

US military prepares assault on Najaf and Fallujah

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Under the cover of ceasefires and negotiations ostensibly aimed at achieving a political settlement to the Iraqi uprising, the US military is assembling the forces to crush the most prominent centres of resistance. Marines are being reinforced for a renewed offensive on the besieged city of Fallujah, while US troops have been rushed from northern Iraq to the southern Shiite city of Najaf, where cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and thousands of his supporters have fortified themselves near the Iman Ali Shrine, the holiest site of Shia Islam.

Iraqi fighters have conducted determined efforts to prevent the US build-up around Najaf, which has been in the hands of the uprising since April 3. Shiite militiamen armed only with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades suffered heavy losses attacking American convoys traveling south earlier in the week. Overpasses in Baghdad were brought down and one bridge over the Euphrates River was destroyed and two others so badly damaged that US armour could not cross.

However, Najaf is now under siege by an American force of 2,500. It includes squadrons of tanks, Stryker armoured fighting vehicles, infantry and ground artillery, backed by helicopter gunships and fighter-bombers. Thousands of Spanish, Polish and Ukrainian troops are also being prepared to take part in an assault.

American and coalition troops have checkpoints blocking all the main roads into the city. Leaflets are being distributed denouncing Sadr for the murder of a moderate Shia cleric at a Najaf mosque in April 2003. As many as 6,000 fighters loyal to Sadr are believed to be ready to resist any US attack. Local people are said to be stock-piling food, water and oil, and shopkeepers are piling sandbags around their stores, in anticipation of weeks of street-to-street fighting.

Colonel Dana Pritchard of the Third Brigade, First Infantry Division, summed up the mentality of the US forces. He told the *Los Angeles Times* at the beginning of the week: "My intent is to destroy Sadr's militia, absolutely destroy it, and then to capture or kill Sadr. That's our mission. We're just waiting to be unleashed."

The breathing space for the US military preparations has been provided by the clerical leadership under Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the two Shiite parties that sit in the puppet Iraqi Governing Council (ICG)—the Supreme Council for the Islamic

Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Al Dawa Islamic Party.

Hundreds of Shiites have fought and died over the past 12 days against the US occupation, and hundreds of thousands have demonstrated in sympathy, especially in Baghdad where Sadr has his main base of support among the working class and urban poor. But Sistani, SCIRI and Al Dawa have used their influence to try to defuse the uprising.

Clerics aligned to Sistani—who is the most authoritative leader in the Shiite hierarchy—have issued repeated calls for "calm" and refused to endorse the armed resistance. The 10,000-strong Badr Brigade militia of SCIRI stood by last week while coalition forces suppressed the uprising and reestablished control over all the main southern Iraqi cities except Najaf.

According to the US military, while fighting is continuing in Sadr City and other suburbs of Baghdad, the situation has been mainly stable this week across southern Iraq, including in Basra, Amara, Nasiriyah, Kut and Karbala. Most of the youth in the south who took up arms on April 3 have gone to ground, been killed or wounded or have made their way to Najaf.

Since the weekend, delegations including Sistani's sons and representatives of Al Dawa have met with Sadr and sought to pressure him into calling off the insurrection.

The motives of the Shiite elites are twofold. Firstly, they fear that any attack on Najaf—which one US officer compared with attacking the Vatican—will unleash a rebellion among Iraqi Shiites they cannot control. Khithar Jaafer, a spokesman for Al Dawa, told the *Los Angeles Times*: "The situation is so dangerous because it doesn't just involve Moqtada [Sadr]... the Shias are feeling in general that this is a confrontation. If the US moves militarily, it will be understood as a message against all Shiites. We are very concerned that if this sedition breaks out, it will be hard to stop."

The second motive is even more base. The Shiite elites are making a venal gamble that by betraying the aspirations of the mass of Iraqi Shiites for an end to the US occupation, the Bush administration will give them a dominant position in the puppet state it is attempting to establish in Iraq. The main demand of Sistani and the Shia parties is that Iraq's interim constitution is revised to remove clauses that give a degree of power to Iraq's minority Kurdish and Sunni communities. Iraqi Shiites make up some 60 percent of the population. The Shia clerics and parties

hope to be able to mobilise them on a sectarian basis in elections and dominate any future parliament.

