



Who's to Blame for The Killing

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This week the internecine warfare in Iraq, already bewildering -- Sunni vs. Shiite, Kurd vs. Arab, jihadist vs. infidel, with various Iranians, Syrians and assorted freelancers thrown into the maelstrom -- went bizarre. In one of the biggest battles of the war, Iraqi troops reinforced by Americans wiped out a heavily armed, well-entrenched millenarian Shiite sect preparing to take over Najaf, kill the moderate Shiite clergy (including Grand Ayatollah Sistani) and proclaim its leader the returned messiah.

The battle was a success -- 263 extremists killed, 502 captured. But the sight of the U.S. caught within a Shi-ite-Shiite fight within the larger Shi-ite-Sunni civil war can only lead to further discouragement of Americans, already deeply dismayed at

the notion of being caught in the middle of endless civil strife.

There are of course many reasons for these schisms. Some, like the fundamental division between Sunni and Shiite, are ancient. Some of the wounds are more contemporary, most notably the social devastation and political ruin brought upon the country by 30 years of Saddamist totalitarianism and its particularly sadistic persecution of Shiites and Kurds.

America comes and liberates them from the tyrant who kept everyone living in fear, and the ancient animosities and more recent resentments begin to play themselves out to deadly effect. Tens of thousands of Iraqis have died, the overwhelming majority of them killed by Sunni

insurgents, Baathist dead-enders and their al-Qaeda allies who carry on the Saddamist pogroms.

Much of their killing -- the murder of innocent Shiites in their mosques and markets -- is bereft of politics. It is meant to satisfy instead an atavistic hatred of the Shiite heresy. The late al-Qaeda leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was even chided by headquarters in Afghanistan for his relish in killing Shiites for the sport of it.

Iraqis were given their freedom and yet many have chosen civil war. Among all these religious prejudices, ancient wounds, social resentments and tribal antagonisms, who gets the blame for the rivers of blood? You can always count on some to find the blame in America. "We did not give them a republic," insists *Newsweek's* Fareed Zakaria. "We gave them a civil war."

Of all the accounts of the current situation, this is by far the most stupid. And the most pernicious. Did Britain "give" India the Hindu-Muslim war of 1947-48 that killed a million souls and ethnically cleansed 12 million more? The Jewish-Arab wars in Palestine? The tribal wars of post-colonial Uganda?

We gave them a civil war? Why? Because we failed to prevent it? Do the police in America have on their hands the blood of the 16,000 murders they failed to prevent last year?

Thousands of brave American soldiers have died trying to counter, put down and prevent civil strife.

They fight Sunni insurgents in Fal-lujah, Ramadi and Baghdad, trying to keep them from sending yet one more suicide bomber into a crowded Shiite market. They hunt Shiite death squads in Baghdad to keep them from rounding up random Sunnis and torturing them to death. Just this week, we lost two helicopter pilots who were supporting the troops on the ground fighting the "Soldiers of Heaven" outside Najaf to prevent the slaughter of innocents in a Shiite-Shiite war within a war.

Our entire strategy has been to fight one side and then the other to try to prevent sectarian violence -- a policy that has been one of the leading reasons why Americans are ready to quit and walk away. They can understand one-front wars, but they can't understand two-, three- and four-front wars, with Americans fighting any and all in sequence and sometimes in combination.

And at the political level, we've been doing everything we can to bring reconciliation. We got the Sunnis to participate in elections and then in parliament. Who is pushing the Shiite-Kurdish coalition for a law that would distribute oil revenues to the Sunnis? Who is pushing for a more broad-based government to exclude Moqtada al-Sadr and his sectarian Mahdi Army?

We have made a lot of mistakes in Iraq. But when Arabs kill Arabs and Shiites kill Shiites and Sunnis kill all in a spasm of violence that is blind and furious and has roots in hatreds born long before America was even a republic, to place the blame on the

one player, the one country, the one military that has done more than any other to try to separate the combatants and bring conciliation is simply perverse.

It infantilizes Arabs. It demonizes Americans. It willfully overlooks the plainest of facts: Iraq is their country. We midwived their freedom. They chose civil war.

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