

The assault on Adhamiya: “Shia against Sunni” US sponsored ethnic War

Limitations and perspectives of war reporting from Iraq

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Sources in Baghdad

“The situation is terrible!” said the voice on the telephone, “Since last night, there is fighting in the streets. Here, in my neighborhood, Adhamiya.” The voice is a good friend of mine from Baghdad. His words brought an uncomfortable feeling to the pit of my stomach as I realized that I’m still not used to the idea of having friends in a war zone. “Who’s fighting? Militias? Americans?” I asked. “Shia against Sunni”, he replied, “Shia attacked a Sunni mosque.” When I asked how it had come to that, he said: “Well, this is what the US and Iran have been trying to achieve all the time.” Suddenly, the line was cut and I could only hope the disconnect was a technical problem in the network, which is not an unusual event in occupied Iraq.

Shia against Sunni? I could hardly believe the civil war scenario had materialized. An estimated 30 % of Iraqi families are Sunni-Shia mixed. For years now, the occupation forces and their allies have talked about Iraq being on the brink of civil war. And all that time, they’ve tried their best to divide the country along sectarian lines. None of my Iraqi friends ever believed Iraqis would fall into that trap. Did they get it wrong? It’s true that the bombing at the Al-Askariya mosque in Samarra on February 22 triggered a wave of sectarian violence, in spite of repeated calls from several clerics and politicians to preserve calm. Although nobody claimed the attack, authorities immediately held Sunni extremists accountable. Western media never really paid attention to the circumstances under which the assault took place and its professional character. According to the Iraqi Minister of Construction, it must have taken at least four hours to drill the holes in the pillars where the explosives were planted.^[1] And the whole operation happened during the nightly curfew, with Iraqi and American security forces patrolling the streets.^[2]

In the evening, I finally reached my Iraqi friend again. This time, the conversation provided me with sufficient information for a short report on Indymedia Belgium about the clashes in Adhamiya.^[3] The translated text goes as follows:

Baghdad/Brussels, 18 April, 2006 – In Al-Adhamiya, Baghdad, heavy fighting broke out at 1 am and lasted until 2 pm on Monday. Men in police uniforms attacked the neighborhood. The Ministry of Interior claimed the uniformed men don’t belong to the puppet forces, but local residents are quite sure they are special forces from the Ministry of Interior, probably Badr brigades. The neighborhood was sealed off and the mobile phone network was disconnected until 10.45 pm. Electricity was cut off from 10 am on.

When the uniformed forces entered the neighborhood, the National Guards that are usually patrolling the streets left. Young armed men from the neighborhood fought side by side with mujahedin against the attacking forces to protect Al-Adhamiya. Several residents have been killed in the streets, but there are currently no figures available. US troops also entered the neighborhood. At first, they just stood by and watched; later they, too, fired at the locals, who tried to repel the attacks.

Later in the day, rumors circulated that another fierce attack of Al-Adhamiya is planned on Wednesday, but the correspondent couldn't confirm this information.

In the mean time, several Iraqi bloggers were also busy covering the Adhamiya clashes. [Baghdad Treasure](#), who lives in Adhamiya's periphery, posted testimonies of a friend in the middle of the area.^[4] [Zeyad](#) only published a short report during the fighting, because the electricity was cut off and the local generator was damaged.^[5] A more detailed account followed a few days later.^[6] Iraqi-Austrian [TAI](#) regularly posted an overview of the information he obtained from his friends in Adhamiya, and compared it with reports in the Arab and western press.^[7] By the end of the week, after the neighborhood had calmed down, [Baghdad Dweller](#) had gathered information from his friends and relatives in Adhamiya.^[8]

Independent journalist and Iraq expert, [Dahr Jamail](#), was on alert as well and consulted his local sources. In an op-ed for Truthout^[9] he put the events in the broader context of the mass media's defective reporting and in a report^[10] for IPS, he promptly showed how it can be better done.

Direct accounts passed on by Adhamiya's residents via informal channels delivered a significant amount of information. Without consulting a single official press report, the events as observed by local residents could be summarized as follows:

In the middle of the night on Sunday fighting broke out in the center of Adhamiya. Men in police uniforms and Shiite militias attacked the district. Assisted by resistance fighters residents took up arms in order to defend themselves against the attack. The offenders entered the area from three directions: Omar Abdul Aziz street, the bank of the Tigris, and the US controlled bridge across the river.

