

Silence and Suicide

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By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

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If I were editor of this newspaper, I would have led last Thursday's issue with the news report, under a big headline, saying that a Sunni Muslim suicide bomber attacked the Shiite mosque in Hilla, Iraq, on Wednesday - the Shiites' first day of Ramadan - and blew himself up, killing at least 25 worshipers and wounding more than 87. The worshipers had come to the mosque not only to mark the start of the Muslim holy month, but also to mourn a Shiite restaurant owner who had been killed by insurgents a few days earlier. According to The A.P., "The explosion hit the Husseiniyat Ibn al-Nama mosque, ripping through strings of light bulbs and green and red flags hung around the entrance to celebrate the start of the holy month."

This attack, which got scant attention, deserved much, much more because it's the essence of the terrorism problem we now face. When a Sunni Muslim jihadist blows up a Shiite mosque - a mosque - during Ramadan - Ramadan - and virtually no one in the Sunni world utters a word of condemnation, it means there is no controlling moral authority in the Sunni Muslim community anymore.

When Sunni Muslim insurgents have no respect for the sanctity of Muslim lives, Muslim houses of worship or Muslim holy days - and no one from their own wider Sunni community really moves to restrain or censure them - then there are no boundaries anymore. No one is safe. Anything goes, against anyone, anywhere. If the Sunni Muslim world does not act to halt this genocidal ethnic-cleansing campaign against the Shiites of Iraq, which this week included a teacher's being dragged from a classroom and shot in front of his students, the Sunni world will eventually be consumed by this very violence. A civilization that tolerates suicide bombing is itself committing suicide.

Inexplicably to me, the Bush team, which has finally settled on the right rationale for the war in Iraq - to help Arabs carve out a space in the heart of their world where they can create a decent, progressive future, instead of drifting aimlessly under autocrats and worshipping a glorious past - is equally silent. Instead of going to the U.N. and seeking a resolution declaring the Sunni terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his ilk war criminals, it sends Karen Hughes around the Arab world to get flagellated by Sunni Muslim women for how awful we are.

The Bush team calls that "public diplomacy." I call it losing a public relations war to mass murderers.

Yes, we, too, are hypocrites. I think the U.S. abuses of prisoners of war in Iraq and Afghanistan (we apparently tortured to death scores of prisoners in our custody) is a

lasting blot on us all. But at least we have news media, a religious elite and courts that are exposing this, and a Senate majority that is now acting to bring it to a halt.

As Human Rights Watch noted in an Oct. 3 report, U.S. abuses in Iraq cannot justify the deliberate attacks by Iraqi insurgents on civilians, which "are serious violations of international humanitarian law - war crimes - and in some cases they are crimes against humanity. ... Not only should all insurgent groups in Iraq cease such attacks, but the political and religious leaders in Iraq and other countries who have expressed support for the insurgency should condemn the targeting of civilians."

But try to find an Arab head of state, or a major Sunni Arab cleric, who has consistently and repeatedly condemned Zarqawi or bin Laden by name. There are very, very few. Oh, yes, they arrest these jihadists in their own countries. But they rarely take them on - head on - in the war of ideas, because they are afraid of their own Sunni fundamentalists, many of whom tacitly support the war on Shiites.

And that is a real problem. Because there is only one way to stop this terrorism we are seeing from Indonesia to Iraq and from Madrid to London: it takes a village. It will stop only when the religious and political leaders, and parents, in these Sunni Muslim communities delegitimize it and anyone who engages in it.

Western leaders keep saying after every terrorist attack, "This is not about Islam." Sorry, but this is all about Islam. It is about a war within Islam between a jihadist-fascist minority engaged in crimes against humanity in the name of Islam, and a passive Sunni silent majority. Many of those Sunnis, I'm sure, are appalled by the violence against Iraqi civilians, but are too afraid, too morally leaderless or too quietly anti-Shiite to act.

As I said, a civilization that tolerates suicide-genocide will eventually be devoured by its extremists from within - and quarantined by its friends from abroad.