

The Iraqi Civil Conflict: Another Reason for Bringing the Troops Home

Raed Jarrar | July 12, 2006

The ongoing civil conflict in Iraq is one of the major issues being considered in the debate over future U.S. military and political steps in Iraq. A growing number of analysts argue that U.S. military forces must stay in Iraq to prevent a full-scale sectarian civil war between Sunni and Shia Arabs in Iraq. But evidence exists that the roots of the Iraqi civil conflict is political rather than sectarian, and that the best solution is finding a way to bring the troops home.

A History of Conciliation

The history of Muslim-Muslim conflict in the Middle East is a long and bloody one. The division of Islam into Shia and Sunni sects was the result of two famous battles: the Battle of the Camel (656 AD) and the battle of Seffin (657 AD).

Islamic history is full of wars between different regional powers and within Sunni and Shia Muslims. And while Sunni and Shia Iraqis have undergone some periods of sectarian tension, these tensions have never led to a full scale conflict like those seen in Bosnia, Rwanda, or even in Lebanon.

Shia and Sunni Iraqis have lived in harmony for centuries. Historically the two sects have lived in the same areas, intermarried, worked together and have had few conflicts based on religious beliefs. Arab Iraqis, especially in contemporary history, have not prioritized their religious or sectarian belonging over national identity. Iraqi nationalism united Iraqi Shia against Iranian Shia for eight years during the 1980s in the Iran-Iraq war.

Iraqi tribal systems have also integrated Sunni and Shia communities as many Shia tribes have Sunni branches among them and vice versa. In addition, lines between the sects have been blurred in Iraq. One of the core concepts in Shiaism worldwide is

glorifying Muhammad's descendents. Anyone who is in the prophet's line of descent is called *Sayyed* (pl. *Sadah*). Therefore, being a *Sayyed* implies that one is a Shia Muslim. Iraq is the only case in the world where there are Sunni *Sadah*.

Despite the fact that Iraqis never had a sectarian civil war, foreign politicians have a history of misguided analyses about the issue. In 1920, the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George warned of a civil war in Iraq if the British army withdrew, which is the exact same thing heard today in the U.S. Ironically, the same Iraqis George wanted to protect from each other actually united in a revolution against the British occupation forces.

Roots of the Civil Conflict in Iraq

When the Iraqi regime was brought down by the U.S. in the second week of April 2003, U.S. forces entered most of the Sunni Arab cities without engaging in major combat. Iraq's largest province, al-Anbar, containing the cities of Fallujah, Ramadi, Haditha, and Qaem, surrendered under an agreement with local Sunni tribal leaders.

When Baghdad fell, there was a striking increase in criminal activities and full-scale looting of the public sector, but no signs of civil clashes. But the situation quickly changed as the U.S. administration,



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led by Paul Bremer assumed control over Iraq. Early on Bremer, attempting to put an Iraqi face on the occupation, appointed members to the Iraqi Governing Council. Aimed to reflect Iraq's diverse ethnic, political, and religious mix the Governing Council comprised 13 Shia, five Sunnis, five Kurds, one Christian, and one Turkoman. But instead of bringing unity to the political sphere, this reflection of Iraq's diversity, when thrust into the political playing field, became the base for sectarian division in Iraq.

The new political order engineered by the U.S. resulted in deep divisions between Iraqis. Entering into a marriage of convenience, Shia and Kurds were eager to join the government but for different reasons. Shia politicians from the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and Dawa parties were supported and encouraged by Iran to take a part of the new regime. Kurdish political leaders, who participated in the U.S.-led coalition that brought down Saddam, sought the opportunity to rule the country instead of continuing to be the central government's victim. And while included in the government, Sunni Iraqis were scattered without strong leadership, were victims of de-baathification policies, and were reeling at their sudden loss of political power.

Just as the political order was reflecting chaos, so too was the military order. The vacuum in the military and police forces created by de-Baathification was being filled by tens of thousands of Kurdish and Shia Iraqi militia members. This pushed sectarian tension to a new level as most of the Sunni Arabs who did not join these forces became the primary target.

