

Iraq: Imam Assassination Sparks Fears of Violence

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In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

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BAGHDAD, Apr 20, 2010 (IPS) – The assassination of Sheikh Ghazi Jabouri, a prominent Sunni Imam in the Al- Adhamiya district of Baghdad, has raised fears of renewed sectarian violence in the wake of the Mar. 7 elections.

Tensions have been reported in the area following the assassination Wednesday last week. At least two gunmen killed Sheikh Jabouri, 42, as he walked home after completing morning prayers at the Rahman Mosque.

His brother Sarmad Faisal Jabouri, like many Iraqis in Adhamiya district, blames the government. “We hold the government fully responsibility for the killing of my brother, because they are supposed to be in control of security at the entrances and exits to the area,” Jabouri said.

The attack came on a morning when a high-ranking officer in Iraq’s anti- terrorism police was killed by a bomb planted in his car. The attack also killed two nearby policemen.

The violence comes amidst a wave of increasing attacks across the capital, and amidst political instability in the wake of last month’s elections, that have yet to yield a clear winner.

The U.S. fears that rising sectarian violence could begin to match the 2006- 2007 sectarian violence that resulted in tens of thousands of deaths across the war-torn country.

Sectarian violence had erupted across much of Iraq earlier in 2006, forcing the Bush administration to add 30,000 more troops to the occupation forces in Iraq.

Gen. Ray Odierno in charge of U.S. forces in Iraq says any repeat of that kind of sectarian violence could stall the scheduled drawdown of U.S. troops, currently numbering about 96,000.

Adding tension to the already precarious political situation, Iraq’s Election Commission announced Apr. 19 that it was ordering a full manual recount of all ballots cast in Baghdad. The move is likely to alter the results of the vote, Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki has said. His bloc is trailing that of Ayad Allawi 91-89.

Sheikh Abu Arabiya Al-Adhami, imam of a mosque in Adhamiya district, told IPS he believes the killers of Sheikh Ghazi Jabouri were trying to fuel sectarian violence.

“We do not know who wants the Iraqis to be in worse condition, and who wants to destroy our nation,” the sheikh told IPS after the burial. Iraqi army personnel, he said, “were in the

neighbourhood but did not try to catch the criminals.”

A 38-year-old resident who gave his name as Tariq told IPS: “At five in the morning we awoke to the sound of gunshots near our house. There was a weak voice pleading ,’Why? Why, I did not do anything, please’.”

After that, Tariq said, he heard another shot and then silence. “I went out to catch the criminals, but they had fled quickly. I say to the Iraqi government: if you cannot protect us, why have our weapons been taken by the Iraqi Army? Why not let us protect ourselves?”

This area of Baghdad has seen much violence recently. The last few weeks have seen the assassination of the commander of the U.S.-formed Sunni militia known as the Sahwa, or the Awakening groups. Sniper fire killed a pharmacist a week ago, and a car bomb attack nearly killed a university professor.

Forty-year-old Khalil Naimi, a security official with the local Sahwa in Adhamiya, said there was a year of peace under their charge, but problems began again after the Iraqi government security forces took control at the end of 2008.

“We therefore demand the recovery of the Awakening movement for real, and not as a formality, as is happening now.”

The U.S. has formally handed control of the Sahwa to the Iraqi government, after helping set them up. Since then the Sahwa have been disenfranchised and largely left out of the security forces in predominantly Sunni areas like Adhamiya.

The formation of the predominantly Sunni Sahwa by the U.S. was a method of ending attacks against U.S. forces, as the Sahwa are largely comprised of former resistance fighters.

Government security forces dominated by Shias are widely believed to be largely sectarian. In the past, as now, many Iraqis in areas like the predominantly Sunni district of Adhamiya fear that Kurdish or Shia government forces do not adequately protect people in the district, and sometimes attack them.

Naimi says “there is a conspiracy to bring sectarian problems back to the country.” But he said he hopes this can be averted because “Iraqis have learned the lesson and will not repeat mistakes of the past again.”

Former interim prime minister Ayad Allawi, warned last Wednesday that Iraq could slide back into sectarian violence if his group is shut out of the next government. He said the U.S. should work more aggressively to prevent that from happening.

In another development that is heightening sectarian tensions, Amnesty International called on Iraqi authorities Apr. 19 to investigate allegations that government security forces tortured hundreds of Sunni detainees at a secret prison in Baghdad.

The Sunday LA Times quoted Iraqi officials as saying that more than 100 of the facility’s 431 prisoners were tortured using electric shocks, suffocation with plastic bags and beatings. Prisoners reportedly revealed that one man died in January as a result of torture.

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