

# A Call for Muslim Solidarity

A Sit-in denouncing the Loss of Human Lives and the Sacrilege of Holy Sites across Iraq

## Samarra, Sacrilege, and Violence - FAQs

What's going on in Iraq now?

On February 22, shortly before 7 a.m., the Askariya Mosque in Samarra, Iraq was destroyed by two blasts. The attack was carried out by a group of individuals who somehow gained access to the usually heavily protected Askariya mosque, set demolition explosives, and then fled.

The blasts were evidently aimed at provoking sectarian violence and thereby destabilizing Iraq. This was only the latest link in the chain of attacks, albeit a very significant one, aimed at provoking sectarian and ethnic violence in the last three years. Serious incidents like this one, involving big loss of life, have happened in the past too. The situation in Iraq is worsening day by day. The American forces have been unable to provide adequate protection to the civilians and the holy sites so far.

What is so significant about the Askariya Mosque (mosque with the golden dome)?

The holy places in the Middle East (and for that matter, anywhere in the world) are very special to people. People's values and identities are attached to them. The more significant a holy site, the more the attachment of the people (just like the great Christian cathedrals in Europe or the Western Wall in Jerusalem). Askariya Mosque houses the graves of two noble and pious descendants of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh). Imam Hadi and Imam Askari were known for their knowledge and piety and are considered to be the Imam (leader) and role models for all Shia Muslims. This mosque and places like these have a very special place in the hearts of Shia Muslims.

On a more general note, the Holy Ka'ba (Mecca), the Shrine of Prophet Mohammad (in Medina, Saudi Arabia), and the shrines of the descendants of the Prophet (in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Syria) are inspiration for all Muslims. Any violation of their sanctity is considered an attack on Islam and all the Muslims.

What do the Iraqis feel about this?

For the families of the people who have died under Saddam's torturous rule or after the invasion, or the thousands more who have been maimed, or those who have been kidnapped, it probably does not matter much what sort of war is going on in Iraq. The fact is that they have been living in terrible conditions for many years now. They do not want to fight on any ethnic or religious divisions – they just want peace.

Who is involved in the sectarian violence? Who are the perpetrators?

With conflicting interests of so many groups within Iraq and of nations outside, it's difficult to make such evaluations without expert knowledge. What we know for sure is that this is not a "religious conflict" per se. Unfortunately, the latest escalation of violence in Iraq has been mainly presented as a "religious-sectarian conflict" in the media. To explain the whole complexity of tension in Iraq in terms of a 1400 year old conflict is to ignore the current political context in Iraq. The political interests of leaders and nations have much to do with the escalation of sectarian violence in Iraq and in any other part of the world (for example, in Pakistan and Lebanon) as history tells us.

Furthermore, anyone from the Middle East or familiar with Middle Eastern history could have guessed the

immediate reaction of the Shias in Iraq. It would be naïve to say that the instigators only wanted to destroy the Askariya mosque with no intention of provoking violence among Shias and Sunnis.

The Shia and Sunni religious leadership in Iraq must be commended in this regard for their staunch condemnation of all forms of violence and urging their followers to practice restraint and not to fall into the traps set by the anti-Iraqi and anti-Islamic elements.

How did the religious leadership respond?

The immediate reaction from Ayatollah Sistani, the top Shia authority, after the attacks at the Askariya mosque, was to urge the followers to observe non-violent public mourning for seven days.

Understanding the context is important here. The Shia population has displayed high restraint in reaction to the past atrocities. Literally, every Shia family in Iraq has lost a member to violence in the last few years. They are torn and frustrated. There seems to be no end to their misery. Most of the time all they hear from their religious leaders is that they should exercise restraint. Their patience has been tried to a great extent.

Ayatollah Sistani has been very successful in keeping his followers from taking the law into their hands during the last three years. In the chaos that followed the American toppling of Saddam's regime, Ayatollah Sistani's was the first voice of peace and sanity. The grisly attacks in Samarra were clearly aimed at breaking the Shia restraint, and the attackers would have been very successful in provoking Shias had Ayatollah Sistani not channeled their anger and frustration into the long established Shia ritual of peaceful public mourning.

Similarly, Sunni religious authorities have urged their followers to not fall into the traps set by the people that wish to divide the Muslims. They held combined Friday prayers of Shias and Sunnis in the Grand Mosque of Tikrit and other areas to send the message of peace and harmony to all the Muslims.

The tiny faction that has chosen extremism doesn't represent Shias or Sunnis. Their rhetoric and their actions do not represent the wishes of the larger Muslim nation. The latest violence is against the essential Islamic values of unity, peace, and justice. Given all these considerations, to explain such violence primarily in terms of "Islam" is unfair to the religion and all of its followers.

What is this Sit-in about?

The Iraqi people, their lives, their values, their identity, and their country – all of these are at stake with the current escalation of violence. The only thing that could save them is unity and peace. Only through unity can they defeat the plots of those that wish to divide them. And only through peace can they speak out to those that wish to provoke violence. With this sit-in, we wish to send a resounding message to the Iraqi people and to all the people in the world, Muslims and Non-Muslims alike, that all Muslims are united and we are with you in defending your unity and peace.

The sit-in will denounce the sacrilege of all holy sites across Iraq. We cannot allow such violence to happen in our name, in the name of our religion. We will denounce all forms of violence and call for preserving the sanctity of all sacred sites in Iraq. We urge all people of conscience to join us in denouncing the violation of sanctity of human life and values in Iraq.

*Handed out during Call for Muslim Solidarity Sit-In by Society for Islamic Awareness (SIA) at UT Austin  
Last updated: March 15, 2006*