

US forces attack in Baghdad, tensions build around Najaf

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Some of the heaviest fighting of the US-led occupation of Iraq is currently taking place in Baghdad, provoked by US efforts to crush the uprising being led by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. In the early hours of Monday morning, American tanks and helicopter gunships launched a major assault on the working class, predominantly Shiite suburb of Sadr City, killing and wounding dozens of Iraqi fighters and civilians.

US troops provocatively raided the suburb on Saturday night, seizing six of Sadr's supporters, including two leaders of his organisation. The following day, militiamen of Sadr's Mahdi Army attempted to seal off the densely populated suburb with barricades to prevent US forces entering again. Militiamen took control of several key buildings and distributed leaflets appealing for people to remain indoors and not to open businesses. According to journalists at the scene, cranes and bulldozers were used to block roads and militiamen established defensive positions on key roadways.

Against the lightly armed Iraqis, the American military deployed heavy armour. Roadblocks were cleared by tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles. Then at 2:00am on Monday morning, a column of American armour rampaged into the heart of Sadr City to attack the headquarters of the Madhi militia.

A local leader, Sheikh Fakher al-Azawi, told a *New York Times* correspondent: "[T]anks and armoured vehicles entered our street. Our youth responded to that force. People were hiding in their houses. It was a street battle." A resident reported: "The Mahdi Army was hiding behind the buildings shooting at the Americans. The Americans in return bombed the whole street. It is really chaotic. All we can do is watch, nothing more."

According to the US military, Iraqi fighters fought back with volleys of rocket-propelled grenades and small arms fire. Four American troops were reportedly wounded. The headquarters, however, was empty when troops searched

it. Nevertheless, in an Israeli-style act of reprisal, the building in the centre of a city street was reduced to rubble by tank shells and helicopter gunships. After destroying the office, the US forces withdrew to the edges of Sadr City.

The US claims to have killed 35 militiamen in the night operation, plus at least 18 in fighting during Sunday. A spokesman for the local hospital reported that it had treated 32 wounded people before last night's assault.

These bloody events underscore the absurdity of US claims that it is not confronting a broad and popular liberation movement. While the US occupation authority has fortified itself inside the Green Zone in central Baghdad, Sadr City, just five kilometres away and with a population approaching two million, is supportive of al-Sadr and his demand for the immediate end to the occupation. Washington's only answer is force, relying on the fact that the Iraqi fighters do not have the heavy armaments needed to confront American tanks in direct battle.

The animosity among the urban poor in Baghdad toward US imperialism is the product of long experience. They endured repression in the 1980s under the former Baathist regime when Saddam Hussein was a loyal US ally, immense deprivation under the UN- and US-enforced economic sanctions in the 1990s and ongoing suffering since the US invaded the country.

Thousands were killed or tortured in what is now Sadr City during the US-backed Baathist purges of the Stalinist Iraqi Communist Party in the early 1980s. Thousands more were killed or imprisoned during the anti-Baathist Shiite uprising in 1991, which the US allowed to be crushed by Hussein's Republican Guard. Another bloodbath took place after an aborted uprising in 1999 following Hussein's assassination of al-Sadr's father.

Life for Baghdad's working class under American rule is little different from under the Baathists. Unemployment

is over 50 percent. Thirteen months after the invasion, sewerage, electricity and basic services have not been restored to even the limited levels that existed in the final days of the Hussein regime. Hundreds of young men have been killed, maimed or dragged off to American prisons by US troops. On April 4 and April 5 alone, when the uprising began, at least 100 were killed.

The assessment in Sadr City of the American invasion is summed up by a local saying: “The student [Hussein] left and the teacher [the US] came.” Revelations that Iraqi prisoners are being tortured have fueled the hostility of masses of Iraqis toward the occupation.

Fighting is expected in a number of Iraqi cities over the rest of the week. Throughout Monday, there were reports of further clashes in Sadr City, as well as in the southern Shiite holy city of Karbala. Associated Press reported that US tanks exchanged fire with Shiite militiamen entrenched in the vicinity of the al-Mokhayam mosque, with the American forces stopping short of approaching the holy site. American troops have continued to encroach closer to the main Shiite Iman Ali Shrine in Najaf. British troops are also stepping up operations against Sadr’s militiamen in Basra and Amara.

In Fallujah, the US sent its first military convoy into the city since handing it to the “Fallujah Protection Brigade” formed by former Iraqi generals and fighters largely recruited from within the city. While the convoy was permitted to pass through the city unharmed, attacks on US forces are continuing in the surrounding area and tensions remain high.

In answer to the US offensive, a spokesman for al-Sadr told Reuters: “Our policy now is to extend the state of resistance and to move it to all of Iraq because of the occupiers’ military escalation and crossing of all red lines in the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf.” Sadr himself is believed to be located close to the Ali Shrine, where Mahdi militiamen have established defensive positions.

The main Shiite clerical leadership under Ali al-Sistani, along with the pro-occupation Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), are continuing to oppose both the uprising and Sadr’s presence in Najaf. A number of senior clerics, including Sistani, have demanded that Sadr withdraw his forces from the Shiite holy city and disband his militia.

At stake are the material interests of the Shia clergy who derive large amounts of money from donations given by pilgrims to Najaf and Karbala. Since thousands of US troops surrounded Najaf in early April, the number of pilgrims has fallen sharply. In the longer term, Sistani and

the Shiite organisations aligned with him view cooperation with the US occupation as the means of gaining a dominant position within a future Iraqi state. SCIRI already has members in the puppet Iraqi Governing Council.

There are growing signs of tension between Sadr’s militiamen and the Shiite groups gathered around Sistani. At a rally yesterday, SCIRI spokesman Sadreddin al-Kubbanji denounced Sadr and his militiamen for being used by “outside elements” and declared there was a “treacherous plot being hatched in the name of fighting the US-led occupation.”

There is little doubt that the US military is urging Shiite groups opposed to Sadr to physically attack the Mahdi Army. SCIRI’s Badr Brigade militia, for example, numbers approximately 10,000. An unsigned leaflet is reportedly being distributed in Najaf threatening to kill any members of Sadr’s militia who do not leave the city.

The potential exists for a confrontation between the rival factions on Friday. SCIRI has called for a demonstration in Najaf before prayer sessions to demand that Sadr leave the city. US military spokesman General Mark Kimmitt implied at a press conference yesterday that the US military would not enter Najaf and intervene if armed clashes broke out in the city.

According to the *New York Times*, SCIRI hopes the rally will draw “250,000 people.” There is little evidence, however, that the opposition of Sistani to the uprising has swayed Sadr’s supporters or turned the bulk of the Shia population against them.

A SCIRI march yesterday in Najaf had only 200 people and was reportedly heckled by Sadr’s militiamen. If anything, it appears that it is the Shiite leaders cooperating with the US occupation who are becoming increasingly isolated.



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