

Iraq: The Scourges of God

The Muslim cleric Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim has been the most prominent victim to date of the bloody power struggle among religious leaders in the holy city of Najaf. As Iraq descends into chaos, young extremists are attempting to transform the country into a Shiite theocracy modeled after Iran.

If it weren't for the shining, centuries-old dome on the mosque marking the grave of the Imam Ali, the faithful would have perceived the destruction visited upon the holy city of Najaf by dictator Saddam Hussein as a deep disgrace. It seemed as if the brilliance of the mosque's golden roof could offset all the suffering inflicted upon Iraq's Shiite population by its former president. Saddam brutally oppressed the Shiite clergy and turned their holy city into a miserable place. Najaf's religious district was left marred by the ruins of destroyed caravans and the gaping pits of construction projects left unfinished for years.

But the goal of all pilgrims to Najaf, the mosque of the revered Imam Ali rising high above this city on the Euphrates, is a symbol of both Najaf's glorious history and its bloody past. It was 1342 years ago that Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed and founder of the Shiite branch of Islam, was stabbed to death while praying in nearby Kufa and was then buried on the site where the mosque stands today.

His martyrdom has hovered over Najaf like a curse ever since. Dozens of Shiite clerics have been murdered here. In fact, entire dynasties of religious men have been extinguished - both by religious adversaries and malevolent tyrants.

The bloodiest massacre by far occurred just after prayers last Friday, as thousands of worshippers flooded onto the square in front of the mosque and the silence was suddenly broken by a powerful explosion. A car bomb killed up to a hundred people, including 64-year-old Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, one of Iraq's three most important Shiite leaders.

The country that the Americans and British believe to have liberated from terror by deposing its tyrant is drifting more and more deeply into chaos. Iraq after Saddam has become a powder keg in which nothing and no one seems to be sacred anymore; not the UN, not the embassies of friendly Arab states, and not the clerics. At the same time, the attacks on American soldiers are continuing unabated. 144 GIs have lost their lives since the official end of the war, more than died during the war itself.

Ever since Saddam Hussein and his cronies were removed from power four months ago, the rule of anarchy has prevailed in large parts of the country. Under the protectorate of superpower USA, the capital, Baghdad, feels like a city under siege. Power and water are in short supply, while looters and criminals terrorize the city's people. US civil administrator Paul Bremer says he is proud of the fact that "no one is getting his tongue cut out any more." Superpower America has lowered its profile on the banks of the Tigris, doing its best to minimize its own losses. No one in Washington ever thought about protecting Shiite clerics.

Ayatollah Hakim also felt reasonably safe among his own people, even though he was aware of the dangers he faced. Hakim, the leader of the "Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq" (Sciri), had spent the past few months living in seclusion at his headquarters a few minutes from the center of Najaf, barricaded behind walls and thick steel doors, and protected by a small army of bodyguards. Anyone given an audience with the Ayatollah was required to undergo extensive security checks. Hakim had many enemies. But, as Hakim said after the ouster of Saddam, his principal opponents were the occupiers, whom he wanted to drive out of Iraq as quickly as possible.

In an interview with *Der Spiegel* in early June, Hakim said that "the history of the Iraqi people is a history of our struggle against invaders. We may not shy away from whatever is required to bring about an end to the presence of occupying forces in Iraq as quickly as possible."

At least the combative mullah got to experience the Americans' withdrawal from Najaf. The Americans, advancing toward Baghdad, had originally set up their base at a point 20 kilometers outside the city.

They called it "Bushmaster" and protected it with sandbag walls and barbed wire. The soldiers lived there for two months, but in late May they withdrew, taking their tanks, field kitchens and tents with them. Their withdrawal was not as much in response to the terrorism that has plagued the Sunni belt surrounding Baghdad. Instead, the US army's principal motivation for reducing its presence in the holy city of Najaf was to avoid openly provoking the Shiite faithful. Only the barbed wire in front of "Bushmaster" has remained.

"We don't need the Americans. We can bring about order ourselves," said construction foreman Ali early last week as he drove a team of construction workers across the grounds. Ali and his men are rebuilding an industrial building. It is intended to serve as the regional headquarters for the recently established "oil police," which guards Iraq's pipelines and refineries.

"We obey our imams. If they lead us into jihad, we will heed the call," says Ali. He is a follower of Muktada al-Sadr, a young theocrat from a prominent family who is making a name for himself in Najaf with his radical sermons. But his followers also believe that he could be responsible for ordering assassinations like the one that has now claimed the life of Hakim. Muktada's men are feared because of their fanaticism.

"Muktada is our leader," says the 30-year-old Ali, holding up his shovel like a rifle. His military gesture seems ridiculous on this construction site in the middle of a salt desert. But in the downtown area of the nearby city, people have been taking the martial appearance of Sadr's fanatics seriously for some time. It is precisely because of his radical politics that Sadr is gaining more and more followers. In Baghdad in August, 30,000 of the young cleric's sympathizers demonstrated against the Americans because they had removed religious posters from a tower. Sadr

refuses to recognize the governing council installed by Bremer and agitates against the 25-member body at every opportunity.

