

Iraqi Resistance Makes Rummy's Vietnam in the Desert

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) grabbed headlines on April 6 when he called Iraq "President Bush's Vietnam," but he was saying much too little, much too late. Months ago, Democratic Presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche warned that Iraq would become "Vietnam in the desert" if the United States pursued its insane war and occupation policy. LaRouche had clearly indicated what exit strategy the United States must take from an impending disaster (see *EIR*, Dec. 12, 2003). The United States, LaRouche stated, must declare its intention to withdraw all troops, and hand over responsibility to the United Nations, which could oversee elections and the establishment of a legitimate, sovereign government, as well as the drafting of a constitution modelled on the historic 1958 republican constitution of Iraq. LaRouche also called for the rehabilitation of leading political figure Tariq Aziz, former deputy prime minister, who had enjoyed fruitful relations with diplomatic representatives throughout the world, including the Vatican.

Washington chose to reject LaRouche's policy and is paying the bitter price. Unless United States policy is radically reversed, it will lead to the same kind of humiliating defeat dealt by the Vietnamese, at the cost of unknown thousands of lives on both sides. Despite Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's pathetic protestations, that the armed resistance to the United States-led occupying forces were a "small number of terrorists, a small number of militias, coupled with some demonstrations and some lawlessness," in reality, there exists a nationalist Iraqi resistance, encompassing Shi'ite and Sunni forces which are increasingly coordinating their activities.

Shades of Somalia As Well

A shift in the conflict between Iraqi resistance forces and the occupying powers' military began with the killing and

mutilation of four Americans in the Sunni stronghold of Fallujah on March 31. The images that flashed across television screens worldwide evoked similar scenes in Somalia, where American soldiers' bodies had been dragged through the streets. That humiliation led to the rapid withdrawal of United States troops. This time, the United States military and political command opted for a Rambo response, vowing that those responsible for the killings would be identified, apprehended, and killed. A total siege of the city of Fallujah, which counts upwards of 250,000 inhabitants, was decided.

At the same time, conflict with Shi'ite forces broke out in Najaf, Baghdad, Nasiriyah, and Amarah on April 4, followed the next day by Shi'ite actions in Basra. In the following days, the clashes spread to virtually every major city, including Kut, Ramadi, Amarah, and Kerbala, as well as the Shi'ite neighborhoods in Baghdad, of Sadr City and al-Shula.

What sparked the Shi'ite uprising was a series of deliberate provocations by America's proconsul Paul Bremer, officially head of the Coalition Provisional Authority. Bremer had ordered the closure of the newspaper *Al Hawza*, associated with radical Shi'ite leader Moqtadar al-Sadr, and the arrest of his aide, Mustafa al-Yacoubi, for having planned the assassination of another Shi'ite last year. On April 4, in response, al-Sadr called on his followers to move from peaceful demonstrations to "other effective actions." This translated into an April 5 Shi'ite protest in Basra which led to their occupying the governor's office, and to other actions nationally. Shi'ite riots erupted in Baghdad and Najaf, where shooting broke out and an estimated 60-90 Iraqis were killed and hundreds wounded. Nine occupation troops were killed. In fighting in Sadr City, up to 1,000 United States troops moved in, engaging in gun-battles with more than 500 militiamen, while Apache helicopters hit civilian residences in Baghdad's al-Shula.



Not the neo-conservatives' promised "flowers in the streets" of Iraq; U.S. forces now face the prospect of a nationwide insurrection in which Sunni and Shi'a join forces. This is the fruit of the Cheney circle's crazy policy of "democratizing" the world by a perpetual series of wars.

Bremer upped the ante on April 5, announcing a warrant for the arrest of al-Sadr himself, and declaring al-Sadr to be an "outlaw" who would be apprehended. "Effectively [al-Sadr] is attempting to establish his authority in the place of the legitimate authority. We will not tolerate this. We will reassert the law and order which the Iraqi people expect," Bremer told a security team meeting which had been convened to discuss a response to al-Sadr. The declaration escalated the conflict between the United States and al-Sadr's militia, the Al-Mahdi Army. "There is no room for militias in the new Iraq. . . . If there are militias that seek to exert control, we will address that head on. And that is clearly what we are doing right now," a senior U.S. official said.

