The New War for Iraq

Larry Diamond

On a rough, woven mat, under a huge tented mudheef (a traditional reed-frame guest house), atop the roof of one of Iraq's most beautiful mosques, a giant bear of a man implores his American visitors to act against the religious fascists who have vowed to kill him and destroy his movement for democracy. The black-turbaned man with outsized feet, hands, girth and ambition, is a Sayyid, a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed. With his unruly black beard, flowing clerical garb, and retinue of religious followers, he could easily be mistaken for one more radical Shiite Mullah.

But this is a different kind of Islamist cleric. In the former presidential mosque in Hilla—a majestic, towering new structure of stone and marble that Saddam never allowed the impoverished Shiite masses of this ancient Babylonian region to pray in—Sayyid Farqad al-Qizwini has established a university for humanistic studies. His students—men and women—study not just Islam, but all of the world’s great religions (including Judaism and Christianity), and principles of democracy as well. On the grounds behind the mosque, millions of dollars in U.S. assistance are going to construct a regional democracy center (already complete), men's and women's dormitories, and a cafeteria. This complex will enable Iraqis throughout the region to come and receive intensive training in the ideas, values, and techniques of democracy.

The South Central Regional Democracy Training Center is a gleaming new building, with a conference room, two state-of-the-art computer rooms with 36 computers, more than a dozen offices, and a 200-seat auditorium. It will house, assist, and empower a plethora of NGOs and democracy activists from all over Iraq. And through the miracles of MSN’s “Arabic Messenger,” it will be connected over the internet to 18 local democracy centers (for human rights, women, and development) in Najaf, Karbala, and the four other provinces of South Central. In the mosque, Sayyid Qizwini has established the largest single center in Iraq for translating Western works on democracy into Arabic, with 30 computer terminals and numerous professional translators at work every day, and also a new radio station that will broadcast far and wide the lessons and issues of democracy.

The Coalition Provisional Authority has been generous to Qizwini and his vast movement, which tribes as far away as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are bidding to join. But we have not given these brave and creative Iraqis the one thing they now implore us to provide: a rule of law.

A few minutes down the road from this stunning democratic complex stands a different center of activity. In the courtyard of a nondescript building, the followers of a crude, young radical, anti-American Islamist cleric, Muqtada Sadr, are training for the coming war in Iraq. They learn how to handle firearms, assemble bombs, and kill “infidels.” Like Qizwini, Muqtada Sadr has a fiery black beard and an ability to organize and move the masses. And his father, like Qizwini’s, was murdered by Saddam’s regime during the 1990s. But there the resemblance ends. Saddam meant to kill Muqtada’s father, who had a wide following. The car-bomb that killed Qizwini’s father was meant for Qizwini himself, a leader in the underground resistance.

Qizwini’s vision is expressed in these words that moved him at the Jefferson Memorial when he visited Washington last month: “I swear eternal enmity, upon God’s altar, to all forms of tyranny.” Sadr’s vision is of a new tyranny, an Iranian-style Islamist dictatorship in which he will have the ultimate power. Whereas Qizwini is building a massive peaceful movement of farmers, tribal sheikhs, moderate Islamic clerics, women’s rights advocates, and urban professionals—the Iraqi Democratic Gathering—Sadr is using massive inflows of Iranian money and arms to take by force the power that he can never win at the ballot box.

Last week, Sadr’s organization widely distributed a leaflet in the Hilla region denouncing Qizwini and ten of his leading supporters as “pigs and dogs” who had defiled Islam and needed to be “stopped and silenced.” Qizwini has lived under threat of assassination for months, but now this public declaration
of justification for his murder has raised the stakes. The menace of radical, Iranian-backed armed militias—not only Sadr’s al-Mahdi Army, but the Badr Corps of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, long based in Iran until Saddam’s overthrow), the militia of the Islamist Da’wa Party, the Hizbollah, and many other smaller groups and factions—is mounting rapidly, even as the leaders of their sponsoring political parties sit in Baghdad on the Iraqi Governing Council, signing democratic declarations and evincing to their American interlocutors moderation and restraint.

If these militias are not disarmed and demobilized soon—beginning with the most militant and reckless, the Mahdi Army—Qizwini and his colleagues will be killed and their movement and its facilities overrun. Then Muqtada Sadr and his army will have the most modern network of offices, meeting rooms, and computers of any Iraqi political force—resource centers for making a fascist-Islamist revolution, funded and equipped by the American taxpayer.

The powerful tribes that back Qizwini’s movement will not sit passively back and wait to be slaughtered. Already, most of their adult males have automatic rifles. If it becomes clear in the coming weeks that the United States and its coalition allies cannot protect them, they will acquire with alacrity the heavier weapons they will need to save themselves from the Iranian-backed militias. Then, the new war for Iraq—a war that is in some form inevitable—will mutate into a civil war of faction upon faction, tribe upon tribe. That war of all against all would be steeped in foreign intrigues and layers of religious, ethnic, and tribal cleavage and retribution that we in the West could not possibly comprehend, much less contain. At that point—a point that could arrive in a matter of months—Iraq could become one giant Lebanon, sucking the hopes for peace and democracy in the region into its widening vortex of violence.

