

# **Exhibit 15**

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SENSITIVITY: Sensitive  
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From: svcSMARTMFI  
Sent: 4/24/2009 7:29:49 AM  
To: SMART Core  
Subject: KARBALA SHRINES PURSUING INDEPENDENT AGENDA

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RELEASE IN PART  
B6

MRN: 09 BAGHDAD 1100  
Date/DTG: Apr 24, 2009 / 241120Z APR 09  
From: AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD  
Action: SECSTATE WASHDC, PRIORITY  
E.O.: 12958  
TAGS: PGOV, KISL, PREL, SOCI, ECON, IZ  
Captions: SIPDIS  
Sensitivity: Sensitive  
Reference: A. A) 08 BAGHDAD 3651  
Pass Line: AMEMBASSY ANKARA PASS TO AMCONSUL ADANA  
Subject: KARBALA SHRINES PURSUING INDEPENDENT AGENDA

DE RUEHGB #1100/01 1141120  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
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FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2823  
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REVIEW AUTHORITY: Sharon Ahmad, Senior Reviewer  
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TAGS: PGOV, KISL, PREL, SOCI, ECON, IZ  
SUBJECT: KARBALA SHRINES PURSUING INDEPENDENT AGENDA

REF: A. A) 08 BAGHDAD 3651  
B. B) 08 BAGHDAD 3701

Classified By: Deputy Polcouns John G. Fox, reasons 1.4 b/d.

This is a PRT Karbala Reporting Cable

1. (C) Summary: The religious leadership of Karbala's al-Husayn and al-Abbas shrines, among the most revered sites in Shi'a Islam, pursue an independent agenda encompassing economic development, reconciliation and reconstruction. Well-funded and led by representatives of Grand Ayatollah

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al-Sistani, the shrines nevertheless are not immune to the influence of public opinion. The leadership of the shrines coordinates its endeavors neither with decision-makers in Baghdad nor here, but appears broadly supportive of the national government. For some here, however, the influence wielded by the shrines' leaders is a potential threat. End Summary.

Brazilian Chickens

2. (SBU) The al-Husayn and al-Abbas Shrines draw millions of pilgrims to Karbala each year. Among the most revered sites in Shi'a Islam, the spiritual influence exercised by each is immense (refels). However, the leadership of the shrines is not content merely to work toward the salvation of souls. In conversations with a variety of knowledgeable observers here, the PRT has developed new insights into the shrines, independent agenda in areas such as economic development, reconstruction and reconciliation. In none of their endeavors do the shrines appear to coordinate with either the provincial or the national governments.

3. (SBU) In the economic sphere, for instance, the shrines have gone into the food-import business. According to a local business leader, Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i and Ahmad Jawad Nour al-Safi -- Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's representatives here and imams, respectively, of the al-Husayn and al-Abbas shrines -- wanted to be able to feed hungry pilgrims chicken on the cheap. Evidently avid supporters of David Ricardo, they entered into an agreement with a supplier in Brazil who agreed to ship frozen chickens slaughtered under halal conditions to Iraq for less than the shrines would have to pay for local poultry.

4. (SBU) The program, according to several contacts, has become such a success that the Brazilian chickens now are ubiquitous on the local market, causing local poultry producers to complain that they cannot compete with lower priced, better quality Brazilian chicken that also carries an implicit & Good Imam Seal of Approval.& Unlike an ordinary Iraqi investor who might have attempted such an enterprise, the shrines apparently were unencumbered by bureaucratic requirements (whether they were waived, ignored or deemed inapplicable we do not know) and unconstrained by concerns about limited capital. The advantages they enjoy have not gone unnoticed by some business leaders here, who have voiced concerns about growing clerical influence in the economy. Embracing the Sunni Brethren

5. (C) In late 2008, according to [redacted] Imam Karbala'i became

convinced the shrines had to act to help stem sectarian violence in Iraq. He told [redacted] that the Iraqi Government's efforts in this regard were insufficient. With Sistani's blessing, and working in concert with Imam al-Safi, he decided to invite Sunni tribal leaders and delegations to Karbala as a public demonstration of reconciliation and brotherhood. Each of the resulting visits was trumpeted by Karbala'i and Safi in Friday sermons.

6. (C) The first group of Sunni tribal elders arrived in October 2008. Representing the major clans of Anbar QOctober 2008. Representing the major clans of Anbar Province, they met with their Karbala peers at the al-Husayn shrine. (Comment: Al-Anbar and Karbala share disputes over provincial boundaries as well as tribal conflicts. End Comment.) They were followed by a group from Diyala in November and another from Mosul in December. In January

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2009, a Sunni delegation from Salah al-Din called on Karbala'i. In March, another group from Mosul -- this one including Christians -- visited. On April 9, the shrine received elders from Baghdad as well as (once more) from Salah al-Din and the Kurdish region. Each visit has been commemorated by Karbala'i and Safi in their Friday sermons, who extolled the virtues of reconciliation and described the guests as "overwhelmed" by the spirit of brotherly love they encountered in Karbala. There also have been visits by Sunni delegations from several Gulf Arab states, fueling anxiety among those here who fear the shrines' leadership exercises too much influence on Iraqi foreign policy.

Foreign Assistance Has No Constituency: In Iraq Too

7. (SBU) In early April, the shrines announced that Sistani had provided funds for and approved the construction of a \$2.5 million apartment complex 2km north of the al-Husayn shrine. The 5,000-square meter project is to encompass eight buildings, each of which will comprise 64 apartments measuring 80 square meters apiece. These reportedly will be distributed to local families of widows and orphans.

8. (C) According to \_\_\_\_\_ and others, the project arose when Karbalans discovered that Sistani was financing the construction of an apartment development in Qom, Iran. Rumors circulated that the Qom project's supervisor was Sistani's son-in-law, Jawad al-Shahristani. Several contacts reported that Imams Karbala'i and Safi -- concerned that the Iraqi faithful might curtail their payment of khums (in Shi'a Islam, believers are required to pay one-fifth the value of certain items they acquire as wealth as an "Islamic tax") if there was a perception that all of their money was going to be sent to Iran -- urged the Grand Ayatollah to "build something here" in order to counter this public perception.  
Comment

9. (C) That the leadership of the shrines coordinates its endeavors neither with decision-makers here nor in the capital does not mean it opposes Baghdad's agenda. Indeed, the charitable, reconstruction and reconciliation activities of the shrines put them squarely on the side of those who are broadly supportive of the national government. In a state where political power frequently is seen less as a public trust than an opportunity for private gain, and where the media have yet to embrace their role as the "fourth estate," the shrines set a practical, if not a moral, example by demonstrating some of what can be accomplished. Yet, for those here with a broader optic, the influence wielded by the shrines' leaders is a potential threat. They note that clerical involvement in the private and public sectors generally does not enhance either free markets or democratic governance. End Comment.

BUTENIS

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