Most Iraqi Shiites will not be satisfied with control over their holy cities alone. The bomb attack on Hakim only scratches the surface of the bitter factional dispute within the Shiite clergy for dominance over Iraq. It certainly cannot be ruled out that the "army of the Madhi" created by Sadr in July is already poised to become the most powerful party in this conflict.

Most of his followers are people of modest means. Young men from Kerbela, Basra and Baghdad are now converging on Najaf to join the holy militia, the formation of which Sadr announced to his cheering followers during Friday prayers.

The force is intended to protect the city's holy sites, claims Sadr. In truth, however, it represents the germ of his vision of establishing an Iranian-style religious dictatorship in Iraq. Not all of the 3,000 Shiite clerics living in Najaf agree with this objective, and it remains a matter of great dispute among them as to whether they should collaborate with or fight against the Americans. And it is a dispute that is increasingly being played out with bombs.

Sadr's fighters' most prominent targets are the hated American occupiers. However, they also oppose those of their fellow Shiites whom they consider "too moderate." Moreover, the young fanatic Sadr must have been particularly irked by the obvious success with which his adversary Hakim was able to mobilize the faithful so soon after his return from exile in Iran.

On May 18th, more than 10,000 people in Baghdad celebrated the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed, in what was then the biggest post-war demonstration in Iraq. Their posters and banners read "American occupiers, leave our country immediately!" or, simply, "USA, no, no, no!" Some posters showed another face next to Hakim's - that of Iranian revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. It was the manifestation of a theocracy, done deliberately to impress the cameras. But Hakim knew that the future struggle for power in Iraq will not take place on the streets of Baghdad, but in the Shiite Vatican - in and around the shrine of Najaf. In the spring, however, Najaf was precisely where things were not progressing as the Iranian clerics had hoped.

Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim's most devoted followers were in rural southern Iraq. Although he was also celebrated in Najaf, his reception there was not quite as overwhelming. Many did not support the Ayatollah, who had not been living in Iraq for more than twenty years and was at least considered to be "under Iranian influence."

Iraqi's feelings about their neighbouring country are divided. There have always been historical differences between Arabs and Persians. The heavy casualties inflicted by the eight-year war, which was begun by Saddam but prolonged by Khomeini, have not been forgotten. And during the 1991 Shiite uprising against Saddam, Iran failed to come to the aid of its fellow Shiites (just like the Americans, who had helped initiate the revolt). "Many Shiites in Iraq are Iraqis first and Shiites second," says Baghdad political scientist Wamid Nadhmi, who was imprisoned several times for voicing his independent opinion of Saddam.

Religious adversaries have always spied on each other in the holy city of Najaf. New arrivals have never fared particularly well. A clear case in point was that of Shiite leader Abd al-Majid al-Khoei - a drama involving millions of dollars, CIA intrigues, and clerical murder.

According to a report in Newsweek, the CIA had secretly flown the cleric, who was a member of a renowned family of scholars and fled Najaf in 1991, into Iraq from exile in Great Britain, via Bahrain, and "outfitted him with 13 million dollars" in seed money. Al-Khoei, a moderate, pro-Western Shiite, was one of the key figures in Washington's post-war plans. However, the 41-year-old al-Khoei also made some powerful enemies. He obtained the keys to the golden shrine of Najaf and, with them, access to millions in donations that were being kept there. He subsequently refused to even discuss the key issue with Sadr, who was jealous of al-Khoei's position.

The young radical's fanaticism more than makes up for his lack of religious training, as do his excellent ties to radical Shiites in neighboring Iran. Iran's pronouncements are clearly addressed to Sadr, whom they have called up to "kill Saddam loyalists and work to oppose the Great Satan."

It was probably the followers of this fiery young leader who murdered his religious adversary, who arrived in Iraq from London on April 10th. Al-Khoei, a friend of America, was ambushed at the golden mosque and hacked to death with knives. Mukkada al-Sadr denies having ordered the murder, claiming that an "agitated mob" was responsible. From his headquarters on the street leading to the market, al-Sadr constantly watches the shrine, waiting, drinking tea, scheming.

By now people whisper when his name is mentioned in tea rooms and in the market.

Only a few days before last week's bloody Friday, an uncle of Hakim, also a Shiite leader, barely escaped a bomb attack. Three of his bodyguards were killed in the attack.

Many in Najaf are convinced that they know who is behind the attacks, for which no one has yet claimed responsibility. During the funeral of the bodyguards of Hakim's uncle, many mourners were already cursing the name Mukkada. Black banners fluttering in the wind on the walls of Najaf's enormous cemetery also name Sadr as being responsible for the attack.

Does this young radical truly intend to use force to expel the Americans from the country and eliminate the clerical competition to bolster his own position?

Although his rhetorical abilities are considered unlimited, his theological training is viewed as inadequate. Sadr is undoubtedly a gifted speaker. However, the man in the black turban coolly denies any involvement in the murders, claiming "I do not issue orders to shoot."

