

## Fighting Insurgency on Sacred Ground

In April 2003, a U.S. platoon en route to the house of a local Shi'a leader in the Iraqi city of Najaf lowered its weapons and knelt down "in a surreal act of submission," surrounded by an angry crowd of 200 residents. The locals, convinced that the soldiers' intended target was the nearby Shrine of Ali, had blocked the platoon and exclaimed, "In the city, okay. In the mosque, no!" An astute U.S. military officer, recognizing the explosive potential of the situation, commanded his troops to disarm and kneel down and began gesturing reassuringly to the gathering mob. The tense standoff concluded with the careful retreat of the U.S. military unit.<sup>1</sup>

This anecdote is just one example of the pervasive and global phenomenon of conflicts over sacred places. Violence has erupted over the ownership of sacred sites; the desecration or destruction of tombs, temples, churches, mosques, and shrines; and demands for free exercise of controversial rituals on pilgrim routes or burial grounds. Appealing to religious absolutes, conflicts at sacred sites mobilize tribal, nationalist, and ethnic sentiments, inciting violence that spreads rapidly beyond the structure's physical boundaries. In regions such as South Asia, the Balkans, and the Middle East, where political and religious interests often coincide, disputes over these sites have also sparked interethnic riots and armed confrontations that have exacerbated preexisting conflicts. These antagonisms are often at the core of long-standing disputes, thwarting attempts at peaceful resolution by creating intractable challenges and offering spoilers opportunities to escalate violence.<sup>2</sup> In Iraq, for example, mosques are becoming the locus of sectarian conflict between Iraq's Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, mani-

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fested by mutual attacks on crowded mosques or attempts to assassinate religious and secular leaders during prayer.

The issue of sacred sites in Iraq has also given rise to a unique dilemma for U.S. military operations. Increasingly, Iraqi insurgents are using their own mosques as tactical bases in their irregular war against the U.S. military. By launching direct attacks on U.S. troops from the interior of mosques, the insurgents have placed U.S. forces in a precarious position: choose between desecrating a sacred space or restrict their fighting to respect the opponent's religious sensibilities. If they choose the latter option, U.S. soldiers place themselves in greater harm and risk the insurgents' escape. The U.S. military has responded with an uneasy compromise, often sacrificing the success of a mission for the integrity of a sacred site, but just as often arresting or killing insurgents and incurring the wrath of the Iraqi population for the destruction of a venerated local shrine. U.S. troops can ameliorate this dilemma by learning from the experience of other states, such as India and Israel, which have conducted successful counterinsurgency operations near sacred sites. The most important lesson to be drawn from these precedents as well as from U.S. military operations in Iraq today is that preventive and postaction measures taken by military commanders can have a greater impact on the success of an operation than any attempts to constrain the actual use of force at a sacred site.

## **The Challenge of Sacred Space**

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Sacred places have religious as well as political significance for the communities seeking to protect them. To avoid alienating the local population, decisionmakers who wish to execute successful counterinsurgency operations need some basic understanding of the meaning of sacred space, the rules governing access to such spaces as well as behavior within them, and the implications of breaching these rules.

Worshippers consider sacred spaces to be sites at which the heavenly and the earthly meet, providing meaning to the faithful by metaphorically reflecting the underlying order of the world. They are places where believers can communicate with divinity through prayer, movement, or visual contact and where there is a divine presence, often promising healing, success, or salvation. Such qualities set them apart from secular or profane spaces. This distinction is underscored and upheld by rules and practices that regulate access to and behavior within sacred sites, including gestures that one makes when approaching the threshold of a sacred site such as ablution and removing shoes. Additional codes dictate apparel and prohibit a narrow range of activities within the sanctuary or forbid all but a narrow range of

behavior. Carrying weapons, using force, and shedding blood, for example, are strictly prohibited within a mosque. The religious community views failure to abide by these rules as sacrilege that can incur the wrath of the divine. Even though actions taken by a religious community to defend a sacred site from desecration or destruction are driven by religious precepts, they are essentially political because they involve monitoring access to the site and policing behavior within it. Sacred places thus translate abstract religious ideas into concrete political action and even violence.

Desecration, the transgression of the boundary between the sacred and the profane, is more than just an offense to the sensibilities of those who revere a sacred site. Believers view such an action as a tangible assault on the status of the site that, if successful, can strip it of its sanctity. The Bible and the Qur'an are replete with examples of sacred sites that have been defiled and rendered profane by inappropriate behavior. These texts also provide painstaking descriptions of the complex procedures required for cleansing and reconsecrating sites. As a consequence, believers have used force to prevent the desecration of their holy places or to avenge such transgressions.

