



## Armed Conflicts Report

### Iraq - Shia Muslims (1991 - first combat deaths)

Update: January 2004

#### Summary

Type of Conflict

Parties to the Conflict

Status of the Fighting

Number of Deaths

Political Developments

Background

Arms Sources

#### Summary:

**2003** *Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Iraqi security forces were disbanded, ending the conflict between Iraqi government forces under Saddam Hussein and Shia fighters within the country. However, following the fall and subsequent capture of President Hussein, several Shia factions remained engaged in armed conflict. These clashed with each other for power in post-Saddam Iraq or offered armed resistance to the US-led occupation forces.*

**2002** The Badr Corps rebel group, attacked Iraqi targets while government forces killed Shia clerics and followers and burned marshland in the south to drive out Shias. Casualty figures were not available.

**2001** Shia rebels based in Tehran claimed responsibility for rocket attacks in Baghdad targeting government buildings. Conflict casualty figures were not available for the year.

**2000** Repression of Shia civilians by Iraqi forces, including reported executions, expulsions and at least one attack on a village in Southern Iraq, was met by rocket attacks on the Presidential palace by Shia rebels. Possibly over 150 people died during the year.

**1999** The ongoing assault of Iraqi forces against Shias in the south included forced relocation of civilians and artillery bombing of villages. The intensity of the repression increased following the February killing of a leading Shia cleric. As many as 100 people died in 1999, with some reports of many more deaths.

**1998** Further Iraqi security forces operations against Shias in the South included mass civilian arrests, burning of crops, houses and marshlands, and artillery bombardment of villages.

**1997** Iraqi troops continued artillery attacks against Shia rebels and civilians as well as the large-scale destruction of their homeland in the marshes of southern Iraq.

**1996** Iraqi troops continued the destruction of southern marshes, home to Shia rebels, and there were unconfirmed reports of at least one major Iraqi assault.

**1995** Iraqi armed forces continued artillery attacks on Shia civilians and large-scale marsh destruction in southern Iraq.

#### Type of Conflict:

## State formation

**Parties to the Conflict:**

## 1) Government:

President Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi army was used to reconquer and suppress any rebels.

## 2) Rebels:

Shia Muslim forces, led by the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI), also known as the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The military arm of the group is the Badr Corps.

"SCIRI is headed by Ayatollah Mohamad Baqir Al Hakim the son of the late Grand Ayatollah Muhsin Al Hakim, who was the spiritual leader for the Shia in the world for the period 1955-1970. SCIRI consist of a general assembly of 70 members which represent various Islamic movements and scholars. SCIRI has a military force called Badr Corps. It started as a brigade and developed into a division and then into a corps. The Badr Corps consist of thousands of former Iraqi officers and soldiers who defected from the Iraqi army, Iraqi refugees and POWs. A mutual agreement has been signed by SCIRI with The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) headed by Jalal Talabani to work against Saddam's regime. A similar agreement was signed with the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) headed by Masood Barzani several years ago." [<http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/sciri.htm>, April 2000]

"Along with the main Kurdish groups, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) is the main armed opposition to President Hussein. It is made up of exiled members of Iraq's Shia community - which is based in the south and represents about 60% of Iraq's 22 million inhabitants. The group enjoys the backing of Iran. Its spiritual and political leader, Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, is based in Tehran. SCIRI claims to have a sizeable guerrilla network inside Iraq. Western governments estimate that the group has a force of between 7,000 and 15,000 men." [BBC News, February 17, 2003]

"The Iraqi Shias have an impressive army which trains in Iran. It includes survivors of the 1991 Shia uprising against Saddam Hussein, which failed, they say, because of the premature withdrawal of American support. They don't advertise how big this army is. It's rumoured to be about 15,000." [BBC News, December 17, 2002]

**Status of Fighting:**

**2002** The Iraqi government continued its attacks on Shia clerics and followers even as US and British forces stepped up their bombing campaigns in the no-fly zone of the Shia region in southern Iraq. In retaliation for SCIRI attacks on government targets and in anticipation of a US-led war on Iraq, Iraqi forces set fire to marshlands to drive out Shia rebels.