The elder statesmen among the ayatollahs of Najaf never leaves his house these days, and is guarded around the clock by armed bodyguards. He is the Persian-born Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. As the director of Najaf's theological seminary, the Hausa, he is considered the highest religious authority. So far he has managed to stay out of the fray, and he is considered a moderate. Thus, it is all the more alarming to the occupying power that al-Sistani issued a fatwa two months ago expressly forbidding collaboration with the country's foreign masters. As a religious scholar, he enjoys great respect among all factions, and has maintained contact with moderate forces in Iran through middlemen. The question now is whether the 73-year-old al-Sistani possesses the power and the determination to play a key role in shaping the future of Iraq. Al-Sistani is not believed to be particularly interested in politics. Or could it be that he is simply practicing "Takiya," the art of disguise and deception permitted in the Shiite faith?

In any case, the Grand Ayatollah appears to have the last word in day-to-day political matters. He sends his deputy, Mohammed al-Haqqani, to attend regular meetings with the other clerics. An elegant coolness prevails in his prayer, reading and work room. This man of the cloth, seated modestly on a mat, is surrounded by three telephones, half a dozen pairs of glasses, countless bottles of German vitamins, and a stack of religious documents. Whenever he shifts his position, he takes pains to avoid allowing the soles of his bare feet to face his visitors, a gesture that is considered impolite.

Al-Haqqani speaks of the country's future, vaguely referring to an "Islamically characterized state," one that must orient itself toward the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed. But Iraq, says al-Haqqani, is a difficult country, far more complex than its almost entirely Shiite neighbor Iran. Whoever rules the country one day, he says, must make allowances for its other religious groups, the urban Sunnis, the Christians, the Kurds.

A theology student asks what should be done with the wives of Christians, those who refuse to wear a veil. Another student asks how the state will deal with thieves, those who were able to buy their way out of any criminal penalty by bribing Saddam's corrupt judges: "Doesn't the Koran require that their hands be cut off?"

The Grand Ayatollah's deputy smiles and advises the students "not to take all rules so literally." It's obvious that al-Sistani's deputy is fully aware of the implications of each of his statements. At times he presses ahead, sounding as socially-minded and worldly as a Catholic liberation theologian, only to retreat back into ideologically conservative territory. "We will not tolerate bars and pornographic films in Iraq," he says in closing. "However, just as we Shiites demand respect for our faith, we too must tolerate the practices of others. Otherwise, this country could break apart." His audience listens attentively. Some take notes. Not everyone seems convinced. Can a Gandhian policy of non-violence prevail if the religious competition commits murder, if militant Saddam loyalists provoke the Shiites to revolt, if the Americans continue their occupation?

In its day-to-day life, Iraq already exhibits some of the characteristics of an Islamic state today. In recent years, even Saddam's regime limited itself to the use of police and secret service forces to govern the Shiite southern portion of the country. Civil administration was left largely to the mullahs, provided it remained "non-political" and did not oppose the dictator. Nowadays, the well-organized religious elite are in charge of the entire health and education system in cities such as Najaf, Kerbela, Kut, and Nassiriya. They also control the legal system. Anyone south of Baghdad who has matters of inheritance to settle will heed the ruling of his local cleric. Merely the thought of submitting to a worldly jurisdiction is considered perverse by the more than 14 million Shiites in Iraq.

Whether this religiously shaped and organized society develops into a theocracy depends on the Shiite power struggle, and on the Americans' willingness to respect majority decisions. US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has already announced that "under no circumstances will we allow a regime based on the Iranian model to come to power in Baghdad." He has neglected to mention how he intends to do this once US forces have pulled out of the country.

In any case, Shiites of all political persuasions in Najaf have come to one conclusion: In the future, Iraq will not be governed without the Shiites, a group that makes up more than 60 percent of the country's total population. A leader will emerge from within the Shiite spectrum. Since Friday, many Shiites have been praying that it will be not the power-hungry Sadr, who is clearly doing his utmost to reach the top.

Apparently young Lebanese men who receive their orders from Iran and are prepared to engage in violent acts have already been seeping into Iraq for some time. They were trained in camps of the Lebanese Hezbollah (Party of God) to launch attacks on Israel from southern Lebanon. "Now we are getting what we never had under Saddam: a close connection between Shiite terrorists and Al Qaeda, an Iran-Iraq-Lebanon triangle, a Shiite belt in the Middle East," says a worried Western intelligence expert. And then he adds, sarcastically: "Thanks, Mister Bush."

The Shiites represent a branch of Islam that encompasses more than ten percent of all Muslims, or 150 million people out of a total of about 1.3 billion Muslims. However, they are disproportionately feared in the West. According to the New York Times, "in American eyes the Shiites are a symbol of terrorism," a scourge of God.