Sub-head

Historians may well date the onset of this decade’s second war for Iraq to the launching at the end of last month of a long-overdue campaign by the Coalition to close down Sadr’s radical, criminal operation. That began with the closure on March 28 of his incendiary weekly newspaper, and took on new momentum with the arrest on April 4 of Sadr’s senior aide, Mustafa al-Yacoubi, for the murder one year ago of a leading moderate Shiite cleric and prime rival to Sadr, Abdel-Majdid al-Khoei. In response, Sadr has unleashed a frenzied mob response from his followers in several cities, including Najaf, Karbala’, Hilla, al-Kut, and Nasiriya, and the sprawling slum in Baghdad named (after his martyred father) Sadr city. Since erupting last Sunday, this violence has claimed the lives of 52 Iraqis and nine Coalition forces, eight of them Americans. [These are the numbers as of Monday; update just before publication.]

With the joining of this war, Sadr has thrown any remaining caution to the wind. Having already seized numerous public building in recent months, his followers took over the offices of the Governor of Basra and assaulted police stations in several cities, including Karbala’ with its sacred Shi’ite religious shrines to the Imam Abbas and the Imam Husayn. In Najaf his followers invaded Shia Islam’s holiest center, the Shrine of the Imam Ali. Last October, Coalition forces intercepted busloads of a thousand heavily armed Sadr followers as they were headed down to Karbala’ to seize control of its shrines and the central city.

On Monday, the Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad, L. Paul Bremer III, declared Muqtada Sadr an “outlaw.” Now there is no turning back. If any kind of decent, democratic, and peaceful political order is to be possible in Iraq, the Coalition will need to arrest Muqtada Sadr, crush his attempt to seize power by force, and dismantle his Mahdi army.

This will only be the beginning of a campaign to control privatized violence and construct a rule of law in Iraq. The CPA is now negotiating with a variety of militias tied to Iraq’s political parties a comprehensive plan for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of their fighters into the new armed forces of the Iraqi state (including the police), as well as into other jobs and roles in society. Reintegration has its own hazards; command posts in the army and police cannot be given to agents who will remain loyal mainly to a political party or private cause. Neither can intelligence be compromised by placing senior party or militia loyalists in sensitive positions. Disarmament will need to be carefully
monitored and checked against the common tendency in many post-conflict situations to cheat and deceive, hiding large arms caches as a hedge against a dangerous future. As in many other aspects of Iraq’s transition, the assistance of the United Nations would be valuable in advising, monitoring, and giving credibility to this process.

Negotiated demobilization of the principal militias can only work if the Mahdi Army is forcibly disarmed, for that will both eliminate one of their most dangerous rivals and send an indispensable message about the will of the Coalition. But many additional forceful measures will be needed. These must include vastly enhanced security on Iraq’s borders with Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, and blunt messages to the Iranian and Syrian regimes. The Iranian Mullahs must understand that we will not stand by and watch them brazenly subvert the quest for democracy in Iraq. They must know that two can play this game. They face a mounting resistance to oppression in their own country, and we can do much more to assist it, in direct proportion to the irresponsibility of their actions in Iraq and with regard to nuclear proliferation. And the same goes for Syria, through which—Iraqi democrats are convinced—al Qaeda terrorists are passing freely into Iraq, with the assistance of Syrian intelligence.

At best, we are in for a rough few weeks and months ahead in Iraq. Tragically, there are going to be many more Iraqi, American, and other Coalition casualties. Al-Qaeda will probably attempt another spectacular act of terrorism as Shi’ite pilgrims now flood into the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala’ for the religious holiday of al-Arbain. As the violence increases, more and more critics will be uttering the words “Vietnam” and “quagmire.” But this is not Vietnam—most Iraqis are disgusted with the violence and clearly want the chance to freely elect their own government.

There is only one way out of dilemma we confront, and it is not via retreat or “holding the line” at an untenable status quo. Instead, it is to move forward assertively, to commit all the troops and resources it will take to defeat the religious Bolsheviks and thugs, to build up the security elements of the new Iraqi state, and to give Iraqis a chance to speak, advocate, campaign, and vote free of fear and intimidation. Such renewed military resolve must be combined with a political strategy to produce a significantly more inclusive and representative Interim Government than the 25-member Governing Council with whom we have worked since mid-last year. Fortunately, UN representative Lakhdar Brahimi is in Iraq now with a first-rate team to consult widely in order to identify a means to produce just such a government.

President Bush is right to insist that the rising tide of violence will not shake our resolve, or alter our plan to transfer authority to an Iraqi Interim Government on June 30. But his Administration has not leveled with itself or the American people about the resources that will be needed to achieve any kind of victory in Iraq. Our mission in Iraq has been under-resourced from the start. We do not have enough troops there. We do not have enough secure transport, including helicopters. And we do not have enough armored cars, trained security personnel, and high-quality body armor to protect the many brave civilians—career diplomats, aid workers, and term consultants—who have been risking their lives for this cause.

In the next few months, we could lose the new war for Iraq if we do not project the necessary resolve, combined with the right political strategy to generate a more inclusive and legitimate government. Victory will take much longer to achieve, and will never be hailed by a unanimously grateful Iraq. But if we can defang and contain the militias, while building up the new Iraqi instruments of a rule of law, a small miracle could yet unfold by January: reasonably free and fair elections for a transitional government (which will also write a new permanent constitution). Then, what now appears a downward spiral into civil war could well be averted, and this long-suffering country could be placed on a rocky but realizable path to democracy.

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