**Iraqi insurgents are increasingly using their own mosques as tactical bases.**

Understandably, the physical destruction of sacred places in the course of combat has unleashed the greatest protest in the Muslim world. During the Persian Gulf War in 1991, Saddam Hussein purportedly tried to exploit this sensitivity by destroying Iraqi mosques, including the al-Basrah mosque in Baghdad, to inflame Muslim public opinion against the United States.<sup>3</sup> Although U.S. officials managed to avert an international outcry in that particular situation by providing photographic evidence that exposed Saddam's ploy, Muslim anger and humiliation in response to images of damaged mosques has played into the hands of anti-U.S. forces in the Middle East and beyond.

Yet, even if U.S. soldiers seek to minimize damage to shrines, they face diverse and often subjective sets of rules governing access to and behavior in these sacred spaces, in addition to the obvious tactical challenges, which can foil even the most well-intentioned combatant. Soldiers offend the religious community when they disregard the required gestures of approach, such as ritual ablution, the removal of shoes, and the discarding of weapons. Once inside the mosque, soldiers can trigger indignation in an endless variety of ways, including acting or talking inappropriately, handling items considered sacrosanct, consuming foods prohibited by Islam, spitting, smoking, or even posing irreverently for the media.

International law poses additional challenges to combat operations near sacred sites. The Hague Convention includes admonitions against damaging sites of historical or cultural value, a prohibition that applies to many of Iraq's ancient and beautiful shrines. More importantly, to minimize harm to civilians, the Geneva conventions prohibit attacks on public spaces, such as schools, hospitals, and religious sites. This prohibition is particularly relevant to the case of mosques in Iraq. Because of the pivotal function performed by these sites in Iraqis' lives, civilians are at risk of becoming the primary victims in any attack on a mosque. Any transgression of these requirements is likely to inflame not only regional but also world opinion. The difficulty in complying with these norms thus challenges U.S. attempts to win both hearts and minds in the Muslim world and support from Western allies.

## **Sacred Space and Insurgency in Iraq**

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In successfully executing counterinsurgency operations near mosques, U.S. troops must strike a difficult balance between alienating the local population by desecrating sacred sites and responding to the tactical use of those same sites by insurgents.

### **IRAQI GRIEVANCES**

In Iraq, fighting near mosques has resulted in a consistent outcry over the desecration of sacred space by U.S. forces. Sahar Muhammad Abdullah, a 23-year-old resident of Falluja, recounted his emotional response to the state of the Abdul Aziz al-Samarrai mosque after a U.S. military operation in November 2004. Abdullah had suffered gunshot wounds from U.S. Marines occupying the mosque and was carried into the building's interior to receive treatment from a U.S. medic. He later recounted his impressions on entering the mosque: "I forgot all my pain when I saw the condition of the mosque. ... I saw the Americans sitting on boxes full of Korans, and at that moment I wanted to grab one of them and kill him. I would have preferred to stay in the car bleeding rather than witness that scene."<sup>4</sup>

Iraqi objections can be grouped into two categories, relating either to the behavior of U.S. soldiers within mosques or to the very presence of non-Muslims in or near mosques. The former objections result from the failure of U.S. soldiers to comply with the requirements of *tahara* (ritual cleanliness) on entry. Such regulations vary by scenario, however, as well as by individual believers' subjective interpretations. Some revered Muslim jurists have prohibited the consumption of pungent foods such as onions or garlic before entering a mosque because of the potential offense to the olfactory sensibili-

ties of other worshippers. By contrast, other jurists have demonstrated little concern in response to incidents of urination in mosques or to the presence of stray animals.<sup>5</sup> In respecting Muslim concerns over purity in mosques, U.S. soldiers thus face a twin dilemma. On one hand, it is difficult to determine which actions are likely to cause offense. On the other hand, some actions that will clearly cause offense are entirely unavoidable from an operational standpoint: barefoot and unarmed soldiers cannot be expected to pursue insurgents successfully.

U.S. troops must also contend with widely varying interpretations and perceptions of what constitutes significant damage to shrines. Iraqis and other Muslims around the world were outraged when mosques in Falluja, Kufa, and Samarra were severely damaged, particularly when these attacks caused significant civilian casualties. Yet, Iraqis also erupted in protest in August 2003 when a U.S. helicopter blew away a flag from the minaret of a mosque, an incident that unleashed violent protests and resulted in multiple Iraqi casualties.<sup>6</sup>

The very presence of non-Muslims in mosques poses similarly daunting problems. The Qur'an states that "idolaters have no right to visit the mosques of Allah,"<sup>7</sup> but this pronouncement leaves open the question of who constitutes an idolater and whether the absence of a right constitutes an outright prohibition. Many Muslim jurists have interpreted the injunctions narrowly as referring to polytheists, concluding that Jews and Christians may enter mosques on invitation.

