Cleric's Death Sparks Broader Shia Worries

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Najaf bombing highlights lack of security and concerns about sectarian violence.

The car bomb that killed Iraq's leading Shia cleric and political leader Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim in Najaf last week marked the start of a new phase for post-war Iraq.

It drove home the message to the new Iraqi leadership that the resistance is not only directed against the Americans, it targets them too.

The shockwaves reverberated throughout the country, triggering fears of a descent into a sectarian conflict. United States forces scrutinised their own security arrangements, and voices were raised calling for more direct Iraqi involvement in maintaining security.

Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim was the leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI, formerly an opposition Shia party and now represented on the interim Governing Council.

It was not immediately clear who was behind the attack, but speculation centred on two groups: diehard Saddam loyalists, and Wahhabi fundamentalists - members of the radical school of Islam emanating from Saudi Arabia. In the aftermath of the bombing, angry Shia crowds took to the streets in a number of towns carrying anti-Wahhabi banners.

Suspicions that the attack was sectarian sparked fears that a conflict based on confessional differences could be stirred up, especially if the Shia began labelling the entire Sunni community as Wahhabis.

But Alaa Abd-al-Hussain, a resident of Najaf, an important Shia centre, insists that there will be no conflict between Shia and Sunni, or any other groups. "We all know who our enemies are," he said.

The Governing Council, eager to diffuse tensions between Shia and Sunni, quickly put the blame on remnants of the old regime. Council member Ibrahim al-Jafari pointed out that the Ba'ath government had carried out many assassinations of leading Shia figures in the past, and would be capable of carrying out this one, too. "They were trying to spread sedition among Iraqis," he said.

But Al-Jafari did not rule out external involvement, "The way it was conducted shows that the planning was foreign."

Another Governing Council member, Muhsin Abd-al-Hamid, leader of the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party, described Hakim as a symbol of struggle for freedom. "His killing represents the scale of the conspiracy against us," he said.

The Najaf car bomb attack heightened concerns about how the US military is handling security matters. Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the supreme religious leader of Shia, said coalition forces were responsible for the deteriorating situation in Iraq because they refused to bring local people into security arrangements. In the wake of Hakim's assassination, he called on the US to "support the patriotic Iraqi forces and enable them to provide peace and security".
Another leading Shia figure, Mohammad Bahr al-Ulum, suspended his seat on the Governing Council in protest at the lack of security. He threatened to form a militia to protect the holy shrines in Najaf.

Some Shia think the security vacuum in their areas is a direct result of the US decision to disarm the Badr Brigade, SCIRI's military wing. Before Saddam's removal, SCIRI operated out of Iran and the Badr Brigade was part of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, which made the US deeply suspicious of its intentions.

Leading SCIRI member Adel Abd-al-Mahdi said the organisation had warned the Americans from the start that allowing a vacuum would have "grave consequences". But, he said, they were ignored, and the US "disarmed the ordinary Iraqi and left the evil ones armed". This led directly to the Najaf attack.

There are now concerns that Iraqis angered at their exclusion from playing a role in security may act on their own, settling scores with real or suspected supporters of the old regime.

"The killing of Hakim will push us to take care of security ourselves," warned Hussain Abd-al-Malik, one of the mourners at Hakim's funeral in Najaf. "From now on, we will hunt down the Ba'athists, the fedayeen [Saddam's paramilitaries] and the Wahhabis ourselves."

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