"The regime reportedly continued to pursue a policy of eliminating prominent Shi'a clerics and their followers suspected of disloyalty to the regime. For instance, the Sunday Times reported in May that regime security forces attacked Shi'a worshippers in Karbala on a religious pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Hussein, killing at least 40 of them. This continued an alleged pattern of repression against Shi'a. For example, according to HRW, five Shi'a from al-Najaf province were among those apparently executed in March in Abu Ghurayb prison." [*Iraq: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2002*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US State Department, March 31, 2003]

"The group attacks Iraqi targets relatively often. It has fired Katyusha rockets, ambushed officials or lobbed mortars at Iraqi soldiers every three months or so for the last two years. The last attack this year was in the first week of February." [[www.globalpolicy.org](http://www.globalpolicy.org), June 11, 2002]

"Officials in south-west Iran have been quoted as blaming the Iraqi military for starting the fires, speculating that it may have been a pre-emptive move, aimed at driving out rebel Shia fighters in advance of a possible American attack on Iraq." [BBC News, October 30, 2002]

**2001** A number of rocket attacks occurred in the Iraqi capital. The Iraqi government blamed Shia Muslim groups stationed in Tehran for the attacks.

"An explosion in Baghdad injured six people, Iraqi television reported. The explosion – second in less than a week – rocked the Al-Karadah neighbourhood. An announcer accused groups linked to neighbouring Iran of setting off explosions in an attempt to frighten Iraqis." [CNN, March 21, 2001]

"An Iraqi dissident group backed by Iran launched a rocket attack against Government targets in Baghdad, in a rare and noisy act of defiance against President Saddam Hussein. The Supreme Council for the Islamic Republic in Iran (SCIRI), a Shia Muslim group based in Tehran, claimed that it had fired 16 Katyusha rockets in the early hours at the secret police headquarters, the presidential palace, the radio and television center and the Iraqi Council of Ministers building." [*The Times*, July 12, 2001]

**2000** Repression of Shia civilians by Iraqi forces, including reported executions, expulsions and at least one attack on a village in Southern Iraq, was met by rocket attacks on the Presidential palace by Shia rebels.

"Hasan 'Abdullah, official spokesman of the 'Iraq Islamic Resistance,' said his forces attacked the Presidential Palace in Baghdad with 122 mm Katyusha rockets. He noted that this was the third such attack; others took place in May and September of last year." [*Iraq Report*, 30 March 2001]

**1999** The Iraqi government's repressive campaign against the Shias in the south continued during the

year. Government security forces carried out mass arrests, forceful relocation of the Shia populations, and attacks on the villages in the southern marshes. Following the February assassination of a prominent Shia cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq Al-Sadr and his sons in the holy city of Najaf, mass protests staged in the Shia sectors in Baghdad and in cities with a Shia majority such as Karbala, Nasiriyah, Najaf, and Basra, were brutally put down by Iraqi forces.

"In the large-scale assaults against Shi'a reported by several sources throughout the year... many thousands of persons reportedly were arrested arbitrarily. The Human Rights Organization in Iraq (HROI) reported that 1093 persons were arrested in Basrah in June alone.... The Government also continued the forced internal relocation of Shi'a populations from the south to the north, and other minority groups such as Kurds, Assyrians and Turkomen, to Kurdish-controlled territory in the north..."

"As in previous years, the armed forces conducted deliberate artillery attacks against Shi'a civilians and large-scale burning operations in the southern marshes. In 1991 and 1992, the Gulf War allies imposed "no-fly zones" over northern and southern Iraq respectively. The no-fly zones continued to deter aerial attacks against the marsh dwellers in southern Iraq and the residents of northern Iraq, limiting the Government to ground-based assaults..."

