

Iraqi conflict a sectarian civil war:

We need to understand that much of the carnage stems from the majority Shia Muslims asserting their new-found power over their former oppressors, the Sunni Muslims

By Douglas Todd

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If your eyes glaze over at the daily headlines coming out of the Iraq war -- which invariably run something like "Iraqi insurgents kill 21... 80 ... 35 ... (fill in the blank)" -- you're not alone.

Human beings are an inconstant bunch. We often fail to identify with the suffering of strangers in a strange land. And we quickly grow tired of repetitive news.

But it isn't just this fickle side of human nature that makes us hurriedly flip the page after noting that scores of Iraqis and American soldiers are again being cut down in Iraq.

Another reason for the lack of engagement with Iraq's escalating battles and mass murders is that most journalists are not providing us with crucial religious context.

In their kill-count stories, for instance, media outlets are almost always failing to place the adjective "Sunni" before the word "insurgents."

It's rarely reported that more than 90 per cent of the insurgents in Iraq are Sunni Muslims.

Or that their targets are virtually always Shia Muslims.

Only about seven per cent of Iraq's insurgents, according to reliable scholars, are unrelated foreign jihadists, the type who would have travelled almost anywhere to join an insurrection against U.S. forces.

As a result, most media outlets are routinely losing an opportunity to explain the Iraq conflict is turning into a sectarian civil war defined largely by religion and ethnicity.

The ethno-religious motivations behind the suicide attacks, bombings, missile barrages and rising "disappearances" in Iraq are crucial because observers from all political camps are starting to recognize that defusing them is essential to ending hostilities and bringing stability.

In his debate-provoking comments this month, once-hawkish Congressman John Murtha, a decorated Vietnam veteran, said the U.S. presence in Iraq is exacerbating the Sunni insurgency, which has so far killed more than 2,100 U.S. troops and left 15,000 seriously wounded.

That's why the Pennsylvania Democrat is among those calling for a more representative government in Iraq, one not dominated by Shias. He also believes foreign troop withdrawals will lead Iraq's Sunnis to stop blaming the U.S. for all their problems.

"All of Iraq must know that Iraq is free," Murtha said, "free from a United States occupation, and I believe this will send a signal to the Sunnis to join the political process."

Even a Pentagon spokesman this week admitted the U.S. presence in Iraq is "inflaming Sunnis."

This week 100 leaders from Iraq's three main ethno-religious factions -- the Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs and Sunni Kurds -- also issued an unprecedented joint statement from Egypt calling for a "reconciliation conference" and U.S. troops to leave Iraq.

The Bush administration surprised some by cautiously welcoming the Cairo development.

With an estimated 30,000 to 125,000 Iraqis killed so far, Iraq's expanding ethno-religious civil war is making the age-old conflict between Irish Catholics and Protestants and even Israel's Muslims and Jews look in comparison like a mere fracas.

Here's a brief historical primer on religion and ethnicity in Iraq:

Iraq is different from most Muslim-dominated countries, in that Sunnis are not the majority.

Globally, Sunnis make up 85 per cent of the world's more than one billion Muslims, with the rest being Shia.

But the Sunni-Shia mix is turned around in Iraq. Only 20 per cent of Iraq's population is Arab Sunni.

The majority of Iraqis, 60 per cent, are Arab Shia.

They were persecuted by ousted dictator Saddam Hussein, who is Sunni. And although Hussein is widely considered to have been insincere about his devotion to the religious precepts of Sunni Islam, he took advantage of Sunni loyalties to build and brutally protect his power base.

Another 17 per cent of Iraq's population is Kurdish Sunni. They are an anomaly because the Sunni Kurds tend to live in northern Iraq, have some political autonomy and are generally lining up with the Shia because they also were oppressed by Hussein.

(The theological differences between Sunnis and Shia are not critical to understanding Iraq's conflict; they involve centuries-old disagreements over who is the proper successor to Mohammed, Islam's founder.)

The media, however, are missing most of this ethno-religious angle.

Most daily reports don't properly explain the vast majority of insurgency attacks are aimed at Shia targets -- including Shia politicians, Shia police, Shia neighbourhoods, Shia businesses, Shia mosques and Shia funerals.

And only a few in-depth articles are making clear that Shia Muslims are now largely in control of Iraq's government, police force, army and prisons, supported by 155,000 American troops as well as 10,000 mostly British soldiers. It is increasingly obvious many of those Shias are using their new-found powers to intimidate, terrorize and murder Sunnis.

Yet just a few reporters are filing stories about how the bodies of countless "disappeared" Sunni citizens are showing up in rivers and garbage dumps, often mutilated by power-drill holes, a current interrogation technique of Shia police.

The recent grim discovery by U.S. troops of 175 starving Sunnis in a secret Shia-run jail has simply added to Sunnis' already-feverish persecution fears.

And only a few media outlets are starting to detail a related tragedy -- that Sunni and Shia families that used to get along or tolerate each other are now fleeing once-mixed neighbourhoods, especially in Baghdad's suburbs. They're segregating themselves into their own ethnic-religious enclaves to escape sectarian-motivated attacks.

Revenge dominates the desert air.

Without understanding this worsening Sunni-Shia rivalry, however, we in North America are missing a huge part of the Iraq story.

Being a father with parenting responsibilities, I'm not lobbying for the dangerous overseas assignment -- but it's clear the western world could use a few savvy religion reporters filing from the front lines of this agonizingly divided country.