

Iraqi soldiers

# The Future of Iraq

*The search for a way to stem the violence*

U.S. President George W. Bush has long said U.S. troops would “stay the course” in the war in Iraq. But is it time for a change of direction?

That is the pressing question facing the United States as 2006 comes to a close. Despite more than three and a half years of fighting and several Iraqi elections, the sectarian violence between Sunni and Shiite Muslims continues to rage throughout central Iraq. The death toll for U.S. troops has risen to almost 3,000, and tens of thousands of Iraqis have been killed. A recent United Nations (U.N.) report puts the civilian Iraqi death toll at 3,709 for the month of October alone. Unidentified bullet-



U.S. President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Malaki at a summit in Jordan.

ridden bodies litter the streets of Baghdad; most are the innocent victims of sectarian militias, insurgents, and death squads.

On November 23, more than 215 people died as a series of car bombs

set by Sunni extremists exploded in a Shiite section of Baghdad. Shiite militia groups quickly responded by blowing up nearby Sunni mosques. (See Time Trip for some differences between Sunni and Shiite Muslims.)

The U.N. report estimates that 1.6 million Iraqis have fled their homes within Iraq and that about 1.8 million others have left the country. Every month, an estimated 100,000 Iraqis flee to neighboring Syria and Jordan to escape the violence.

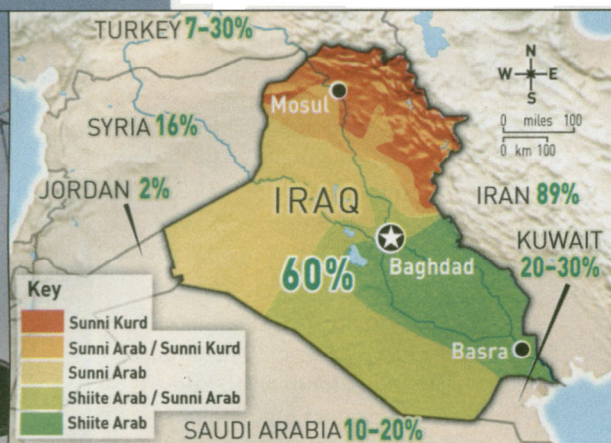
What started as a conflict pitting Sunni and foreign insurgents (such as members of Al Qaeda) against U.S. and coalition troops (now numbering 160,000) has transformed into a war between Sunni and Shiite militias. U.S. and coalition troops and the fledgling Iraqi government find themselves caught in the middle, unable to stop the violence.

The infighting haunts Sabah, a 41-year-old Shiite woman whose husband was murdered by Shiite militia members because he had a common Sunni last name. “I am so sad they were Iraqis who killed him. Not





ward a Sunni mosque in Baghdad, Iraq.



This map shows the religious and ethnic makeup in Iraq. The percentages represent Shiite Muslims in the region.

headed by James A. Baker (who was secretary of state under President George H. W. Bush) and former U.S. Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), calls for gradual U.S. troop withdrawal. The panel also advises direct talks between the United States and Iran and Syria to have the nations wield any influence they have in the region. Bush, however, has in the past refused to talk with Iran until it abandons its nuclear program. The United States also asserts that Iran and Syria have long sponsored terrorist groups.

### 'OUT OF CONTROL'

King Abdullah says "something dramatic" needs to be done because Iraq is "beginning to spiral out of control." Bush has rejected claims that Iraq is in a state of civil war, but others aren't so sure.

Sheik Abdel Hadi al-Mohammedawi, a leader in Muqtada al-Sadr's powerful Shiite militia, said the Mahdi Army has called for restraint among its members. But, he said, civil war is imminent. "I believe civil war will happen now, though I pray to God it won't." If that happens, he says, "everybody will lose in the end. Everybody will attack everybody. Neighbors will attack neighbors." **CE**

**PREDICT THE NEWS**  
In what ways might increasing violence in Iraq affect neighboring countries?

## TIME TRIP

### Sunnis and Shiites

What exactly is the difference between Sunni and Shiite Muslims? The schism between the two groups goes back to the death of Muhammad, Islam's founder, in 632.

When the Prophet died, his followers had a big problem—who would lead the growing Muslim community?

One group elected Abu Bakr, a close companion of Muhammad, as caliph, or successor. Supporters of Abu Bakr and the two caliphs who succeeded him came to be known as Sunnis. Today, Sunnis make up more than 80 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims.

Another group thought that Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, should have been the Prophet's successor. That group came to be known as Shiites. They believe that only members of Muhammad's family should lead the faithful.

Shiites today revere Ali and his sons Hasan and Husayn (pictured below) as the first three imams, men thought to have a special relationship with God. Many Shiites believe that nine imams followed. According to the largest sect of Shiites, the 12th imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, disappeared in 941. Shiites consider him the last imam and believe he will one day return to Earth and lead the righteous to salvation.



foreigners. Not Americans. Iraqis," she told *The New York Times*.

### CHANGING COURSE

In a search for ways to stop the fighting in Iraq, U.S. and Iraqi leaders have crisscrossed the Middle East. In late November, Iraq's president, Jalal Talabani, met in Tehran with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the nation's religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Talabani said Iraq is "in dire need of Iran's help." Neighboring Iran is a Shiite nation with growing influence in the region. The United States has accused Iran of stoking the violence in Iraq by training Shiite militias. Iran dismisses the charges and says the United States should pull out of Iraq.

On November 30, Jordan's King Abdullah hosted Bush and Iraq's prime minister, Nouri al-Malaki. The leaders discussed the need to more quickly transfer security responsibilities to Iraqi forces. Malaki said Iraqi troops would be ready to assume control next June. Bush pledged to keep U.S. troops in Iraq as long as the Iraqi government wants them there.

A U.S. bipartisan commission, known as the Iraq Study Group,