As a result, a new set of targets emerged for the resistance; Iraqis who were against the occupation began attacking and killing other Iraqis who were taking a part of the new government or its military and police forces. The civil crisis was born.

The Real Face of Fighting

While most Sunnis reject the new government, the violence is not led exclusively by Sunnis. By the fall of 2003, there were two main Shia groups and the beginnings of two main Sunni-dominated groups. On the Shia side, there was interfighting between two groups with strong militias: one which participated in building the new regime, (e.g. al-Hakim's SCIRI, al-Jaafari's Dawa, and other politicians

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blessed by Ayatollah al-Sistani), and another opposing any political work under the occupation (e.g. al-Sadr's movement and others blessed by Ayatollah al-Baghdadi, Ayatollah al-Hasani, etc.). On the Sunni side, there were clashes between Sunni Arabs who were against the new regime and Sunni Kurds who took a part of the new regime, the largest being open fighting between the two sides in Fallujah in April 2004.

The al-Sadr movement includes more than 5 million Shia Iraqis, which makes it the biggest single social group in Iraqi society. In other words, the number of al-Sadr supporters is equal to or more than the number of all Sunni Arab Iraqis. Sunni Arabs demonstrated the ability of small groupings of people to unleash large amounts of violence, while the al-Sadr movement showed a centralized pattern with potential capacity to organize large-scale attacks. Although the groups adopted different patterns of armed attacks they clearly showed that the use of the term "insurgency" must be

expanded to all of the anti-regime military players—not just limited to those groups with Sunni identity.

Although most of the military players often identify on a sectarian basis, there is little evidence that their actions are directly against other sectarian groups. For example, Ansar al-Sunnah Army and the Islamic Army in Iraq are two of the largest insurgent groups who have claimed responsibility for hundreds of attacks against the U.S.-led coalition. Both of these groups frequently distribute videos showing executions and attacks against Iraqi soldiers and policemen. These videos accuse Iraqi soldiers and policemen of being “traitors” and “collaborators” who are getting their “fair judgment” as ordered by the Quran. There are no videos or announcements with statements such as “let’s kill the Shias” or “let’s get rid of the Sunnis.” Instead the focus is on targeting and killing the “collaborators.” There is a long list of other insurgent groups that adopt similar logic and terminology where no traces for a Shia-Sunni oriented conflict can be found. They do contain grandiose statements about fighting the occupation and they make speeches about a holy war between Islam and Christianity and Judaism, but nothing is said about a war between Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims.¹

Even the now-deceased leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, one of the most extremist and brutal movements in the world, sought to target “the collaborators.” In one of Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi’s last statements before his death, he asked Iraqis not to participate in the newly elected government, threatening to kill “secular Zionist Kurds,” “vengeful Shias,” and “collaborator Sunnis” who take part in the “Crusader’s Regime.” While there is a strong fundamentalist anti-Shia strain in al-Zarqawi’s announcements, he never gave a direct order to kill Shia because they were Shia.²

Despite the popular public belief that Iraq’s insurgents are causing most of the violence, it is clear that all sides involved in the conflict are contributing to the killing and destruction. Analytical sources tracking civilian deaths in Iraq provide a clear analysis of casualties in the conflict.

The Iraqi Civilian Casualties: A Breakdown

One of the most informative reports about Iraqi civilian casualties was produced last year by Iraq Body Count (IBC). IBC systematically calculates Iraq’s casualties based on the English-language media’s daily reports of casualties, including reports from the Arab media. The IBC report analyzed 24,865 Iraqi civilian deaths reported by the media through the first two years of the occupation, through March 19, 2005.³ These cases do not represent the full number or an estimate of casualties, as IBC clarifies, but represent the so-far *documented* portion of the total number based on media reports.⁴

According to IBC, “Anti-occupation forces/insurgents” killed 9.5% of civilian victims, “unknown agents” killed 11%, and “post-invasion criminal violence” accounted for 36% of all deaths.⁵ These numbers show that most of Iraq’s civilians were not falling because of the sectarian violence during the first two years, and that most Iraqi civilians were killed because of the post-occupation security void.

