

# Iraq 2006

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**Q: The past few months in Iraq have seen widespread sectarian attacks. How do you assess the evolution of the situation? In particular, do you believe that a civil war is going on? Is the sectarian turmoil a reason to extend the stay of U.S. troops?**

Gilbert Achcar: In the past six months, the situation in Iraq has deteriorated in a truly frightening manner, proceeding inexorably toward the actualization of the worst-case scenario — the worst for Iraq, that is, which is not necessarily the worst for Washington, as I shall explain.

The outcome of the December 2005 parliamentary election was quite bad for U.S. plans in Iraq. The official results confirmed that the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) once again secured a major voting bloc in the parliament (128 seats out of 275), although they did not get the majority that they enjoyed in the previous assembly. That was foreseen, however, as the January 2005 election had been boycotted by most Arab Sunnis and its outcome was accordingly quite exceptional. Nevertheless, the loss of 12 seats by the UIA was rather less than the 22-seat loss by the Kurdish Alliance, while the coalition list headed by Washington's henchman, Iyad Allawi, suffered a very serious decline, falling to 25 seats from 40, which had already been a poor showing.

These results meant that, had any of the "Sunni" coalitions — whether the Iraqi Accord Front (44 seats), which is a coalition between the Islamic Party (i.e., the Iraqi "moderate" branch of the Muslim Brotherhood the Association of Muslim Scholars being the "hard-liners" originating in the same tradition) and traditionalist Arab Sunni tribal forces; or the Iraqi National Dialogue Front alone (11 seats), a motley Arab nationalist coalition including present or former Baathists who disavow Saddam Hussein's leadership — agreed to join an alliance with the UIA, they would have secured together an absolute majority in the parliament. For that, the UIA needed only 10 more votes, or even fewer if one takes into account the 2 seats won by a small Shiite grouping close to the Sadrists, which joined the UIA. Such an extended cross-sectarian bloc would thus have been able to counter political pressure exerted by Washington through its Kurdish allies and Allawi's group and whoever else might have joined with them.

Yet, both "Sunni" coalitions proved more interested in doing business with Washington, believing that getting U.S. support against the Shiite UIA would put them in a better overall position than allying with the latter. They were thus keener on playing a petty sectarian political game than on speeding national liberation from the occupation. On the other hand, many Arab Sunnis consider Iran's hegemony — of which, they believe, the UIA is but a tool — to be a greater threat than U.S. hegemony, thus justifying politically that kind of behavior.

The Arab Sunni parliamentary coalitions entered into an alliance with Allawi to dispute the electoral results. Last January, I commented that their objections to the election results were not sincere, but aimed only at exerting political blackmail on the UIA. What happened afterward proved this assessment correct: When they — and U.S. proconsul Zalmay Khalilzad — got what they wanted with regard to the government, they just ended all their clamoring about “rigged elections.”

In the meantime, intensive tugs-of-war took place in Iraq between several forces. The main contest pitted, on one side, the UIA, backed by Iran, and on the other side, a broad coalition of the Kurdish Alliance, the “Sunni” electoral parties, and Allawi, backed by Khalilzad and by regular statements and high-ranking visitors from Washington insisting hypocritically on the need to give Arab Sunnis an important share of power. As after the January 2005 election, the Bush administration tried to dictate not only its own conditions on the UIA but also Allawi’s participation in the government, despite Iran’s and the UIA’s red line. Washington finally conceded this last point, but only after they managed to get rid of the candidate designated by the UIA to head the first “regular” Iraqi government under the new constitution — the same man who headed the provisional government based on the Constituent Assembly: Ibrahim al-Jaafari.

The other major contest took place within the UIA itself, pitting against one another the two major blocs: the SCIRI and the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr. The SCIRI wanted the premiership for their own man, Adel Abdel- Mahdi, an ex-Maoist turned fundamentalist in both Islamic and neoliberal religions. Despite the fact that the SCIRI is the closest of all Iraqi groups to Iran and despite its advocacy of a super-federal state in southern Iraq, an idea that is resented by the United States (and rejected by all other Arab Iraqi forces, including Muqtada al-Sadr’s followers), Washington backed Abdel-Mahdi, hoping that he would help the United States lay its hands on Iraq’s oil in the name of free marketeering. Khalilzad, chiefly obsessed with reducing Muqtada al-Sadr’s clout, was also trying in this way to fan the dissension within the UIA. For his part, Sadr strongly backed his friend and leader of the Dawa Party, Jaafari, whom he deemed closer to his political stance (Jaafari had subscribed without reservation to the “Pact of Honor” that Sadr tried to get all major Iraqi forces independent of Washington to sign 1) and more open to his pressure.

