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COMMENTARY

A Fatwa Against Violence

By ROBERT MCFARLANE

August 25, 2007

Cairo

Last week, I participated in a three day meeting here that included six of the most senior Iraqi Sunni and Shia religious leaders. At the meeting, held at a Marriott hotel in a Cairo suburb, they formally agreed to "end terrorist violence, and to disband militia activity in order to build a civilized country and work within the framework of law."

This gathering was a truly historic event, given the authority of the participants -- including Sheikh Ahmed al Kubaisi, acknowledged by all Iraqis as the senior Sunni religious authority (the weekly audience for his Friday sermons, broadcast from Dubai, number 20 million), and Ayatollah Sayyid Ammar Abu Ragheef, chief of staff for Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani, the acknowledged leader of the Shia community in Iraq and beyond. One has only to consider the power of these specific religious leaders, and the instruments at their disposal for getting results, to grasp the gathering's enormous potential importance.

Going well beyond traditional rhetoric in their closing statement late last week, they stated their intention to work for the early issuance of a joint Sunni-Shia fatwa to the Iraqi people. A fatwa such as this will carry the force of law for all followers. Think about that. After more than four years of brutal warfare and untold suffering, the leading religious authorities in Iraq have joined hands and said "Enough," and have committed to use their authority to bring peace to their country.

How does this relate to the Iraqi government and coalition forces? Can these clerics achieve anything concrete? If so how soon? And will it be enforceable?

Simply stated, these men -- all self-interested stewards of their separate Sunni and Shia constituencies -- have seen that their government's failure to act could lead Iraq into an irretrievable situation. They feel a moral imperative to fill the power vacuum. As for whether their actions will be taken seriously and be enforceable, the affirmative answer lies in the acknowledged role of the mosque, and of the grand ayatollahs and imams of the seniority represented here in Arab societies.

As additional evidence that Iraq's most senior religious leaders see the potential for catastrophe in prolonged violence unabated by government action, Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani has reached out to the most senior Sunni Imams and asked that they meet with him as soon as possible in

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Najaf, Iraq, to focus on peacemaking. Such an invitation by the most senior Shia for a meeting with the most senior Sunni is unprecedented in Iraq's history.

It was also noteworthy that these leaders included Sheikh Abdul Lateef Humayeem, the former personal iman to Saddam Hussein. Welcoming Mr. Humayeem to this very elite circle -- a religious board of directors in Iraq -- is a clear signal to former Baath civil servants and military officers that they will be welcome in the new Iraq.

Here in the West we tend to discount the role of religion in resolving disputes. Indeed our diplomatic tradition eschews involving religion -- or even mentioning it -- in diplomatic discourse. Clearly, however, its role is central in underpinning the sectarian violence in Iraq. U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, understands that, as well as the powerful role that religious leaders could play if they chose to do so. He has been a strong supporter -- as has the U.S. commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus -- of the painstaking process that preceded this meeting in Cairo. Nothing like this has ever occurred in Iraq's history -- and yet it is happening.

Going forward, the key leaders have agreed to a calendar of concrete actions starting with the unprecedented meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani in Najaf within two weeks. If that meeting goes well, it could lend momentum to the early development of the planned joint Sunni-Shia fatwa. Such a fatwa would stand as a historic milestone with profound meaning and effect on the Iraqi people.

To be fair, it was clear that one of the factors which motivated these very senior leaders to come together was their common goal of getting the U.S. out of Iraq -- obviously a goal we share, assuming we can achieve an acceptable degree of security before leaving. Just as important, however, was their alarm over growing Iranian influence in southern Iraq and the common sentiment among them that they do not want to be dominated by Iran.

This process of nurturing reconciliation by bringing Iraq's religious leaders together -- gradually in small groups leading to a conference this past June involving over 70 leaders, and devolving now here in Cairo to the six most senior clerics in all Iraq -- has been led by Canon Andrew White, an Anglican priest who has established his contacts and credibility with Iraqi leaders during more than nine years of service in Baghdad. Mr. White is a commanding presence and a man who deserves our prayers and support. The process he has organized and set in motion could mark a turning point in the wretched history of Iraq.

Mr. McFarlane was a national security advisor for President Ronald Reagan.

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