These same statistics indicate that the U.S. military has caused more than one fourth of the total documented cases so far, including those who perished as a result of the “major operations.”

Despite the deteriorating situation over the last six-months, the most recent updates of IBC’s database show that “criminal violence” and “unknown agents” are responsible for most of the killing in the last year as well. IBC’s figures challenge mainstream accounts which identify Iraqi insurgents as

responsible for the majority of the ongoing death and destruction.

What is troublesome about IBC's statistic is the term "unknown agents" which reflects the growing concern about civil war, leaving hundreds of Iraqi casualties without a known murderer. These faceless killings are carried out in two main forms: "ID card assassinations" and attacks on mosques and churches. But the motivations behind the attacks are unclear. Some Iraqis accuse regional powers like Iran, Syria and Israel of having a hand in the attacks; other Iraqis accuse internal groups like the Badr militias, al-Qaida, and the Baath party (al-Awdah Party and Muhammad Army) of initiating such attacks to further destabilize the country.

Further confusing the situation lately, Iraqi leaders from Sunni and Shia communities, like the Council of Muslim Scholars and the al-Sadr movement, are blaming the U.S.-led coalition for all the sectarian based attacks. The rumors and uncertainties surrounding these deaths not only fuel speculation around a Shia-Sunni civil war, but also could fuel a possible Shia and Sunni alliance against the U.S.-led coalition.

The Askari Shrine

The al-Askari Mosque, a shrine to Imam Ali al-Hadi (died in 868 AD) and his son Imam Hassan al-Askari (died in 874 AD) in Samarra, was bombed and partly destroyed on February 22, 2006 in what seems to be the biggest sectarian based attack to date in Iraq.⁶ Hundreds of news stories and political speeches were written around the world within hours of the bombing predicting a full scale Sunni-Shia war in Iraq. The al-Askari attack was represented as *the* event that would start the awaited sectarian civil war. In fact, many scholars, politicians, and journalists considered the

attack as the milestone marking the official beginning of the ongoing sectarian civil war.

Ironically enough, the very same shrine whose destruction was expected to trigger a sectarian civil war between Sunni and Shia Iraqis is an exceptional case where a Shia shrine is ran and managed by Sunni *Sadah*. For many centuries, the shrine has symbolized this harmonious integration where Shia Muslims visited al-Askari shrine at least once a year and were welcomed as religious tourists by their fellow Sunni Iraqis. In describing his future shrine al-Askari said, "My shrine in Samarra will be a refuge for both Sunni and Shia Muslims."

Alarmed by the Samarra attack Iraqi political and religious leaders started working quickly to contain the situation. Al-Sistani made a very rare appearance on national TV to ask his followers to calm down. Al-Sadr cut short his visit to Lebanon to return to Iraq, where he deployed his followers and militias around the country to protect Sunni mosques from attacks and started a new trend of Shia-Sunni joint prayers. Main Sunni leaders started a campaign of condemning the attack and working to stop further tension and the Iraqi government announced a temporary curfew and spread armed forces around the country.

Iraqi religious and political leaders, with the help of millions of their supporters around the country, managed to contain the situation in a relatively successful way that prevented any military clashes between Shia and Sunni establishments. Iraqis worked alone, without any help from the U.S.-led coalition, and prevented a full-scale sectarian civil war.

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The Role of the U.S. Military

In the aftermath of the bombing it was clear that Iraqis were working hard to stop the spread of violence, but the U.S. military was noticeably absent.

Fox News reported that, “U.S. military units in the Baghdad area were told Thursday morning to halt all but essential travel.”⁷ Other news sources wrote, “The U.S. military ordered the U.S. soldiers in Baghdad to stay in their barracks and not to circulate if it could be helped.”⁸

With these reports, it is clear that the U.S. army was not planning, in the case of al-Askari attack or for any other incident, to interfere and protect Iraqi citizens from killing each other. So even if the U.S. was concerned about sectarian civil war, there were no plans to stop it.

According to the United Nations Security Council, the U.S. is supposed to be acting as the “authority” to promote the welfare of the Iraqi people including the restoration of security and stability. In addition, the UNSC calls upon “all concerned to comply fully with their obligations under international law including in particular the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Hague Regulations of 1907.” During the bombing of Samara, the U.S. coalition failed on both accounts, raising questions about the role and usefulness of the coalition itself.

