

US faces ongoing Shiite uprising in southern Iraq

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6 May 2004

Even as marines pull back from a confrontation with resistance fighters in the city of Fallujah, the American military is continuing operations to suppress the Shiite uprising that erupted on April 4 under the leadership of 31-year-old cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

Until this week, southern Iraq has been relatively subdued, since the heavy fighting in the first 10 days of April. A tense standoff has prevailed in a number of cities, with some districts under the control of fighters loyal to al-Sadr and others under the control of the US-led occupation forces. Sadr and thousands of his supporters have fortified themselves in the holy Shiite city of Najaf, close to the Iman Ali Shrine, the holiest site of Shia Islam. The US military, heeding warnings by Shiite leaders that any damage to the shrine by a US attack could trigger an even broader insurrection, has not attempted to enter the city centre thus far.

Fighting between US troops and the militiamen of Sadr's Madhi Army is now steadily escalating.

On Tuesday night, after coming under heavy Iraqi mortar fire the day before, 450 American, Polish and Bulgarian troops with tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles and helicopter gunship support launched a midnight assault on militia positions in the southwestern suburbs of Karbala. For the first time, US troops used heavy machine-guns and tank fire in the streets of the city—the location of other important Shiite shrines.

A government office that had been taken over by the militiamen and used to store ammunition was strafed by a helicopter gunship and then reduced to rubble by tank fire. The US military estimated at least 10 Iraqi fighters were killed. One American soldier died when Iraqis used a dump truck to break through a US roadblock.

An attack was also launched Tuesday night on Sadr's supporters in Diwaniyah, a city to the east of Najaf. In heavy fighting to take several buildings held by militiamen, three American soldiers and at least nine

Iraqis were killed. A spokesman from the local hospital said five civilians had also died.

The raids followed intense bursts of fighting on Monday around the former Spanish compound in Najaf, which has been taken over by 200 American troops. Shiite militiamen have regularly fired mortar barrages on the base in an attempt to force the US forces to withdraw completely from the city. Fighting has also flared in al-Sadr's hometown of Kufa, which is only some five miles from Najaf. British and American forces in Amara and Basra have come under attack over the past week.

The most intense military activity appears to be taking place in Baghdad, though it is receiving little coverage in the western media. Parts of the eastern, northern and western suburbs of the capital are effectively battlegrounds between US troops and Sadr's Shiite militiamen or Sunni Muslim guerilla groups. The most oppressed area of the city, the working class Shiite suburb of Sadr City—named after al-Sadr's father—is a virtual no-go area for the US military except in heavily armoured convoys.

American troops are suffering continuous losses from resistance attacks in Baghdad. On Sunday, two US troops were killed by a roadside bomb in the north-west of the capital. One soldier was shot dead and two wounded on Monday as they stood guard outside a weapons depot. Ground artillery was called in against resistance fighters firing on aircraft landing at Baghdad airport. According to the most recent briefing by the US-controlled Coalition Provisional Authority, some 430 patrols were carried out in Baghdad on Tuesday alone in efforts to suppress guerilla activity.

The fact that a popular armed struggle is underway against the US occupation of Iraq was underscored by the announcement this week that US troop numbers in the country will be kept at 138,000 until at least the end of 2005. Less than four months ago, the American military

had begun a rotation plan to reduce the force in Iraq to just 105,000, with further reductions intended in 2005. The entire plan has now been scrapped. The British government is reportedly under pressure from Washington to deploy as many as 4,000 extra troops.

In contemplating whether or not to launch an assault on Sadr's forces in Najaf, the Bush administration and American military face an even greater dilemma than they confronted when deciding how to end the month-long siege of Fallujah. An attack on the holiest city of the Shiite faith could unleash massive outpourings of anger in Iraq and other parts of the Middle East, with unpredictable consequences.

There appear to be behind-the-scenes efforts by the US to convince sections of the Shiite establishment to function as proxies for the US military in suppressing the uprising around Sadr.

In particular, the Bush administration is seeking the collaboration of the main Shiite cleric Ali al-Sistani and the 10,000-strong Badr Brigade militia maintained by the Iranian-backed Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which has members in the puppet Iraqi Governing Council.

Sistani, SCIRI and another Shiite religious party, al-Dawa, have not supported the calls for armed struggle to free Iraq from US rule. Instead they have sought to use their authority to isolate Sadr's supporters. Over the past several weeks, they have stepped up demands on Sadr that he end the uprising and disband his militia. In exchange they have offered Sadr a worthless undertaking that he will not be tried over US allegations he ordered the murder of a rival Shia cleric until a sovereign Iraqi government is formed.

On Tuesday, some 100 representatives of SCIRI, al-Dawa and local Najaf business and tribal groups, while again insisting the US not send troops near the holy Shiite shrines, issued a demand that Sadr withdraw his militiamen from around the mosques and shrines in Najaf and Kufa; allow the Iraqi police to resume patrolling; and withdraw all the weapons of his militia from the two cities.

Under conditions where the city is surrounded by 2,500 American troops with tanks and air support, this is effectively a demand that Sadr surrender his forces to the US.

Behind the demands of Sistani, SCIRI and al-Dawa is their ambition to strike a deal with US imperialism that will give them the dominant position in the Iraqi state being established under the auspices of the occupation. To

achieve a deal, some elements of the Shiite establishment appear prepared to betray Sadr and the Shiite youth who have taken up arms.

According to the *New York Times*, a Najaf tribal leader declared at Tuesday's meeting: "The Americans don't want to go into the shrines. They want to get rid of criminals and thieves. So what if they enter the city?" The *Times* reported that dozens of men called out "Yes, yes".

To the extent the Bush administration has a strategy for ending the Shiite uprising, it appears to be attacking Sadr's militia outside of Najaf and convincing other Shiite factions to agree to a Fallujah-style arrangement in which they accept responsibility for disarming the Mahdi Army in the holy city. To facilitate a settlement, the Bush administration has stopped declaring it intends to "kill" Sadr and indicated it is prepared to allow the Shia hierarchy to work out a compromise.

Bush told Arab station Al Arabiya yesterday: "I think he [Sadr] ought to be dealt with by the Iraqi citizens who are getting tired of him occupying the holiest of holy sites. The Iraqis will deal with Mr. Sadr."

At this point, Sadr has not responded to the calls that he order his supporters to lay down their arms. In an indication of the bitterness that is felt among Sadr's supporters for the Shia leaders who have not supported the uprising, a guard for Sistani told Agence France Presse: "I hear many Mahdi militiamen grumbling that Sistani is just sitting inside his air-conditioned home saying nothing to support their fight against the Americans."

Washington's calculations ignore the main driving force of the struggle against the occupation: the opposition of the vast majority of the Iraqi people to the invasion and plunder of their country. This anti-colonial sentiment is not going to be dissipated by whatever temporary deals the Bush administration makes, whether in Fallujah or in Najaf.



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