"Following the February 19 killing of Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq Al-Sadr and his sons, there were widespread reports of military assaults on protesters in areas of Baghdad heavily populated by Shi'a, and in cities with a Shi'a majority such as Karbala, Nasiriyah, Najaf, and Basra, in which hundreds of persons were killed." [*Iraq Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1999*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State, 2000]

**1998** Iraqi security forces' operations against Shias in the South included mass civilian arrests, burning of crops, houses and marshlands, and artillery bombardment of villages.

"Tehran-based SCIRI [Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq] reported a government campaign of house burning intended to suppress resistance in the southern marshes... In the southern marshes thousands of people were reportedly denied rations for alleged cooperation with the opposition." [*Human Rights Watch World Report 1999*, p358-9]

"Military operations against Shi'a civilians, particularly in southern Iraq, continued throughout the year, increasing in the summer after the killings of Ayatollah Ali al Gharawi and Shaykh Borojoudi." [*Iraq Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State, February 26, 1999]

**1997** Iraqi troops conducted artillery attacks against Shia rebels and civilians as well as the large-scale destruction of their homeland in the marshes of southern Iraq.

"The no-fly zones continued to deter aerial attacks on the marsh dwellers in southern Iraq and residents of northern Iraq, but they did not prevent artillery attacks on villages in either area, nor the military's large-scale burning operations in the southern marshes.... Shi'a opposition groups report that, due to the continuing fighting, the condition of the Shi'a in the south has continued to deteriorate even after the institution of the U.N.'s "oil for food" program." [*Iraq Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US State Department, January 30, 1998]

**1996** Iraqi troops continued artillery attacks against civilians, and destruction of southern marshes, home to Shia rebels. There were unconfirmed reports of at least one major Iraqi assault.

"The Tehran-based Supreme Assembly for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the main Shia opposition movement, said in a communiqué that 4,000 troops supported by 300 MBTs and APCs were involved in the assault [a new offensive against Shia Muslim rebels in southern Iraq on 27 August], the largest such Iraqi action in the region for a year.

"It claimed a large number of Iraqis were killed or wounded in what appeared to be heavy fighting." [*Jane's Defence Weekly*, 4 September 1996, p.22]

"Government forces reportedly executed more Shi'a inhabitants of the southern marshes in 1996, but there remains no independent means to verify these reports." [*Iraq Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State, January 30, 1997]

"As in previous years, the armed forces conducted deliberate artillery attacks against Shi'a civilians in the southern marshes and against minority groups in northern Iraq.... Credible reports confirm the ongoing destruction of the marshes. The army continued to construct canals, causeways, and earthen berms to divert water from the wetlands. Hundreds of square kilometers have been burned in military operations." [*Ibid.*]

**1995** Iraqi armed forces' artillery attacks on Shia civilians and large-scale marsh destruction continued in spite of US-led bombings of government targets and enforcement of the "no-fly zone" in southern Iraq.

"INC news releases claim that two divisions of the Republican Guard, equipped with T-42 main battle tanks, have moved south towards the marsh Arab enclaves between Al Basrah and Nasiriyeh." [*Jane's Defence Weekly*, 25 March 1995, p.19]

"As in previous years, Iraqi armed forces conducted deliberate artillery attacks against Shi'a civilians in the southern marshes.... The no-fly zones continue to deter aerial attacks on the marsh dwellers in southern Iraq and residents of northern Iraq, but they do not prevent artillery attacks in either area or the military's large-scale burning operations in the south." [*Iraq Human Rights Practices, 1995*, US Department of State, March 1996]

## Number of Deaths:

**Total:** Estimates of the number of Shias killed since the 1991 uprising vary widely, ranging from thousands to hundreds of thousands. In 2002, the government of Iraq estimated that close to 1,500

people had been killed by bombing in the no-fly zones.