Electricity and telephone networks were cut off. The ministry of Interior denies any involvement. During the clashes, American helicopters circled the area. The Iraqi army^[1] initially believed it to be an 'insurgent' attack and returned fire on the residents. American troops provided assistance. When, on Monday at noon local elders and clerics were able to correct this error, the Iraqi army started to set up checkpoints in order to restore security. After the clashes, the neighborhood came under mortar fire from outside. During the fighting, residents and resistance fighters had destroyed some vehicles of the attackers. Residents tried to confiscate one of the abandoned vehicles, but American troops intervened and pulled it away.



At 6.45 am on Tuesday, unknown gunmen in a speeding vehicle fired at an Iraqi National Guard check point. The unit responded with a rabid barrage, damaging several stores and hitting the nearby Al-Anbia mosque. The mosque guards returned fire. American troops entered Adhamiya again and fired at anything that moved. The battle lasted until noon on

Tuesday.

On Wednesday, another short clash took place near the police office. Later, residents helped the Iraqi National Guard to set up checkpoints throughout the district. Reports of civilian deaths range from one to ten.



The red lines indicate the district borders. The battles in Adhamiya took place mostly in the lower bulge, where the border goes along the Tigris bank. Another name for Thawra is Sadr City, a predominantly Shiite slum. Khadamiya is equally predominantly Shia. The bridge connecting Adhamiya and Khadamiya is currently closed. Further to the South there is another bridge across the Tigris, which is controlled by US troops. According to my contact, armed militias could reach Adhamiya via this bridge.

Western news reports

Official news agencies it took a little longer to get the story out. Sources within the police forces and the Ministry of Interior informed Reuters[\[11\]](#) that fighting had broken out in Adhamiya after armed men attacked a police office. At the time of the report, it was unclear who was involved in the clashes. Later police reinforcements arrived with the assistance of Shia Moslem militiamen. Residents took up arms to defend themselves from the militias. Casualties had been reported on Omar Abdul Aziz Street. Hospital staff members told the Associated Press[\[12\]](#) that one civilian had died and seven more were wounded in clashes between 'insurgents' and the Iraqi army. The army intended to carry out home raids in order to search for the offenders. Deutsche Presse-Agentur[\[13\]](#) reported fighting between residents and armed men. The Iraqi army, police forces and American troops later sealed off the district. An Iraqi general reported on television that the neighborhood was 'secured'. By Monday evening, Reuters had updated their report.[\[14\]](#) "About 50 insurgents had mounted a brazen attack on Iraqi forces on Monday", a U.S. military spokesman told them. He added that guerrillas attacked Iraqi forces overnight and that five 'rebels' were killed and a member of the Iraqi forces was wounded. Residents had said that Shiite militiamen accompanied the Iraqi troops, but "that could not be independently confirmed." Reuters did not mention whether the American spokesperson's statements had been independently confirmed.

On Tuesday, newspapers released additional information, which led to an increase in contradicting reports. The New York Times[\[15\]](#) wrote that in a statement released on Monday the Iraqi Islamic Party said clashes were between Iraqi government forces and residents of Adhamiya, implying that the uniformed forces were the aggressors. In a telephone interview, a guard at Abu Hanifa Mosque stated, "fighting erupted around midnight when gunmen clashed with Iraqi soldiers at Al Sabah library nearby. Police commandos, long suspected of operating Shiite death squads, then entered the area and joined forces with the soldiers." According to the guard, shooting quieted down Monday morning only after American troops and Iraqi soldiers rolled through the streets with armor. "He added that at least 5 civilians were killed and 14 injured, but there was no official confirmation of those numbers", reads the NYT article. On the state-run television network Al Iraqiya, an Iraqi Army commander said that Iraqi soldiers had fought insurgents in the streets. The spokesman for the American military didn't comment on the clashes.

Meanwhile a Reuters' correspondent had interviewed residents and resistance fighters.

