

IRAQ: CIVIL WAR ON THE INTERNET **PAUL EEDLE**

Window into the D

Some 32 journalists died last year alone while reporting on the war in Iraq. In this increasingly dangerous setting the internet is providing a window into the conflict. But internet postings tend to reflect the sectarian struggle. Are the increasingly bitter outpourings having an effect?

THE FACE OF A YOUNG SHI'A MUSLIM PREACHER IN A BLACK TURBAN and close cropped beard fills the screen, his voice cracking as he declares, 'The Imam orders you to kill. The Imam orders you to slaughter. The Imam orders you to defend what is sacred to you.'

The camera cuts to a young man with a bandaged head lying half naked on a bed, his voice so weak and slurred that subtitles are necessary. He murmurs, "They told us, "You are Sunnis. You are perverts. You are the people of Saddam Hussein."

This is a new propaganda video by Ansar al-Sunnah, the Supporters of the Way of the Prophet and one of the main Sunni Muslim insurgent groups in Iraq. It does not even mention the American occupying forces. Instead, for thirty minutes it displays what it says is evidence that the main Shi'a Muslim militia in Iraq, the Mahdi Army, is waging a vicious sectarian war against Sunni Muslims. It says Iran is supplying weapons and interrogators, and Shi'a-run police and army units are colluding in the killing.

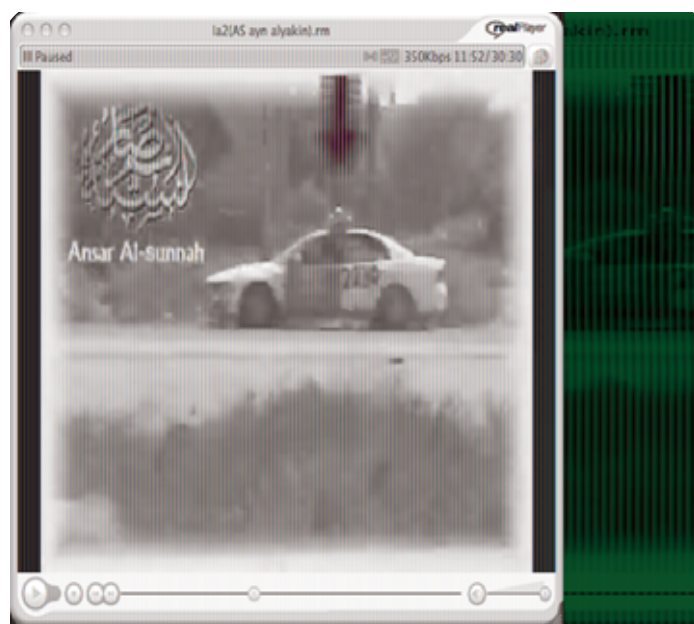
Sectarian Propaganda

Insurgent propaganda on the internet is finally reflecting clearly what any Iraqi living in Baghdad has seen for a year – that the main violence is now a sectarian civil war between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, not a largely Sunni insurgency against American and British forces and the Iraqi government.

The Sunni groups have regularly used sectarian language, accusing the 'renegades' – the Shi'a – in written statements and audio recordings of plotting to rule Iraq in the interests of America, Iran and Israel. Sunni politicians have distributed video footage of the bodies of Sunnis allegedly tortured and killed by Shi'a death squads, and of Sunnis held in secret Interior Ministry prisons.

But the Ansar film *The Eye of Certainty* takes anti-Shi'a propaganda to a new level. It is the most systematic attempt yet by a Sunni group to use video material to support accusations that Shi'a are deliberately exterminating Sunnis. Its most unusual elements are sequences filmed inside the Mahdi Army's world – the sermon by the young Shi'a preacher, who the video says is the Mahdi Army's representative at the great Shi'a shrine at Kadhemiya in northwest Baghdad, and scenes of black-shirted Mahdi Army militiamen dancing in a road as Iraqi police and army vehicles pass by, apparently unconcerned.

The film combines this material with testimonies from two badly injured men who said they survived Mahdi Army death squads. One said through a translator he was interrogated by Iranians in a well-known Shi'a mosque which was raided by United States troops last year. The other said he was detained at a checkpoint because his identity card had been issued in the largely Sunni governorate of Anbar. Both said they had been taken out with other men to be shot dead in rubbish dumps but by chance had survived.



To some extent, Shi'a material on the internet mirrors the Sunni propaganda. The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the biggest party in the Shi'a coalition which dominates the current government, has an area of its website devoted to The War of Annihilation against the People of the House – meaning the house of the Prophet Mohammed, that is the Shi'a.

The site carries media reports of attacks on Shi'a, and like Ansar al-Sunnah quotes its enemies to prove how sectarian they are. It republishes in full a statement last September by the Shoura Council of the Mujahedeen – an insurgent alliance including Al Qaeda in Iraq and now renamed 'The Islamic State' – urging Sunnis to fight 'the danger of the Renegades with their militias and their government apparatus and their filthy Safavid [that is, Iranian] plan to eliminate the Sunnis in Iraq and establish a Safavid Renegade state and achieve the dreams of their Ayatollahs in Qom and Isfahan.'

However, the SCIRI section on The War of Annihilation has not been updated for several months, and that is typical of the very different internet presence of the Sunni and Shi'a movements.

The main Sunni insurgent groups– the Islamic State, Ansar al-Sunnah and the Islamic Army – issue almost daily internet communiqués listing attacks on American forces and the Iraqi police and army. They upload dozens of videos ranging from short clips of American vehicles being blown up to hour-long documentaries with music and graphic effects. They have access to ten or more widely-known message board sites run by jihadi sympathisers where they can publish material and interact with recruiters and financiers in the outside world.

