

# Iraq 'Exit Strategy'

## Means: Announce an Exit

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Conventional wisdom on Iraq—that the United States has “won the war,” but not “won the peace”—has been shown a pathetic illusion by the events of April. The fact is, the United States has *lost* the war, both militarily and politically. The only relevant question is: What will the dumb President Bush and his incompetent administration do now? Will they pursue their reckless course to prevail at all costs, expressing a crude Nietzschean will to power—by escalating militarily, deploying more troops, and repeating the tragic experience of Vietnam? Or, will they finally face reality and heed the policy directives of Presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche: To announce an American intention to withdraw troops, hand over responsibility to the United Nations, and allow an orderly political process to begin, which could lead to the re-establishment of Iraqi sovereignty, independence, and peace?

In the first half of April in Iraq, a *de facto* nationally-unified resistance emerged. The two facets of this process can be identified with the names of Fallujah and Najaf. In Fallujah, part of the “Sunni Triangle,” lying on the road from Amman, Jordan to Baghdad, 1,200 U.S. Marines, flanked by two battalions of Iraqi security forces, laid siege to a city of 300,000, with massive deployments outside it. Though killing an estimated 600 civilians and wounding 1,200 more in the first week of their siege, the Marines were unable to seize positions even in the outlying suburbs against guerrilla fighters, nor secure the road from Baghdad to Fallujah. They had overlooked fact that this city is home to huge numbers of Iraqi military veterans, formerly organized in the army which pro-consul Paul Bremer’s Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) unwisely dissolved. These trained forces—including, reportedly, enough senior officers to make up a division—had gone underground after the April 9, 2003 fall of Baghdad, with their weapons. Following the announcement disbanding the army, they prepared to join the resistance.

Parallel to the siege of Fallujah, and with the same Rambo mentality, Bremer and the U.S. military forces set their sights on Najaf, one of the two holiest sites of Shi’ite Islam (the other being Kerbala). Bremer pursued hostilities beginning March 28 against radical Shi’ite splinter group leader Moqtadar al-Sadr. As armed uprisings in support of the Shi’ite militia leader arose in a number of cities, the American leadership, instead of seeking to quell the violence, poured oil on the fire, by announcing that the aim of the operation in Najaf was to “arrest or kill” al-Sadr. “The target is not Najaf,” Brig. Gen.

Mark Kimmitt said. "The target is Moqtadar al-Sadr and his militia. We will hunt them down and we will destroy them." Al-Sadr—who had been catapulted to nationwide and international prominence as a result of the provocations—vowed that he would accept martyrdom, and called on all Iraqis to continue the struggle.

## Voices of Reason

Had the U.S. forces made good on their threats to storm al-Sadr's office, located very close to the holy shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf, this would have ignited an explosion not only in Najaf, but throughout Iraq and beyond. U.S. forces have been prevented from doing so by the intervention of senior Shi'ite religious authorities, who moved to de-escalate the conflict, and pave the way for a negotiated solution.

The first news of talks was released on April 9, involving senior Shi'ite religious figures and the renegade al-Sadr. One group, led by Mohammed al-Mudarisi, a member of the Marja (the highest religious leadership), received delegations from al-Sadr's forces and from the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC). Another team, assigned by Ayatollah Mohamed Baqir al-Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), also met with al-Sadr's people. Other talks involved the son of Ayatollah Ali Hussein al-Sistani, who is the highest Shi'ite authority anywhere. Al-Sadr, in the midst of his fiery statements, had made clear that he would follow the guidance of al-Sistani; he made good on this promise with the announcement of a ceasefire for the weekend of April 9-11. This coincided with the al-Arbacen, a holiday commemorating the end of the mourning period of Shi'ite saint Imam Hussein, observed by 1.5 million pilgrims in the holy city of Kerbala. A national general strike was called for the same time, jointly by Shi'ite and Sunni religious leaders.