This is why images from the past are now reappearing, images from 1979, when Iranian students incited by Shiite Ayatollah Khomeini occupied the US embassy in Tehran, paraded blindfolded diplomats in front of the world's eyes, and kept them captive for 444 days; or from 1983, when Shiite terrorists attacked the US embassy and the headquarters of the US Marines in Beirut, forcing the superpower, after it had lost just under 300 lives, to withdraw from Lebanon in disgrace. These images from the past are mixed with the bloody flagellation scenes, reminiscent of medieval times, witnessed in Iraq in April of this year: scenes of people who, out of sheer religious fervor, seemed to almost take pleasure in torturing themselves, while at the same time appearing to be well-organized, bearing signs calling for a theocracy and condemning the "American occupiers."

For theologians like Tübingen-based orientalist Heinz Halm or the Parisian Arabic studies expert Gilles Kepel, the Shiites are by no means fanatical religious warriors across the board, but for the most part members of a faith that preaches respect and is to some extent even socially progressive, such as the tiny minority of two million Ismailites under the leadership of Karim Aga Khan IV. Although there are Shiite minorities in Pakistan, Afghanistan and East Africa, the center of this religious group is in the Middle East. It constitutes a majority in the Iranian theocracy (90 percent), in Azerbaijan (70 percent), and in Bahrain (65 percent), while playing an important role in Lebanon (19 percent)

However, it was only after the removal of Saddam Hussein, who was especially vehement in his repression of Iraq's Shiite majority, that a continuous geographic belt of Shiitism in the region was formed. The religious leaders of the individual countries, who had been forced to communicate in secrecy in the past, can now join forces in making pilgrimages, praying, and exchanging thoughts (and weapons), and can do so without obstruction. Moreover, the focus of their world is beginning to shift from Iran to Iraq, as the Shiites' two most important holy sites, Najaf and Kerbela in Iraq, have once again become generally accessible to all.

Far more important than the sheer number of Shiites is their religious fervor and their cohesion, as well as their concentration in regions that contain the world's richest reserves of raw materials. The majority of workers in the oil fields of Iran and southern Iraq, but also in those of Kuwait and the especially high-yielding eastern Saudi Arabian province of Hassa, are Shiites, and they are literally "sitting" on these important petroleum reserves. If they were to engage in an organized work stoppage effort from one day to the next, the global market would quickly collapse.

But do the Shiites even exist? Is this denomination a monolith or a mosaic, a single force or a thousand-and-one forces? And does this religious group truly preach hatred of the West, and to such an extent that the West must fear this renaissance of the Shiites as the devil would fear holy water?

To comprehend the world of the Shiites, their willingness to engage in martyrdom, their feeling of being chosen, one would have to be transported back to a point in history at least 1300 years ago. For many Shiites, this is not a step backwards into a remote and mysterious past, but rather a part of a constantly recurring religious experience, one that is both celebrated and suffered.

Mohammed claimed to be a herald of the word of Allah, even the last and final prophet of all prophets. But he would never have presumed to consider himself as godly or immortal. His realm was of this world. He was the son of a merchant, and enjoyed great military and political successes during his life. He created a new community in Medina and then liberated his birthplace of Mecca, from which he had been forced to flee. He commanded armies, levied taxes, and imposed the rule of law. For centuries, Christian societies accepted as a matter of course the concept that two authorities existed, that of God's representatives and that of the emperor. Mohammed was both an interpreter of the true faith and a worldly ruler in one. A separation of church and state is inconceivable in Islam, at least in its original form.

To this day, a large percentage of Muslims believe that Mohammed, in his capacity as the "seal of the prophets," declined to appoint a successor. However, a minority of Muslims are convinced that he did indeed appoint a successor in March of the year 632, three months before his death, during his final pilgrimage to Mecca. According to Shiite lore, when his caravan stopped to rest by a pond halfway to Medina, Mohammed asked his followers: "Do I not have more to say to you than all others." And when his followers gladly agreed, he continued: "All those whom I command shall also be commanded by Ali!"

Ali was the cousin of the prophet and became Mohammed's son-in-law when he married Fatima. He fought as Mohammed's deputy in several military campaigns, and was very close to the prophet. However, he was not the prophet's only companion. After Mohammed's death, Abu Bakr prevailed as the Caliph (successor). He was succeeded by Omar and Osman, two Muslim rulers from the old urban aristocracy of Mecca who had once made life difficult for Mohammed and only later became his followers. In the eyes of Ali's supporters, these men were unlawful rulers. They believed that it was their man alone who could claim to be a member of the original religious aristocracy of Medina, and that only he was a true Muslim.

Following the murder of Osman, Ali finally came to power in 656. However, his regency was so disputed that he was forced to retreat to the city of Kufa, not far from Najaf in present-day Iraq. Ali's position worsened when a majority of Muslims recognized the Syrian Muawija as the true caliph. A small minority bravely held its own against the overwhelming majority. They called themselves the "Shiate Ali" or "party of Ali," bringing the Shiite movement to life. From then on, the paths of the Shiites and the Sunnis diverged. In 661, the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed was stabbed to death in the mosque in Kufa, becoming the first in a series of Shia martyrs.