Civil and customary law in Muslim states has sometimes extended the restriction on non-Muslim access from the boundaries of a shrine to the city in which a shrine is located or to the entire region surrounding the shrine. Consequently, protests in Muslim states have occurred in opposition to the presence of U.S. soldiers in Iraqi cities known for their sacred sites, such as Najaf and Karbala. Indeed, several Muslim movements hold the extreme position that any non-Muslim presence on Muslim lands constitutes sacrilege. Osama bin Laden expressed this opinion in his initial call for jihad against the United States, which he justified in terms of the U.S. presence in "the land of the two sanctuaries," a reference to Saudi Arabia, where the great mosques of Mecca and Medina are located. A similar position has been embraced by radical opponents of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, who consider the very presence of U.S. troops in the Persian Gulf an affront to Islam and compare it with the Crusades or the Mongol invasion of Iraq.

**Utilizing Iraqi soldiers to secure mosques' interiors provides a partial solution at best.**

## INSURGENTS' STRATEGIC USE OF MOSQUES

These Iraqi objections to U.S. behavior toward sacred sites, although genuine, have played into the hands of insurgents in Iraq. The insurgents have consistently exploited U.S. reluctance to execute standard operations near mosques for fear of a public backlash. The most elementary manner is by making these sites centers for rallying public support for the insurgency. Sunni clerics have used their podiums at large mosques in Baghdad, such as Abu Hanifa and Umm al-Qura, to exhort the population to join the insur-

gency and call for a holy war against U.S. soldiers. In the early stages of the war, it was common to hear calls for jihad over mosque loudspeakers, particularly in mosques located in such cities as Samarra and Falluja, where U.S. forces were conducting particularly intense operations. Through their contribution to the anti-U.S. recruitment effort, such appeals can have a long-term negative effect on the counterinsurgency campaign.

**India and Israel have also had to deal with insurgencies focused on sacred shrines.**

In the short term, however, the presence of pro-insurgency clerics in Iraqi mosques seems to pose no immediate threat to U.S. operations, and no drastic steps have been taken to curtail their activities.

The use of mosques to store ammunition poses a more significant challenge. In mosques throughout Baghdad, Karbala, Kufa, and Mosul, U.S. forces have found explosives and bomb-making materials, rifles, machine guns, bullets, mortars and rounds, rocket-propelled grenades and launchers, anti-U.S. propaganda, and pro-insurgency documents. Although at times weapons were well concealed within the mosque, the quantity and quality of weapons discovered in some cases leaves no doubt that worshippers were well aware of their presence and location. The storage of weapons in mosques was most apparent in Falluja where, according to one U.S. military report, more than 20 of the city's 133 mosques contained caches of weapons or were used as bases for insurgency operations.<sup>8</sup> U.S. forces made one of their greatest discoveries on November 24, 2004, when they entered the mosque headed by radical Sunni cleric and insurgent leader Abdullah Janabi. According to one report, the complex, which was rigged to explode and had to be disarmed by a U.S. team of experts, was "packed with bombs, guns, rocket-propelled grenades and ammunition," as well as "an aluminum shed full of mortars and TNT" and even "an ice cream truck, decorated with orange, red, and blue popsicles and packed with rocket-propelled grenades and bomb-making materials."<sup>9</sup>

Finally, enemy fire directed at U.S. troops from inside mosques poses the greatest difficulty for U.S. operations in Iraq. Since the onset of the

military campaign, the media have reported scores of incidents in which U.S. forces have come under fire originating from the interior of mosques. In most cases, insurgents have used rifles or rocket-propelled grenades to target soldiers from inside or from the mosques' minarets. Often, conflicts between soldiers and insurgents end with the latter's retreat into the apparent safety of the mosque and a final clash at the site. In several instances, news coverage of the ensuing clashes has omitted references to the insurgents' deliberate choice of these mosques as battle sites, reporting only the U.S. infringement on Muslim sacred space.<sup>10</sup>

Shi'a cleric Moktada al-Sadr has been particularly adept at exploiting sacred sites for his personal safety and the security of his militia. In April 2004, he successfully avoided capture by U.S. troops by seeking refuge in a mosque in Kufa, guarded by militiamen armed with heavy machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. Al-Sadr then moved to the most sacred Shi'a shrine in Iraq, the Imam Ali Shrine in Najaf. Ignoring calls by Iraq's then-prime minister, Ayad Allawi, to leave the mosque, al-Sadr remained within the shrine and continued to call for war against U.S. forces.<sup>11</sup>

