

An Eye for an Eye

As the violence in Iraq grows more shocking and brutal, TIME explores the roots of the murderous rage—and why the United States may be powerless to put a stop to it

By APARISIM GHOSH

CIVIL WARS, AS A GENERAL rule, don't announce themselves when they arrive. But how else to label what Iraqis are witnessing in their streets these days? What other term could describe the sight of armed and angry Shi'ite mobs rampaging through Baghdad and other cities, dragging Sunnis into the streets and executing them, looting their homes and burning down their mosques? The immediate cause of this wave of violence was the bombing on February 22 of al-Askari, the sacred Shi'ite shrine in Samarra, but that attack could only partially account for the hatreds unleashed. Ordinary citizens guided assassins to the homes of their neighbors. After three days of violence, more than 200 people were killed, and Sunni groups claimed at least 100 mosques were damaged. The extent of the carnage left many with the uneasy sense that the long-simmering hostility between the country's two main sects has at last boiled over—and that Iraq's fragile institutions of authority have no means of holding the anger back.

Caught off guard by the mayhem and powerless to stop it, U.S. officials could only offer general expressions of optimism. President George W. Bush spent an hour on seven phone calls to Iraqi leaders, expressing condolences, thanking them for their appeals for calm and urging them to continue working to form a new government. In private, U.S. officials sounded guarded. "This is plainly a test for the Iraqi government," says a well-placed national-security official. "What the outcome will be is not entirely clear."



Some leaders of Iraq's warring sects are urging their followers to step back from the brink, but not everybody is listening. The violence that racked the country in the hours after the Samarra explosion subsided briefly after the imposition of a daytime curfew but soon flared up again. A statement released by Grand Ayatullah Ali Husaini Sistani, Iraq's most revered cleric, called for nationwide demonstrations and seven days of mourning.

However shocking in scale and ferocity, this eruption of sectarian violence was not totally unexpected. For months, hundreds of dead bodies have been turning up in streets, ditches and sewers in and around Baghdad—most of them bearing unmistakable signs of military-style execution. Almost all the dead are Sunni males, many of whom had been arrested by men wearing police uniforms. Sunni politicians have long blamed those deaths on Shi'ite death squads operating within Iraqi police and security forces. U.S. officials now privately concede that the death squads may indeed exist.

Although the violence that followed the Samarra bombing may have been sparked by a single act of provocation, it came in the context of a history of Shi'ite-Sunni enmity. The roots of the sectarian divide lie in a schism that arose shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century. Although Shi'ites make up the majority in Iraq, the country was long ruled by a Sunni elite, often under the patronage of a foreign power, like the Ottoman and British empires. Sunnis historically had a monopoly on the best

education and jobs, especially in government and the military. As a result, many Sunnis see themselves as Iraq's natural ruling class, and the Shi'ites as poor, superstitious rabble. The U.S. invasion upended the "natural" order: in the past two elections, the Shi'ites have finally made their numerical superiority translate into political power, leaving many Sunnis bitter and resentful over their diminished status.

In turn, fanatical Shi'ites regard Sunnis as descendants and followers of the murderers of their most revered heroes. That resentment culminated in the rule of Saddam, who outlawed important Shi'ite observances, had many top Shi'ite clerics murdered and finally, after the first Gulf War, ordered a massive campaign of murder and repression of Shi'ites. Now politically ascendant, some Shi'ites want reckoning for those and other historical wrongs. They regard the assassination of Sunnis by death squads as eye-for-an-eye justice. Even some moderate Shi'ites, who condemn extrajudicial killings, view Sunnis as deluded losers who are supporting terrorist groups in a futile bid to regain their monopoly on power.

Yet the two sides have more in common than they openly admit. Iraq's Arab Shi'ites

and Sunnis come from the same ethnic stock (the Kurds, a different ethnic group, tend to be Sunni) and share the same language and diet. Indeed, what makes the rise of sectarian violence

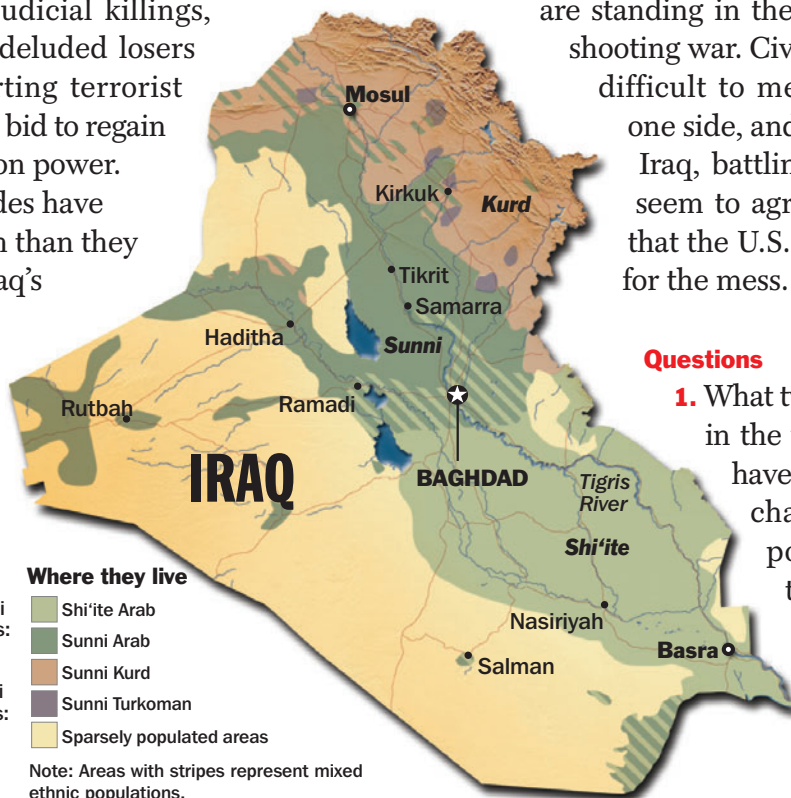
so chilling is precisely the difficulty involved in carrying it out. Some Shi'ite mobs stopped people in the street and demanded to see their ID cards, looking for Sunni names. In the end, as is often the case in sectarian wars, many of the victims of the violence were simply fingered by their neighbors.

Given the failure to head off this eruption of violence, U.S. hopes of averting a shameful defeat in Iraq now hinge on whether it can bring the fighting to an end. The biggest fear is that the breakdown of order could draw neighboring countries

into the conflict, with Iran intervening on behalf of the Shi'ites and Arab states supporting the Sunnis.

But the U.S. has few good options left. Public patience with the mission in Iraq is likely to keep eroding as long as it appears that U.S. troops are standing in the middle of a religious shooting war. Civil wars are notoriously difficult to mediate without taking one side, and it doesn't help that in Iraq, battling Shi'ites and Sunnis seem to agree on only one thing: that the U.S. is ultimately to blame for the mess. ■

The Shi'ites have finally made their numerical superiority translate into political power, leaving many Sunnis bitter and resentful over their diminished status.



Questions

1. What two groups are involved in the violence in Iraq? How have the last two elections changed the balance of power between these two groups?
2. What is the U.S.'s biggest fear in response to the breakdown of order in Iraq?