"Ayatollah Hakim said that since the 1991 uprising the regime has killed more than 300,000 people in an attempt to crush rebellion among the Shiites, who dominate the south and make up about 60 per cent of Iraq's 17 million population." [*Globe and Mail*, February 22, 1994]

"Numbering some 250,000 people as recently as 1991, the Marsh Arabs today are believed to number fewer than 40,000 in their ancestral homeland. Many have been arrested, 'disappeared,' or executed; most have become refugees abroad or are internally displaced in Iraq as a result of Iraqi oppression." [*Human Rights Watch*, The Government Assault on Marsh Arabs, January 2003]

"A total of 1,479 Iraqis have been killed since the no-fly zones were set up, according to Baghdad." [*Agence France-Presse*, May 23, 2002]

**2002** Numbers of deaths were not available this year.

"On June 10 the group's Web site said that 'resistance forces' attacked a motorcade of a senior Iraqi official, killing three bodyguards. SCIRI also said it attacked and wounded another senior official a month ago in southern Iraq." [[www.globalpolicy.org](http://www.globalpolicy.org), June 11, 2002]

**2001** Casualty figures were unavailable for the year.

**2000** Although figures are difficult to verify, there were reports of the death of as many as 150 Shia civilians as well as several Republican Guards during the year.

"Authorities continued to target alleged supporters of Al-Sadr... during the year. In February security officials reportedly executed 30 religious school students who had been arrested after Al-Sadr's killing. In March numerous Shi'a who fled the country in 1999 and earlier in the year, told HRW that security forces interrogated, detained, and tortured them. In May six other students who were arrested following the killing were sentenced to death. It was unknown whether the death sentences had been carried out by year's end.

"As a reprisal for the disturbances following Al-Sadr's killing, the Government expelled approximately 4,000 Shi'a families from Baghdad and sent them to the south and west in 1999 and during the year." [*Iraq: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices -2000*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US State Department, February 2001]

"Republican Guard and Special Forces,... recently 'destroyed the Salin village in southern Iraq, where they killed more than 120 Iraqi citizens over three days.'" [*Iraq Report*, 22 May 2000]

**1999** As many as 100 people died in 1999, with some reports suggesting many more.

"Iraqi security forces clashed with Shia demonstrators on Monday for the third running day after the assassination of a leading cleric, in some of the most serious outbreaks of public defiance in recent years. Some reports suggest that as many as 100 died in the riots as the unrest spread from the holy city of Najaf where Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al-Sader and two of his sons were shot dead last week." [*Guardian Weekly*, February 28, 1999]

**1998** Accurate figures are difficult to obtain, but it is likely over 1,000 Shi'a civilians died at the hands of Iraqi security forces during 1998. These were political prisoners summarily executed and civilians killed in military operations in the South.

"Along with the reported killings of 25 or more military officers during Operation Desert Fox, the total summary execution toll attributable to the regime for October through December amounted to nearly 500 persons." [*Iraq Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State, February 26, 1999]

"Hundreds of persons reportedly were killed in late November in Amara, as part of a security sweep personally directed by Qusay Hussein." [*Ibid.*]

**1997** Hundreds of people died in government attacks on marshes, state political executions and clashes between Shi'a pilgrims and security forces.

"The Government continued to summarily execute perceived political opponents, and reports of such summary executions increased significantly during the year. More than 2,000 killings were reported. Several dozen of these reported executions followed specific allegations of coup attempts in February and August. However, reports suggest that far more people were executed merely because of their association with an opposition group or in an effort to clear out of the prisons anyone with a sentence of 15 to 20 years or more.... In June serious clashes were reported between Shi'a pilgrims traveling to Karbala for the Arba'in commemoration and security forces and government-backed Sunni civilians. Reports of casualties varied widely, indicating that between 40 to 500 pilgrims were killed." [*Iraq Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US State Department, January 30, 1998]

## Political Developments:

**2002** In June, the SCIRI met with US State Department officials in Washington to discuss cooperation in a potential war against the Iraqi regime. The US offered military funding to the group. In December, the SCIRI met with other Iraqi opposition groups in London to discuss options for a post-Saddam Iraq.

