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Iraq's Shadow Widens Sunni-Shiite Split in U.S.

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

DEARBORN, Mich. — Twice recently, vandals have shattered windows at three mosques and a dozen businesses popular among Shiite Muslims along Warren Avenue, the spine of the Arab community here.

Although the police have arrested no one, most in Dearborn's Iraqi Shiite community blame the Sunni Muslims.

"The Shiites were very happy that they killed Saddam, but the Sunnis were in tears," Aqeel Al-Tamimi, 34, an immigrant Iraqi truck driver and a Shiite, said as he ate roasted chicken and flatbread at Al-Akashi restaurant, one of the establishments damaged over the city line in Detroit. "These people look at us like we sold our country to America."

Escalating tensions between Sunnis and Shiites across the Middle East are rippling through some American Muslim communities, and have been blamed for events including vandalism and student confrontations. Political splits between those for and against the American invasion of Iraq fuel some of the animosity, but it is also a fight among Muslims about who represents Islam.

Long before the vandalism in Dearborn and Detroit, feuds had been simmering on some college campuses. Some Shiite students said they had faced repeated discrimination, like being formally barred by the Sunni-dominated Muslim Student Association from leading prayers. At numerous universities, Shiite students have broken away from the association, which has dozens of chapters nationwide, to form their own groups.

"A microcosm of what is happening in Iraq happened in New Jersey because people couldn't put aside their differences," said Sami Elmansoury, a Sunni Muslim and former vice president of the Islamic Society at [Rutgers University](#), where there has been a sharp dispute.

Though the war in Iraq is one crucial cause, some students and experts on sectarianism also attribute the fissure to the significant growth in the Muslim American population over the past few decades.

Before, most major cities had only one mosque and everyone was forced to get along. Now, some Muslim communities are so large that the majority Sunnis and minority Shiites maintain their own mosques, schools and social clubs. Many Muslim students first meet someone from the other branch of their faith at college. The Shiites constitute some 15 percent of the world's more than 1.3 billion Muslims, and are believed to be proportionally represented among America's estimated six million Muslims.

Sectarian tensions mushroomed during the current Muslim month of Muharram. The first 10 days ended on Tuesday with Ashura, the day when Shiites commemorate the death of Hussein, who was the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad and who was killed during the bloody seventh-century disputes over who would rule the faithful, a schism that gave birth to the Sunni and Shiite factions.

The Shiites and the Sunnis part company over who has the right to rule and interpret scripture. Shiites hold that only descendants of Mohammad can be infallible and hence should rule. Sunnis allow a broader group, as long as there is consensus among religious scholars.

Many Shiites mark Ashura with mourning processions that include self-flagellation or rhythmic chest beating, echoing the suffering of the seventh-century Hussein. As several thousand Shiites marched up Park Avenue in Manhattan on Jan. 28 to mark Ashura, the march's organizers handed out a flier describing his killing as "the first major terrorist act." Sunnis often decry Ashura marches as a barbaric, infidel practice.

Last year, a Sunni student at the [University of Michigan](#) at Ann Arbor sent a screed against Ashura to the Muslim Student Association's e-mail message list. The document had been taken off [SunniPath.com](#), one of many Web sites of Islamic teachings that Shiite students said regularly spread hate disguised as religious scholarship.

Azmat Khan, a 21-year-old senior and political science major, said that she, like other Shiites on campus, was sometimes asked whether she was a real Muslim.

"To some extent, the minute you identify yourself as a Shiite, it outs you," Ms. Khan said. "You feel marginalized."

Yet some Shiite students said they were reluctant to speak up because they felt that Islam was under assault in the United States, so internal tension would only undermine much-needed unity among Muslims. At the same time, the students said, the ideas used by some Sunnis to label Shiites as heretics need to be confronted because they underlie jihadi radicalism.

At the Ann Arbor campus, Shiite students set up a forum for all Muslims to discuss their differences, but no Sunnis who had endorsed the e-mail message about Ashura showed up, and the group eventually disbanded.

Trying to ease tensions, the Muslim Student Association this year invited a prominent Shiite cleric to speak.

"I don't want Shiite students to feel alienated," said Nura Sediqe, the president of the Ann Arbor student group. "But the dominant group never sees as much of a problem as the minority."

At the University of Michigan's campus in Dearborn, the Muslim association pushed through rules that effectively banned Shiites from leading collective prayers.

Apart from a greater veneration among Shiites for the Prophet's descendants, there are slight variations in practice. Shiites, for example, pray with their hands at their sides, while Sunnis cross them over their chests.

"Most Sunni Muslims can't pray behind a Shiite because if you are praying differently from the way the leader is, then it doesn't work, it's not valid," said Ramy Shabana, the president of the association on the Dearborn campus.

Shiite students at various universities said they faced constant prejudice. Some Sunni students have refused to greet Shiites with "Salamu aleikum," or "Peace be upon you," to slight them.

At [Johns Hopkins University](#) in Baltimore, Salmah Y. Rizvi, a junior who stocked a reading room with Islamic texts, said the Muslim Student Association there told her to remove them because too many were by Shiite authors.

Students have also taken note of attacks on their faith from the broader world through the Internet. One YouTube video showed Catholics bleeding by crucifying themselves and then showed Shiites bleeding through self-flagellation, as the Arabic voiceover suggested that Shiites were more Catholic than Muslim.

Not all campuses have been affected. Some, like [Georgetown University](#) and [Cornell University](#), were considered oases of tolerance.

At Rutgers University, the tension started last year after 15 to 20 conservative Sunni students began openly mocking Shiites, and considered barring women from leading the student association. "They felt it was time to correct individuals within the organization, cleansing the beliefs of the students," said Mr. Elmansoury, who opposed the rift.

Several students involved said the group was heavily influenced by teachings from Saudi Arabia. The puritanical Wahhabi sect there holds that Shiite reverence for the Prophet's family smacks of idolatry.

Shiite advocates believe that that thinking has influenced some mainstream American Muslim organizations like the Islamic Society of North America and the Council on American Islamic Relations, which they said were slow to criticize attacks against Shiites abroad until the violence in Iraq escalated. As a consequence, Shiites founded their own national lobbying organizations.

Both organizations denied that they disregarded Shiite issues.

Still, some Muslims said that prejudices had continued.

After [Saddam Hussein](#)'s execution Dec. 30, one Sunni cleric near Dearborn reportedly gave a sermon concluding that the Prophet Mohammad forgave his enemies, so why couldn't certain people in Iraq?

Much of the Middle East tension stems from the sense that Shiite power is growing, led by Iran. The grisly video of Mr. Hussein's execution, with his Shiite executioners mocking him, fanned the flames.

"As a Shiite, I was taking in this event very differently from the Sunnis," said Shenaaz Janmohamed, a graduate student at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. "In a lot of ways Saddam has become this martyr figure who sort of represents Shiite unruliness."

It is not the first time Shiite-Sunni tensions have spilled over into the West. Britain has experienced periodic outbursts for years. Stabbings and other violence between Sunni and Shiite prisoners in New York state jails prompted a long-running lawsuit by Shiite inmates seeking separate prayer facilities.

Some Muslims worry that the friction might erupt in greater violence in the United States. Others, in both camps, think the tension could prove healthy, forcing American Muslims to start a dialogue about Muslim differences.

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