

## Iraq: The Nightmare Scenario Arrives

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Suddenly the comforting myth that the US-led coalition forces in Iraq were just dealing with the death throes of a small band of die-hard "dead-enders" has been blown away by the last five days of shocking violence.

First came last Thursday's brutal killings and desecrations of American civilians and soldiers in Falluja. True, many commentators dismissed this as just another example of "Sunni Triangle" opposition. But the depth of popular hatred for what most Iraqis now call "the Occupation" was evident to anyone who had the stomach to watch the videos of throngs of cheering teenagers dragging body parts through the streets.

Then, on Sunday April 4, we faced some equally appalling developments in "Sadr City," a suburb northeast of Baghdad that is home to 2 million Iraqi Shiites, many of whom are poor and unemployed. Many of them are followers of **Muqtada al-Sadr**, a thirty-year old radical who comes from a long line of prominent Shiite leaders, and has been a thorn in the side of the Coalition Forces from the start.

Last April, one of his closest aids took part in the murder of the moderate US-backed Shiite cleric Abdul Majid al-Khoei, who had just returned from exile. Last July, Muqtada formed his own armed militia, the "**al Mahdi Army**," and began to demand

that US troops leave the country. Only a week ago, on March 28, his newspaper, **al-Hamza**, was ordered closed for 60 days by the Coalition, after it incited his followers to violence against the "Occupiers." Then, on Sunday morning, after an incendiary speech by al-Sadr, in which he reportedly urged his black-suited storm troopers to "be on the utmost readiness and strike them where you meet them," they tried to seize several police stations in Sadr City -- with the assistance of most of the US-trained Iraqi policemen in the area.

The result for this "Bloody Bagdad Sunday" is one of the highest tolls in months -- 10 US dead and 24 wounded in Sadr City and **al-Hamrah**, another city where Sadr's support is strong, plus several Coalition troops from El Salvador and at least 20-25 Iraqis dead. In the wake of today's uprising, resistance all over the country is likely to be emboldened.

Of course the Coalition still has overwhelming firepower. And Sadr's supporters are only one of several factions Shiite factions, by no means the largest.

But all this begs fundamental questions, which must now be faced by the Bush Administration *and* the US Congress, as well as by Senator Kerry.

- Is the Coalition indeed facing a growing tide of mass resistance throughout the country, from irate Sunni and Shiite militants alike?
- If so, is the June 30th date for transferring governance and policing to Iraq's new provisional government still realistic? How much time will really be required to restore order?
- Is the US government really prepared to use the kind of force that might well be required to put down this resistance in civilian areas? Would any amount of force really do the job?
- Is the Coalition really prepared to sustain this level of violence for **the year** or more that may be required in order to hold national elections in this situation? Given the increasing polarization, is it really plausible to believe that such elections will be feasible?
- Given the badly-damaged nature of civil society in Iraq, and the incredible influence that political and religious extremism and tribal divisions apparently still have, is the notion of holding national elections and implementing a federal, constitutional democracy not just a Utopian pipedream?
- If we can't manage to hold national elections, can't we at least take a poll of ordinary Iraqis, and find out whether or not they'd like us to exit stage right directly? Does Iraqi popular opinion count for anything?

- Is there a Plan B? Was there ever really a Plan A?

We are reminded of the **1920 Iraqi revolt** against the British, when Iraq's Shiites and Sunnis united to amount a stubborn resistance that ultimately forced the British to decide that occupation was not worth the candle. The British managed to transfer power to King Feisal's puppet government only after they had sustained 2200 British dead and wounded and four times that many Iraqi casualties. We doubt that it was easy to explain to those veterans' families precisely what all their sacrifices had accomplished.

We are also reminded of the scene in **Pontecorvo's film "Burn,"** when the well-meaning Governor orders his Army to distribute bread to starving masses. In the peoples' haste to get to the loaves, they riot, and to the Governor's dismay, the Army shoots them down to maintain order.

Rather than hope for the best, or blindly stay the course, we need to face up to these realities. We need to decide out as soon as possible if this is a no-win situation, a sort of miniature version of Vietnam's drip drip drip. Today's "median American" was barely even born in the late 1960s, when the Vietnam War was raging. Those of us who lived through that disaster need to remind our country of the bitter lessons that we learned about "staying the course." This time around, if it turns out that we've made a mistake, let's not waste any more lives. Let's do the right thing as soon as possible.

Of course the national security types who reasoned us into this tight spot will say -- "But that would only lead to chaos in Iraq! That would only undermine our nation's credibility!" Open your eyes, fellas. Our credibility around the world is at record lows, partly because of all the exaggerations that were employed to justify this war. And the fact is that, like it or not, **chaos is what we've already got.**



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