Tension might have arisen between the two factions, but Tehran — which invited Muqtada al-Sadr for a visit after the December election — was certainly instrumental in preventing the UIA from splitting and urging the SCIRI to consider the UIA’s unity as a priority. The issue of the UIA’s candidate for premiership was thus decided democratically by a vote within the alliance, which gave a narrow majority to Jaafari. Washington’s “democracy promoters” did their best thereafter to prevent the constitutional mechanism from getting under way: Normally, the Assembly would have convened and elected among others a president who would have been required to designate the candidate put forward by the largest bloc in parliament — Jaafari, in this case — to try to form a government. This position would have enabled Jaafari to maneuver between the other blocs and try to win over enough Arab Sunni representatives to secure a parliamentary majority, thus forcing the Kurdish Alliance to join lest they be excluded from the government.

Obviously, such a scenario was out of the question for Washington: The result was a very tense and highly dangerous standoff, until a compromise was reached whereby Jaafari agreed to be replaced with his second-in-command in the Dawa Party, Nouri al-Maliki. The latter was presented as being less sympathetic to Iran and more flexible and amenable than Jaafari. As a matter of fact, Maliki seems more compliant than Jaafari in his relations with the United States. The difference between the two men, leaders of the same party, was nonetheless not such as to warrant Washington’s and London’s indecent self-congratulation after Maliki’s designation, as if Allawi himself had been anointed again prime minister of Iraq.

The whole situation was clearly a setback for Sadr, however. As I mentioned earlier, he had tried

hard to convince the Sunni Arab parliamentary and extra-parliamentary groups to join in an anti-occupation alliance. He failed totally in that respect: The Arab Sunni parliamentary groups rejected his advances, and stuck to their alliance with the Kurdish parties and Washington's proconsul. On the other hand, the Association of Muslim Scholars, which is very close to the Arab Sunni insurgency, disappointed Sadr bitterly: He couldn't get them to condemn Zarqawi and his al-Qaeda branch in strong terms (Sadr even wanted them to excommunicate Zarqawi's group), and his radical anti-Baathist attitude was equally a stumbling block in his relations with Sunni Arab nationalists. He has complained that of the Sunni groups he approached before the December election and asked to adhere to his "Pact of Honor," none have signed it.

The next major blow to Sadr's strategy of trying to build an anti-U.S. alliance with anti-occupation Arab Sunni forces was the single event that contributed most to fueling the sectarian tension between Arab Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq — I mean, of course, the attack against the Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra on February 22, 2006. This sectarian attack unleashed reprisals on a large scale by Shiite militants infuriated by the unending series of murderous sectarian attacks to which their community had been subjected ever since the occupation started. In these reprisals, Sadr's ragtag "Mahdi Army" was apparently very much involved. Not that Sadr gave a green light for this — on the contrary, like most other Shiite leaders, he tried his best to cool things down — but since his militias are much less centralized than the quasi-military SCIRI Badr militia, Sadrist militiamen obeyed their impulses before considering any other option and before getting to listen to the voice of political rationality.

At any rate, these unfortunate events were hugely exploited by an odd array of forces — including U.S. friends, pro-Zarqawi Sunni fundamentalists, and pro-Saddam Baathists — in order to discredit Muqtada al-Sadr among Arab Sunnis and to destroy any appeal he might have had for both his uncompromising anti-occupation stance and his reputation for being very much independent of Iran. All that Sadr had achieved politically in the previous period, in terms of building his influence on a pan-Arab (Sunnis and Shiites) Iraqi basis, was thus shattered along with the dome of the Al-Askari Mosque. To be sure, he retains formidable clout among the Shiites — above all, among the downtrodden layers of the Shiite community, a clout that very likely has been enhanced by the role of his "army" in embodying the armed wing of the community more than any other group. But the fact remains that he is further from imposing himself as a leader of both Arab nationalist Shiites and Sunnis than he has ever been since he clashed with occupation troops in 2004.

Despite these developments, Iraq has not yet reached a state of full-fledged civil war. Indeed, what I characterized a year ago as a "low-intensity civil war" <sup>2</sup> had not ceased increasing in intensity throughout 2005 and early 2006, even before the sudden and most serious flare-up provoked by the Samarra attack. Nevertheless, drawing on my own Lebanese experience, I would say that there are two elements that at this moment still stand between the present situation in Iraq and a full-scale civil war. The first is the persistence of a unified Iraqi government and the existence of still-unified Iraqi armed forces: In Lebanon, it was the split-up of the government in early 1976 and the disintegration of the Lebanese army that signaled the shift to a full-fledged civil war. The second element is the existence of foreign armed forces playing the role of deterrent and arbiter, like the role that the Syrian army used to play — but only intermittently — in Lebanon from 1976 onward.

