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Behind the Sunni-Shi'ite Divide

By Bobby Ghosh / Baghdad

It has come to this: the hatred between Iraq's warring sects is now so toxic, it contaminates even the memory of a shining moment of goodwill. On Aug. 31, 2005, a stampede among Shi'ite pilgrims on a bridge over the Tigris River in Baghdad led to hundreds jumping into the water in panic. Several young men in Adhamiya, the Sunni neighborhood on the eastern bank, dived in to help. One of them, Othman al-Obeidi, 25, rescued six people before his limbs gave out from exhaustion and he himself drowned. Nearly 1,000 pilgrims died that afternoon, but community leaders in the Shi'ite district of Khadamiya, on the western bank, lauded the "martyrdom" of al-Obeidi and the bravery of his friends. Adhamiya residents, for their part, held up al-Obeidi's sacrifice as proof that Sunnis bore no ill will toward their Shi'ite neighbors across the river.

Eighteen months on, one of the men who jumped into the river to help the Shi'ites says al-Obeidi "wasted his life for those animals." Hamza Muslawi refuses to talk about how many he himself saved, saying it fills him with shame. "If I see a Shi'ite child about to drown in the Tigris now," says the carpenter, "I will not reach my hand out to save him." In Khadamiya, too, the narrative about Aug. 31 has changed. Karrar Hussein, 28, was crossing the bridge when the stampede began. Ask him about al-Obeidi, and his cheerful demeanor quickly turns sour. "That is a myth," hisses the cell-phone salesman. "That person never existed at all. He was invented by the Sunnis to make them look good." Rather than jumping in to help, he claims, the people of Adhamiya laughed and cheered as Shi'ites drowned.

The bridge connecting the two neighborhoods is now closed for security reasons — just as well, since the chasm between them is too wide for any man-made span. Mortars fired from the cemetery behind Abu Hanifa, a Sunni shrine in Adhamiya, have caused carnage in the bustling markets of the western bank. There are more mortars going in the opposite direction; on a recent afternoon, the sound of an explosion on the Sunni side of the river is greeted with cheers by worshippers at a Shi'ite shrine in Khadamiya.

Those cheers are just one sign of how much venom has seeped into Sunni-Shi'ite relations in the year since their simmering conflict was brought to a boil by the bombing of Samarra's golden-domed shrine. The bloodlust is no longer limited to extremists on both sides. Hatred has gone mainstream, spreading first to victims of the violence and their families — the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who have lost loved ones, jobs, homes, occasionally entire neighborhoods — and then into the wider society. Now it permeates not only the rancorous political discourse of Baghdad's Green Zone but also ordinary conversations in homes and marketplaces, arousing a fury even in those who have no obvious, pressing grievance. Neither Muslawi nor Hussein has suffered personal loss, but they are relatively able to tap into the same loathing that motivates the Shi'ite militias and Sunni jihadis. "The air has become poisoned [by sectarianism], and we have all been breathing it," says Abbas Fadhil, a Baghdad physician. "And so now everybody is talking the same language, whether they are educated or illiterate, secular or religious, violent or not."

Worse, there are clear signs that Iraq's malice has an echo in other parts of the Middle East, exacerbating existing tensions between Sunnis and Shi'ites and reanimating long-dormant ones. In Lebanon, some Hizballah supporters seeking to topple the government in Beirut chant the name of radical Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whose militia is blamed for thousands of Sunni deaths. In Sunni Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt, sympathy for Sunnis in Iraq is spiked with the fear, notably in official circles, of a Shi'ite tide rising across the Middle East, instigated and underwritten by an ancient enemy of the Arabs:

Iran.

