

4 The relationship between the two has been one of asymmetrical partnership, in which Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani plays the superior partner, guiding the younger and less experienced Moqtada al-Sadr in his quest for becoming a legitimate leader of the Shi`a Iraqi community. In doing so, al-Sistani has tried to tame al-Sadr by bringing him into the mainstream Najaf establishment to form a united Shi`a front against extremist Sunnis and the United States since late 2006. In return, al-Sadr, who lacks religious credentials, has been using al-Sistani’s support to legitimize his religious authority and expand his influence in southern Iraq. The relationship has been mutually opportunistic but also pragmatic, since the two Shi`a figures have not been able to ignore each other.

from sanctioning suicide operations for various theological and pragmatic reasons. Unlike Lebanon in the 1980s, when clerics provided legitimization for “self-martyrdom” operations against Israeli forces, Najaf and to a certain extent Qom have instead focused on the political process while steering clear of sectarian conflict and seeking to enhance Shi`a influence through voting ballots rather than suicide bombs.<sup>5</sup>

This stands in sharp contrast to the Sunni clerical establishment, which has provided legitimization for suicide bombings in Palestine, Iraq and other regional conflicts through the idiom of defending property, honor and the religious identity of the Muslim community against an invading infidel force—although variation in their theological discourse of violence also exists. Among the leading Sunni clerics who have supported suicide operations, especially in Iraq, are Grand Shaykh Mohammad Sayed Tantawi of al-Azhar University in Cairo and Imam Mahdi al-Sumayadi, a high-ranking Iraqi cleric, who have justified this form of violence as a necessary means of confronting foreign occupation.

Third, Iran may have also played a role in preventing Shi`a suicide attacks in Iraq. This is largely because Shi`a-led suicide attacks would bring unnecessary attention to Iranian influence in Iraq, possibly undermining Tehran’s interest to advance its influence in Baghdad where Shi`a parties are most dominant. In many ways, the official Iranian stance on Sunni-led suicide attacks has been in lockstep with the Shi`a-led government in Baghdad, namely identifying such attacks as “terrorism.” As a result, it is likely that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) active military backing of Shi`a militias has been limited to training in low-intensity warfare, with a particular focus on supplying weapons to Shi`a insurgents. Unlike in the 1980s when the IRGC supported Hizb Allah’s martyrdom operations against Israel, Tehran has instead relied heavily on the patronage of a number of Shi`a political factions—especially the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Sadrist—to

diminish Washington’s influence in Baghdad.

The fourth and final reason for the absence of Shi`a suicide operations involves what Marcel Hénaff calls the symbolic logic of “the production of a spectacular image.”<sup>6</sup> The images of suicide strikes on civilians in major urban areas of the country have created a highly negative perception of these military tactics among the greater Shi`a Iraqi population since 2003. Mainly associated with the Salafi-jihadists, suicide attacks are shunned by Shi`a militants who seek to promote a more “civilized” self-image of their Shi`a community for the broader global audience—one juxtaposed to the brutality displayed by the Sunni insurgency. As a Mahdi militant explained,

We don’t do these acts [suicide attacks] because they create a negative image for our cause. It is like the *fatwa* against the self-injurious *latam* (self-mortification rites during the Muharram rituals in commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain); these actions make us like animals (*haiwan*) or like the Sunnis.<sup>7</sup>

In this statement, the Islamic ruling against *latam* highlights the clerical influence over ethical behavior in the course of warfare. Such rejection of suicide attacks, however, has less to do with a complex theological doctrine and more with a pragmatic attempt to preserve the face of “civility” for the Shi`a Iraqi community. In such a public relations strategy, more conventional forms of asymmetrical warfare have, accordingly, given militias strategic depth in the heart of the Shi`a Iraqi community, which translates into a legitimacy factor. This is especially true for a younger generation inspired by the story of Husayn’s martyrdom in regular warfare at the battlefield of Karbala.