## **The Spectrum of U.S. Responses**

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The aborted siege of the Imam Ali Shrine in Najaf, in which al-Sadr's forces sought refuge, represents one extreme end of the spectrum of U.S. policy: situations in which U.S. troops abandon operations altogether for fear of harming a sacred shrine. Although U.S. military helicopters and jets targeted houses around the mosque and U.S. Marines conducted intense combat in the adjacent cemetery, the marines received explicit instructions not to fire at the shrine. Predictably, the insurgents eventually withdrew into the shrine itself. After eight days, U.S. forces withdrew completely from the site in response to intense pressure from Arab and Muslim leaders worldwide. They were replaced by Iraqi policemen who, thanks to intervention by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, were able to enter the shrine and disarm al-Sadr's men.

In all cases, U.S. soldiers operate under orders that prohibit raids on mosques unless insurgents are using these sites for hostile purposes. As then-Secretary of State Colin Powell explained, "We understand the sacred place in the life of Islam that mosques occupy. ... [O]ur commanders are extremely sensitive to anything that would violate that concept."<sup>12</sup> Although claiming the right to attack mosques and shrines used as bases, U.S. troops have ceased pursuit of insurgents when they seek refuge inside at other times as well. The United States has refrained from sending soldiers into the Shrines of Hussein and Abas in Karbala for fear that a U.S. troop presence in these sacred sites would inflame the Shi'a population.<sup>13</sup> When U.S. sol-

diers decide to pursue operations despite proximity to a mosque, they often try to minimize the harm to the site even when insurgents are using it for military purposes. When a target for aerial bombing is in the vicinity of a shrine, for example, the military reportedly allots additional time and caution to allow laser spotters to identify and “paint” targets.

With progress in the training of Iraqi security forces, U.S. troops have increasingly transferred responsibility for operations within a mosque to their Iraqi counter-

terparts, especially when the shrine is one of particular importance or popularity. When they attacked a mosque in Falluja that served as an insurgents’ command center, for example, “the marines opened the doors of the mosque for Iraqi security forces to clear out the interior; it was thought better to let the Iraqis go into the holy place, even though it had been transformed into a kind of barracks. The Iraqis entered, their uniforms crisp and spotless because they had done none of the

**Decisionmakers should become acquainted with unique religious dimensions of each situation.**

fighting until then, and fought with the insurgents and won.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, utilizing Iraqi soldiers to secure mosques’ interiors provides a partial solution at best. Given their inferior training, Iraqi soldiers are no less likely to damage structures or injure innocent civilians inside mosques. Consequently, Iraqi forces are equally hesitant to operate within shrines and at times have even refused outright.<sup>15</sup>

At the other end of the continuum of U.S. responses lie cases in which U.S. forces have attacked sacred sites with full knowledge of the destruction that was likely to result. Although in some cases the damage to or destruction of shrines appears accidental, at other times U.S. forces have fought fire with fire. To prevent insurgents from returning to mosques from which they have been expelled, U.S. forces have also taken over the structures and positioned themselves on their rooftops or minarets. This strategy has pervasively led to insurgent attacks on mosques that are being used as bases of U.S. operations. On April 1, 2005, insurgents blew up the top of the Malwiya minaret, one of Iraq’s most important heritage sites, because U.S. forces were using the 1,000-year-old sandstone tower as a sniper’s nest.

All-out attacks by U.S. forces at sacred sites have tended to occur after particularly significant, difficult, or drawn-out battles with insurgents situated inside. In April 2004, for example, U.S. Marines attacked the Abdul Aziz al-Samarrai mosque in Falluja with Hellfire missiles and two 500-pound bombs. Lieutenant Colonel Brennan Byrne claimed that between 30 and 40 insurgents had been firing at marines from the mosque, explaining that, “if they use the mosque as a military machine, then it’s no longer a house of worship and we strike.”<sup>16</sup>



## Lessons for the U.S. Military

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To avoid continuing the ad hoc U.S. response to insurgents' use of sacred sites, to confront the current insurgency in Iraq effectively, and to minimize the alienation of the local population resulting from damage to or desecration of sacred sites, it would be wise to study the experience of other governments that have confronted insurgencies at such sites. India and Israel, in particular, have had to address insurgencies focused on sacred shrines. Similar to today's U.S. soldiers in Iraq, Indian forces operating in the Punjab or in Kashmir, as well as Israeli forces operating in the West Bank, have had to confront insurgents at sites associated with a religion other than their own, yet sacred both to the insurgents and a hostile local population. The experiences of these two states, along with the lessons the United States can draw from its experience in Iraq to date, offer four core lessons regarding the most sensible way to respond to insurgents' strategic use of mosques.