For those who follow Iraq from afar, the daily stories of sectarian slaughter are perplexing. Why are the Shi'ites and Sunnis fighting? Why now? There are several explanations for the timing of the outbreak of hostilities, each tied to a particular interpretation of how events unfolded after the fall of Saddam Hussein: flawed American postwar policies, provocation by foreign jihadis, retaliation by militias like al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, the ineptitude of Iraqi politicians and, lately, Iranian interference. But the rage burning in people like Muslawi and Hussein has much deeper and older roots. It is the product of centuries of social, political and economic inequality, imposed by repression and prejudice and frequently reinforced by bloodshed. The hatred is not principally about religion. Sunnis and Shi'ites may disagree on some matters of dogma and some details of Islam's early history, but these differences are small — they agree on most of the important tenets of the faith, like the infallibility of the Koran, and they venerate the Prophet Muhammad. Despite the claims by some Arab commentators, there is no evidence that Iraq's Shi'ite extremists are trying to convert Sunnis, or vice versa. For Iraqi fighters on both sides, "their sect is nothing more than a uniform, a convenient way to tell friend from enemy," says Ghanim Hashem Kudhir, who teaches modern Islamic history at Baghdad's Mustansiriya University. "What binds them is not religion but common historical experience: Shi'ites see themselves as the oppressed, and they see Sunnis as the oppressors."

Sunnis and Shi'ites are fighting for a secular prize: political domination. The warring sects, says a U.S. official in Baghdad, "are simply communities ... striving to gain or regain power." Without an understanding of the roots of the rage that drives people like Muslawi and Hussein, any plan — American or Iraqi, military or political — to stabilize Iraq is doomed to failure. And that power struggle in Iraq, whether it draws neighboring countries into a wider sectarian conflict or forces a realignment of alliances, has the potential to radically alter the Middle East.

Origins

Islam's schism began in A.D. 632, immediately after the Prophet Muhammad died without naming a successor as leader of the new Muslim flock. Some of his followers believed the role of Caliph, or viceroy of God, should be passed down Muhammad's bloodline, starting with his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib. But the majority backed the Prophet's friend Abu Bakr, who duly became Caliph. Ali would eventually become the fourth Caliph before being murdered in A.D. 661 by a heretic near Kufa, now in Iraq. The succession was once again disputed, and this time it led to a formal split. The majority backed the claim of Mu'awiyah, Governor of Syria, and his son Yazid. Ali's supporters, who would eventually be known collectively as Shi'at Ali, or partisans of Ali, agitated for his son Hussein. When the two sides met on a battlefield near modern Karbala on Oct. 10, 680, Hussein was killed and decapitated. But rather than nipping the Shi'ite movement in the bud, his death gave it a martyr. In Shi'ite eyes, Hussein is a just and humane figure who stood up to a mighty oppressor. The annual mourning of Hussein's death, known as Ashura, is the most poignant and spectacular of Shi'ite ceremonies: the faithful march in the streets, beating their chests and crying in sorrow. The extremely devout flagellate themselves with swords and whips.

Those loyal to Mu'awiyah and his successors as Caliph would eventually be known as Sunnis, meaning followers of the Sunnah, or Way, of the Prophet. Since the Caliph was often the political head of the Islamic empire as well as its religious leader, imperial patronage helped make Sunni Islam the dominant sect. Today about 90% of Muslims worldwide are Sunnis. But Shi'ism would always attract some of those who felt oppressed by the empire. Shi'ites continued to venerate the Imams, or the descendants of the Prophet, until the 12th Imam, Mohammed al-Mahdi (the Guided One), who disappeared in the 9th century at the location of the Samarra shrine in Iraq. Mainstream Shi'ites believe that al-Mahdi is mystically hidden and will emerge on an unspecified date to usher in a reign of justice.

Shi'ites soon formed the majority in the areas that would become the modern states of Iraq, Iran, Bahrain and Azerbaijan. There are also significant Shi'ite minorities in other Muslim states, including Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Pakistan. Crucially, Shi'ites outnumber Sunnis in the Middle East's major oil-producing

regions — not only Iran and Iraq but also eastern Saudi Arabia. But outside Iran, Sunnis have historically had a lock on political power, even where Shi'ites have the numerical advantage. (The one place where the opposite holds true is modern Syria, which is mostly Sunni but since 1970 has been ruled by a small Shi'ite subsect known as the Alawites.) Sunni rulers maintained their monopoly on power by excluding Shi'ites from the military and bureaucracy; for much of Islamic history, a ruling Sunni élite treated Shi'ites as an underclass, limited to manual labor and denied a fair share of state resources.

