

Fighting intensifies around Shiite holy cities in Iraq

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The US military is intensifying its efforts to crush the uprising in Iraq led by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Over the past week, major attacks have been launched by American troops in Najaf and Karbala—the location of the most important shrines of the Shia faith—as well as ongoing operations in the rebellious Sadr City, a major working class suburb of Baghdad.

Sadr and thousands of fighters in his Madhi Army militia have held Najaf and the nearby town of Kufa since early April. Defensive positions have been erected in the city centre around the revered Shrine of Iman Ali. Previously US troops had not made a concerted push into the city after warnings by Shiite religious leaders that fighting in Najaf would inflame the Shiite population, especially if the sacred sites were damaged.

Over the last week, however, the scale and intensity of US military operations in Najaf have steadily escalated. US troops battled for most of Friday to drive militiamen out of the sprawling Shiite cemetery on the outskirts of the city and move tanks to within a few kilometres of the city centre. In the course of the fighting, four bullets hit the golden dome of the Shrine of Iman Ali. The Najaf hospital reported treating at least 26 wounded civilians.

Further clashes took place over the weekend. As it did during the siege of Fallujah, the American military has deployed squads of snipers to kill as many militiamen as possible and terrorise the population. Thousands of civilians have reportedly fled Najaf, fearing that the US is on the verge of a final offensive to recapture the city from Sadr's fighters.

People are also fleeing Karbala. US and Polish troops have positioned themselves within 400 metres of the city's two shrines—the Shrine of Iman Hussein and the Shrine of Abbas. During fighting on Wednesday, the Mukhaiyam mosque, which was being used as a base of operations by Sadr's militia, was partially destroyed by US tanks and warplanes.

On Friday, American tanks directly fired at the roof of the Thulfiqar Hotel, which was being used by a number of journalists and camera crews to record the US push into the city. The owner of the hotel told the *Washington Post*: "They [the tanks] first made warning shots. When the reporters wouldn't move, they shot." None of the journalists was injured.

Fighting continued over the weekend. On Sunday, an unarmed 1,000-strong crowd, chanting "Long live Sadr! The Americans are an army of infidels!" prevented a column of US tanks from approaching the shrines.

At least a dozen clashes took place in the Sadr City district of Baghdad on Friday and Saturday between militiamen and US troops. Three American troops were killed and 18 Iraqi fighters. The Green Zone—the heavily fortified and guarded base of the US Coalition Provisional Authority in the capital—was rocketed by resistance groups.

Shiite fighters also carried out attacks on coalition troops in other cities in southern Iraq. In Nasiriyah yesterday, Sadr's militiamen forced Italian troops to evacuate their base. At least 10 Italians were wounded. In Basra, a British base was mortared on Saturday, while Dutch troops in Samawah also came under mortar fire.

The decision by the US military to go on the offensive in Najaf and Karbala appears to stem from the recognition that Sadr's six-week-old uprising is not running out of steam, but gaining strength.

US spokesmen have confidently predicted for weeks that the Shiite factions under the influence of leading cleric Ali al-Sistani were on the verge of pressuring Sadr into bowing down to US authority. In the last two weeks, they have gone further, insinuating that pro-occupation Shiites were about to step in and physically deal with Sadr's militiamen.

However, an anti-Sadr demonstration planned in Najaf on Friday by the pro-occupation Supreme Council for the

Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) was called off, ostensibly to avoid a confrontation with his militiamen. The more likely reason was that it was abandoned due to lack of support. In an area with a population of several million, less than 1,000 people took part in anti-Sadr protests earlier in the week.

On Saturday a delegation from Fallujah met with Sadr and reportedly offered to send fighters to Najaf if they were asked for. Food and humanitarian assistance is being gathered in Sunni areas to send to the fighters in the Shiite south. A convoy of nine trucks arrived in Kufa on the weekend.

Far from support waning, it is apparent that millions of Iraqis believe that Sadr's uprising embodies their aspirations for liberation from American rule. In a recent poll, 50 percent of Iraqis said they now support or strongly support al-Sadr, compared with 2 percent before the start of the rebellion.

In another significant development, a British convoy was ambushed in the marshland region of southern Iraq between Basra and Amarah. While the organisers of the attack has not been verified, it can only further unnerve the occupation forces.

The Shiite Marsh Arabs fought a protracted guerilla war against the former Baathist regime and were viewed in Washington as one of the Iraqi groups most likely to support the US-led invasion. Last month, however, their main leader, Abdul Karim Mahoud al-Mohammedawi, resigned from the puppet Iraqi Governing Council, denouncing the US atrocities against the Iraqi people in Fallujah and other areas of the country. If the Marsh Arabs have begun to take up arms, it opens up an entirely new front.

Thirteen months after the invasion of Iraq, the US-led occupation confronts a burgeoning armed resistance movement, constant casualties and the realisation that the vast majority of the Iraqi people want them out of the country.



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