

# Limited War Now Versus Civil War Later?

By Jim Lobe | April 6, 2004

With the Iraqi city of Fallujah under a U.S. Marine-enforced lockdown, other U.S. military forces in Iraq opened a new front this week to quash an apparent uprising by a Shiite militia in Baghdad and the south in what some experts warn could be a major turning point in the year-old occupation. U.S. officials appear to believe that the two shows of force—coming in the wake of some of the worst U.S. losses since the official end of major hostilities in Iraq 11 months ago—will remind both rebellious Sunnis and increasingly impatient Shiites that Washington remains very much in charge of the ongoing “transition” process.

But some experts believe that both actions could well trigger even greater resistance in the Sunni heartland, and, more dangerously, among the Shiite community, which, with roughly 60% of Iraq’s total population, could create overwhelming problems for an increasingly beleaguered occupying force. Independent analysts, such as Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, have long warned that active opposition by the Shiite population would doom the occupation and make Iraq ungovernable.

The recent military operations follow the killing and mutilation of four private U.S. security contractors in Fallujah and the deaths of five U.S. troops in a roadside bomb explosion about 15 kms from the predominantly Sunni city last Thursday.

They also followed the killings of eight U.S. troops in gun battles with members of the Mahdi Army headed by the radical, outspokenly anti-occupation Shiite cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, in the Sadr city section of Baghdad Sunday. His militia and supporters, who had carried out increasingly confrontational demonstrations after Sadr’s *Al Hawza* newspaper was closed down last Sunday, also mounted uprisings in Najaf, Kufa, and Amara in the southern part of Iraq, where they quickly took over police stations and clashed with Iraqi and occupation troops. One soldier from El Salvador and at least two dozen Iraqis were reported killed.

## Arresting Sadr

To reassert their power, U.S. forces flew Apache gunships over Sadr City Monday; journalists reported that the Mahdi army appeared to remain in control of the streets. Meanwhile, an Iraqi judge issued an arrest warrant for Sadr in connection with the killing of Ayatollah Abdel-Majid al Khoei in Najaf shortly after the U.S. invasion. Meanwhile, Sadr retreated to a mosque in Kufa that has reportedly been surrounded by Coalition troops.

While U.S. officials downplayed any sense of crisis over the situation in Fallujah or the unprecedented crackdown against

the Mahdi, and U.S. President George W. Bush insisted that Washington would “stay the course” on Iraq, including handing over sovereignty to an interim government June 30, others—both for and against U.S. designs in Iraq—depicted a much more dire scenario. “We are on the edge of a generalized civil war in Iraq,” said Prof. Larry Diamond, a senior adviser to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), who noted that the occupation authorities must follow through on any crackdown against the Sadr forces by disarming and dismantling all of Iraq’s militias if the transition process and future elections are to have any hope of success.

Diamond, a democracy specialist at the Hoover Institution in California, also called on the administration to sharply increase the number of U.S. troops in Iraq to disarm and dismantle the militias, and accused Iran of financing and arming Sadr and other Shiite militias, which he says are building up their arms in advance of elections or possible civil war. “Iran is embarked on a concerned, clever, and lavishly resourced campaign to defeat any effort to create a genuine pluralist democracy in Iraq, and we’ve been sitting back,” he said in what has become a growing refrain among neoconservatives and administration officials who blame Teheran for the Coalition’s growing problems among the Shiites. “I think we should tell the Iranian regime that if they don’t cease and desist, we will play the same game—we will destabilize them.”

Chris Toensing, editor of the Middle East Research and Information Project who visited Iraq last month, agreed that the situation, particularly regarding the Shiites, had reached a potentially decisive moment but warned that shows of military force of the kind the Coalition appears to have embarked on are likely to be counter-productive. “This is what Sadr wants,” said Toensing. “His father was a martyr to Saddam; he wants to be a martyr of the U.S. occupation, so, in a sense, the U.S. is playing right into his hands” by issuing the arrest warrant now.

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Hunkered down in the Baghdad “Green Zone” and in U.S. bases across the country, the occupation’s military and political leadership, according to Toensing, fails to appreciate how distrustful most Iraqis are about U.S. intentions. Rather than persuade Iraqis that the crack-down on Sadr is designed to protect the transition process, according to Toensing, “it will be largely understood as a provocation in order to create violent conflict that will, in turn, justify the continuing U.S. presence.”

## Risk of Radicalization

The move also risks radicalizing Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq’s leading Shia cleric, who has generally cooperated with the CPA, although his recent ruling, or fatwa, that declared the interim Constitution approved by the CPA-selected Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) illegitimate, has clearly clouded the transition process. While Sistani is considered a political moderate who is reported to personally detest Sadr, he has also publicly supported some of his positions. Indeed, while a close aide of Sistani’s reportedly urged in the ayatollah’s name that Shia demonstrators “remain calm” Monday morning, he also noted their demands were “legitimate” and that Sistani “condemns acts waged by the occupation forces...”

“Sistani has been following rather than leading Shiite opinion,” according to Toensing, who added that, while the Sadr is only one actor in the Shiite community, “it’s also true that the most prominent poster on display on the highway from Sadr city to the south is of his father. The U.S. has a vested interest in keeping him alive.”

Iraq expert Juan Cole at the University of Michigan, however, said this may actually be difficult to accomplish, given Sadr’s “apocalyptic mindset,” which left him convinced after the closure of his newspaper that the “U.S. planned to silence him and destroy his movement, leaving

him no choice but to launch an uprising. Muqtada saw his father and brothers cut down by Saddam and he is clearly a paranoid personality deeply traumatized by Baath terror against Shiites, and he views the Americans as little different from the Baathists,” Cole wrote in his weblog ([www.juancole.com](http://www.juancole.com)), adding that perhaps at least a third of Iraqi Shiites are sympathetic to his ideology.

Cole wrote that he could not fathom why the Coalition acted against Sadr now, given that the actual indictment of the cleric was issued last November and he and his followers “haven’t been up to anything extraordinary as far as I can see in recent weeks. This is either gross incompetence or was done with dark ulterior motives.” The latter could include, according to Cole, the provocation of greater sectarian violence or casting blame on Iran—and thus halting any progress toward detente with Teheran in its tracks.

Diamond, however, insisted that the speed and intensity with which all the Shiite militias, including al-Dawa and the Badr Brigades of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—both of which are represented on the IGC—as well as the Mahdi Army, have been building up their arsenals and their ranks was “very alarming.”

“If we don’t get a grip on this situation, entire communities will be prevented from registering to vote, opposition candidates will be assassinated, and electoral officials will be intimidated,” he said. “There’s no hope for a peaceful and democratic Iraq without taking apart these militias,” an action he said will naturally create “more protest and violence. But what I’m saying is that’s better now than later.”

“We will fight a limited war now to disarm and demobilize these militias, or there will be a larger civil war later,” he stressed.

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