

Sunni clerics back anti-U.S. violence: Other Sunni clerics call violence unjustified

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For Sheik Mohammad Ali Mohammad al-Ghereri, a Sunni Muslim cleric in Baghdad, the question is no longer whether to tell his followers to fight the Americans, but how to assure that they wage war properly.

“The holy warriors should have a clerical leader with them to advise them on all points, such as how to properly treat the Americans they capture,” he said in his austere mosque in the Iraqi capital’s Zafarenieh district.

For fellow Sunni cleric Abdul Sattar Abdul-Jabbar, the issue is not whether his followers should kidnap foreigners, but which ones. “Isn’t the trucker who brings supplies for the Americans and helps the occupation also part of the occupation?” said Abdul-Jabbar, a member of the Association of Muslim Scholars, the country’s largest Sunni religious grouping. “I think so.”

To Mohammad Amin Bashar, a Sunni cleric and professor at Baghdad’s Islamic University, the limits of classroom debate are likewise clear: “When two students come to us and have a disagreement, we tell them it’s all right to disagree. The important thing is that we have a unified position in resisting the occupation.”

If Sunni clerics are a window into the soul of the violent resistance to U.S. aims in Iraq, the landscape they reveal couldn’t be bleaker for American-led forces trying to quell an insurgency that shows no signs of abating.

Among Iraq’s Shi’ite Muslim majority, the U.S. can at least count on a few high-ranking clerics to counter junior preacher Moqtada al-Sadr’s fiery calls for holy war. But among the Sunni “ulema,” or clerical leaders, who guide the Sunni masses, the calls for armed opposition to the U.S., no matter the cost, have become increasingly strident.

“There is no discussion,” said Imam Mahdi al-Sumaydai, a high-ranking Sunni cleric who was jailed for six months by the Americans for his inflammatory teachings. “Jihad [holy war] is a must in the religion to defend your property, your honor or your religion. How can anyone deny our right to jihad?”

An estimated 60 percent of Iraq’s 24 million people are Shi’ite. Roughly 35 percent are Sunnis, including both Arabs and Kurds. Publicly, the U.S. military and the Bush administration, as well as interim Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, describe those who battle the U.S.-led coalition as “dead enders,” criminals, gangsters and losers of the former regime making a last desperate stand in the face of the interim government’s successes.

“The insurgents see a successful Iraqi interim government taking control of the country,” explained the commander of the army’s First Cavalry Division, Major General Peter Chiarelli, when asked why the insurgency seems to have intensified in September. “They see improvement of basic services. They see their power base slipping away. They see elections on the horizon. If you’re a terrorist, that must be your worst nightmare.”

But on the streets, the calls by clerics for jihad are spreading into the mainstream, seeping into a popular culture liberated, ironically, by the same occupation they’re opposing. Unencumbered by Saddam Hussein’s strict censorship laws, videos of armed mujahedeen (holy warriors) battling Americans—often set to rhythmic religious music—sell briskly at CD shops and in bazaars.

“People are trying to be more religious right now because they think it’s [part of the] opposition to the Americans,” said an Iraqi translator working for Westerners who asked that his name not be published. “They tell me, ‘It’s *halal* [holy] to kill you because you’re a translator working for the Americans.’”

Among Sunni clergy, opponents to violent resistance are rare. One exception is Sheikh Adel Khalid Dawoud, a loyal follower of the Islamic Salafi tradition, which spawned the Wahabbi sect that influences Osama bin Laden. Dawoud originally heeded senior clerics and urged his followers to wage holy war against the occupation. But as the level of human suffering rose, and the numbers of dead, widowed and orphaned soared in urban strongholds of resistance like Fallujah, Dawoud became one of the few opposing violent actions. “What we can hear from the people of Fallujah coming to visit us is that most of the houses have been

partially destroyed and many, many families have left Fallujah,” Dawoud said. “The people have been unemployed for a very long time.”

Unlike scholarly clerics immersed in books, Dawoud says he ministers to those suffering the consequences of the insurgency from his tiny mosque in Baghdad’s Karada district. “The jihad itself is meant to remove injustice and harm from the back of the people,” he said. “If the jihad brings more harm to the people, then it is not justifiable.”

But most Sunni religious authorities dismiss such talk as nonsense, not in line with Islamic teachings in the Qur’an or the Sunna, the body of work produced by Muslim scholars after the religion’s founding. “The jihad is a necessity for each Muslim,” said Ziad Farhan, a master’s degree candidate at Islamic University. “The Prophet [Muhammad] gave up everything for elevating the religion. In Islam there is either death or jihad. There is no other way.”

Under the administration of former occupation chief L. Paul Bremer, U.S. officials closely monitored the religious leaders, seeking out allies, asking some to tone down their rhetoric and occasionally arresting firebrand clerics. But since Allawi took over, U.S. officials have done little to engage or communicate with Sunnis outside the confines of the interim government.

However, some U.S. military officials in far-flung locales continue to attempt to build friendships and identify enemies among religious and tribal leaders in their areas of operation.

Muslim clerics typically speak indirectly, often looping vague religious references and poetic verses from sacred texts into their often-repetitive talks. But in their support of jihad, they mince no words. They cite a litany of perceived American missteps, from the stalled reconstruction effort, the killing of innocent Iraqis and the abuse of prisoners, to soldiers entering mosques without taking off their boots, entering women’s quarters during house raids and patting down female detainees.

They believe that force is the only language the United States understands. Were it not for the resistance throughout the Sunni Triangle following the 2003 war, they say, the now-dissolved Iraqi Governing Council would not have been conceived; and without the ongoing violence in Baghdad and the rest of the country, elections would not be set for January.

“Those who called for political solutions have been repeatedly embarrassed and outdone by those wanting military solutions,” said Professor Bashar. -*Borzou Daragahi, Religion News Service*