The Shi'a, by contrast, have all the media machinery of government to communicate their cause – official spokesmen, the state Al Iraqiya broadcasting network and a state-run daily

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newspaper, Al Sabah. Government websites are bland and formal: that of the Interior Ministry, accused by Sunnis of operating death squads, offers photos of policemen handing out school supplies to children and downloadable powerpoint presentations of statistics.

Public statements by Shi'a politicians are careful to avoid sectarian language, which would be unacceptable to the Americans on whom they depend. It would also undermine their claim to be leading a democratically-elected government of national unity representing Sunnis as well as Shi'a. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's regular condemnations of suicide bomb attacks on Shi'a civilians talk only of 'terrorists and Saddamists'.

Many ordinary Shi'a have lost patience with this vocabulary. After a massive suicide bombing at a Shi'a market in Sadriya in central Baghdad in February, Maliki issued a statement promising in routine fashion that 'the hand of justice will pursue those who carried out this vile crime'. This provoked contemptuous comments on a popular Shi'a internet message board, www.iraqcenter.net

'We want a Shi'a ruler on the model of Saddam. A criminal ruler who will kill in masses, who will slaughter, who will create mass graves for the Sunnis, who will demolish their shrines and makes slaves of their sons. This is the ruler who will be qualified to rescue the Shi'a from the situation they are in now,' one poster demanded. 'To war! To the shedding of blood! Anything that is sacred they violate. We have been silent before these cursed people too long. They have taken our silence as cowardice. To battle, and God curse anyone who calls for calm!'

Other Networks

The movement which might be expected to express the anger of alienated Shi'a, the Mahdi Army, has only the patchiest presence on the internet. I can find no currently active official site for either the Mahdi Army or its leader, Muqtada al-Sadr. Supporters run at least one outdated site and have uploaded a few old motivational videos to YouTube and Google Video, but that is all.

This may be because Sadr simply does not need the internet to reach his audience, which in any case includes many of the poorest and least educated, unlikely to have access even to an internet café let alone their own computer. Iraq's most senior Shi'a religious leaders have networks of representatives and offices throughout the country. Sadr is not one of them, but his father, Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr was the most revered Ayattollah in Iraq until he was assassinated in 1999 and the chain of offices he left now works for the son.

The most powerful piece of Shi'a propaganda on the internet may not even have been deliberate. Its impact has certainly been extremely negative for Shi'a politicians clinging to the legitimacy of an elected government.

This was the mobile phone footage of former President Saddam Hussein's execution, revealing the chants and taunts of Shi'a guards who watched the one-time dictator hanged in December. In official images, the proceedings seemed orderly. The phone footage showed a scene like a bear-baiting, with men shouting 'to hell, to hell!'

More than 2,500 copies have now been uploaded to different places on the internet, and the most-

viewed version has been seen more than sixteen million times, according to Google Video.

The indiscipline and indignity of the execution outraged Sunni Iraqis and caused an international outcry. The video has been proudly uploaded to YouTube by people who regard Saddam as a martyr. Was the leak condoned by senior officials so triumphant that they did not care if they handed Sunnis a propaganda gift? Or was it the independent act of a guard? If the government's investigation has been completed, the results have certainly not been published.

Murderous Hate

The execution video, though, is a rare example of Iraqi material on the internet having an indisputable effect on public opinion. The flood of material posted particularly by Sunni insurgents opens a valuable window into the heart of Iraq's civil war for foreign journalists and analysts for whom it is too dangerous to report at first hand. But there are reasons to doubt that it is playing a big part in shaping Iraqi opinions.

I travelled to several Arab countries late last year to make a film for Britain's Channel 4 about jihadi videos on the internet and their impact on young people. Even allowing for people lying to a foreign journalist, I found remarkably few young Arabs who consumed jihadi internet propaganda. But almost everyone I met was strongly influenced by what they saw every day on the ordinary television news – scenes of death and suffering in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon blamed on America, Israel and Britain.

'When I left home, it was when we heard that the US forces wanted to occupy Iraq. We were watching Al Jazeera,' said a Lebanese man who had volunteered to fight in Iraq and returned with his legs blown off. 'What we saw was an Arabic Islamic country being attacked, houses destroyed, people slaughtered, air strikes, innocent people killed. Our jihad was to protect our religion, our honour, our land, our integrity, and our freedom.'

The latest United Nations human rights report on Iraq said that 34,452 Iraqis were killed last year, most in sectarian violence. 30,842 were in detention, more than half in the hands of an Iraqi government which has been shown to be operating secret jails and abusing prisoners. 470,000 people were driven from their homes by sectarian cleansing.

Every one of these victims has a family and friends, so these figures mean that nobody in Iraq can now have escaped being personally touched by the sectarian civil war. It is killing, torture and terror, experienced among family and friends and seen on the daily television news, which is breeding murderous hatred between Sunnis and Shi'a in Iraq, not propaganda on the internet.



الغاية مجرم المحرم	المشاركة	الردود	المتابعون
واحدة تجوز العالم (1000000)	91,693	20,345	20,345
واحدة الخليفة	501	145	145
واحدة الشهيد الصدر (10000)	942	218	218
مكتبي الوثائق وطقوس الإنسان (10000)	750	231	231
واحدة الخليفة والوراثة الشيعي (10000)	2,755	459	459