The rulers used religious arguments to justify oppression. Shi'ites, they said, were not genuine Muslims but heretics. Devised for political convenience, this view of Shi'ites solidified into institutionalized prejudice. Sunnis likened reverence for the Prophet's bloodline and the Shi'ites' fondness for portraits of some of the Imams to the sin of idolatry. Shi'ite rituals, especially the self-flagellation during Ashura, were derided as pagan. Many rulers forbade such ceremonies, fearing that large gatherings would quickly turn into political uprisings. (Ashura was banned during most of Saddam Hussein's rule and resumed only after his downfall in 2003.) "For Shi'ites, Sunni rule has been like living under apartheid," says Vali Nasr, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and author of *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*.

But religious repression was uneven. Sunni Caliphs in Baghdad tolerated and sometimes contributed to the development of Najaf and Karbala as the most important centers of Shi'ite learning. Shi'ite ayatullahs, as long as they refrained from open defiance of the ruling élite, could run seminaries and collect tithes from their followers. The shrines of Shi'ite Imams in Najaf, Karbala, Samarra and Khadamiya were allowed to become magnets for pilgrimage.

Sectarian relations worsened in the 16th century. By then the seat of Sunni power had moved to Istanbul. When the Turkish Sunni Ottomans fought a series of wars with the Shi'ite Safavids of Persia, the Arabs caught in between were sometimes obliged to take sides. Sectarian suspicions planted then have never fully subsided, and Sunni Arabs still pejoratively label Shi'ites as "Persians" or "Safavis." The Ottomans eventually won control of the Arab territories and cemented Sunni dominance. The British, the next power in the Middle East, did nothing to change the equation. In the settlement after World War I, they handed the newly created states of Iraq and Bahrain, both with Shi'ite majorities, to Sunni monarchs.

Saddam's Legacy

When Saddam Hussein assumed power in Baghdad in 1979, Iraq's Shi'ites had enjoyed a couple of decades of respite under leaders who allowed them some measure of equality with the Sunnis. Then came Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Fearing a similar uprising in Iraq, Saddam revived some old repressions and ordered the murder of Iraq's most popular ayatollah, Mohammed Bakr al-Sadr, uncle of Muqtada. Shi'ites made up a majority of those killed in Iraq's war with Iran, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, but after it ended they were once again shut out of most senior government and military positions. With the defeat of Saddam's army in the 1991 Gulf War, Shi'ites saw a chance to rise against the dictator. But they received no protection from the allied forces, and Saddam was able to smash the revolt. By some estimates, more than 300,000 Shi'ites were killed; many were buried in mass graves. For the rest of his reign, Saddam kept the Shi'ites firmly under his thumb. Several popular clerics were killed, including Muqtada's father. Saddam ordered the murder of Sunnis too, but there was a crucial difference. "When Saddam killed a Sunni, it was personal — because of something that person had done," says author Nasr. "But when it came to killing Shi'ites, he was indiscriminate. He didn't need a specific reason. Their being Shi'ite was enough."

Remarkably, despite the profound imbalance in political power and the legacy of repression, many individual Iraqis forged business, social and personal relationships between the sects. In Baghdad and other cities, most neighborhoods built in the modern era were mixed. Residents of Adhamiya and Khadamiya were able to reach across the Tigris and socialize. Mohammed al-Shammari, an Arabic-literature professor, fondly remembers evenings with friends in Khadamiya, followed by dinner and late-night revelry in

Adhamiya, where shops and restaurants stayed open later. "Nobody asked us if we were Shi'ite or Sunni," says al-Shammari. "And we never thought to ask each other. I have friends I didn't know were Shi'ite until quite recently." Among the urban educated classes, it was considered unsophisticated and politically incorrect to ask people their sect, though there are other ways to find out (see box). Some of the people mentioned in this article agreed to be interviewed only if their names were changed. Many of Iraq's tribes have always included clans from both sects. Sunni-Shi'ite marriages were commonplace, especially among the educated urban population. In the winter of 2002, when Fattah, a Shi'ite computer technician, asked the father of his Sunni girlfriend Zahra for permission to marry her, there was no hesitation. The couple was married a few days before the start of the war, and Zahra says, "Many of the guests were themselves mixed couples."

