Iraq

Response to Information Request Number:	IRQ02002.REF
Date:	May 23, 2002
Subject:	Iraq: Information on Followers of Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Iraq / Clergy / Dissidents / Extrajudicial execution / Political opposition

Query:

Is there any evidence of radicalism, anti-American views, or advocacy of violence among the followers of assassinated cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr?

Response:

There is no hard evidence of radicalism among the followers of Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, the moderate Iraqi Shiite cleric who was assassinated in 1999, according to experts consulted by the RIC. They add, however, that al-Sadr enjoyed broad support among the diverse Iraqi Shiite population, making it difficult to be sure if individual followers share his moderate religious views.

Al-Sadr attracted a wide following among Iraqi Shiites because of his calls for Saddam Hussein's regime to release detainees and ease repression, according to a senior program officer for the Middle East and North Africa at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington. The program officer said that al-Sadr was not identified with any particular political ideology. Al-Sadr also did not lead any formal organization, the program officer added, although many Shiite imams were loosely affiliated with him (NED 23 May 2002).

The program officer noted that al-Sadr's broad support among Iraqi Shiites makes it impossible to know for sure the views of individual followers. He added, however, that the slain cleric had no connection to armed Shiite groups operating in southern Iraq (NED 23 May 2002).

A desk officer for Iraq at the U.S. State Department, said that al-Sadr's moderate brand of Shiite Islam was somewhat comparable to the relatively tolerant religious outlook of Iranian president Mohammad Khatami, also a Shiite. He said, however, that al-Sadr was not pro-Teheran and did not call for the imposition of Islamic law. He described al-Sadr as the most prominent Iraqi Shiite cleric at the time of his death, and an independent religious figure who could have vied for the leadership of the Shiite branch of Islam. This made al-Sadr something of a threat to Iran's clergy, the desk officer said (USDOS 21 May 2002).

Like the NED program officer, the State Department Iraq desk officer said that there is no evidence that al-Sadr's followers have anti-American or other radical views, while noting that it is hard to be sure of the views of individual al-Sadr supporters (USDOS 21 May 2002).

In his last sermon, al-Sadr criticized government restrictions on religious freedom, according to the London-based Amnesty International. Al-Sadr also called for the release

of Shiite clerics detained by the regime (AI 24 Nov. 1999).

The State Department Iraq desk officer said that al-Sadr also angered the Iraqi regime by refusing to put pro-government propaganda into his Friday sermons (USDOS 21 May 2002).

An Iraq researcher at Amnesty International said that her organization believes that the Iraqi regime was behind the death of al-Sadr as well as other Shiite leaders. Like the other experts, she said there is no way of knowing for sure whether al-Sadr's supporters adhere to the generally moderate views of their slain leader (AI 23 May 2002).

Al-Sadr was 56 years old when armed men killed him and his two sons on the night of February 19, 1999, in the southern Iraqi town of al-Najaf (AI 24 Nov. 1999).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

References:

Amnesty International (AI). Researcher, Gulf Team. Telephone interview (London: 21 May 2002).

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