Follow-up negotiations continued, with the sons of Iraq's three highest ayatollahs and al-Sadr on April 12, during which they "agreed not to allow any hostile act against Seyyed Moqtadar al-Sadr and the city of Najaf," according to one participant. Al-Sadr's militia leader stated that in Kerbala, the ceasefire would hold as long as "occupation forces do not enter inside central Kerbala and do not approach the holy sites and the checkpoints manned by the militiamen at the entrance of the city." The talks appeared, by April 15, to signal a possible breakthrough: The religious leaders, in discussions with the CPA, reported a pledge that the occupying forces would no longer demand the arrest of al-Sadr, but leave the entire affair to the work of a competent court constituted by a legitimate, future Iraqi government. Furthermore, al-Sadr's militia, the Al Mahdi Army, would not be disbanded, but transformed into a political party.

Parallel to the partial solution of the crisis in Najaf, the deadlock in Fallujah entered a new phase. A ceasefire there was announced by Bremer on April 9, and has been extended on a day-to-day basis since. Bremer was forced to make the move, not only under pressure from the Shi'ite/Sunni reli-

gious leadership, but due to the fact that his Iraqi allies—in the IGC—as well as his international "coalition of the willing" were showing signs of bolting. Abdel Basit Turki, and a member of the IGC's rotating presidency, Iyad Allawi, resigned on April 9, while another, Ghazi Ajil al-Yawer, threatened the same. "How can a superpower like the U.S. put itself in a state of war with a small city like Fallujah? This is genocide," he told Agence France Presse.

It was not only the IGC which began to unravel, but also the "new Iraqi army" which Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez have praised so highly. On April 11, it was reported that "The 620-man 2nd Battalion of the Iraqi Armed Forces refused to fight . . . after members of the unit were shot at in a Shi'ite Muslim stronghold in Baghdad, while en route to Fallujah." And, Iraqi police were going over to the resistance, a fact which led Bremer to fire the interim Interior Minister.

Despite the ceasefire, fighting has continued in Fallujah, as well as in other areas of the Sunni triangle, especially on the road from Baghdad to Fallujah, around Abu Graib. And despite the fact that the U.S. moved an additional battalion of Marines, about 600 troops, to reinforce the two already around Fallujah, U.S. casualties have risen. One spectacular attack came April 13, during a five-hour battle, when 100 Iraqi resistance fighters assaulted an armored vehicle with 20 Marines inside.

Whether or not the ceasefire will hold, and whether or not talks aimed at solving the conflict will succeed, is up in the air as of this writing. What is clear is that there is no military solution. As Aziz Alkazaz, the Iraq expert at Germany's Orient Institute has stressed, "It is not a question of military power, it cannot be solved militarily. It is not a question of more or less military force." In his view, "Even with five times the current troop strength, it can't be solved. NATO would be no better. The U.S. is naive if it thinks it can bring in NATO. NATO is security-dominated thinking. It can't solve economic-political problems. The solution must be political. The U.S. needs an exit strategy, a way of leaving with prestige, and winning the trust of the population. They can't do it with Chalabis," referring to Ahmed Chalabi, a thoroughly corrupt and discredited member of the IGC. "The U.S. has to transfer real power to Iraqis who represent the country," he concluded.

What the Najaf developments demonstrated, was that there are authoritative personalities in the Iraqi religious leadership layers, willing to seek a political solution, and capable of moving forces in the desired direction. If one seeks a political way out, these circles are the obvious interlocutors. If there is a will, a normal political process leading to legitimate elections and a government, can unfold.

UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, on return from his mission to Iraq, proposed on April 15 that an interim caretaker government should be put together to take office after June 30—a government other than the discredited IGC. Brahimi suggested that the IGC be disbanded and a new executive formed,

made up of respected Iraqis, including a prime minister, two vice presidents and a president. This group would be chosen by a combination of the United Nations, the IGC, Bremer's CPA, and a group of Iraqi judges. Most important, reports indicated that this new body would not be selected on the basis of ethnic, religious, or party affiliation.