### Conclusions

On an analytical-theoretical level, an in-depth study of the dearth of Shi`a suicide attacks in Iraq would require a multidimensional approach across

individual, organizational, cultural and structural levels of analysis.<sup>8</sup> In this short study, however, three broad conclusions can be drawn.

First, suicide attacks are not necessarily a consequence of territorial occupation—although such military operations continue to play a significant role in the anti-government and anti-occupation activities of a number of non-al-Qa`ida Sunni insurgencies.<sup>9</sup> Depending on the strategy of insurgent groups and their changing relations with the state, suicide attacks can also be a liability for a militant faction seeking to legitimate its political authority through an electoral process of a transitional democratic state.

A second preliminary finding is that local politics and shifting alliances in the context of a competitive political landscape play an important role in the emergence and thus also the absence of suicide attacks. Contrary to the Hizb Allah-Amal conflict in Lebanon during the 1980s, when suicide attacks were used as a way for the factions to outbid each other to gain more popularity and legitimacy within the Shi`a community, the Iraqi case of Sadr-ISCI rivalry has hardly given way to the emergence of suicide military campaigns. This is primarily because the nature of Sadr-ISCI competition within local Iraqi politics differs greatly from that of their Lebanese counterpart: while Iraqi militias already held relative political power within the Iraqi state in the post-war period, the two Lebanese groups lacked political authority due to a weak state and the highly marginalized and then-minority status of the Shi`a community within Lebanese society.

A third aspect is the role of religious doctrine. Ideas matter insofar as they can be strategically interpreted by individuals, groups or elites in response to shifting conditions on the ground. The key is the discursive process of

5 For the case of Lebanon, see Martin Kramer, “Sacrifice and ‘Self-Martyrdom’ in Shi’ite Lebanon,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3:3 (1991).

6 Marcel Hénaff, “Global Terror, Global Vengeance?” *Substance* 37:115 (2008).

7 Personal interview, Mahdi militant, Najaf, August 4, 2005.

8 See Ami Pedahzur, *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism: The Globalization of Martyrdom* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Mohammed M. Hafez, “Rationality, Culture, and Structure in the Making of Suicide Bombers: A Preliminary Theoretical Synthesis and Illustrative Case Study,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29:2 (2006).

9 This claim ultimately undermines Robert Pape’s famous argument that suicide terrorism is mainly a strategic response to foreign occupation.

interpretation and how an idea or a tradition can be reconstructed to justify action (suicide attack) for a particular objective in a given moment. By avoiding certain discursive arguments in favor of suicide attacks within the framework of classical Shi`a traditions of martyrdom, Shi`a clerics, along with various non-clerical leaders of Shi`a militias, have successfully prevented the Muharram narratives of self-sacrifice to attain a suicidal military significance. Unlike the Iranian martyrdom operations by the Basiji militias during the Iran-Iraq war, largely inspired by the story of Husayn's martyrdom in Karbala narrated by mid-ranking clerics in the early years of the 1979 revolution, Shi`a Iraqis have focused more on the narrative of Muharram in the medium of ritual commemorations of Ashura, with its performances made legal after 2003. Whereas in the Iranian case the narrative of Muharram was externally reenacted in a perceived military battlefield against the Ba`athist army, the Shi`a Iraqi case has shown how noble sacrifice can be symbolically internalized through ritual action performed in the communal public spaces.

By and large, what the absence of Shi`a suicide attacks brings to light is not merely the significance of strategic ways by which actors, organizations and elites can select or choose not to conduct suicide operations in the shifting context of local politics, but how symbols and ideologies can be reconstructed to promote particular behaviors at a given moment. The two key factors to understand in this context are "situation" and "agency," not only on an individual level, but also on collective-institutional levels. Indeed, future comparative studies examining the relationship between Sunni and Shi`a manifestations of suicide attacks (or lack thereof) are likely to prove a fruitful area of research.

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