### LESSON I: THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

Before searching or attacking a sacred site, decisionmakers should do their utmost to become acquainted with the religious dimensions of the situation. They should learn the rules that restrict access to a particular site and dictate behavior within it; Shi'a and Sunni sites are governed by distinct sets of rules regarding access and behavior. Appropriate conduct in sacred places is constrained by customary rules that vary from site to site and are no less important than the formal letter of the law. Decisionmakers should also study the shrine's configuration, as well as which elements of the shrine are most vulnerable to desecration. Commanders should expect some parts of the shrine to be more important to believers than others.

One crucial step that must precede any operation in or near a shrine is to assess the site's importance as a whole. The more important the site, the greater the likelihood that access has been strictly limited, the range of permitted actions within the shrine circumscribed, and the rules extended to encompass space beyond the actual structure. Yet, evaluating the importance of a sacred site can prove a difficult task. From the believers' perspective, a site's value is a composite of formal factors and subjective, regional preferences. Muslim voices outside Iraq are most likely to protest attacks on widely popular sites, such as the largest or oldest mosques in Iraq. The three Shi'a shrines in Karbala and Najaf would rank highest on this scale. Local resistance, however, is just as likely to occur in response to threats against minor sites that enjoy local popularity or that play a particularly important role in a community's daily activities, such as shrines that are associated with a revered local saint, sites renowned for their miracles or cures, or

places that provide essential employment, welfare, and social services to the surrounding community.

Military commanders should also carefully consider the time and date chosen for military action. Believers will respond with greater vehemence to attacks that display a lack of sensitivity to prescribed times of prayer, dates

of fasting and celebration, anniversaries, and holy days, regardless of whether congregants are actually present at the mosque when military operations commence. Additional key dates may include the beginning and middle of the month and year, points of seasonal transition, and commemorations of otherwise minor events that the community holds dear, such as the founding of the shrine or dates associated with the shrine's namesake.

**Consulting religious leaders at all levels can provide key facts about the targeted site.**

Indian authorities learned this lesson in their disastrous confrontation of a Sikh insurgency in the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar.<sup>17</sup> In 1980, an extremist preacher and leader of a radical Sikh separatist movement, Sant Jarnail Bhindranwale, sought refuge from the Indian police in this most sacred Sikh temple. Over the course of four years, Bhindranwale's forces turned the temple into a fortified stronghold, replete with fortified machine gun nests and ammunition depots. In 1984, Indian special forces began planning a complex operation focused on eliminating the insurgents without damaging the most revered buildings inside the shrine. The architectural layout of the site posed a significant challenge to their task: the temple complex consists of a large rectangular courtyard with a single entrance embracing an artificial lake that holds the Golden Temple in its center. Bhindranwale's men took full advantage of this arrangement by assuming positions in or near the most revered of these structures.

The operation, code-named Operation Blue Star, was a disaster on all fronts. After suffering extreme losses in an initial attack, the Indian army threw all restraint to the wind, employing six tanks and approximately 80 high-explosive squash-head shells to reduce the preacher's fortified positions to rubble. This attack led to the surrender of the insurgents and to Bhindranwale's martyrdom, but it also destroyed many of the ancient structures in the temple complex and burned invaluable manuscripts housed inside. Six months after the event, Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, unleashing months of sectarian riots across India.

Aside from the damage to the temple and the sacrilegious behavior of soldiers within the complex, the Indian government's insensitivity, as demonstrated by the date chosen for the operation, ranks high among the factors that exacerbated the public response. The date of the attack marked the

martyrdom of the Sikh guru and founder of the temple, Guru Anjun, who had undergone religious persecution and was ultimately executed, an act marking the evolution of the Sikh movement from one of pacifist reform to ritual militancy. When the attack occurred, Amritsar was crowded with visitors who were there to commemorate the day. The attack also coincided with the fifth day of a lunar month, a particularly auspicious day for bathing in the temple's lake. One thousand pilgrims lost their lives.

## **LESSON 2: CONSULT RELIGIOUS LEADERS**

After Operation Blue Star's failure, reporters asked Sikh religious leaders why they had not issued an edict to oust the insurgents from the Golden Temple. One Sikh high priest replied, "No one complained to me about this matter."<sup>18</sup> There is no indication that the Indian government ever discussed the crisis with the religious leaders in charge of the Golden Temple or attempted to compel their cooperation. Had government officials done this, they would have learned at the very least that the hostel at which Bhindranwale had resided during the first weeks of the operation, although near the temple, was not considered by Sikhs to be part of the sacred temple complex. The government's reluctance to apprehend him there, based on its ignorance of the temple's precise boundaries, would ultimately end in the deaths of thousands.