The Current Situation

The attack on the al-Askari shrine was one of many attacks carried out by faceless hit men attempting to trigger a sectarian conflict in the last two years. None of the past attacks initiated a full-scale sectarian civil war, nor did the al-Askari incident. Despite the exaggerated predictions and assessments about its effect and consequences, the number of casualties has not dramatically changed since the attack.

Nevertheless, there is a continuing increase in the total number of Iraqi civilian casualties during the last three years. IBC’s online counter indicates that the daily average of Iraqi civilian casualties has increased from around 20 in the first year (excluding the initial invasion in March 2003), to more than 30 in the second, reaching to 40 in the third year. The numbers continue to increase this year as well.

According to another monthly breakup by Iraq Coalition Casualties Count (ICCC), another credible online counter based on media archives, the deaths from the date of al-Askari Mosque bombing until the last week of May 2006 indicate a noticeable raise in the monthly toll from around 550 Iraqis in the last four months prior to the attack to around 850 Iraqis in the four months after the attack.⁹

The increase in civilian deaths, while trending higher, has not reached the record set in August 2005 when more than 1,500 civilians were killed during the month. The al-Askari incident was a very tragic and catastrophic attack but it did not start a sectarian civil war.

Seeking a Resolution

The situation in Iraq has proved that as bad as it gets, things can always get worse. Indeed, 2006 is the worst year of violence since the initial invasion. But while continuing sectarian-based propaganda and attacks are increasing the civil tension around the country, it has not yet reached a point where a full-scale sectarian civil war is erupting.

But as noted earlier, even if a civil war is around the corner (or is already occurring), the U.S. military has proved that it will not intervene in such a scenario. With general security in shambles, the U.S. military directly responsible for thousands, if not tens of thousands of Iraqi civilian deaths,

reconstruction stalled, and with the growing tension seen as politically motivated, there is little evidence that the U.S. can resolve the Iraqi crisis.

Based on this scenario, the ongoing Iraqi-Iraqi conflict can only be resolved when the U.S.-led occupation begins the process of leaving Iraq completely. As suggested by Iraqis and a growing number of U.S. politicians, setting a timetable for withdrawal should be one of the first steps to stop the current cycle of death and violence in Iraq

The conflict in Iraq is happening between Iraqis who are against getting involved in any political action *under* the occupation, and Iraqis who are building their new regime *despite* the occupation. But ironically, both of these groups want the occupation to end.

A recent poll from World Public Opinion shows that 87% of Iraqis want a timetable for U.S.-led coalition withdrawal.¹⁰ A majority of Iraq's leaders have asked for setting a timetable as well. When President Bush visited Iraq last month, Iraq's Vice President asked him to set a timetable for withdrawal. This request is supported by Iraq's president. In addition, Iraq's National Security Advisor, Dr. Mowaffak Al-Rubaie requested a similar "roadmap" for complete withdrawal of the U.S.-led coalition in a recent op-ed in *The Washington Post*.¹¹ The vast majority of Iraq's MPs, religious leaders and political leaders want to see Iraq free of foreign troops.

But the U.S. has thwarted calls for a withdrawal by Iraqis. Last month, the Iraqi Prime Minister proposed a comprehensive 28 point package for Iraqi reconciliation and an end to violence after months of Iraqi-Iraqi discussions and meetings. The plan was warmly received by different Iraqi political, religious, and even insurgent leaders after it was published. But the U.S. embassy turned the 28 point package into a weaker 24 point plan which

was rejected by all major Iraqi stakeholders. The four dropped demands included putting a timetable for pulling out the occupation troops, amnesty for anyone who has not killed civilians, compensation for civilian victims, and an immediate halt of all raids on homes and cities without Iraqi court orders.

