

Shia Rivalry Sparked Battle of Zarqa

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Iraqi officials claimed a major military victory over Sunni insurgents near Najaf last month. But official sources reveal that the alleged militants were in fact Shia members of a religious cult that the authorities wanted to get rid of - with the help of

When the "Battle of Zarqa" erupted on January 28 in the date palm orchards of Zarqa, 16 kilometres northeast of the holy city of Najaf, the conflict seemed clear.

Gunmen battling Iraqi and US forces in a fierce, day-long fight were, say the Iraqi government, a large group of Sunni militants affiliated with al-Qaeda en route to attack the holy shrines in Najaf and the high-ranking Marjaiya clerics, as well as Shia pilgrims, gathering for the ten-day religious festival of Ashura.

The group was heavily armed and even managed to shoot down a US helicopter, killing two American soldiers.

Sunni attacks on Shia pilgrims during holy days have occurred before. Thus the claim of government ministers in Baghdad and the Iraqi national security adviser, Muaffaq al-Rubaii, seemed plausible.

Najaf was about to be attacked by al-Qaeda elements, they claimed, and in an effort to avert the attack, "hundreds of foreign fighters" had been killed.

The successful assault thus seemed a major victory for the embattled Iraqi government in its effort to assert authority, especially in Najaf which, along with US forces, had taken control over security in the holy city only the month before.

SOLDIERS FOR WHOM?

But only one day later the picture looked quite different. The approximately 300 fighters killed in the battle turned out not to be Sunni insurgents as the government had claimed but Shia members of the little-known cult Jund al-Samaa, or Soldiers of Heaven. This religious sect was led by a man named Dhia Abdul Zahra al-Garawi, who claimed he was the Imam Mahdi, whom Shia believe to be the Muslim messiah.

So why were they attacked, and into what kind of battle did the Iraq government draw US forces?

When news of the group's sectarian affiliation emerged after the battle, official statements repeated the claim that the group was nevertheless intent on attacking Najaf. In short, even though it turned out that they were Shia, not Sunni, the group was still planning to decimate the Shia shrine, authorities claimed.

In a statement published by his office, Assad Abu Galal, the governor of Najaf, said that the militant group was planning an attack "to destroy the Shia community, kill the Grand Ayatollahs, destroy [pilgrim] convoys and occupy the holy shrine".

Abu Galal said members of the cult were pretending to be farmers, but intelligence sources and pilgrims had provided information that the movement was religious “and we realised that something would happen during Ashura”. He insisted that “Syria, Saudi Arabia, Britain, the Emirates and the Ba’ath party were involved. They were planning to destroy Najaf”.

The statement also claimed that al-Garawi, who died in the battle, had his hair cut to make him look like one of the Twelve Shia Imams, blood descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. The governor said the cult’s leader “was well trained and educated” in Islamic affairs and that he had the sort of background and knowledge which would enable him to persuade some to believe that he was Imam Mahdi. The statement also claimed that al-Garawi had a British passport and that his group had been trained in Syria and Ramadi, in Iraq’s perilous Anbar province.

According to the governor’s account, eleven Iraqi soldiers were killed and 27 injured in the battle, while 300 members of the cult died, with 121 injured and 650 captured.

GETTING RID OF A RIVAL

The deputy governor, however, tells a different story about the motive behind the security forces assault. Abdul-Hussein Abtan has told IWPR that the operation against the Soldiers of Heaven was less security related than an attempt to eliminate a perceived heretical group.

The assault against the Soldiers of Heaven in Zarqa was about “the honoured people of Najaf taking revenge on the heretic enemies of Shi’ism and thus the enemies of Imam Hussein”, the third of the Twelve Shia Imams. “This battle will last in the memories of Najaf and its residents throughout history for its importance to the future of our faith,” said Abtan.

Abtan said that the provincial government had discovered four months ago that “there is a cult-like organisation dominated by Ba’athists in Najaf and the southern provinces that attracts naïve and poor people. We checked the location of the group; the police commander himself did that, but found nothing abnormal. But later our sources told us that more people are joining the group”.

After a meeting of the local authorities, officials decided to attack the cult’s base in Zarqa, but were surprised that there were so many members and that they were so well armed. In fact, the Iraqi forces were nearly overrun. In the end, the Soldiers of Heaven were crushed by repeated US air strikes, with fighter planes dropping 500-pound (225-kilogramme) bombs on their positions.

A source close to Najaf police, speaking on condition that he not be named, told IWPR that members of the group had been ordered by the police to turn themselves in two hours before the assault. “But they didn’t, so we attacked the area,” he said.

Although the governor of Najaf insists that the Soldiers of Heaven was planning to attack the city, security officials have told IWPR that they had no such information. However, they note that when they had earlier inspected the cult’s base, they discovered it to be a heavily fortified compound surrounded by a two-metre deep trench network and sand-bagged firing positions. This was no make-shift encampment.

The claims by the governor that the group was heavily supported by several foreign countries and trained

in Syria have not been substantiated, nor have the statements that al-Garawi had a British passport and that among the captured were former officers and doctors affiliated to the Wahhabi ultra-conservative Sunni ideology linked to Saudi Arabia, al-Qaeda and Saddam's regime.

Nor have there been any signs of the "Lebanese, Egyptians and Sudanese" that allegedly were taken prisoner during the battle according to an Iraqi army officer.