To say this is to point to what I hinted at already, namely that the slide of Iraq toward the worst-case scenario for its population does not necessarily represent the worst-case scenario for Washington. Actually, most of what has happened in recent months in Iraq, except for the publicity surrounding U.S. troops' criminal behavior, has suited Washington's designs. The sharp increase in sectarian tensions as well as the defeat of Muqtada al-Sadr's project played blatantly into Washington's hands. Along with many others, I have warned for quite a long time that, when all is said and done, Washington's only trump card in Iraq is going to be the sectarian and ethnic divisions among Iraqis,

which the Bush administration is exploiting in the most cynical way according to the most classical of all imperial recipes: "Divide and rule." This is what Washington's proconsuls in Baghdad, from L. Paul Bremer to Khalilzad, have tried their best to put in place and take advantage of.

Seen in this light, the present flare-up in sectarian tensions is a godsend for Washington, to the point that many Iraqis suspect that U.S. and Israeli intelligence agencies stand behind the worst sectarian attacks. Note how the occupation seems now "legitimized" by the fact that many Arab Sunnis in mixed areas, who feel threatened, request the presence of foreign troops to guarantee their safety as they have no confidence in Iraqi armed forces. <sup>3</sup> What a paradox, when you think of the fact that Arab Sunnis were and are still the main constituency of the anti-occupation armed insurgency — though surely not the only one: There has been a growing pattern of anti-occupation armed actions in southern Iraq that is hardly reported, if at all, in the Western media, or even in the Arab media for that matter.

However, Washington is playing with fire: The sectarian feud suits its designs, but only provided that it is kept within limits. It is not in the United States' interests for Iraq to be carved up into three separate parts, as has been advocated cynically in the U.S. media by self-proclaimed "experts" and as neocons and friends believe is the second-best outcome, short of safe U.S. control over a unified Iraq. Not only would that actually be a recipe for a protracted civil war, but it would make U.S. control over the bulk of Iraqi oil that is located in the Shiite-majority South even more uncertain. Washington's best interest is therefore to foster the sectarian feud at a controllable level that suits its "divide and rule" policy, without letting it get out of control and turn into a most perilous civil war. A federal Iraq, with a loose central government, could fit neatly with this design, provided it were accepted by all major Iraqi actors (which is quite difficult), but an Iraq torn apart could be a disaster — all the more so that it could trigger a dangerous regional dynamic. (Think of the Shiite-populated eastern province of the Saudi kingdom where the bulk of oil reserves is concentrated.)

Now, if U.S. forces in Iraq are to be compared to a firefighting force, the truth of the matter is that they are led by highly dangerous arsonists! Ever since the occupation started, the situation in Iraq has steadily and relentlessly deteriorated: This is the undeniable truth, which only blatant liars like those in Washington can deny, insisting that the situation is improving in the face of glaring evidence to the contrary. Iraq is caught in a vicious circle: The occupation fuels the insurgency, which stirs up the sectarian tension that Washington's proconsul strives to fan by political means, which in turn is used to justify the continuing occupation. The latest major way in which U.S. occupation authorities are throwing oil on the Iraqi fire, according to Shiite sources, is by helping the Islamic Party — the Iraqi Arab Sunni group closest to Washington and to the Saudis — build an armed wing that is already taking part in the sectarian feud.

There is no way out of this burning circle but one: Only by announcing immediately the total and unconditional withdrawal of U.S. troops can a decisive step be taken toward putting out the fire. This would cool down the Sunni insurgency that the Association of Muslim Scholars has repeatedly pledged to call to a halt as soon as a timetable for the withdrawal of occupation troops is announced. It would dampen as well the sectarian tension, as Iraqis will then look squarely at their future and feel compelled to reach a way to coexist peacefully. And if ever they came to the conclusion that they needed a foreign presence for a while to help them restore order and start real reconstruction, it should definitely not be one composed of troops from countries that harbor hegemonic ambitions over Iraq, but one that is welcomed by all segments of the Iraqi people as friendly and disinterested help.

## Notes

1. See Gilbert Achcar, "A Pan-Iraqi Pact on Muqtada Al-Sadr's Initiative," ZNet, December 9, 2005.

2. "The only hope one could have of avoiding the slide into a full-blown, devastating civil war — if Sistani were to be assassinated — is not the presence of U.S. troops, but if the forces involved in the political process, i.e. those not already involved in the low-intensity civil war going on in Iraq, were successful in achieving control over their constituencies after an inevitable first outburst of anger, by emphasizing that the perpetrators are either the Baathists or Zarqawi's followers or the like, that their objective is exactly to ignite a civil war, and that the best reply to that is precisely to pay heed to Sistani's insistence on the necessity of avoiding any kind of sectarian war." See "Achcar on Cole Proposals for Withdrawal of US Ground Troops," posted on August 23, 2005, on Juan Cole's blog, Informed Comment, and on ZNet.

3. This analysis was confirmed by Edward Wong and Dexter Filkins's edifying story published in the New York Times on July 17, 2006, under the title "In an About-Face, Sunnis Want U.S. to Remain in Iraq." '