“ ‘There are six people among our dead and wounded. Just half an hour ago a sniper killed Ali,’ said Mohammad, a 28-year-old Adhamiya resident, of his friend. ... ‘Today at noon a group of army soldiers came near the Abu Hanifa mosque and a sniper went on top of the roof. We managed to kill him with a grenade. I destroyed three of their vehicles with roadside bombs,’ said another rebel. ... ‘We expect them to come back again,’ said a man who only identified himself as Abu Bakr and said he was a former army officer under Saddam. ... ‘We saw about 100 to 150 men show up in cars. some were wearing military uniforms and others were in civilian clothes,’ he said, as five gunmen stood guard over one of the main roads leading into Adhamiya.”[\[16\]](#)

The Los Angeles Times[\[17\]](#) mentioned at least three deaths from that Monday and for Tuesday, at least five people killed and another twenty injured. In a telephone interview, an Iraqi commander said that “armed men from outside Adhamiya wanted to make trouble inside,” but that they eliminated them. The LA Times also allowed some residents to speak. They stated that “specialized units of the Interior Ministry had been acting as sectarian death squads and terrorizing their community.”

The Arab perspective

Only a very small fraction of the gamut of Arab media outlets offers readers an English edition on their websites. Best known is probably the [website of the Aljazeera TV news channel](#), which was forced to close its office in Baghdad during the occupation. In contrast to the sporadic reporting in the western press, the events in Adhamiya were followed closely by some Arab news sites. Thanks to the translation efforts of Muhammad Abu Nasr war reports from an Iraqi viewpoint are also available in English. [Free Arab voice](#) compiles war reports from Iraq, most of which are gathered from the Arab websites Islam Memo and Al-Quds. *Free Arab Voice* publishes them daily under the name *Iraqi Resistance Reports*. What follows is a summary of Abu Nasr’s translations[\[18\]](#) with respect to the Adhamiya events:

4/17/2006 – On Monday night fierce clashes erupted in Adhamiya when Iraqi Army troops stormed the district to carry out mass arrests. As dozens of local residents had been murdered after having been arrested, the residents defended themselves against this arrest campaign. Shi’i sectarian militias and Iraqi Interior Ministry Shock Troops (or Maghawir) attacked the district. The Iraqi National Guard and the American troops did not take part directly in this attack, but observed the clashes from the side line. Several houses were destroyed and scores of residents were killed or wounded. In the afternoon, tens of armed residents of neighboring Kadhamiya marched upon Adhamiya. They passed Iraqi and American troops, who encouraged the armed men. Meanwhile, American helicopters circled Adhamiya, according to the local correspondent, to prevent the residents from defending themselves. Residents had already thrown up barriers and snipers positioned themselves atop of the roofs. The attackers carried modern Iranian weapons. Al-Numan hospital mentioned fifteen people killed, among the dead were women and children. The *Association of Muslim Scholars* released an international appeal calling for reaction against the assault. In cooperation with resistance fighters, the residents detained 35 militia members. Some of them appeared to be high commanders within the Ministry of Interior. In the mean time, the U.S. Army sealed off the district. By evening, dozens of resistance fighters arrived to join the residents in their struggle. Shortly after a government spokesman had declared that the clashes had terminated, fierce fighting erupted again on Omar Abdul Aziz Street between residents on one side and Maghawir and militias on the other side. The neighborhood

calmed down later in the evening, although American helicopters continued circling the area and troops wearing Maghawir uniforms stationed themselves outside Adhamiya's perimeter.

4/18/2006 – On Tuesday morning, heavy clashes between resistance fighters on the one hand and Iraqi and American troops on the other resumed. According to eye witnesses, the fighting erupted when American and Iraqi troops backed by helicopter gun ships attempted to storm the district in order to carry out mass arrests. This time, Americans lead the assault. At noon, a sharpshooter killed a high-ranking Maghawir officer, who was currently a commander of the Badr brigade. At least ten vehicles with pro-American Shi'i militias, some of them wearing police uniforms, headed towards the center of Adhamiya. Meanwhile, residents of Fallujah, Samarra and Tarimiya had arrived to reinforce the people of Adhamiya. They came on foot and unarmed in order to get through the checkpoints. Once again, numerous militiamen stormed the district. This time two television teams accompanied the offenders: the United Arab Emirates-based al-Arabiya satellite network and the Arabic language satellite network al-Hurrah with its headquarters in Virginia, USA. Residents and resistance fighters were able to counter the attack. By the evening, a meeting of clerics and tribal leaders was planned in the An-Numan mosque. Since Tuesday morning residents had placed themselves under resistance command.