Thus, by April 5, the United States occupying forces had created a situation in which the armed resistance, formerly concentrated in the "Sunni triangle," had been flanked by demonstrations and armed attacks led by Shi'ites in a half dozen cities. Twelve American soldiers were killed and dozens wounded in Ramadi; in Nasariya, 12 Italian soldiers were wounded in clashes with al-Sadr forces; clashes with Polish troops broke out in Kerbala, after al-Sadr's forces occupied a police station, and several Bulgarian and Polish soldiers were wounded while eight Iraqis and five Iranian pilgrims were killed; Ukrainian forces fought al-Sadr's militiamen in Kut, and were forced to evacuate; fighting was reported in Najaf, Baquba, Amarah, Kufah and Basra. Over several days, 280 Iraqis were killed and 400 more wounded, while casualties whose numbers are not clear, piled up on the side of the occupation, including at least 38 United States troops.

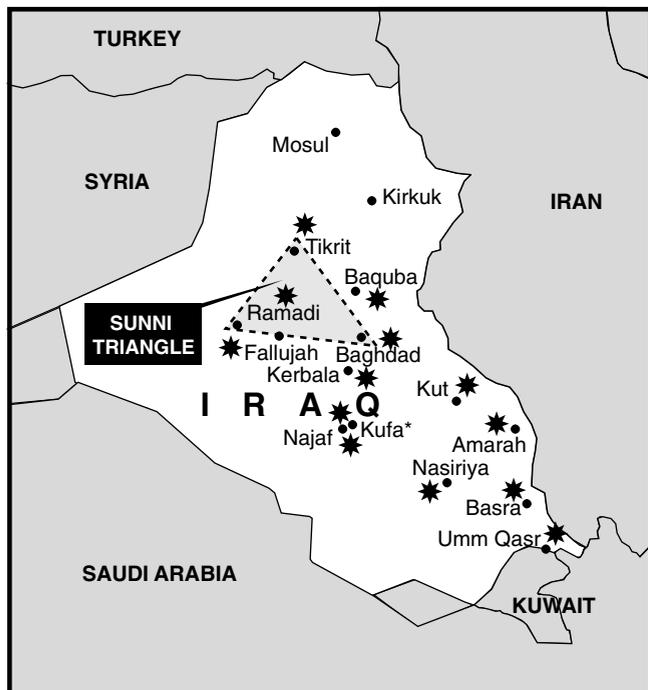
If Fallujah became the symbol of the Sunni resistance, Sadr City and al-Shula in Baghdad became the focal point of Shi'ite resistance, and part of one national movement. There

were reports of messages of solidarity from insurgents in Fallujah to Shi'ites in Baghdad, while Shi'ites in Kerbala applauded the actions of the Fallujah fighters, whom they considered "heroes." Portraits of al-Sadr were pasted up on walls in the largely Sunni city of Ramadi, along with graffiti praising his "valiant uprising." On April 5, al-Sadr militiamen joined forces with insurgents in a Sunni neighborhood in Baghdad. As *Independent* correspondent Robert Fisk noted on April 6, "The British took three years to turn both the Sunnis and the Shias into their enemies in 1920. The Americans are achieving this in just under a year."

The Siege of Fallujah

The massive United States operation in Fallujah, code-named "Vigilant Resolve," reportedly involved 1,200 Marines and two battalions of Iraqi security forces, who entered the city in raids to capture suspected insurgents. Leaflets in Arabic were distributed to mosques, telling Iraqis to observe a curfew (7:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m.), ordering them not to gather in groups, or carry weapons. If United States troops entered their homes, Iraqis were ordered to gather in one room with their hands up, if they wanted to talk. The aim of the Fallujah operation was officially to capture or kill those responsible for the killings the prior week, said Marine 1st Lt. Eric Knapp.

Bremer had announced "overwhelming force" against those responsible for the March 31 killings in Fallujah: After sending in small groups to search houses, U.S. Marines sent in tanks, covered by air power. Four Marines were killed on the first day, April 5, "while conducting security and stabilization operations," said the United States military. This was "as a result of enemy action" in western Anbar province, where Fallujah is located. North of Fallujah on April 6, residents



As of April 8, fighting between coalition troops and a growing Iraqi resistance was becoming national, having spread in one week from Najaf to many cities and towns, and shows signs of unifying Sunni and Shi'ite Iraqi Muslims.

reported heavy fighting, with explosions heard. In nearby Ramadi, the resistance launched a counterattack against the occupation forces, attacking guard posts outside the city, and the governor's palace.