"The sources said the US had started a 'flurry of contacts with various forces among the Iraqi opposition... Intensive contacts are being held with both the Kurdish and Shi'ite opposition in order to establish springboards for potential operations..." [*The Australian*, July 1, 2002]

"The United States approved military funding yesterday for six Iraqi opposition groups [including the SCIRI, the INC, the Iraqi National Accord, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Movement for Constitutional Monarchy, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan]... Under an order signed by President Bush yesterday, SCIRI [the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq] would be eligible for \$92 million worth of military training and defense

articles from the Pentagon as specified under the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act." [washingtontimes.com, December 10, 2002]

"The meeting [to discuss a post-Saddam government for Iraq], scheduled for next month in the Kurdish city of Erbil, will bring together the 75 members of a new steering committee established here whose members represent the various factions of the opposition -- groups that have all worked, but often in competition, to end the rule of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein since the founding of the Iraqi National Congress in 1992." [The Washington Times, December 17, 2002]

**2001** A UN Environment Programme report in May confirmed that about 90 per cent of the southern marshlands have disappeared.

"Satellites now confirm it: the lands of the Marsh Arabs has all but gone. The marshes of Mesopotamia, the great historic wetlands of southern Iraq which until recent years sheltered a 5,000-year-old civilization and unique wildlife, have nearly vanished, according to United Nations scientists. The result is a double disaster, ecological and humanitarian: not only has the world all but lost a unique freshwater ecosystem, the largest wetland in the Middle East, home to a host of specialized animals, birds, reptiles and fish; we have seen the virtual end of one of the world's most ancient civilizations, that of the Madan, or Marsh Arabs, whose way of life has been documented since Sumerian times." [The Independent, May 19, 2001]

**2000** Opposition groups indicated growing interest in united action against the government.

**1999** SCIRI repeatedly rejected aid from Washington to assist efforts to overthrow President Saddam Hussein's regime. The Shia opposition group is eligible for financial assistance under the US 1998 Iraq Liberation Act.

"Iraq's main Shi'ite Muslim opposition group today rejected an aid offer from Washington to help finance efforts to topple President Saddam Hussein. 'Our answer is thank you but no thank you,' said Hamid al-Bayati, British representative of the Tehran-based Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The Clinton administration Tuesday designated seven Iraqi opposition groups as eligible for U.S. aid, including the Tehran-based coalition which dominates Shi'ite Muslim resistance to the Iraqi government. 'We have not received any aid from the United States and believe that this is an incorrect way to deal with the Iraqi opposition,' Bayati told Reuters by telephone. 'Such methods ruin the image of the Iraqi opposition, appearing to receive aid from the West and the United States. We will not take this aid,' he added... Clinton was fulfilling a requirement in last year's Iraq Liberation Act, which makes \$97 million available for approved Iraqi opposition groups." [Reuters, June 17, 1999]

"In what is the largest such meeting in seven years, exiled Iraqi opposition groups began a four-day meeting today in New York. About 320 delegates from the Iraqi National Congress and other groups are expected to approve a unified political platform and choose a new leadership... Several of the participants say they have been threatened directly by the Iraqi regime, which warned them not to attend the conference. One was called by a senior member of Saddam's Revolutionary Command Council, the official said... Also, a major opposition group is boycotting the meeting. The main Shi'ite group, the Iranian-based Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, said it would not to come to New York." [ABCNEWS.com, October 29, 1999].

**1995** The Iraqi military continued its widespread destruction of the wetlands, while the government diverted basic supplies from the southern Shia population.

"Throughout the year, the Government announced that it would undertake several water-diversion and other projects, which continued the process of large-scale environmental destruction. The Government claims the drainage is part of a land reclamation plan to increase the acreage of arable land, spur agricultural production, and reduce salt pollution in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. However, the evidence of large-scale human and ecological destruction appears to belie this claim.

