

The Fake Fatwa

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Iraqi Shia reject the religious decree calling on Iraqis to defend the country, insisting that it has been issued under coercion from the regime.

Sheikh Mohammed Khaqani, a relatively junior cleric from the holy city of Najaf, was visibly nervous as he read out the fatwa, or religious edict, calling on the Iraqi people to defend their country. State-run television, the mouthpiece of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, said the fatwa was signed by Iraq's five most senior Shia clerics including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the head of the entire Shia religious establishment.

Arab media took the broadcast at face value as evidence of the Iraqi people's opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq. When the pan-Arab television station al-Jazeera highlighted the fatwa, its report, picked up by the international press, went around the world.

An increasing number of Islamic clerics worldwide are telling the faithful it is their religious duty to take up arms against the invasion of Iraq. But leaders of Iraq's Shia community say this is not the position of most Iraqi Shias, those with the greatest right to decide their own future. They say the televised fatwa was a fake, a concoction of the regime - evidence not of Shia support for Saddam, but of Saddam's continued abuse of the Shia religion and its adherents. They say Saddam is killing, coercing and bribing Shias in attempt to get Iraq's largest religious community, the bedrock of southern Iraq, to fight for his regime - or at least to give the impression that Shias oppose the war to remove him.

Abdul Magid al-Khoei, son of Ayatollah al-Sistani's predecessor, Grand Ayatollah abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, said he had spoken to representatives of the two most prominent ayatollahs named in the fatwa and had been told that neither had signed it.

"It is the first time in our history that we see a fatwa signed by five people," he said, speaking from a satellite telephone in region. "This does not happen in our religion. I know Khaqani. He is a good man and he was clearly frightened. He was taken by force and by force was made to read this 'fatwa'. It has no significance because it comes from a prisoner."

Shias from Najaf say they do not know the whereabouts either of Khaqani or Ayatollah al-Sistani, who was put under house arrest, forbidden even to go to the mosque to pray, after refusing an order from Saddam's younger son, Qosai Saddam Hussein, to instruct worshippers attending Friday prayers to pray for the regime.

They recall that during the allied war to evict Saddam from Kuwait in 1991, Ayatollah al-Khoei was taken to Baghdad and detained in military intelligence headquarters. While more than 100 of his staff were arrested in southern Iraq, the 92-year-old cleric was shown on television meeting Saddam in his palace as if he were lending him his support.

None of the 100 clerics have been seen since. Some are known to have been killed immediately after their arrest.

While Iraqi Shias are critical of the United States' management of the war, and especially its plans to administer Iraq afterwards, many support war as the only way to remove Saddam - even while recommending that Shias remain neutral until it is clear the regime is crumbling. They recall that Shias only rose up against the regime in 1991 after more than a month of continuous bombardment had thrown

the army into complete disarray.

"Nobody likes to see innocent people lose their life, but there is no alternative to war," said Abdul Magid al-Khoei. "Saddam has killed thousands and millions during his rule. This is the price Iraqis have to pay to get rid of a dictatorship. Killing is not new to us - but until now there has been no light at the end of the tunnel."

Similarly, Izzaq Shabandar, a leader of the newly formed, and predominantly Shia, Movement for Reconstruction and Democracy, said, "If you tell the Shias there is a new tax which means that one or two people in every family will die, but Saddam will go, they will say: 'This is a tax we will pay!'" Speaking in Beirut, he said, "It's a win-win situation for them, because until now they have been dying for nothing."

Every day now, Shia leaders forced into exile to save their lives are returning to areas bordering on Iraq - and sometimes penetrating inside Iraq itself - in anticipation of the downfall of the regime. Contacted by satellite telephone, they all tell the same story: under the overall command of Gen. Ali Hassan al-Magid, known as Chemical Ali, Iraqi officers are killing and detaining Shias who refuse to defend southern Iraq against British and American forces.'

"Ten days ago, Ali Hassan shot four men from one tribe and took 40 from another, saying he needed them as advisers," said Abdul Magid al-Khoei. "Everyone knows they are being held as hostages. He personally executed Sheikh Rahim Abdul Kerim, the leader of the al-Bazzun and al-Isa tribes that live around Nasiriya. He visited the old man at home and asked why he wasn't supporting the government. Sheikh Rahim said he was sick and in bed. Ali Hassan asked why he hadn't sent his sons. The old man said: 'When you are old and dying like me, that's a hard decision to make.' Ali Hassan pulled out his pistol and killed him."

Hamid el-Bayati, London spokesman for the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, said seven members of the ruling Ba'ath Party in Basra were executed on Sunday for refusing to fight.

Al-Khoei said many tribal leaders had been paid vast amounts of money. "It is a common practice," he said. "Saddam has money in one hand and a gun in the other."

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