The United States incursion into Fallujah was conducted "Israeli-style," with massive force against civilians. Tanks and Humvees were backed up by AC-130 gunships, which can spray machine-gun fire, as well as by Cobra helicopters. United States forces bombed houses, destroying four in two neighborhoods, and killing 16 children and eight women. On April 7, the Abdel-Aziz al-Samarrai mosque was hit. A United States Cobra helicopter gunship sent a Hellfire missile into its minaret and an F-16's 500-pound laser-guided bomb destroyed a wall surrounding the location. The bodies of 40 people killed inside the mosque, including 25 members of an extended family, were swiftly taken away in cars.

The killing had been deliberate. Lt. Col. Brennan Byrne told Agence France Presse on April 8, "When we hit that building, I thought we had killed all the bad guys, but when we went in they didn't find any bad guys in the building." Brig Gen. Mark Kimmitt, the American deputy director of operations in Iraq, told CNN that more mosques in Iraq could be targeted, if they were used as bases of attack.

Following the mosque attack, solidarity actions were rapidly organized from Baghdad and elsewhere, as trucks filled with food, medicine, and humanitarian supplies were driven

by Iraqis to besieged Fallujah; 90 cars were initially sent from Baghdad on April 8, along with thousands of protesters marching peacefully to Fallujah. Iraqis described to *EIR* a humanitarian crisis in the city due to the encirclement and siege. The hospital has been reportedly taken over by the United States, and people were dying of their wounds, unable to enter it. Nurses and doctors set up makeshift field hospitals elsewhere.

Al-Sadr and the Al-Mahdi Army

Who, or what, Moqtadar al-Sadr is, is not the point. He has now become the figurehead for a national resistance movement, which he may neither control nor command. Ironically, Paul Bremer catapulted al-Sadr to this new position.

Based in Najaf, al-Sadr is a 32-year-old radical Shi'ite, who comes from a family of martyrs. From the onset of the United States-led war, he called for armed resistance, and has recruited from among the poorest layers of the Shi'ite population, especially in the Baghdad neighborhoods of Sadr City (formerly Saddam City, renamed after al-Sadr's father), and al-Shula. Al-Sadr's militia is growing as the insurgency spreads. Mainstream Iraqi Shi'ites consider him a wild card, a radical firebrand, whose followers are reputed to engage in looting.

Despite this, his bold resistance commands respect now. The entire resistance movement has been transformed through the escalating conflict between Bremer and al-Sadr. In the words of Toby Dodge of Warwick University, one of Britain's foremost experts on Iraq, "Al-Sadr is an umbrella for wider discontent, and the opposition is more coherent. The forces arrayed against the Americans are solidifying. The insurgency now issues national communications, in the form of a weekly newsletter." He characterized the developments at the beginning of April as a "new phase," whereby "the asymmetrical strategy of hitting and running by anti-occupation militias, is being replaced by hitting and *staying*, and the militias showing more confidence and better organization."

Furthermore, the political demands made by al-Sadr and his followers are shared by the majority of the population. Most important is his demand to end the occupation; in addition, he calls for re-opening the *Al Hawza* newspaper, and releasing the prisoners.

The highest Shi'ite authority, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, based in Kerbala, has, up to the present, desisted from armed struggle, and provided the political guidance for the Shi'ite members of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC). Although al-Sistani considers the IGC, as well as its recent interim agreement with the CPA, to be illegal by standards of international law, he has tolerated them in the interest of finding a peaceful solution to the conflict. He has engaged the United Nations in hopes that that body will organize democratic elections leading to the formation of a legitimate government which can get the occupiers to leave.

What Ayatollah al-Sistani says must be respected by Shi'-

ites. His is a much higher authority than al-Sadr's; indeed, the highest. In the current crisis, al-Sistani has intervened to attempt to avert the worst. It was a delegation of the ayatollah which convinced al-Sadr, who was staging a sit-in in a mosque in Kufa, to return to his office in Najaf on April 4. In a statement, al-Sadr said he was moving, to avoid blood being shed in a mosque.

Speaking for al-Sistani, an aide said, "The ayatollah has called on the [Shi'ite] demonstrators to remain calm, to keep a cool head and allow the problem to be resolved through negotiation. Al-Sistani also called on the demonstrators not to retaliate against the occupation forces in the event of aggression." At the same time, al-Sistani "condemned the methods used by the occupation forces in the current escalating situation in Iraq," and repeated that the demonstrators' demands—to end the occupation and release prisoners—are legitimate.