Ali lived on as the first imam (leader), and as a larger-than-life cult figure. His followers refer to him as the "Dhu al-Fikar," or "sword of the prophet." According to one legend, he was able to lift entire city gates from their foundations. Another legend holds that a miracle took place at his burial, when a brilliant white light suddenly emerged from a cliff. To this day, Najaf's imposing shrine rises from this gravesite. It is the most important pilgrimage site in Iraq.

In the spring of 680, Jasid became the first man to mount the throne of the caliphs in Damascus who had not known the Prophet Mohammed personally. Ali's supporters sensed a final opportunity to regain power. They sent emissaries to Mecca to visit Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet, and offer their assistance in waging a decisive battle against the usurper. Hussein decided to go to war, even though he must have known that he would be facing an overwhelmingly more powerful force. According to legend, he set out with a contingent of only 32 horsemen and 40 men on foot. Hussein didn't stand a chance, especially as the military help promised by his supporters failed to

materialize, and his men were slaughtered near Kerbela. Another golden mosque later built at the site of the massacre is now Iraq's second most-important pilgrimage site.

Until that point, Ali's party was principally concerned with acquiring power. However, its political failure and the martyrs' deaths of its heroes transformed it into a religious movement. The men who had so shamefully abandoned the grandson of the Prophet sank into endless self-reproach. They even considered atoning for their disgrace by committing collective suicide. However, they believed that the Koran forbids suicide, just as it forbids the killing of Muslims. Following lengthy discussions, most of them realized that they were left with only one solution: expiatory death on the battlefield, while doing battle against the "infidel enemy."

Those who do not have the opportunity to take this form of martyrdom upon themselves can atone for the collective guilt of their Shiite brothers, at least in part, by engaging in a symbolic ritual of penance. During these annual acts of self-flagellation, which take place on the anniversary of Hussein's death, the fervent believer can beat himself with his hands, chains or whips, or can cut his brow with a sword. The "Ashura" ritual is a passion play, a sort of worldwide, bloody Oberammergau. But it's also much more than that. The true Shiite knows that he can in fact be asked to submit to expiatory death - that is, when it becomes necessary to rise up against an army of overpowering oppressors, just as Hussein did.

No other religion is so enmeshed in its cult of martyrdom. The Shiites believe that all of their imams after Ali died a sacrificial death. A small minority only acknowledges seven imams (like the Ismailites), while most consider themselves part of the twelve imam Shia. The twelfth in the sequence of their leaders is said to have suffered an unusual fate. Little Mohammed, born in 869, was hidden by his father and then disappeared. Most Shiites believe that the "hidden imam," or "Mahdi," will reappear one day and will take the helm of the party of Ali to claim the legitimate rights of its ancestors and lead his followers into paradise.

Together with an order known as the assassines, the Shia entered into a secret alliance that systematically and continuously used terror as a weapon, beginning in the late 11th century and continuing through the middle of the 13th century. Because of their supposed drug use, the men in their inaccessible mountaintop fortresses were called "hashish eaters" by the Crusaders. The English and French word for murderer, assassin, is derived from this term. Contrary to widespread legends, these especially radical fighters rarely turned their daggers on the Crusaders when engaging in their suicide attacks. Instead, their targets were mainly local warlords and religious adversaries within the Muslim faith. However, these "original terrorists" have never represented a mainstream movement within the Shia.

Shiite revolts erupted again and again throughout the ensuing centuries. But whether it was during the golden era of Sunni Islam in medieval times or during later periods of Western Christian predominance, the traditional Shia generally remained apolitical and tended to be a persecuted rather than a persecuting minority. However, it was a minority that consistently reserved the right to deceive its rulers in the form of "Takiya" ("secrecy"), one of the basic tenets of the denomination. Until the second half of the twentieth century, the Shiites silently clung to their belief in the return of the Mahdi - until the arrival of Ruhollah Khomeini.

The Iranian ayatollah spent many years teaching in the Iraqi martyrs' city of Najaf. He was able to pull large portions of the Shiites in his homeland out of their lethargy and incite them to rebel against a westernized, corrupt monarchy. From a Shiite perspective, his most important achievement was that he formulated the clergy's right to political leadership within the state. Khomeini transformed Shiitism into a revolutionary ideology by declaring himself both head of state and religious leader, or God's representative on earth, so to speak - an ersatz Mahdi who strove to serve in place of the hidden one until his reappearance. It was a revolution in the Shiite faith, one which, following Khomeini's illustrious return to Tehran in 1979, led to the establishment of the Iranian theocracy.

The merciless Ayatollah soon revealed that he was no longer satisfied with the symbolic ritual of penance on the Ashura holiday. During the war against Iraq, he demanded true martyr's deaths - even of the underage children whom he sent into the mine fields. Khomeini also planned to export his Shiite revolution. It was an ambition that met with a cool reception among his neighbors. Tehran's religious revolutionary was unable to find imitators of the Iranian model. When he did attempt to topple governments through terrorist activity, such as in Bahrain, Khomeini failed.

