



Middle East Expert: Engage Iraq's Neighbors To Quell Sectarian Violence

Contact: [Lori Wright](#)
603-862-0574
UNH Media Relations

November 16, 2006

EDITORS AND REPORTERS: Prof. Jeannie Sowers is available to discuss the escalating sectarian violence in Iraq and what can be done to reduce or eliminate it. She can be reached at jeannie.sowers@unh.edu or 603-862-1699.

DURHAM, N.H. -- The United States must work with Iraq's neighbors – in particular, Iran – if it has any hope of stopping the sectarian violence in the country, according to a Middle East expert at the University of New Hampshire.

"The best path forward for the U.S. at this point would be to engage Iraq's neighbors — most importantly, Iran, but also Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Syria — in discussions about how to move forward in Iraq," says Jeannie Sowers, assistant professor of political science at UNH.

"On its own the United States cannot address the disintegration of central authority, the powerful militias affiliated with both Shi'ite and Sunni political parties in Iraq, and the escalating forms of torture and death visited upon Iraqi civilians," she says. "In addition, stabilizing Afghanistan is also an impossible task for the U.S. and coalition forces without engaging Iran."

According to Sowers, leading Sunni and Shi'ite figures may be losing their influence over militants responsible for the escalating violence in Iraq. Leading Sunni and Shi'ite clerics have attempted to stop the violence, most notably, with the Mecca Charter signed in late October. The 10-point charter was drafted by four clerics under the auspices of the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). But the two leading Shi'ite figures from Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and radical Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr did not attend nor send representatives, though they formally endorsed it.

"However, some observers suggest that the control of these leaders over the militias themselves is disintegrating, fragmenting into death squads that are potentially not under the direct control of leading Sunni or Shi'ite figures. This means that stopping the violence is progressively more difficult," she says.

Historically once warring parties recognize the conflict is not winnable, there have been negotiated settlements, often under regional or international auspices. But as the civil war in Lebanon showed, this can take years, often prolonged by neighboring states supporting rival militias.

"To prevent this outcome, the United States should abandon its policy of not talking to Iran

and Syria, and engage these states directly. U.S. engagement with neighboring countries and linking issues to encourage their cooperation is one of the only viable ways forward," Sowers says.