

Fighting escalates in Iraq as US seeks to crush Shia rebellion

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10 May 2004

Just over a year after George Bush declared “major combat” to be over in Iraq, fighting is escalating between occupation troops and Iraqi fighters loyal to Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The clashes have resulted from an offensive by the US military to crush the uprising among Iraqi Shiites that erupted in early April.

Heavy combat took place on Wednesday and Thursday in the holy Shiite city of Najaf, the nearby town of Kufa and Karbala. Parts of all three cities are under the control of Sadr’s Mahdi Army militia. Sadr and thousands of supporters have fortified themselves in the centre of Najaf around the Iman Ali Shrine, the most significant religious site of the Shiite faith. The US military has not attempted to enter the city centre thus far out of fears that any damage to the shrine by a US attack could trigger an even broader insurrection among Iraqi Shiites.

As many as 40 Iraqi militiamen are believed to have been killed in clashes in Kufa on Thursday. In Najaf, US forces seized control of the governor’s office which has been held by Sadr’s supporters for over a month. The US military called in artillery and an air strike against Iraqi mortars that had been shelling American troops in the former Spanish base. A number of civilians, including three children, were killed when their house was hit by US artillery shells.

In Karbala, US troops carried out a major assault on militia positions. Dozens of Iraqis were reportedly killed. The *New York Times* reported Bradley fighting vehicles firing “25 millimetre cannons at figures darting down alleyways... By the time the last bullet was fired, bodies of Iraqi men lay strewn across the roads.”

Shiite militiamen responded with a series of counter-attacks on coalition forces on Friday and over the

weekend. The revelations that Iraqi prisoners are being tortured in US and British custody has become an additional factor in the armed resistance. At Friday prayers in mosques across Iraq, clerics aligned with Sadr denounced the hypocrisy of US claims that the invasion had brought “liberation” to the Iraqi people and called for Shiites to take up arms against the occupation. Speaking at the main mosque in the city of Kufa, Sadr declared: “America claims that it is fighting terrorism, not sponsoring it, and that it is spreading justice and equality among peoples and freedom and democracy. Now it is doing the same acts done by the small devil Saddam and in the same place where Iraqis were oppressed.”

At the main mosque in Basra, a leading cleric held up photos showing three Iraqi women allegedly being raped by British troops, and called for attacks on the British forces in the city. A demonstration on Saturday by thousands of angry Iraqis outside the main government offices in Basra developed into an open battle between British troops and Shiite militiamen. According to wire reports, at least two Iraqis were killed and four British soldiers were wounded. In an attempt to restore control, British troops stormed the headquarters of Sadr’s movement. Tanks and armoured vehicles have been stationed in the centre of the city. Hundreds of Iraqi militiamen have reportedly seized control of the northern working class suburb of Qarma and established roadblocks and defensive positions.

A British military convoy was also attacked outside the city of Amarah, to the north of Basra. In response, British troops launched an assault on the suspected headquarters of Sadr’s supporters in the city. At least three Iraqis were killed and two British soldiers were wounded in a 20-minute gun battle. In Nasiriyah, the Italian base was mortared on Friday, injuring two

Italian police officers.

In Baghdad, US troops with tanks and helicopter gunship support launched a raid on Saturday on an office building being used by Sadr's organisation in the poverty-stricken working class suburb of Sadr City—named after Sadr's father who was murdered on the orders of Saddam Hussein. Two leading supporters of al-Sadr were seized. In retaliation, Shiite militiamen launched coordinated attacks on several police stations and established barricades. American troops were rushed into the area to retake control. The US military claimed to have killed 19 militiamen in several hours of fighting. At least three Iraqi police and six civilians were also killed.

Last night, the Four Seasons Hotel in Baghdad was bombed, wounding two British and two Nepalese security guards.

The Coalition Provisional Authority and the US military continue to assert that the month-long uprising led by Sadr is isolated. There is every indication, however that the opposite is the case. On Friday, a joint Sunni-Shiite rally was held in support of al-Sadr in the Baghdad suburb of Adhamiya. Before an audience of thousands, a leading Sunni cleric declared: "They [the US] have tried to sow discord among us, as Sunnis and Shiites, but they have failed." The crowd reportedly chanted "Moqtada" and "Sunni, Shiite, unite!"

The Shiite rebellion has severely undermined the morale of the US military. When the Bush administration launched the invasion of Iraq last March, it claimed that the Shiite population in particular would welcome American troops. Thirteen months on, the Shiite areas of the country are becoming the focus of the Iraqi national resistance to the occupation. Whatever the immediate fate of Sadr, it is now apparent to the US military that it will be confronting a never-ending and escalating guerilla struggle.

The fears in military circles were highlighted on Sunday in an article in the *Washington Post*, headlined "Dissension grows in senior ranks on war strategy." Colonel Paul Hughes, who was a director of strategic planning in the early stages of the occupation, told the *Post*: "I lost my brother in Vietnam... Here I am, 30 years later, thinking we'll win every fight and lose the war, because we don't understand the war we're in." An unnamed military intelligence officer stated: "We

are rapidly losing the support of the middle, which will enable the insurgency to continue indefinitely until our national resolve is worn down."



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