Sadr, a member of one of the most powerful families of the Shiite establishment, is bowing to the pressure. At the start of the week, as the US made its preparations for a massacre, he ordered his militiamen to hand back police stations and strategic buildings in Najaf to Iraqi police. Yesterday, Sadr's spokesman declared the cleric was "ready accept what the Marjaiya [the Shiite religious leadership] ask for and to drop the conditions he had set for mediation".

Sadr's conditions had been that the Bush administration pull US troops out of all Iraqi cities, release hundreds of his militiamen who have been detained over the past two weeks and give guarantees as to when the US military would completely withdraw from the country. Sadr has also declared his willingness to disband his militia and submit to being tried for murder in the future, under a "legitimate and democratic government" established after the end of the US occupation.

Representatives of the Iranian government were invited by the British to take part in talks with the Shiite leadership in Iraq—giving rise to speculation that an attempt was being made to strike a deal with Sadr in which he is given temporary asylum in Iran, in exchange for calling on his supporters to lay down their arms. The Iranian regime is also anxious to end the uprising. The theocracy in Tehran fears it could galvanise the urban poor and oppressed in Iran against its brutal rule and its efforts to reestablish relations with US imperialism

The various efforts by the Shiite establishment, the British and Iran for some type of compromise appear to have broken down, however, due to US refusal to accept anything less than Sadr's total submission and the destruction of his militia. Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi told reporters late Wednesday that Iran's involvement in negotiations had ended. "We felt we were going nowhere," Kharrazi said. "The Americans give promises but don't keep their promises. Currently, they are taking a wrong path."

A US assault on Najaf, with all the potentially explosive consequences, may be imminent.

In Fallujah—where at least 700 Iraqis have already been killed and over 1,200 seriously wounded in the past two weeks—there is little doubt that a renewed attack is being prepared.

For the Bush administration and the entire US political establishment, the city's defiance of the occupation over the past year, and especially over the past two weeks, has made it an unacceptable symbol of resistance. The official US military position is that operations will continue until Fallujah has been completely "pacified".

As many as 200 American troops have been killed or wounded in and around the city since April 5. A ceasefire since the beginning of this week has enabled the US military to rest its forces and bring in hundreds of fresh troops and new tank units. Aerial surveillance has been constant, pin-pointing concentrations of resistance fighters. The ceasefire has also

been used to depopulate much of city. As many as 80,000 refugees have now fled to Baghdad.

The ceasefire was already breaking down on Tuesday evening, with US tanks storming into the city to rescue an armoured fighting vehicle that allegedly "strayed" into resistance-held territory. Helicopter gunships and jet fighters used the opportunity to carry out strafing and bombing runs over suspected Iraqi positions.

The scenes being described from the city are ones of total devastation and bitter urban warfare. A marine major told the *New York Times*: "It's the fight that never came last year. I guess these guys didn't really want to die for Saddam. But all this anti-American feeling is now uniting them."

Associated Press correspondents reported yesterday: "In the abandoned homes they occupy on the frontlines a few blocks into the city, marines punched bricks out of wall to make holes to fire through and knocked down walls between rooftop terraces to allow movement from house to house without descending to the street. Shards of glass were spread across doorsteps, so the approaching boot of an enemy would be heard approaching the door... Insurgents were also organising. Marines said they suspected tunnels had been dug under houses held by gunmen to allow them to move without being targeted by marine snipers...."

The US military is clearly preparing for a bloodbath against the thousands of armed Iraqi men and youth defending Fallujah. A marine corporal told Associated Press on Monday it didn't concern him if the Iraqi fighters used the ceasefire to rest and resupply, because "they're all gonna die".

Lieutenant Frank Dillbeck told AP: "If they're trying to find a peaceful way out of this, great. But at this point there seems to be few options other than to get the innocents out and level it, wipe it clear off the map."



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