Emissaries of the Ayatollah played a key role in the establishment of Hezbollah in Lebanon. This militia, formed in 1982 to fight the Israeli occupying forces in Beirut, still receives most of its funding from Tehran today. The Hezbollah minority has long since given up its original goal of turning Lebanon into a Shiite state, and today acts as a "normal" party in the Lebanese parliament. However, a radical wing of the Hezbollah is now beginning to come to power.

Until recently, the revolutionary fervor of the Shiites seemed to have diminished. Tehran had plenty of its own problems, Baghdad was crippled by the Saddam dictatorship, and Beirut was beginning to turn toward the West. The fall of Saddam Hussein has now liberated the long-repressed faithful, and may have forced them into a different direction than the Americans had expected.

Do the Iraqi or even the Lebanese Shiites intend to forcefully establish a new Middle Eastern theocracy based on the Iranian model? Are Shiite fanatics fanning the flames of global terror? Or, as has presumably occurred in Najaf, are they in the process of cutting one another to pieces in an internal religious power struggle?

The most important answers to these questions are likely to be found in Iran, the first and thus far only Shiite theocracy.

If there is one man who symbolizes the Iranian revolution, from its origins through today, it would be the 80-year-old Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montaseri. He was tortured by the Shah's thugs because of his inflammatory speeches criticizing the corrupt monarchy. He was one of the authors of Iran's constitution, an accomplishment that gave this religious leader the final say in state matters. In 1979, he joined Khomeini in his triumphant march through Tehran. Khomeini referred to his "youngest brother" as "the fruit of my life," and appointed Montaseri as his successor.

But then the two men turned against each other. Montaseri criticized the bloody frenzy of the revolution and the high-handedness of the mullahs, and he refused to support the fatwa against writer Salman Rushdie. Khomeini demoted Montaseri shortly before his death in 1979. Today, agitator Ali Khameni is in power.

In 1997, as Montaseri was becoming increasingly vocal in his criticism of the theocracy's failings, the new religious leader placed his adversary under strict house arrest. Montaseri's religious school in the Iranian holy city of Ghom was destroyed by Islamist storm troopers. However, even Khameni didn't dare to throw Montaseri, a highly respected scholar (whose religious status was superior to that of Khameni), into jail. Seven months ago, the house arrest was also lifted, apparently in an act of mercy, since Montaseri is said to be near death.

His once-round face has collapsed, and the grip of his small hand has weakened. Otherwise the old man, his body enveloped in snow-white robes, makes a rather vigorous impression. What he says is so revolutionary that no one else would dare to say it in public: "Our revolution was correct and good, but our theocracy became a failure. Khameni made some serious mistakes. He should immediately release all political prisoners and introduce true reforms. Because of our excesses, we have lost the respect of the world."

Does this mean that he is not in favor of transferring the Iranian model to Iraq?

"I am pleased about the new freedoms of the Shiites, but God forbid that our neighbors should repeat our mistakes. A truly pluralistic system would be the right thing in Baghdad. But I do not believe that the American occupiers will allow this."

Things are heating up in Ghom. At the Feisije Madrassa, religious students and their teachers hotly discuss the sacred scriptures in an attempt to elucidate how they should respond to the new freedoms of their religious brethren in Iraq. They have embarked on their exploration of their medieval religious past with highly modern tools. "Computer ayatollahs" develop new software containing key words that refer to old passages in scripture, but they also develop e-mail files containing the addresses of thousands of Iraqi Shiites. There are many family ties between Ghom and Iraq's holy sites. In particular, theology students driven out of neighboring Iraq by Saddam Hussein years ago have settled in Ghom.

The radical Ayatollah Qadim Hussein al-Hairi is from Kerbela, and has been living in Ghom since 1973. In April, he issued a fatwa instructing his fellow Shiites in Iraq to kill all supporters of the old regime and to actively fight the "Great Satan," the United States. In his view, Iraq must become a strict Shiite theocracy. If Shiite "compromisers" stand in its way, says al-Hairi, they too must be eliminated. Could this suggest that he may have been behind last Friday's murders in Najaf?

Other clerics view such a development with mistrust, and the reasons for their skepticism are often rather worldly. They fear that their city will be marginalized. Although Ghom is more than 1200 years old and houses the shrine of Fatema, the sister of Shiite martyr Imam Reza, it is a third-tier religious site in comparison to Najaf and Kerbela. Now that the Iraqi holy cities are once again accessible, they fear a dramatic decline in the flow of pilgrims and donations to Ghom.

Young people in Tehran couldn't care less whether or not the center of the Shiite world shifts from Iraq back to its point of origin on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Some undermine their theocracy by simply no longer taking it seriously. They hold private parties with porno videos and whisky. They provoke the moral police by holding hands subversively.

The theocracy has long since condemned itself, partly because of the many children it has produced. According to Khomeini's directive, the Iranians were to bring as many children into the world as possible. Today the country must feed twice as many people as during the Shah's rule. Almost two-thirds of Iran's 70 million people are under 25 and have no recollection whatsoever of the grand acts of the revolution. Many are desperately seeking employment. The competition for jobs is especially tough for Iran's many university graduates, more than half of them women.