4/19/2006 – Negotiations between representatives of the residents of Adhamiya and the Association of Muslim Scholars on the one hand and representatives of the Ministries of Interior and Defense on the other hand resulted in a resolution. The talks took place in a highly charged atmosphere. Residents continued to assert that they were attacked by Shiite militias and Interior Ministry troops with the support of American troops. The government representatives claimed that the fighting emerged from an attack on government troops and did not address the assault of the militias. Then, the residents and the Association of Muslim Scholars supplied evidence in the form of the detained militiamen and confiscated Iranian-made weapons. The Iraqi Army and police do not use these type of arms.

The terms of compromise were as follows:

- All Interior Ministry troops and Shiite militias should have withdrawn from Adhamiya by 8 o'clock p.m. From then on, residents would have the right to shoot any remaining militia member or shock troop.
- All militia members, who took part in the offensive had to be handed over to courts.
- Raids, arrests and searches had to be immediately halted.
- The agreement did not cover U.S. occupation forces, for they are everyone's target all the time.
- Residents cannot be held accountable for the death of militia members, as the latter were the aggressors.
- Iraqi Army forces are still allowed to patrol on specified locations in Adhamiya, on condition that they will defend the local residents from future attacks. If they do not adhere to this obligation, they will be treated like the attackers themselves.

More translations of Arab press reports are available through the pay services of

Mideastwire.com. Dahr Jamail offers the translations of “*Daily Iraq Monitor*” on his [website](#) for free. A short news report from Al Sharqiyah TV informs us that “Al-A’zamiyah district in Baghdad has witnessed clashes between armed groups and local residents since dawn [on April 17, 2006] in which mortars and light weapons were used. Clashes erupted following an attack on Al-A’zamiyah police station.” It adds that one person was killed and others were wounded in the clashes.

Word against word

The least that can be inferred from these reports is that the two-day battle took place under confusing conditions. Obviously, an enemy wasn’t always clearly definable. According to Iraqi government and American spokespersons, the conflict originated in an ‘insurgent’ attack. The western press, especially, parroted this version. Arabic press only mentioned this assertion within the context of Wednesday’s negotiations. According to the Arab press, the neighborhood was attacked by militias and Interior Ministry troops. It seems that the Iraqi National Guard fired on residents up to two times, but according to the Iraqi Resistance Reports these incidents appeared to have happened by mistake. What role the American troops played in the fights is rather unclear. The residents claim that the Americans supported the Shiite and shock troop attacks. It cannot be conclusively proved, however, that the US was not acting on the belief that a so-called insurgent attack had taken place.

Either way, there is once again a considerable gap between the population’s perception and the image Iraqi and American authorities presented through the media. Too often, the western mass media only reports one-side of these conflicts, parroting without question the American government’s pretexts for war about ‘the liberation of Iraq’ and ‘the war on terror’. Bombings, often resulting in many civilian casualties regularly make the news. Following the American war rhetoric, western media attribute these attacks to so-called insurgents. Yet, there are several testimonies indicating that at least some of these bombings have been black operations managed by the occupiers themselves.^[19] The western public learns practically nothing about civilians being slaughtered during home raids carried out by American and Iraqi security forces. They don’t hear about thousands of arrestees, whose bodies are later found tortured and slain in back alleys and on garbage dumps. The Western press did not report on civilians being massacred in numerous air raids in western Iraq. To read these accounts, one must rely on personal sources in Iraq or consult the Arab press. War supporters often disregard the latter as propagandistic. Indeed, names like ‘puppet army’ or ‘puppet government’ might sound peculiar to Western ears. Yet these denominations are less subjective than calling resistance fighters ‘insurgents’, ‘rebels’ or even ‘terrorists’ as western mass media regularly do echoing U.S. military and government statements. According to article 51 of the United Nations Charter, people have the right to resist a foreign occupation force.^[20]

“Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security.”