Security personnel in Najaf told IWPR that they had information that the Soldiers of Heaven cult was planning to announce on the holy day of Ashura - the day when Imam Hussein was killed in the 7th century, the tenth and most important day of the festival - that the Shia messiah, Imam Mahdi, had returned, which would have led to chaos amongst pilgrims in the city and civil unrest in the rest of the country.

The security officials said that two of the Soldiers of Heaven had earlier been arrested in Karbala, not far from Najaf, so the cult decided to bring their plan forward by three days. On the morning they were planning to make their announcement, the security forces struck.

A source close to Najaf provincial council told IWPR that the main reason behind the Zarqa offensive was the concern of the governor, who was appointed by the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or SCIRI, that the Soldiers of Heaven might expand.

"First we thought that the Soldiers of Heaven are peaceful followers of al-Yamani [alias of Ahmed Ibn al-Hasan al-Basri, leader of another Shia splinter group which follow Imam Mahdi]. But we discovered that it was a militant organisation. SCIRI is worried that any new group like the Sadr movement could challenge SCIRI in Najaf and take control of the provincial council," said the provisional council source.

So the main motive for attacking the Zarqa site, it seems, was to get rid of a rival Shia group with perceived heretical beliefs. The battle was not about security or protecting pilgrims in Najaf but rather the biggest episode of Shia infighting in Iraqi history.

Both the main Shia groups in the region, SCIRI and the Sadr movement, are afraid of new rivals, which explains why the head of the Sadr office in Diwaniya, Haydar al-Natiq, accuses the Soldiers of Heaven of being supported by elements anathema to the Shia, such as al-Qaeda, the Wahhabis, Saddam loyalists, foreign armies and even the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service.

THE TWELFTH IMAM

Al-Garawi, the Soldier of Heaven leader, had acquired a following who believe wholeheartedly that he was Imam Mahdi. This following was cultivated largely on account of a controversial book he wrote, Judge of Heaven, which argues that he is in fact the hidden twelfth imam of the Shia, who is supposed to return one day to restore peace and justice to the world.

IWPR obtained a copy of the 416-page book which bears the portrait of al-Garawai on the cover, his face shrouded by a divine white light. Since late December 2006, the book has been circulated in Karbala, Najaf, Diwaniya, Basra and Kut.

The book challenges the traditional stories about the bloodline and identity of the Shia messiah as described in Shia literature. Al-Garawi rejects the Shia notion that the Muslim messiah is the son of the Eleventh Shia Imam, Hasan al-Askari, claiming instead that he, as the son of the first and greatest Shia imam, Ali Bin-Abitalib, is the long-awaited saviour. Al-Garawi claims that a fertilised egg from Fatima, the wife of Ali Bin-Abitalib, was stored in heaven and then implanted in his mother's womb forty years ago.

"The book provides a lot of detail rejecting the idea that the [Muslim messiah] is

Mohammed Ibn al-Hasan al-Askari," said Sheikh Abu Qasim al-Asai, a prominent member of the Asad tribe in Karbala. "But if the son of Imam Ali [al-Garawi] is alive how come so far no imam has ever mentioned that fact [in any Shia religious scripture]?"

Al-Natiq, from the Sadr office in Diwaniya, says he knew al-Garawi, but wasn't aware that he was the leader of Soldiers of Heaven "until his name and photo was released by the government".

He says the claim of al-Garawi is scientifically impossible but even as a religious belief it has no support in the scriptures. "There is no credible Shia story about this. No doubt this man was idiot," he said.

The Sadr official said al-Garawi came originally from Hilla and was imprisoned by Saddam Hussein in Abu Ghraib prison in 2002 for being a member of a Shia messianic group, the Mahdawiye, a movement that believes Imam Mahdi is alive.

According to al-Natiq, during his time in prison, al-Garawi was "an eloquent speaker. During the day he preached about religion while at night he gambled and refused to provide any explanation of his religiously unacceptable behavior."

He said al-Garawi was not following Sharia law as interpreted by any of the Grand Ayatollahs, which is a religious requirement in Shi'ism. "He was paving the way for his current claim and was trying to get other inmates to believe in Imam Mahdi - although he didn't claim he was him. I have heard he told his followers that Imam Mahdi will appear in 2006 or 2007. He distorted religion and tried to gain support from naïve and simple Shiite people," said al-Natiq.

Whatever the merits of al-Garawi's claims, there is no foundation to the government's assertion that his group included foreign extremists. When Iraqi security forces examined the bodies of dead members of the cult at Zarqa they found only poor Iraqi Shia and curiously the corpse of a former Baathist poet, famous for praising Saddam. His participation in the cult surprised people who knew him, as they claim he was an alcoholic and never believed in Islam as way of life.

The battle of Zarqa, then, appears not to have represented a crushing blow to Iraqi insurgents and a demonstration of the increasing professionalisation of Iraqi military and security forces. Instead, it may only demonstrate the continuing politicisation of the use of official force in Iraq, as well as the significant risks of the US military being drawn into murky internal disputes it cannot hope to comprehend as events unfold.

As for the Soldiers of Heaven, the cult has been dealt a severe blow. But at least its members can console themselves with the notion that their fate mirrors the old Shia story of a small group of true believers being killed by overwhelming force of the enemies of Islam.

During the Zarqa battle, some members of the cult repeatedly tapped into the radio frequency of the Iraqi police, repeating an ominous message, "Imam Mahdi is coming! Imam Mahdi is coming!" Yet at the end, nearly all of them were dead - with no sign of the Muslim messiah.

This report was produced by Iraqi reporters in Najaf and Baghdad, with editorial coordination by Christoph Reuter, IWPR's international trainer for investigative reporting.

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