"Credible reports confirm the ongoing destruction of the marshes. The army continued to construct canals, causeways, and earthen berms to divert water from the wetlands. Hundreds of square kilometers have been burned in military operations. Moreover, the regime's diversion of supplies in the south limited the population's access to food, medicine, drinking water, and transportation." [Iraq Human Rights Practices, 1995, US Department of State, March 1996]

## Background:

In southern Iraq, Shia Muslims have opposed the Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein since its detention and execution of prominent clergy in the late 1970s, and its mass executions of Shias during the Iran-Iraq war. Led by the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI), Shias, who are a majority within the Iraqi population, have maintained their resistance in spite of a failed post-Gulf War revolt in 1991 and government efforts to destroy the marshes where they live. As in the north, Western forces declared a 1992 "no-fly zone" to prevent Iraqi air force attacks, but this has not prevented the government from ground attacks against civilian homes and environment and blockading basic supplies to the Southern Shia population.

"Shia opposition to the Baath regime reached a boiling point in the late 1970s and early 1980s, fired in part by the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and in part by the Iraqi regime's detention and execution of prominent members of the Shia clergy." [Human Rights in Iraq, Middle East Watch, 1990, p.52]

"Why the majority of Iraqi Shias remained loyal [during the Iran-Iraq war] is a subject of much conjecture, however, since Shias were executed by the regime in large numbers during the war. In July 1981, twelve Shia officers and two hundred Shias from other ranks were reportedly executed by firing squads, allegedly for planning attempts on Saddam Hussein's life. Shias suspected of membership in al-Dawa and other banned Shia organizations were rounded up in large numbers, and six hundred are estimated to have been executed in 1984 alone. Most of the forty thousand or so soldiers who deserted are believed to have been Shias." [Human Rights in Iraq, Middle East Watch, 1990, p.53]

"Few armed opponents of Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein have suffered as much as Iraq's southern Shia Muslims. They have seen their religious leaders assassinated, their marshes - both their economic lifeline and hiding place - drained, and their 1991 uprising put down mercilessly with a toxic cocktail of chemical weapons. So few might be so willing - after spilling blood for years to topple the Iraqi leader - to embrace Washington's growing plans to do just that." [The Christian Science Monitor, February 14, 2002]

"For more than two decades, Shi'a Muslims across Iraq, who collectively form at least 60 percent of the Iraqi population, have been subjected to a violent government campaign of persecution, the authorities fearing that Iraqi Shi'a might seek to follow the example set by Shi'a in Iran." [*Human Rights Watch*, The Government Assault on Marsh Arabs, January 2003]

### Arms Sources:

Iraq has been subject to a UN economic and arms embargo since shortly after its annexation of Kuwait in 1990. Previously, the USSR, France, China, Brazil, and a host of other countries sold military equipment to the Baghdad regime. In 1992 Bosnia was accused of violating United Nations sanctions by selling arms to the regime in Baghdad. Rebel forces reportedly receive weapons and training from Iran's Revolutionary Guard. In 2002, the US offered military funding to the SCIRI.

"Bosnia's top international representative, Lord Ashdown, has issued a stern warning to the country's politicians over the alleged sale of arms to Iraq in breach of United Nations sanctions." [*BBC News*, October 27, 2002]

"SCIRI has about 4,000-8,000 fighters, composed of Iraqi Shiite exiles and prisoners of war, operating against the Iraqi military in southern Iraq. Although SCIRI has distanced itself from Iran to some extent, Iran's Revolutionary Guard reportedly continues to provide it with weapons and training." [<http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/sciri.htm>, April 2000]

"In September 1992 Iran was accused of 'vastly increasing supplies to Iraq's Shia Muslims in an attempt to help establish an autonomous pro-Tehran state in southern Iraq.'" [*Globe and Mail*, September 3, 1992]

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