If only to regain their private lives, Iran's young people have become political. With an overwhelming majority, they elected the worldly Mohammed Khatami to be their president, and have repeatedly demonstrated to support him in his struggles against the hated ultra-religious mullahs. When students demonstrate in the streets they chant "Down with the Taliban, whether in Kabul or Tehran."

But President Khatami has been unable to prevail with his reformist plans. Revolutionary leader Khameni and his Guardian Council control the courts, the secret service, and the military. The president's actions are more similar to those of an opposition leader than of a head of state, one in which he is forced to oppose a system that threatens to rape the will of the people, simply because it derives its full authority from God.

To many Iranians, however, reforms that are occurring at a snail's pace are no longer enough. During communal elections in February, Khatami was given a rude awakening. Voter turnout in Tehran dropped from a level of 64 percent in 1999 to less than 12 percent. The reformists were the ones who didn't vote, leaving the city council to the arch-conservatives.

The US government believes that Iran's leadership has been actively seeking nuclear weapons and maintaining secret contacts to Al Qaeda terrorists. It claims that terrorists have repeatedly been sighted in back-room meetings with radical clerics, especially in recent times: Al Qaeda spokesman Suleiman Abu Gheith, Osama Bin Laden's son Saad, as well as Saif al Adil, who was probably responsible for the May 12th attack on an apartment complex housing foreigners in the Saudi Arabian city of Riyadh. In an interview with Der Spiegel, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Charrasi rejected these accusations as being "unfounded and outrageous." According to Charrasi, and contrary to US accusations, Iran is not actively involved in the power struggle in neighboring Iraq.

In Ghom, still the center of religious power in Iran, the clerics find such denials amusing. "Of course we need the bomb, and we have established the necessary conditions in our underground facilities near the city of Natan," says one of the radical ayatollahs. "And why, of all things, should we not avail ourselves of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take the Shiite revolution to our neighboring country, and in doing so humiliate the Great Satan?"

An organization headed by Baqir al-Hakim and established specifically for this purpose, the "Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq," has been receiving millions from the Iranian authorities since 1982. There is evidence that Khameni maintains close ties to the organization's leadership. After having taken Iranian citizenship, some members of leadership council of the Sciri rose to high-ranking government positions. As head of the judiciary, former Sciri spokesman Mahmud al-Hashimi Schahrudi has even managed to enter the tight-knit group of leaders surrounding the Ayatollah, and is now ranked fourth in Iran's leadership hierarchy. Khameni also has domestic political reasons for promoting a rigid theocracy in Iraq, as it represents his only hope of undermining the "worldly" reformers surrounding Khatami and combating the depoliticizing of the Shia.

The radicals within the Iranian mullah-crazy apparently viewed the recently murdered Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim as their man in Iraq, their Trojan Horse. Were they disappointed in the moderate words of the cleric in Najaf, so disappointed as to sanction his assassination?

Baqir's nephew, 43-year-old Riath al-Hakim, has remained in Ghom as the Sciri's representative - for now. A few weeks before the assassination, he told Der Spiegel that his father and his uncle were principally interested in building a pluralistic government that would incorporate members of all religious communities and ethnicities, a government that was not to be a copy of the Iranian model. According to al-Hakim, one thing is clear: "More than 60 percent of Iraq's population are Shiites, and they will assert their rights. Iraq will be a country shaped by the Islamic religion."

Riath al-Hakim is an unassuming, soft-spoken man. He says that he screamed a lot in the past - against the walls of his solitary cell in Baghdad's central prison, especially in the mornings, when he would scream to drown out the cries and whimpers of women, old men and children being tortured in the nearby prison courtyard. He spent eight years in Saddam Hussein's dungeons, enduring torture with whips and electrodes inflicted by sadistic guards. "I was only able to endure by thinking about our Shiite martyrs and their example."

In 1991, Riath al-Hakim was released and, with the help of his relatives and their Iranian friends, fled to Ghom via Kurdistan. Since then, he has completed the religious studies he began in Najaf, and now writes commentary in Iranian religious publications.

Upon leaving the interview, Riath al-Hakim pointed to portrait photographs hanging on a laundry line like mementos. "These are fourteen people from our family whom Saddam murdered - an entire gallery. Others from our clan were recently discovered in mass graves near Baghdad, including my eight-year-old niece." Then this otherwise gentle man clenched his fists. "No one will prevent us from creating the new Iraq according to our religious ideas. Not Saddam's supporters and not the Americans. They have no concept of the fervor of our Shiite faith."

Of all people, the grandson of Iranian revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who led Iraq's neighbor into one of the darkest periods in its history following the overthrow of Shah Reza Pahlevi in 1979, could now become the opponent of radical leader Muktada al-Sadr and a proponent of Iraq's US occupiers - creating an even greater headache for Tehran.

Hussein Khomeini lives in a small house in downtown Najaf, from which he calls for reforms in Iran. His grandfather's bloody theocracy has rejected the grandson. State and religious, preaches the 45-year-old Khomeini who spent a portion of his childhood and youth in Najaf, should be separated.