### The Iranian Factor

A new factor was introduced into the Iraq conflict, with Moqtadar al-Sadr. In addition to the Iraqi religious authorities who approached him, several signals were issued from neighboring Iran, a Shi'ite nation with historic ties to Iraq. The Supreme Leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, while predicting that the U.S. would be humiliated in Iraq, expressed his support for the approach spearheaded by Ayatollah al-Sistani, for negotiating a political solution. Other religious figures in Iran echoed this, throwing their support behind al-Sistani. While talks were ongoing in Najaf, the man considered al-Sadr's mentor, Mohammed Mahdi al-Hakiri, issued a statement from the Iranian theological center Qom, saying that it would be in the interests of the nation of Iraq to avoid bloodshed, especially in Najaf. This was a direct signal to al-Sadr, to comply.

Soon these signals were to be translated into a political initiative, announced on April 14 by Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi, who said an Iranian delegation would travel to Iraq for talks with the various parties. The following day, Hossein Sadeghi, a senior diplomat from the foreign ministry, arrived in Baghdad with a delegation, and moved on to Najaf. Shortly after his arrival, the first secretary of the Iranian Embassy in Baghdad was shot dead, clearly by forces opposed to any Iranian role.

Kharrazi, who said the initiative had been prompted by the United States working through the Swiss Embassy, said that discreet talks had gone on between the two powers, but the dialogue "was stopped because we felt we were going nowhere. The Americans give promises but don't keep their promises." Iran, he said, was "making its utmost efforts to help resolve the situation in Iraq as soon as possible so that power be given back to the Iraqi people. The solution is for occupiers to leave Iraq."

Most probably, the Iranian intervention was mediated by the British, who, unlike the United States, do have diplomatic relations with Tehran. British Foreign Minister Jack Straw had first broached the idea of an Iranian role in the first week of April, in telephone discussions with Kharrazi. Straw had emphasized the role of al-Sistani in seeking a solution.

As the foremost (and almost the last) full partners of the United States in the Iraq adventure, the British have good reason to seek help wherever they can find it. That the Iranians could and should play a role, is something that most capitals in Europe have grasped. Iran is a regional power, with historic, religious and cultural ties to Iraq, and is interested in preventing any further destabilization of the region, in the wake of

the Afghan and Iraq wars. Iranian officials have repeatedly told *EIR* that, if the United States were seriously concerned about stabilizing Iraq and the region, it would have to approach Iran, especially in light of relations with the key player in Iraq, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. But America had consistently refused.

One Arab regional expert, speaking with *EIR* on April 15, noted the irony of the fact that the United States was looking to a member of the "axis of evil" for help. He added that he believed Iran would make specific counter-demands: among them, that Iranian assets be unfrozen; that its nuclear energy program be unimpeded; and that the United States commit to withdrawal from Iraq.

### A Political Solution

What will Washington do? Will the administration and military continue their flight forward, committed to a Vietnam-style military build-up and the deployment of overwhelming force? This has been the tenor of remarks made by Kimmit and Sanchez, and those of President Bush himself in his April 13 press conference.

Or, will cooler heads prevail, and accept the reality that Vietnam-style tactics will not work any better than they did the last time? LaRouche, whose principled fight for peace in the region dates to 1975, has emphasized that the current situation of U.S. forces in Iraq is comparable to those deployed in Indo-China during and after the Tet offensive. He has also drawn the historical parallel to France's Algerian war, in which the wisdom of Charles de Gaulle ultimately prevailed, and French troops pulled out.

The main problem LaRouche identifies in the current juncture, is the hysterical state of denial gripping leading political circles, especially in the United States but also in Europe, regarding not only the Iraq morass, but the imminent collapse of the world monetary-financial system. To shift policy on Iraq requires effecting a paradigm-shift in an American political process where LaRouche's intervention is decisive.

As the recent weeks' events have demonstrated, the entire Iraqi population is now mobilized around the demand that the U.S. occupation end. As LaRouche has demanded, the White House must publicly declare its intention to leave Iraq. That step alone would establish the basis on which to effect an exit strategy. Without such a declared intention, on a brief time-frame, no solution to the "Vietnam in the desert" can be found.

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