The religious implications of military operations at mosques are notoriously complex, often vague or contradictory, always perplexing, and yet also significant. The most obvious means of navigating this religious-legal minefield is by eliciting the assistance of qualified guides. Religious leaders at all levels from the imam of the mosque in question or a neighboring mosque to a leading religious actor at the state level to a religious expert in another Muslim country or even in the United States can provide key facts about the targeted site, its meaning to worshippers, existing restrictions on access and behavior, and crucial information about sensitive times and dates. Although religious leaders should not be expected to cooperate enthusiastically with military commanders who are plotting assaults on their mosques, the leaders should be willing to provide information that can help minimize damage to its most important elements, keep believers out of harm's way, and reduce the risk of sacrilege and desecration.

In October 1993, the Indian military demonstrated that it had learned this lesson in Amritsar when it confronted 40 Kashmiri insurgents armed with rifles, machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenades who had sought refuge in the Hazratbal mosque. The most sacred Muslim shrine in Kashmir, it is home to a hair of the Prophet Muhammad, a sacred relic.<sup>19</sup> Rather than attack the shrine, the Indian military sealed off all access and isolated the

site from the rest of the town. Government representatives then initiated a month-long negotiation process with the insurgents, involving local authorities and religious leaders at various levels, and publicly affirming the desire to safeguard the shrine and its sacred relic. Cooperation with local leaders helped evacuate civilians residing near the shrine and led to the eventual resolution of the crisis with no harm to the shrine, the combatants, or innocent bystanders. Despite violent local protests against the Indian military during the siege, resulting in the massacre of Kashmiri civilians in at least one case, the sensitivity with which Indian authorities resolved the standoff seemed to have contained Kashmiri antagonism toward the government at the time.

**Surgical strikes that set the integrity of the shrine as the primary goal are doomed to fail.**

Yet, two years later at a siege at the Charare-Sharif mosque in southern Kashmir in March 1995, the Indian government reverted to its mistakes of the previous decade. In this case, the government made no attempt to contact

local representatives and religious leaders or to win the support of the local population. Instead, negotiations were left to the military commanders who had laid siege to the entire city. The standoff ended with the insurgents' escape, as well as the destruction of the ancient shrine and much of the surrounding area by fire. Having failed to communicate with the local population, the military commanders were apparently unaware that the shrine, constructed entirely of walnut, was highly flammable. It remains unknown whether the accidental fire, which killed several civilians, was ignited by the flares used by the Indian military or by ammunition that the insurgents had stored in the mosque. The timing of the incident, during the Muslim festival of 'Id, as well as the absence of any attempt to win public support for the siege, however, convinced locals that the Indian government deserved all of the blame.<sup>20</sup>

If Iraqi religious leaders are willing, their cooperation with U.S. counterinsurgency efforts can provide far more than factual information. Religious leaders' power lies in their ability to span both religious knowledge and religious action. Because of their expertise, they are capable of applying and interpreting formal religious rules to changing circumstances. Cooperative religious leaders are therefore even potentially capable of redefining the rules that govern behavior and access to sacred places in a manner conducive to counterinsurgency efforts. Although there are limits on religious leaders' abilities to stretch the boundaries of the sacred, the reach and ingenuity of these limits can be surprising. At the same time, religious leaders who are left out of the decisionmaking process are likely to hamper

efforts to conduct successful operations in or near sacred sites. Influential imams can enhance the value of a sacred site that is under attack, expand its boundaries, or increase the insurgents' freedom of operation within its confines.

### **LESSON 3: EXPECT DOUBLE STANDARDS**

U.S. soldiers should expect that their actions at sacred sites will be judged more harshly than comparable actions by insurgents. Whereas Iraqis have repeatedly turned a blind eye to acts of desecration committed by their co-religionists, U.S. troops cannot expect their actions to be interpreted with similar leniency. As the aftermath of the Indian military operations in Amritsar and Kashmir demonstrated, it makes little sense to respond to this double standard with naïve indignation. U.S. soldiers must realize that they will continue to bear the burden of blame for any damage caused to mosques during exchanges of fire.

Iraqi citizens are often aware that their mosques are used to store ammunition and as fortified strongholds. In June 2003, when bombs stored inside the al-Hassan mosque in Falluja exploded, killing six people including the mosque's imam, neighbors admitted knowing that the mosque was being used as a weapons cache. Members of the mosque, however, were quick to attribute the explosion to an attack by U.S. forces. The insurgents, although often responsible for drawing battles into mosques, can act with relative impunity.