The conflict will escalate to new heights, if the occupying forces make good on their threat to apprehend al-Sadr. His top aide, Sheikh Qays al-Khaz'ali, when asked if al-Sadr would resist arrest, answered: "God forbid if this happens, al-Sayed will win martyrdom." He quoted al-Sadr: "My fate will be either my assassination or arrest." He said, "I have pledged not to allow a drop of blood to be shed except my own. I'm prepared to have my own blood shed for what is holy to me." Sadr's supporters said they would fight any attempt to detain him.

Ibrahim al-Ja'fari, a member of the IGC, has called for the arrest warrant against the young radical to be lifted, a move backed by Ayatollah al-Sistani, but rejected out of hand by Bremer. It appeared on April 8 that the United States was softening its stance slightly; Army Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez told a press briefing, that al-Sadr should "turn himself in" to local police.

Denial, and the Will to Power

The posture of Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Richard Myers, and Bremer suggests that they are bent on escalating the conflict. Rumsfeld expressed his state of denial in remarks on April 8, refusing to acknowledge that there is a full-fledged national resistance in Iraq. "The number of people that are involved in those battles are relatively small," he claimed. "And there's nothing like an army or a major large elements of hundreds of people trying to overthrow or to change the situation. You have a mixture of a small number of terrorists, a small number of militias, coupled with some demonstrations and some lawlessness." Rumsfeld and Myers estimated that al-Sadr's militias numbered between 1,000 and 6,000. Myers said that those attacking the coalition shared the anti-Americanism of al-Sadr, but there was no evidence of nationwide coordination of the fighting. "It's not a Shi'ite uprising," he stated. "Sadr has a small following."

Even as he denied reality, Rumsfeld announced that U.S.

forces would be expanded, obviously in response to the guerrilla war. American forces will be beefed up using the troop rotation now ongoing. New troops coming in will simply be deployed in addition to those already on the ground, rather than replacing them. "We're taking advantage of that increase," Rumsfeld said April 8, "and we will likely be managing the pace of the redeployment to allow those seasoned troops with experience and relationships with the local populations [!] to see the current situation through."

Thus, the "Vietnam in the desert" takes very concrete shape. At the same time America is forced to increase its military presence, the political fallout of the gains made by the resistance is devastating, both on the other "coalition of the willing" nations and on the Quisling government known as the IGC. The British are also sending more troops in. But Honduras will pull out its 370 troops this Summer; El Salvador, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic may follow Spain's incoming government when it withdraws. Guatemala has said it cannot send promised troops, and the Netherlands will not keep its 1,300 there. As the fighting escalated, Japan halted its humanitarian operations, and told its troops to stay within their compounds. Kazakstan's defense minister announced on April 8 that its small group working under Polish command would leave May 30 and not be replaced. News broke on April 8 that the resistance fighters had taken hostage three Japanese, eight South Koreans, and two Arab aid workers, fueling the tendency to pack up and leave.

The emergence of a national resistance has also shattered the IGC, by underlining the nature of its collaborationism. Fissures were already visible in the U.S.-appointed body when a woman member, al-Hasraji, threatened to resign in protest over the IGC's stance against al-Sadr. The group had laid the blame for the conflict on him, and demanded he turn himself in. IGC member Ja'fari publicly demanded that the United States immediately change its handling of the riots. Denouncing the "situation in Iraq which has been driven into a military one," he said, "The recent bloody clashes which have resulted in the murder of innocent civilians are regrettable and we condemn it." On April 8, another shoe dropped, when interim Iraqi Interior Minister Nuri Badran resigned, after Bremer expressed dissatisfaction with his performance (there were widespread reports of Iraqi police joining the insurgents). It is expected that leading Shi'ite members of the IGC will come under increasing public pressure.

Foreign allies are falling away, and the Quisling government is tottering. As of April 8, three cities—Kut, Najaf, and Kufa—were under complete or partial control of the Shi'ite militants, and crowds which may grow to millions, were marching towards the holy city of Kerbala, to celebrate the end of the mourning period for Shi'ite leader Imam Hussein over the April 10-11 weekend. Beyond that, Summer is approaching in Iraq, with blistering temperatures, which will pin down U.S. troops.

Is it not time to face reality in Washington?