The acknowledgment of this right of self-defense was reconfirmed by resolution 2649 of the General Assembly in 1970.^[21]

“The General Assembly Affirms the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples under colonial and

alien domination recognized as being entitled to the right of self-determination to restore to themselves that right by any means at their disposal.”

From this point of view and according to International Law, the Iraqi resistance is fully legitimated. Western media ignore this perspective completely and accept the guidance of the war architects’ demagoguery.

What about the victims?

One week after the Adhamiya conflict I called my friend again. Meanwhile, he had checked the English version of the Free Arab Voice reports and found no essential contradictions with his own observations or the testimonies of his fellow neighbors. Of course, one person cannot perceive everything, but it deserves to be mentioned that Adhamiya is a neighborhood where people know each other. Additionally, the FAV reports largely agreed with the testimonies of the Iraqi bloggers and their local contacts. My friend also told me that the Iranian TV channel Al-Alam had come to the district with SNG cars to the time of the clashes. This made him think they had been informed of the attacks in advance, as permission is required to get into a combat zone with these satellite vans.

“And what about the victims?” I asked, “The American press reported one to eight people killed.” He said that a local TV station mentioned eight dead and twenty three wounded, according to hospital staff. A thirteen-year-old girl, who was at the same school as my friend’s niece was one of the dead. She was hanging out the laundry on the roof of the family’s house, when a sniper shot her. And of course, he had heard the stories about the friend of a neighbor and the neighbor of a cousin, who hadn’t survived the clashes, he added.

Another contact person, a journalist from Adhamiya, announced twelve people had been killed, at least one of them a woman. Free Arab Voice mentioned fifteen dead, according to hospital staff. Among the victims were women and children. It is clear that civilians have been killed in the clashes; it’s just not clear how many of them died.

Three weeks after the Adhamiya fights, an update of reported war deaths was available on the website of [Iraq Body Count](#). Official media, human rights organizations and even some anti-war groups deem the IBC counter the most reliable ‘estimate’ of Iraqi casualties. So, I wondered how many Adhamiya victims they had registered. Would it be one, the lowest number mentioned in the press? Perhaps eight, or even fifteen? For the Adhamiya conflict of 17 April, 2006, Iraq Body Count registered three civilians killed due to “clashes between the Iraqi Army and insurgents”. For this figure IBC relies on press reports of Agence France Presse and CNN. Apparently none of the other news reports met with the strict criteria needed to be included in the IBC archives:

- the website has to be updated at least daily;
- all stories need to be separately archived on the site, with a unique url;
- the source should be widely cited or referenced by other sources;
- it has to be an English Language site;
- the site must be fully accessible (preferably free) to the public;

- it's required that two independent press agencies have published a report.

Registration in the IBC database wouldn't bring a parent's child back, but several anti-war activists argue that whether 30,000 or 300,000 civilians died definitely makes a difference in order to mobilize people against the war.

The Iraqi slaughter house

In a two-day conflict on a relatively limited surface and without any air raids, missile attacks, napalm, uranium weapons, and so on, five to twelve civilian deaths have not been reported in the western press. Consequently Iraq Body Count will not register them. How many civilian casualties from the sieges of Fallujah in April and November, 2004, will they have missed? Mass media announced hundreds of killed 'terrorists' at that time. For their numbers, they relied solely on American military press releases, as western journalists had been expelled from the city prior to the attacks. Nevertheless, some of my friends and acquaintances managed to enter the city as aid workers.

One of my friends escaped death by the narrowest of margins when snipers fired at the ambulance she was in. An Iraqi physician who entered Fallujah with a team of volunteers during both sieges, testified on the methods used by the U.S. army,[\[22\]](#) no doubt killing numerous civilians. But even figures corrected retroactively after photos and testimonies had started to leak to the press, cannot reflect the human damage the American and Iraqi armies inflicted on the city. Some journalists tried to investigate the events of Fallujah afterwards. One way or another, they've been hindered in the completion of their work.

