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## Preventing Civil War in Iraq: A News Hour with Jim Lehrer Transcript

### *Strategic Insights*, Volume V, Issue 3 (March 2006)

with Jim Lehrer, [Vali Nasr](#), and Thabit Abdullah

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### Introduction

*On February 23, 2006, Vali Nasr and Thabit Abdullah were featured as guest experts on News Hour with Jim Lehrer. The transcript of the interview below is from [Online New Hour](#).*

Two experts discuss the prospects for peace in Iraq, after a wave of revenge killings and attacks swept across the country in the wake of Wednesday's bombing of a Shiite shrine in Samarra.

JIM LEHRER: For more on this, we're joined by: Thabit Abdullah, a Baghdad native who's an associate professor of history at York University in Toronto; and Vali Nasr, professor at the Naval Postgraduate School and an adjunct senior fellow for Middle East Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Professor Nasr, what's it going to take to stop this, to calm the storm before all-out civil war is triggered?

VALI NASR: Well that is not going to be easy because of the magnitude of what happened yesterday presents a psychological shock for the Shia, a major turning point, as it were.

It's important that the Shiites realize that the national unity government would actually present security to them, it actually will safeguard their future and the task right now is to be able to bring security to Iraq very quickly and make sure that the politicians at the center are able to cobble together a united front.

JIM LEHRER: That's a heavy menu you just outlined. Is it possible to happen? Is it possible that it will happen?

VALI NASR: Well, it's not likely that it will happen. It will not happen very easily. I think yesterday what happened in Samarra has been a major turning point for the wars in Iraq and now going back to the situation even before yesterday is a very tall order for Iraqi politicians as well as for the United States.

JIM LEHRER: Professor Abdullah, do you agree first of all that this is a turning point and, well, do you agree it's a turning point?

THABIT ABDULLAH: Yes, I do actually. Generally speaking, I agree with what Professor Nasr said though there are some hopeful signs. One, as an historian, I'm always encouraged by the fact that there's never been a sectarian war in Iraq, but there have continuously been tensions.

Secondly, just a couple of weeks ago there was some very positive signs toward reconciliation between the different groups and thirdly, there is now greater weight being played by the secular group that is headed by Ayad Allawi.

## Who Benefits from a Civil War?

JIM LEHRER: Help us understand—is it in anybody's interest, in terms of the major groups, the Sunnis and the Shias, for there to be a civil war? Do they have any interest in this violence going on, Professor Abdullah?

THABIT ABDULLAH: Of course, absolutely not. And I believe that the far majority of Iraqis understand this very well.

I was in Iraq about a year after the American invasion and this was what was on everybody's lips, that a civil war would be disastrous for everybody; it would be a fire that would consume all.

But, you know, these things can spin out of control. There are various groups both domestic and regional, and I would point the finger directly at Iran here and other groups also that find in its interest to whip up this kind hysteria to put pressure on the United States.

JIM LEHRER: Well Professor Nasr, how do you analyze who is pushing this and who has something to gain by there being a civil war?

VALI NASR: Well, a marginal element on both sides, the extremist elements on both sides have something to gain from the violence. And it does not require the majority of Iraqis to want peace and harmony for this to happen.

In other words, as we've seen in Yugoslavia, we've seen in Rwanda, in all of these cases it is not those who have common relations with the other side that would define the violence. It's marginal groups that define the violence.

I do not believe Iran is alone involved in Iraq. Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, they're also involved on the Sunni side of this and it's actually not to Iran's interest at this point in time for Iraq to descend into sectarian violence because Iran's game plans for the past months in confronting the United States has been to present itself as a Muslim force, to rally Muslims behind Iran around issues such as the Danish cartoons or by its attacks on Israel.

Iran at this point in time does not want to be defined as a Shia power but a Muslim power. And, in fact, what happened in Iraq is very damaging to Iran's overall chance vis-à-vis the United States.

JIM LEHRER: But you see it differently, Professor Abdullah? You think Iran does have an interest in making this thing blow up?

THABIT ABDULLAH: My reading of this is that there are various interest groups among the elite of the Iranian state and that there are some within that elite who have been pushing for greater involvement in Iraq and taking sides in the sectarian divide actually. This is most noticeable in

Basra where the Iranian influence is greatest, where when I was there, people were saying that Basra is now transforming to an Iranian province actually and there we see the greatest pressure being put on Sunnis, on Christians, on others, and it's hard for me to believe that the Shia militias that receive enormous amount of aid from Iran are not affected by Iranian designs.