Insurgents have also eluded responsibility for attacking their own sacred sites when they are occupied by U.S. forces. One reason for the more lenient application of the rules of desecration to insurgents is that, when they attack, they purport to be defending the shrine against foreign invaders. The Qur'an permits the use of force in a mosque in self-defense against a prior use of force in the shrine.<sup>21</sup> This injunction can justify the insurgents' use of force but not combat by non-Muslims in a mosque, unless a cooperative religious leader has approved the operation and publicly proclaimed his favorable ruling.

The popular bias in favor of insurgents was demonstrated during a tense standoff between U.S. forces and al-Sadr followers in May 2004.<sup>22</sup> U.S. troops assumed positions inside the Mukhaiyam mosque, and the insurgents sought refuge 600 feet away in the Shrine of Abbas and the Shrine of Hussein. U.S. troops exhibited restraint when firing on the two shrines and succeeded in minimizing the damage inflicted on the structures. Yet, voices in Iraq and throughout the Muslim world expressed outrage at the desecration of the shrines by the U.S. forces, remaining silent about the origins of the conflict at these sites and the damage caused by the insurgents to the Mukhaiyam mosque.

Because the Iraqi population shares religious and ethnic ties with the insurgents and may support their political goals, this bias is not surprising. The insurgents' religious affiliation also works to their advantage by reducing the risk of sacrilege. For this reason, the insurgents in Iraq have yet to seek refuge in mosques other than in those belonging to their own religious affiliation, depending on whether insurgents are Shi'a or Sunni. Insurgents have faced the most significant condemnation from the Iraqi public after attacking the shrines of another sect, most notably the Ba'athists' car bomb attacks on Shi'a shrines in August 2003, March 2004, and December 2004.<sup>23</sup>

#### **LESSON 4: WHEN POSSIBLE, BESIEGE**

U.S. soldiers should resist the temptation to respond to this double standard with unrestrained combat in mosques. In the absence of exceedingly cooperative religious leaders who are willing to issue rulings that relax restrictions on behavior in and access to sacred sites, military commanders should strive to negotiate with insurgents to facilitate the peaceful conclusion of hostilities. If negotiations fail or drag on, the exchange may assume the form of a prolonged siege. By cordoning off the mosque, insurgents can be kept at bay and damage to the shrine minimized. Yet, the insurgents will continue to goad U.S. troops to exchange gunfire, and public opinion is likely to castigate the U.S. troops for constraining the public's freedom to worship at the shrine.

The Israeli military successfully grappled with these challenges in April 2002, when some 40 Palestinian gunmen sought refuge in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, a site venerated by Christians as the birthplace of Jesus Christ.<sup>24</sup> The gunmen placed explosives throughout the church and held more than 100 locals and clergy hostage over the course of a five-week siege. Having failed to prevent the militants from gaining access to this sensitive and publicly visible site, Israeli forces proceeded with caution. They isolated the church from the surrounding houses, cut off water and electricity, and employed psychological warfare to increase pressure on the gunmen. Israeli forces also used crane-mounted cameras and remote control-operated sniper rifles to kill seven of the insurgents and wound seven others without harming the hostages or the church structure. Exchange of fire caused extensive damage to parts of the church compound but did not damage the church itself. Despite the local Arab Christian population's natural sympathy for the gunmen's cause, the restraint exhibited by the Israeli military, as well as their contact with church leaders in Israel and the Vatican, ensured that any ill will associated with the incident was aimed at the Palestinian leadership. When the gunmen fi-

nally surrendered, the Arab Christian community castigated their armed presence in the church and their use of a sacred site for publicity purposes.

The most obvious lesson to be learned from this and other sieges at holy shrines is that decisionmakers should try to identify key sacred sites at the outset of a conflict and aim to prevent insurgents from gaining access to these structures in the first place. This effort will prove difficult, however, when sacred sites are plentiful and the insurgency is widespread, as is the case in Iraq. The siege techniques described above, including the careful segregation of the structure from its surroundings and the patient use of psychological warfare, have also proven difficult to implement in Iraq. U.S. soldiers often find themselves conducting multiple sieges at disparate sites in hostile territory and thus face the need to resolve standoffs quickly to resume counterinsurgency operations.

**Commanders should focus their attention on actions taken before and after attack.**

### **Easier Said Than Done**

Although these Israeli and Indian precedents are useful, they should not necessarily lead U.S. commanders in Iraq to make tactical accommodations to operations in sacred places. Rather than inhibit the counterinsurgents' ability to fight effectively by imposing fruitless restrictions on combat in mosques, commanders should focus their attention on actions taken before and after attack, including the choice of time and location, consultation with religious leaders, and the rehabilitation of damaged sites.