The Implosion

For two years after Saddam's fall, such ties were strong enough to keep widespread sectarian violence at bay. There were provocations: Sunni jihadi groups, such as Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda, began a bombing campaign against Shi'ite targets. But many Shi'ite extremists, rather than lashing out at Sunnis, sometimes joined them in the insurgency against the Americans and their allies. When Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army rose against the U.S. in the summer of 2004, it was supported by the Sunni insurgency. That fall some of al-Sadr's fighters joined Sunnis in the battle of Fallujah. Al-Sadr portrayed himself as a defender of Arabs, not Shi'ites alone. Even the hard-line Sunni clerics' group, the Association of Muslim Scholars, hailed him as an Iraqi hero; Sunni politicians spoke of a political alliance with the Mahdi Army.

Inter-sect relations, political and personal, began to fray with the approach of Iraq's first post-Saddam election in January 2005. Sunni parties boycotted the poll, allowing a Shi'ite coalition to sweep to power. With an assertiveness that at times bordered on arrogance, the Shi'ite-led government inflamed Sunni resentment. An especially sore point was the mass recruitment into the police and the military of Shi'ite militiamen, some of whom used the immunity of their uniforms to avenge old grudges against Sunnis. Sunni terrorism groups stepped up their bombing campaign, which convinced Shi'ites that the former ruling class was never going to accept its reduced status. By the time U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad persuaded Sunni parties to take part in a second general election in December 2005, the two sects were some distance apart.

Then came Samarra. The operation carried the Jordanian-born al-Zarqawi's fingerprints, but Iraqi Sunnis were the ones who would endure the bloody fallout. For many Shi'ites, this was an atrocity too far. They turned to militias such as the Mahdi Army to avenge the desecration of the site, and those militias ran amuck, slaughtering Sunnis and attacking many of their mosques. After the first, furious convulsion of violence, the militias began a more systematic campaign of kidnap and execution. The bodies of their victims, bearing signs of bestial torture, were often tossed into sewers or garbage dumps. Jihadi groups responded in kind. The U.S. military had passed on most security responsibilities to Iraqi forces, but they proved unable to halt the killings. Worse, they were frequently accused of joining in the fighting, usually on the side of the militias. Last fall two U.S.-Iraqi joint security operations failed to stanch the bloodletting.

Saddam's execution became another flash point. Even Sunnis who had little sympathy for Saddam were incensed that the government chose to hang him at the hour of morning prayers on one of the most sacred Muslim holidays (Iraqi Sunnis celebrated the holiday one day before the Shi'ites). The choice seemed to confirm suspicions that Shi'ite political dominance would be a constant humiliation. "It was their way of telling us, 'We're in charge now, and you are so weak that even your holy days have no meaning anymore,'" says media analyst Kadhim al-Mukhdadi. "That morning I gave up hoping that things would get better."

He is not alone in that hopelessness. Sectarian lines have been drawn through mixed neighborhoods. Where Shi'ites are in the majority, Sunni families have been forced to leave for fear of death. Sunnis have responded with their own sectarian cleansing. A large portion of the mostly Sunni middle and upper classes has fled the country; Jordan and Syria together now have nearly 2 million Iraqi expatriates. Inter-sect

marriages have become less and less common. Zahra's father has refused to give his younger daughter permission to follow in her sister's footsteps and marry a Shi'ite. "He is the same man," Zahra says in her father's defense. "But the situation around him has changed. Now if he allows a daughter to marry a Shi'ite, people will ask questions."

