

Unite To Stop The Isis Crisis Engulfing The Muslim World

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By Ahmed Rashid

The meltdown of the Iraqi state, resulting from the military successes of renegade Sunni extremist group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis), could lead to a [Sunni-Shia sectarian war](#) across the entire Muslim world - if Isis succeeds in reaching the Shia holy cities of Karbala and Najaf.

Isis has vowed to destroy the Shia shrines in those cities and threatens a genocidal campaign against all Shias. Such a move could inspire Sunni militants to attack Shias everywhere, while forcing Shia militants to take revenge on Sunnis across the globe. There is little the vast majority of peaceful Muslims around the world would be able to do. Aside from [Iraq](#) and Syria, Shia-Sunni sectarian warfare is under way in Yemen, Pakistan and Bahrain. Tensions are high in other states, especially the in Arabian Gulf and Saudi Arabia, where Shias are a minority.

The blood-curdling audio statement by Abu Mohammed al-Adnani of Isis at the weekend is an uncompromising appeal for a permanent state of sectarian war and the mass killing of Shias. "We need to settle our differences with you," his statement read. "These differences go back a long way. We will settle our differences not in Samarra or Baghdad but in Karbala, the filth-ridden city and in Najaf, the city of polytheism."

This makes it clear that Isis is not just after taking over the capital Baghdad or seizing power - its agenda is far more wide-ranging, and affects Muslims everywhere.

The two holy cities hold the burial sites of the founders of the Shia branch of Islam and the graves of other prominent Shias. The cities' mosques, which Isis would no doubt destroy, are revered only second to the mosques of Mecca and Medina. The Americans took great pains to protect these mosques when they invaded Iraq.

Tens of thousands of Shia travel from across the world, but particularly [Iran](#), to pray at Karbala and Najaf. That traffic has now ceased - but tens of thousands of Shia pilgrims from all over the world are stuck in Iraq because the country is now a battlefield. They will become easy victims for Isis if it continues to expand its territory. Even though al-Qaeda had intense hatred for the Shia, it never called for the complete destruction of Shia holy sites or wholesale genocide. During the Iraq war in the previous decade, leaders of the group based in Pakistan frequently admonished Arab allies for killing too many Shia.

In that sense Isis has gone several steps further in its aim to wipe out Shia, thereby distancing itself considerably from al-Qaeda. Whatever atrocities Isis commits will reverberate widely across the Islamic world, where sectarian tensions are already high. Certainly nothing could be worse than the destruction of the holy sites in Karbala and Najaf, a move that could be comparably worse than Genghis Khan's destruction of Arab cities in the 13th century.

This looming catastrophe calls for a united response from the Muslim world but it is nowhere in sight. First, Iran, the leading Shia state, and Saudi Arabia, the leading Sunni state, where the Prophet Mohammed is buried, should immediately put aside their squabbles and address the crisis.

They should jointly enlist the backing of the Organization of the Islamic Conference to support Muslim states in engaging Isis in some kind of dialogue and also to consider ways and means to protect the two cities. Although it may sound far-fetched, these states should be thinking of putting together a force of Muslim military peace keepers to protect the cities.

This should clearly be a joint Sunni-Shia endeavor. It would be abhorrent to consider that only Iranian forces and Shia militias would protect these cities from Isis because such a step would truly inflame what is already the worst sectarian crisis ever to convulse the Muslim world.