The Indian assault on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, a meticulously planned operation that ended in catastrophic failure, demonstrates that surgical strikes in sacred places that set the integrity of the shrine as the primary goal are doomed to failure for three simple reasons. First, the design of most mosques would make the success of such a restrained attack almost impossible. Second, observers are likely to take as much offense at the mere presence of non-Muslim soldiers in a shrine as they are at any moderate damage to the structure. Some form of offense, from the soldiers' failure to remove their shoes or to discard their weapons, is certain to occur regardless of the effort invested in safeguarding the shrine's integrity. Third, undue concern for superficial damage to the shrine is likely to hamper the counterinsurgents' ability to operate quickly and effectively and may lead to drawn-out conflicts that result in greater loss of life both to defenders and attackers, as well as to bystanders. This misguided approach, adopted by the

Indian military in Operation Blue Star, could result in failure, repeated attacks, heavier casualties, and, paradoxically, greater damage to the sacred shrine than that caused by conventional attacks. The safety of believers must take priority over the integrity of a mosque.

Instead, military decisionmakers should focus their efforts before the attack on limiting operations to sites that will not incense the local population as well as choosing the date and time of attack with sensitivity to religious

sensibilities. The contribution of a successful attack to the counterinsurgency efforts should be weighed carefully against the public relations cost of an assault on a popular shrine. If U.S. commanders decide to place particular shrines off-limits to their troops, temporarily or permanently, they should also ensure that these shrines are as inaccessible to insurgents as possible, particularly during sensitive periods in the religious calendar. Should this pre-

caution fail, a siege is preferable to an assault on a mosque.

Before attacking a mosque, the U.S. military should also try to obtain formal permission from the local community or its leaders to enter the site. It is the uninvited entry of non-Muslims into mosques more than their actual presence in sacred space that causes offense. Whether or not such permission is granted, the mere request signals respect for the community and its shrine. Such communication with a religious leader can also be useful to clarify the consequences of future insurgent presence in the mosque, particularly when it seems impossible to prevent insurgent access to the mosque by other means.

After the attack, U.S. soldiers should strive to support the community morally, financially, and administratively in its efforts to rebuild and reconsecrate a damaged shrine. In the aftermath of Operation Blue Star, Gandhi refused to permit the Sikh priests to conduct the ritual cleansing and restoration of the Golden Temple, a complex ceremony called *kar sewa*, because she feared that the Sikhs would want to preserve the damage caused to the temple for propaganda purposes. The temple priests responded by calling Gandhi a *tankaiya* (religious offender), an act which is roughly the equivalent of excommunication. It was the Indian government's callous attitude toward the Sikh community's sensibilities after the attack, more than the destruction of the site itself, that led to its horrific aftermath.

Worshippers will inevitably respond with resentment and anger and even violence to attacks that damage their shrines. Assisting locals in restoring these sites to their former state may compensate for much of the ill will incurred by desecration or destruction. Indeed, most of Iraq's ancient shrines

**Assisting locals in restoring these sites may compensate for much of the ill will.**



experienced the process of construction, destruction, and reconstruction repeatedly in the decades before the current war, when Saddam regularly employed the willful devastation of shrines and ensuing repairs to coerce sectarian groups into cooperating with his regime. Although sacred structures are fragile, they are merely markers for underlying sacred sites that are indestructible. Mosques, similar to synagogues and churches, are edifices that are constructed by humans and designed to protect sacred space or to communicate its meaning to believers. Because they are artificial, these edifices can be rebuilt. Because they are man-made, their desecration can be reversed by means of complex and costly religious rituals. The ravages of war pass over sacred sites and may destroy the shrines that mark their location, but the sites themselves remain eternal.

U.S. commanders must heed the lessons of the past: weigh carefully the religious importance of the time and location chosen for combat against the benefits of striking, learn as much as possible about the site, and try to keep insurgents away from sites at which exchanges of fire will be particularly complicated. Decisionmakers should consult religious leaders where possible and treat the community and its shrine with deference after operations have ended. Yet, they should also expect to bear a lion's share of the blame for any desecration or damage caused to a mosque, irrespective of responsibility, careful preparations, or detailed accounting after a battle. In the end, the ability to minimize the loss of life and preserve the dignity of a sacred site during counterinsurgency operations depends not on the manner in which operations are executed or the physical damage caused to a mosque, but on the manner in which military action at such a site is planned and concluded.

## Notes

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