A Wider War

In Iraq, the Sunni-Shi'ite war can sometimes seem no more than a series of concurrent battles between neighborhoods such as Adhamiya and Khadamiya. The people fighting may have no conception of any greater plan. The wider Muslim world, however, tends to focus on the big picture. Shi'ites are now politically dominant in Iraq, and Iran is the leading Shi'ite power. So in most Arab capitals, the sectarian war in Iraq is increasingly blamed on Iran. Taken along with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's nuclear ambitions, Iran's sponsorship of the Shi'ite Hizballah militia in Lebanon and its backing of Hamas, Iran's supposed meddling in Iraq is proof to Arab leaders that their old Persian rivals are determined to reshape the Middle East to suit their own interest.

As early as 2004, Jordan's King Abdullah warned of a rising Shi'ite "crescent" running from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Although the Shi'ite-led government in Baghdad had the backing of the U.S., in many Arab eyes it represented the expansion of Iran's influence. Sunni Arab leaders have begun to ratchet up their rhetoric against Shi'ites in general and Iran in particular. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2006 said, "Most of the Shi'ites are loyal to Iran and not to the countries they are living in." After a storm of protest from Iraq and elsewhere, Mubarak claimed he had been referring only to matters of religion. In the predominantly Sunni Palestinian territories, supporters of Fatah have taken to branding their Hamas rivals as a Shi'ite organization. In January, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah informed a Kuwaiti newspaper that he had told an Iranian envoy that Iran was interfering in Iraq and endangering the region. King Abdullah also accused Iran of wanting to spread Shi'ism in Sunni countries.

But both sides are responsible for stoking tensions. Religious leaders of the Wahhabi sect, often backed and bankrolled by members of the Saudi royal family, contribute to the spread of sectarian violence by preaching a hard-line form of Sunni Islam that condemns all other strains as heresy. In Pakistan, moderate Muslims blame Wahhabi madrasahs as well as Iranian-funded Shi'ite seminaries for the escalation of Sunni-Shi'ite violence that has claimed more than 4,000 lives in the past two decades. In the latest attacks, three separate suicide bombings killed 21 during the Ashura rituals in January. In Lebanon, sectarian tensions have risen after years of relative calm. Hizballah, the Shi'ite militia, won praise from Sunnis when Israeli forces left Lebanon in 2000. But after the assassination in February 2005 of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, a Sunni, intra-Muslim antagonism began to harden. Sunnis blamed Hizballah's patron, the Syrian government, for the killing. While faulting Hizballah for provoking last summer's war, many Lebanese Sunnis stood with Hizballah in the face of Israel's onslaught against the country. But any residual Sunni admiration for Hizballah vanished by the end of the year, when Hizballah led a campaign to bring down the government of Hariri's longtime friend Fouad Siniora.

Iraq's Sunnis, for their part, have grown adept at playing to wider Middle Eastern concerns about Iran's influence in the region. Sunni politicians stoke these anxieties in the hope that Arab pressure on the Iraqi government will force it to give Sunnis a greater share of power. "If the Arab states don't come to our help, they will find [Iran] at their gate," says Mohammed Bashar al-Faidi, a spokesman for the Association of Muslim Scholars. "For the sake of the entire Muslim community worldwide, the beast has to be destroyed in Iraq." For leaders of terrorist groups, the fear of a regionwide Shi'ite ascendancy serves as a useful fund-raising tool as well as recruiting propaganda. Radical Sunni preachers and TV talk-show hosts across the Arab world are inflaming sentiments by accusing Iraq's "Persians" of ethnic cleansing. In January, an editorial in *al-Ahram*, a newspaper widely seen as the voice of the Egyptian state, declared, "Iran is working actively toward spreading the Shi'ite doctrine even in countries that do not have a Shi'ite minority." Iran, in turn, has accused Sunnis of issuing fatwas authorizing the killing of Shi'ites.