While the U.S. embassy has rejected the wishes of Iraqis, U.S. citizens have a different opinion. For example, World Public Opinion's latest poll shows that if the new Iraqi government asks the U.S. to establish a timeline for withdrawing forces within the next two years, 71% of Americans said that the U.S. should do so. Just 28% said the U.S. should only reduce U.S. forces as the security situation improves in Iraq.¹²

Putting a timetable for withdrawing the U.S. troops, as have most of the other countries in the U.S.-led coalition, would be the first step in the right direction to follow the demands of both the Iraqi and U.S. people to stop the war and begin grappling with the much bigger issue of dealing with its consequences. With over \$320 billion spent, more than 2,500 U.S. soldiers dead, and countless Iraqis killed, the time for such an alternative is now.

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End Notes

- ¹ See, International Crisis Group, "In their Own Words: Reading the Iraqi Insurgency," February 15, 2006. Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/middle_east___north_africa/iraq_iran_gulf/50_in_their_own_words_reading_the_iraqi_insurgency.pdf>.
- ² Media reports have been selective in translating al-Zarqawi's speeches. For example, The Washington Post translated a part of his last audio statement where he called for the killing of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest ranking Shia cleric. But *The Washington Post* neglected to mention that al-Zarqawi threatened in the same very statement to kill all the leaders of the Association of Muslim Scholars, the highest ranking group of Sunni clerics in Iraq. The full translation of al-Zarqawi's statement shows his anti-collaborator politics, while *The Washington Post* version makes it seem like an anti-Shia policy.
- ³ Iraq Body Count, "A Dossier of Civilian Casualties: 2003-2005," July 2005. Available at: <http://reports.iraqbodycount.org/a_dossier_of_civilian_casualties_2003-2005.pdf>.
- ⁴ Other studies, like the well known paper "Mortality Before and After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: Cluster Sample Survey," published in the British medical journal *The Lancet*, estimated on the basis of a random national sample that 100,000 Iraqis, in excess of pre-war rates, had died from a variety of causes (including accidents and illness, as well as violence) in the first 75% of the period that IBC's dossier covers.

The violent deaths in *The Lancet* estimate were extrapolated from 21 documented deaths, which is too small a sample for deriving a reliable breakdown on which actors have been doing what proportion of the killing throughout Iraq. However, on careful examination, the breakdown of violent deaths in *The Lancet's* 2004 sample is quite similar to that found in IBC over the same period, suggesting that although non-randomized, IBC's recorded deaths may not be biased in any particular direction. IBC's tally in the tens of thousands of deaths can therefore provide a highly-detailed and useful breakdown.
- ⁵ IBC defines insurgents as, "Those who target U.S.-led forces, ordinary police and other security forces, military installations and support workers for U.S.-led forces."
- ⁶ The Shrine, built in 945 AD, is considered to be one of the four most important Shia shrines in Iraq. One of the reasons why this shrine is highly valued by Shia Muslims is that al-Askari and his wife are the parents of al-Mahdi, the 12th Imam and a messianic figure whose return is expected by Shia. In addition, al-Mahdi was last seen around his parents' graves in 878 AD before he disappeared, which was another reason why the shrine was first built.
- ⁷ "More Than 100 Killed in Iraq Following Mosque Attack," *Fox News*, February 24, 2006. Available at: <<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,185782,00.html>>.
- ⁸ Cited in "Three Years and Counting," *The Nation*, editorial, March 27, 2006. Available at: <<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060327/editors>>.
- ⁹ Author's calculations. Iraq Coalition Casualties Count, "OIF Iraqi Deaths," ND. Available at: <<http://icasualties.org/oif/IraqiDeaths.aspx>>.
- ¹⁰ "New WPO Poll: Iraqi Public Wants Timetable for US Withdrawal, But Thinks US Plans Permanent Bases in Iraq," World Public Opinion, January 31, 2006. Available at: <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/home_page/165.php?nid=&id=&pnt=165&lb=hmpg2>.
- ¹¹ Mowaffak al-Rubaie, "The Way Out of Iraq: A Road Map," *The Washington Post*, June 20, 2006.
- ¹² "Comparing Americans and Iraqis," World Public Opinion, March 24, 2006. Available at: <<http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brunitedstatescanadara/182.php?nid=&id=&pnt=182&lb=brusc>>.

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