

Clashes Spread Between Iraqi Shia Groups

Author: [Khalid Waleed](#)

Rival supporters of leading religious figures accused of attacks on each other.

Clashes between supporters of two prominent Shia clerics in Iraq have spread from Nasiriya in the southern province of Dhi Kar to other parts of the country, as Baghdad struggles to calm tensions between them.

The trouble began on February 17, when a recently-opened office of Shia cleric Mahmoud al-Hasani al-Sarkhi was set on fire. The office was located in a part of Dhi Kar dominated by followers of the country's most revered Shia scholar, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

The violence has escalated since then, with attacks on individuals as well as buildings.

In the most recent incident, a car belonging to Sheikh Ahmed al-Ansari, Sistani's envoy in the southern Maysan province, was targeted by a bomb last week. On April 3, an explosive device was planted outside the house of Sistani representative Sheikh Hasan al-Khamasi in Hilla, 100 kilometres south of Baghdad.

Other figures close to Sistani have been attacked in Baghdad, Karbala, Muthanna, Babil, Qadisiyya, Najaf, Dhi Qar and Basra.

Meanwhile, Sarkhi's offices in Karbala, Najaf, Qadisiyya, and Basra have been bombed, and other centres in Maysan, Dhi Qar, Babil and Muthanna set on fire.

Mohammed al-Yaseri, a spokesman for Sarkhi, claimed that Sistani's followers had been rabble-rousing against the cleric.

"The first fire in our Nasiriya office was started by Sistani's followers, who were incited by their clerics in the [Dhi Qar] province," he said.

Yaseri said Sistani supporters were trying to push Sarkhi allies out in the province. "They don't want us there, because the number of our followers is increasing rapidly, and they are afraid of losing supporters to our cause."

Sources close to Sistani denied the accusations, noting that he was highly respected by the country's religious figures.

"Each cleric has his own followers - that is not in dispute," Habib al-Khatib, a Sistani representative, told IWPR, adding that the ayatollah had ordered his followers to pursue "reconciliation with others" and to refrain from violence against fellow-Iraqis.

Sarkhi and Sistani have in the past disagreed on ideological matters, with the former supporting armed struggle against American troops when they were still present in Iraq, and opposing both past governments and elections. Sistani has taken a more moderate position, encouraging his followers to work towards full sovereignty by peaceful means.

The core of the dispute, however, comes down to which of them is the more eminent Shia figure.

Despite Sistani's position, and undoubted influence, as the senior Shia figure in Iraq, Sarkhi has claimed he is the higher authority.

Sarkhi has spoken out against Iranian influence in Iraq, and played up his own Iraqi origins in contrast to Sistani's roots in Iran.

For his part, Sistani is thought to be concerned about Sarkhi's apparent attempt to portray himself as something akin to a Shia saviour.

Sarkhi has never given an interview and remains distant even from his followers. This echoes a Shia prophecy that their redeemer is in hiding and will emerge from seclusion one day to dominate the entire world.

"We have tried to reach out to him, speak to him, and find out what his views are in the hope of solving this dispute," Ghaith al-Tememi, head of the Religious Rapprochement Centre, which attempts to bring diverse religious groups together, said. "But his representatives have told me it is not possible [to meet him], even for them."

Sarkhi's representatives denied that he saw himself as a Shia saviour, explaining that his apparent aloofness was due to his busy schedule.

The clashes between the two groupings have alarmed the Iraqi government – itself dominated by Shia politicians – and it has ordered efforts to work towards resolving the conflict and preventing it from spreading further.

Baghdad is keenly aware of the difficulty of trying to contain sectarian violence, and will remember the trouble caused by armed followers of another Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who fought both American and Iraqi troops in the years following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

Amer al-Khozaei, head of the National Reconciliation Committee, one of the institutions called upon to ease tensions, said his organisation was talking to both sides and trying to find a solution.

Tememi, meanwhile, acknowledged that it was proving difficult to make headway.

“Although we've taken early action to contain this crisis, it is no easy mission,” he said. “The two sides share the same residential areas, and there are large numbers of them.”

Osama Murtadha, an expert on Iraqi communities and politics, said that disagreement was a normal part of any healthy society, but that many Iraqis – particularly the less educated among them – did not understand this.

“When they hear their leaders disagreeing, they think they should do the same as a way of expressing loyalty to those leaders,” he said. “It is the duty of those leaders not to highlight their differences, in order to prevent people losing their lives.”

Khalid Waleed is an IWPR-trained journalist. Ali al-Allaq, a freelance reporter in southern Iraq, and Emad al-Shara, a local editor in Baghdad, contributed reporting.

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