

# BESIEGING HOLY SITES: PAST LESSONS

**The standoff at one of Islam's holiest shrines parallels one at the Church of the Nativity in 2002. Then, patience prevailed.**

*By Dan Murphy | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

*BETHLEHEM* – As the standoff between US forces and militiamen loyal to the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr at Najaf's Shrine of Imam Ali teeters between a bloody conclusion and a possible truce, analysts say there are lessons in patience to be learned from Israel's handling of its siege of the birthplace of Jesus more than two years ago.

In the evening of April 2, 2002, a small group of Palestinian gunmen, driven out of a nearby mosque by Israeli defense forces, shot open a lock on a side door of the Church of the Nativity and were soon joined by about 150 more men. As the evening progressed, Israeli forces surrounded the site with massive amounts of weaponry and sophisticated surveillance equipment, with remotely controlled machine guns hoisted over the church courtyard. The lightly armed men inside were counting on the religious symbolism of the site to protect them from an all-out assault.

As the weeks dragged on, it was an assault that never came. Instead, the Israeli military, drawing on bitter past experience, deescalated the conflict, kept lines of communication open, and was eventually rewarded six weeks later with a peaceful end to the siege with a negotiated settlement that allowed some of the militants to depart for Cyprus and others simply to go home.

"The siege in Bethlehem "was a unique success," says Gerald Steinberg, director of Bar Elon University's Program on Conflict Management and Negotiation, some of whose students led the talks with the militants inside the church. "There was a long discussion inside the military on what to do, and there were pressures from the inside, as there probably are within the US military in Iraq, to hurry up and get it over with. But in the end, patience was the key."

The government sealed off access to the compound, preventing new weapons or militants from getting in. While power was cut (as was in Najaf), Israeli forces made sure that cellphones remained in the hands of the people inside the church, Mr. Steinberg says.

The Israeli government had learned from past mishandlings of conflicts around holy sites, like the October 1990 confrontation between Palestinians and Israeli security forces on the Temple Mount - holy to both Muslims and Jews - that left 21 Palestinians dead and badly inflamed the conflict.

In 1982, when settlements were dismantled on the Sinai Peninsula, thousands of hard-core settlers were allowed to pour into the area to oppose the effort, which gave a political black eye to the government at the time and is somewhat analogous to the thousands of Sadr supporters who have entered Najaf in recent days and are surrounding the shrine.

There are rarely, if ever, direct analogies in conflicts like this. The nativity siege was less fraught for the Israelis and for the Palestinians than the events currently wracking Najaf. While providing brief sanctuary to the Palestinians, the church itself is not an important site to Palestinian Muslims, nor to Israeli Jews. While a small band of gunmen took refuge in this tiny church, it didn't serve as a staging ground for attacks or as the last refuge for an insurgency leader of the status of Sadr. Sadr's national standing has soared thanks to his conflicts with the US.

But in their symbolic importance to millions around the world, the two sites and their sieges parallel each other with the same risks for the governments and soldiers behind them. As in Najaf, the pressure to end quickly the stand-off in Bethlehem was balanced against the major damage an assault could cause the Israeli government if the situation came to a bloody conclusion.

#### WHY THE SITES ARE HOLY

Roman Emperor Constantine built the Church of the Nativity in 326, on what local Christians believed to be the birthplace of Jesus. For the nearly 1,700 years since, the church has been one of the holiest sites in the world for many Christians, with monks leading prayers there every day. It is visited by millions of pilgrims each year.

As the crisis deepened in April 2002, the Israeli government came under intense international pressure from the Vatican and elsewhere to avoid a frontal assault that could damage the

church. Storming the site would have angered Christians worldwide and, by extension, some of Israel's biggest allies.

Josh Hammer, author of "A Season in Bethlehem: Unholy War in a Sacred Place," which closely follows events surrounding the siege and its aftermath, says a crucial difference from the siege in Najaf were concerns that some of the priests trapped inside with the militants would be killed if an assault was mounted.

"The guy who was in charge of the operation had been at Waco ... and was afraid that if they stormed the church that the Palestinian militants would turn on the priests," says Mr. Hammer, referring to the Texas town where 76 members of a religious group were killed in 1993 when the government moved in on their compound. "They were also terrified of causing a lot of casualties and the storm of protest that would come if the holy site had been damaged or destroyed."

Catholic and Greek Orthodox church leaders who lived through the Bethlehem church siege say they were never held captive and chose to remain behind because they're custodians of the site. "It was a very tense, frightened time," says Father Emjad Sabbara, who was in the church at the time. "We saw our job as trying to keep people calm and to hope for a peaceful solution."

The shrine held by Sadr's men marks the grave of Imam Ali, the cousin of the prophet Muhammad who was assassinated in 657 amid a fight over who would lead the faithful. Ali's death gave birth to Islam's minority Shiite sect, and the shrine is the third holiest to Shiites, after those in Mecca and Medina.

"Each situation is different, but over the years, various confrontations took place ... where the Israeli use of forces triggered a series of chain reactions and bred a caution in the people handling the siege in Bethlehem," says Steinberg.

#### RATCHETED RHETORIC

In the past three days, the door to negotiations has opened, closed, and appears to have opened again. On Tuesday, a team of Iraqi leaders went to Najaf to mediate an end to the crisis, as US tanks ringed the Old City of Najaf, which has the shrine at its heart. Sadr refused to meet with them. In response, Hazem Shaalan, Iraq's defense minister, responded by

saying: "We have to ... teach them a lesson that they won't forget, and to teach others a lesson as well."

But press time Wednesday, Reuters quoted a Sadr spokesman saying that the cleric's militia had agreed to lay down their arms and leave the shrine. Nonetheless, fighting continued in the streets of Najaf.

The effort of the mediators underlined the fact that the siege overshadowed a National Conference of 1,000 appointed delegates who were meant to have selected an advisory body for the interim government by Tuesday.

In the Bethlehem siege, it was talk and more talk that created the breakthrough. "It was crucial that there were men there who were trained negotiators, they weren't just soldiers who were thrown into this situation," says Steinberg. "The question in these situations always is: How do you avoid escalating the conflict?"

If the US and Iraq follow their tough talk with action, the siege could be over in a few hours. But the aftermath of storming the shrine could be even more challenging.

Analysts expect many of the fence-sitters within Iraq's Shiite community to turn decisively on the US presence and the interim government if they damage the mosque and martyr Sadr.

***Staff writer Scott Baldauf contributed to this report from Najaf.***