## Negotiations Set Back

JIM LEHRER: Professor Abdullah, how do you read the decision by this large group of Sunnis today to not participate in the summit discussions about forming a new government? Is that a major setback?

THABIT ABDULLAH: It's definitely a setback, though it could actually be a form of pressure on some of the Shiite leaders to take a more active role in trying to calm the mob. I wish they hadn't backed out but they did need to make some strong statements because a lot of the top Shiite leaders, I was rather surprised because Sistani and Hakim and Jaafari and other important Shiite leaders have in the past taken an extremely responsible role in trying to calm the sectarian tensions.

But after the bombing—and to a certain extent this is understandable—this is one of the most sacred sites that one can imagine for Shias - it houses two imams - and these are sacred figures for the Shias - the immediate response of the Shia leaders was not to tell people to stay off the streets, to calm down, rather, it is to play into the violence.

Now nobody actually said, go out and attack Sunnis, and they did condemn some of the attacks against the mosques but; nevertheless, they have not specifically come out very strongly in trying to calm the mob down.

JIM LEHRER: Professor Nasr, how do you assess the leadership on both sides in trying to calm this thing down, first of all, what they've done and what they could do to make it better?

VALI NASR: Well, I think the Shia leadership did not have any choice. One cannot overemphasize the blow to Shiaism of the destruction of the shrine. The relationship of Shiites, particularly average Shiites to their faith are through these same shrines. This was on the attack on the very existence, on the very meaning of Shiaism.

No Shia leader one would be worth his weight his salt if he did not flex his muscle somehow. And one could have expected that they could have called for far more than they actually did.

Secondly, there is a perception among many Shia that the United States and the Sunnis and particularly the United States takes Shia calm or the peace in the South, the fact that the Shias have not joined the insurgency for granted and periodically we've seen that Ayatollah Sistani did this also previously when Paul Bremer wanted to push for a caucus system in Iraq - that he brings the mobs into the streets in peaceful demonstrations in order to show the United States that the Sunnis, that the other players should not take the Shia's position and the Shia force in general for granted that, they have—that it's not only important to placate the Sunni; it's not only important to make sure that the Sunnis are pleased with the political process but that also the Shias have interests, they have fears, they need security.

They have a vision of the future and that has to be safeguarded as well if Iraq is to work. It's not enough just to see what it takes to bring the Sunnis in. It is important to look at what it takes to keep the Shias in the process as well. And that's a signal that Sistani is sending by calling the mob into the streets.

However, what is very worrisome about what happened today is that there is an indication that Sistani may no longer be able to control the mob that, that the forces now within the Shia community, the anger and the fear are such that his call for restraint may not be holding much longer.

## What the United States Can Do

JIM LEHRER: And Professor Abdullah, that brings to us the United States' role in this now. Is there anything at all the United States could do to help calm this thing and keep this thing from blowing out of control?

THABIT ABDULLAH: I was hoping you wouldn't ask me that question actually. But the United States has not been very helpful. I must tell you that I was one of those who rejoiced at the overthrow of the dictatorship, though I was like the majority of Iraqis, extremely suspicious of U.S. intentions.

I believe that the United States has missed one opportunity after another to play a positive role. From the beginning, they started to play the sectarian game in a country that has a very long history of secular politics as you noted—the lack of effective security, the Abu Ghraib scandals, the joke that is the reconstruction—one disaster after another.

I believe the United States does not have much credibility in Iraq anymore, especially after the Abu Ghraib scandal. If I'm really pushed to answer this question, I would say the only thing that the U.S. ambassador can do is try to provide good offices for mediation right now, try to provide back-up for Iraqi security if the situation spills over into violence.

JIM LEHRER: Professor Nasr, what would you add or subtract from that about the U.S. role?

VALI NASR: Well, I would say in the realm of security, the military, I feel a great deal of danger facing the U.S. position, namely we're overstressing Iraq just dealing with the Sunni insurgency. If we have to deal with trouble among the Shia—demonstrations, agitation, attacks, even anti-American demonstrations—we simply won't be able to cope with both a Sunni insurgency and Shia anger at the same time.

Politically I agree with my colleague that the U.S.'s role right now is to help to bring mediation and at least help the government in Iraq form sooner rather than later. But unfortunately, given how quickly the sectarian tensions are spiraling out of control, I see very little that the U.S. can do at this moment to veer Iraq in a new direction.

JIM LEHRER: Gentlemen, on that down note, I'm sorry, we'll leave it, thank you both very much.

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