Such position statements are declarations of war against Sadr's extremists. A few days after the attacks on the moderate Hakim family, Khomeini and his entourage left Najaf. It was said that he was travelling to Bahrain to visit Shiites living there. According to Khomeini's neighbors, however, his departure came as a surprise. Did Sadr's opponent move to a safer place after receiving warnings? In any event, the houses of all religious leaders in Najaf have now come to resemble heavily guarded fortresses.

The possibility that Iraq, envisioned by the US as a model of Western democracy in the Middle East, could descend into full-scale chaos and violence is not the only nightmare for Western intelligence services. They are particularly concerned that portions of Bin Laden's Al Qaeda network could have joined forces with a newly strengthened group of terrorists surrounding the Shiite Hezbollah militia supported by Iran. If this were the case, these fanatics could extend the scope of their attacks from such "soft targets" as discotheques, bars and apartment buildings housing Western businesspeople to include America's economic and political arteries in the region.

"What happened in recent months in Riyadh and Casablanca were human tragedies," says one of these intelligence experts, "but as far as possible terrorist attacks committed by Shiite religious fanatics against the poorly secured Saudi oil facilities, combined with attacks on US positions in Iraq, is concerned: that would be another catastrophe on the order of September 11th."

The name of one man keeps popping up in conversations among Western intelligence experts: Imad Mughniyah, chief of the "external security apparatus" of the Hezbollah for many years. US Secretary of State Colin Powell allegedly delivered an ultimatum during his recent visits to Beirut and Damascus: the extradition of Mughniyah. The Americans hold this secretive man, of whom only one photograph exists on the FBI website, responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Americans in Beirut since the 1980s. The Israelis hunted him, and even murdered his brother in 1994 while attempting to catch the terrorist during a wedding ceremony, but were ultimately unsuccessful.

The only known information about Mughniyah, who is now 41, is that his father was a Shiite scholar from Lebanon, and that he was trained in the training camps of radical Palestinians during the civil war years. After years of remaining on the sidelines, Mughniyah is now allegedly once again involved in the planning of international terrorism - acting through a newly intensified network of fellow Shiites linked by a group of religious fighters from Ghom in Iran, Najaf in Iraq, and Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. According to one intelligence report, "Mughniyah is the beneficiary of a wave of Shiitism that has taken the entire Middle East by storm in the wake of Saddam Hussein's downfall, a wave whose extreme factions have paved the way for new violence."

For Professor Hamid Algar of the University of California at Berkeley, "every day in the life of a Shiite is a day of struggle, a day on which he must seek either triumph or martyrdom." University of Tübingen Professor Halm believes that "the Shiite clergy forms a tightly knit network across national borders, a network that can be utilized for political ends if necessary." And presumably for acts of terrorism, as well.

So where is this Imad Mughniyah, the former chief of operations of Hezbollah, wanted worldwide on charges of murder and kidnapping? Did he meet with Osama Bin Laden, as he once did in Sudan, to plan the most recent attacks, possibly in collaboration with his Shiite friends in Iran?

There is one nightmare scenario that Western politicians fear more than anything else, and it looks like this: The terrorists will arrive from across the sea. Their base? A secret site in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Their destination? Platform number four at Saudi Arabia's most important oil terminal at Ras Tanura. The complex explodes into an inferno following a collision with a boat loaded with explosives.

At the same time, another suicide commando crashes a small plane into the Abkaik complex a few kilometers away in the country's interior. The world's largest petroleum processing center is essentially destroyed. As a result of the simultaneous attacks, Saudi Arabia's oil exports are reduced by a devastating two-thirds, and the world market loses just under five billions barrels of oil a day - almost one-fourth of the US' daily consumption.

On this day, however, the terrorists do not limit their attacks to Saudi Arabia. They also attack in Iraq, storming oil fields near Basra and attacking the US forces command center in Baghdad. Suicide bombers blow up Jewish settlers in the West Bank. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon responds with a massive military attack. In this vision of horror, the world faces a new Middle East war, an acute bottleneck in the supply of raw materials on world markets, and an exploding price of oil.

For the time being, however, the people of Najaf are busy mourning and burying the dead Ayatollah.

Death is already omnipresent in the holy city, a city in which there are more graves than houses. In front of a mausoleum, a group of young men lights sticks of incense at the grave of their uncle. Twice a year, according to custom, Ruhullah and his brothers travel to Najaf from Baghdad.

Since the fall of Saddam, about 2,000 believers flow into Najaf each day from Iran alone, and not just to pray, something they have been forbidden to do for the past two decades. Some arrive with coffins strapped to the roofs of their cars to bury their family members in Najaf. Kilometer after kilometer of sandstone-colored gravestones and mausoleums stretch to the horizon in Najaf's gigantic cemetery. Devout Shiites prefer to be buried in the shadow of the holy shrine. This is an honor that will certainly be bestowed upon Hakim.

The Ayatollah's final resting place will be in the holy city's famous martyrs' cemetery - in the shadow of the golden dome of the Imam Ali mosque.

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