[>>> In memorium: Fallujah](#)

At the moment of this writing, the first major attacks on Ramadi have been launched. For the last few months, the 'war on terror' was systematically forced upon the city. Under the pretext that the leader of 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq', Zarqawi, was hiding somewhere near the city, American and Iraqi troops have continuously terrorized the local population. The official press releases of the army and the reports of their obliging journalists once again show striking differences with testimonies of Ramadi's residents.

Once again, the number of registered casualties reflects the one-sided reporting of the western press. In Adhamiya, where only light weapons had been used, western press missed, according to IBC data, 60 to 80 % of the deadly victims. In Ramadi, increasingly bombed by warplanes and with its citizens regularly coming under sniper fire or being subjected to home raids that every now and then result in the execution of the residents, the Western press announced 15 people killed due to military operations between 22 April and 12 May. For the same period, locals testified that between 47 and 65 people were killed by the American army. Statistically, this equals a 70-77 % discrepancy with the official figure. Ramadi is home to about 400,000 people, so it seems probable that some of the victims have been mentioned in neither the Western nor Arab press. The worst can be feared, now that the long-expected offensive on Ramadi has begun.

[>>> SOS Ramadi](#)

When last December a journalist asked president Bush how many Iraqi civilians had been killed in the war, he answered: "I would say, 30,000, more or less, have died as a result of the initial incursion and the ongoing violence against Iraqis." This number obviously

referred to the IBC figure. He couldn't go any lower. The IBC figure represents an absolute minimum of Iraqi civilian war victims reported by the Western press. Unreported violent deaths from many hidden massacres and uncountable Iraqi victims as a result of the demolished healthcare system[23] and the use of uranium and chemical weapons with their belated deadly impact are not included here.

Why this one-sided reporting? Shouldn't the media offer an impartial view on the facts? That's what they pretend to do, but even the most idealistic reporter runs into the inevitable obstacles of today's media structure.[24] Additionally, war reporting is one of the most difficult and risky branches of journalism. Iraq is currently notorious for being the most dangerous place on the planet for journalists. According to the Associated Press, at least 70 of journalists have been killed in the war-torn country over the last three years, almost 73 % of them Iraqi.[25] Last May, the Iraqi Journalists Union published a list of 127 media professionals killed in the war from Iraq alone.[26] Independent foreign reporters have become very rare in Iraq. The journalists who remain are forced to employ what Robert Fisk calls 'hotel journalism': they work from hotels in the green zone getting their information by phone from spokespersons of the American army or the Iraqi government. Of course, there are also the embedded journalists. They are the ones we expect to show what the war really looks like, and they do. They show us once again only what the U.S. military sees or wants us to see, as former embedded journalist, Thorne Anderson, explained: "Embedding with the military is a great way to do a story about the soldiers and the effect the war has on them, but it's not the best way to report on what this war has done to Iraq." Anderson continued his job as a war photographer independently. His fellow photojournalist, Rita Leistner added:

"The obvious costs of war are perhaps the ones we see on TV: soldier casualties, Iraqi 'enemy' casualties. Some destruction of buildings. The real cost of course is much wider than that. There are uncountable civilian casualties. There are the wounded and maimed. There are orphaned children. Schooling is disrupted. Entire cities are leveled by bombs (this is never shown in the mainstream media). Children become soldiers willing to die fighting. Security erodes to the point that everyone is afraid - of attacks, of kidnappings, of robbery, of assassination. Amenities in general suffer with direct results on the population: No electricity means no water, no sanitation, no added security of lights at night. The rights of women are deteriorating in Iraq as religious fundamentalists gain power. This doesn't just mean being forced to wear covers, but beatings and the legal murder of women (called honor killing) is finding renewed popularity." [27]

These are not the images the American propaganda machine wants us to see. The neo-conservative government it works for is firmly determined to gain total global power.[28] In the eyes of the machine and its government, Iraq is an important- though not the last- step towards this goal.

[1] A few months ago, residents of Adhamiya and the Iraqi National Guard made an agreement, according to which the army is allowed to patrol the streets on condition that no militias or Interior Ministry's police troops enter the area. These measures had been taken because people who had been arrested by the security forces of the Ministry of Interior have often been found tortured and killed a few days after their arrest.

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