The Unbridgeable Chasm

Most Iraqis, caught up in their own terrors, have little time for the angst of the wider Islamic world. Those who can look past the daily horrors see an even more frightening future, in which their children carry today's hatreds into the next generation. With thousands being killed on either side, the nationalist, secular slogans that were long taught in Iraq's schools have lost much of their meaning. And children do not get too many lessons in secularism at home. "When we were kids, my parents taught us that Shi'ites had the wrong idea about Islam but were just misguided, not bad people," says Ayesha Ubaid, 26, a Sunni doctor's assistant whose late husband was a Shi'ite. "But now I hear my brothers and sisters-in-law telling their children, 'Those people killed our uncle and two cousins and stole our ancestral home.'" Her son Mohammed, 8, returned from school one afternoon and angrily asked, "Why did you marry an infidel?"

Ubaid lives with three brothers and their families. In November, they all moved to Adhamiya from Shulla, a mostly Shi'ite neighborhood where she was born. "I knew every brick of every house on my street," she says. "When we left, some of our neighbors cried and promised they would protect our house with their lives. But the next day, a Shi'ite family took the place, and nobody stopped them." Ubaid says she had considered raising Mohammed as a Shi'ite, out of respect for her husband. But now, she says, "that would be inviting disaster." Still, Ubaid says that in her new neighborhood, she feels as safe as it is possible to be in Baghdad.

Will she stay that way? With a large supply of luck, Operation Imposing Law, the new security operation enabled by President George W. Bush's "surge" of U.S. troops, may halt the sectarian fighting in Baghdad long enough for Shi'ites and Sunnis to start mending fences. If all goes according to plan, the Iraqi government will use the respite from violence to launch a massive economic program that will create jobs and improve civic services like electricity and water supply. If the government can do that, says veteran Shi'ite politician Abu Firas al-Saedi, "people won't immediately start hugging each other and become best friends again — but at least if they are busy working and making money, they will have time to forget the past." In this optimistic view, the militias won't take their fight from Baghdad to other Iraqi cities, where the U.S. presence is minimal, and any security gains in Baghdad will quickly spread elsewhere.

Conceivably, all that might happen. As Operation Imposing Law got under way on Feb. 14, there were some signs that Shi'ite militias might be reducing their attacks on Sunnis. Al-Sadr has ordered his Mahdi Army to lie low and avoid direct confrontation with American troops. Al-Sadr himself and several of his top commanders are believed to have left for Iran. But few in Baghdad doubt that he will be back. "He is just bending to the wind because he knows his fighters can't face the Americans," says Hussain al-Moed, a rival Shi'ite cleric. "But he also knows that the Americans will leave. The Mahdi Army can afford to wait." Sunni jihadis have kept up their bombing campaign despite the security operation — and if they continue to strike against Shi'ite neighborhoods, the Mahdi Army may return to the fight.

It's too early to tell if the new operation will damp down sectarian tensions. "There are more ways in which this could go wrong than go right," says political analyst Tahseen al-Shekhli. "We have seen too many plans fail to have any faith in this one." Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a lifelong Shi'ite partisan, has shown little patience for Sunni grievances and has failed to start an oft-promised national reconciliation process. So despite his professed conviction that the security operation is working, chances remain high that it will eventually falter, brought down by the inability of Sunnis and Shi'ites to find a political settlement or the reduction of U.S. forces that is bound to happen one day.

And then all hell would be let loose. Iraq is a country where almost every household has at least one AK-47. If there is no Sunni-Shi'ite rapprochement, a full-blown civil war would raise the daily death toll from the scores to the hundreds — to say nothing of the escalation that would come if neighboring countries became involved, Iran backing the Shi'ite militias, Arab states sponsoring the Sunnis. Such a war could continue for years, with each sectarian community splitting into smaller factions led by rival warlords. In Baghdad, the ethnic cleansing would continue to its logical conclusion, with the city split into a Shi'ite east and a Sunni west.

If it came to that, no bridge, no crossing, would convince the residents of Adhamiya and Khadamiya that they had dreams in common. Just as Muslawi and Hussein look back at the stampede over the bridge in 2005 and see different pasts, so Iraq's Sunnis and Shi'ites may now be contemplating a future that they cannot share. There could be no more bitter legacy of the Bush Administration's fateful decision to go to war in Iraq.

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