

Iraqi city of Karbala left in ruins by US military

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After three weeks of destructive fighting, the US military claims to have re-taken control of the city of Karbala from the Iraqi resistance fighters being led by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. American tanks and armoured vehicles rolled through the centre of the city on Friday and Saturday nights, close to the holy Shiite shrines of Imam Hussein and Imam Abbas, without coming under attack. US-controlled Iraqi police are reported to be once again carrying out patrols.

The conduct of the American military in Karbala has received virtually no attention in the international media. The US assault has left entire streets of the old city around the shrines in ruin. Agence France Presse (AFP) reported on Saturday: "Buildings are gutted, walls blown off and businesses reduced to towering piles of rubble, with twisted wires sticking out of the wreckage... destroyed and burnt-out vehicles littered the ground, as upset residents stumbled across fallen electricity cables." Much of the Mukhaiyam mosque has been damaged. Bullets and shrapnel have scarred hundreds of houses.

Karbala has effectively been held to ransom by the US military—with the implicit threat that unless Sadr's militia ceased their resistance the Shiite shrines inevitably would be damaged by the shells and machine-gun fire being unleashed all around them. On Friday morning, a school and other buildings directly behind the Hussein shrine, where Sadr's Mahdi Army militia allegedly had their headquarters, were shelled by tanks and strafed by an AC-130 gunship. *Al Jazeera* reported that at least nine civilians were killed. An American officer described the area to the south of the shrine as "complete, total destruction".

There are new accusations from Karbala that US troops are deliberately trying to kill journalists and cameramen documenting their actions. Rashid Hamid

Wali, a 44-year-old *Al Jazeera* camera crew member, was shot dead on Friday morning on the fourth floor of a hotel as American tanks rumbled past. The network is demanding an investigation. On May 14, American tanks shelled the roof of the Thulfiqar Hotel, where a number of journalists were working.

US forces launched an offensive to retake Karbala at the beginning of May. Iraqi fighters, armed only with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades, have been pitted against armoured vehicles, helicopter and fixed-wing gunships and US infantry with full body armour and state-of-the-art night vision equipment. The US military claims to have killed at least 120 of Sadr's militiamen, at the cost of four American dead and 52 wounded. There is no reliable estimate for the number of civilians who have been killed or injured. Thousands of people are known to have fled the city.

US troops entering Karbala on the weekend found no signs of the hundreds of Iraqi militiamen who held the city from early April until last week. According to a *New York Times* correspondent, members of the Mahdi Army could be seen on Thursday and Friday packing their weapons into bags and leaving defensive positions they had been holding around the shrines. The *Times* reported that residents of the city told US troops on Sunday morning that "busloads of fighters from Fallujah" had also left Karbala on Friday, concluding that they did not have the necessary weapons to fight against American tanks.

The field commander of the US troops in the area, Colonel Peter Mansoor, told journalists: "It looks like they just packed up and went home."

The circumstances leading to the withdrawal by the Iraqi resistance are not entirely clear. The leading Shiite cleric, Ali al-Sistani, has made repeated appeals for Sadr's militiamen to leave Karbala and Najaf in order

to ensure the Shia shrines are not damaged.

A spokesman for al-Sadr, however, claimed that the pullout was the outcome of negotiations with the US military, which had agreed to withdraw from the city centre if the militiamen did the same. The American command denied that any truce or deal existed. But on Friday morning US troops were ordered to retreat to the outskirts of Karbala from the central positions they had taken around the Mukhaiyam mosque. The pause in combat provided the opportunity for the Iraqi fighters to leave.

Whether the result of negotiations or not, the ability of hundreds of Iraqi insurgents to simply melt into the population to fight another day underscores the tremendous military difficulties confronting the US occupation forces. They are fighting an uprising that is able to draw upon the support of most Iraqis and sustain an indefinite guerilla war. While American spokesmen have declared that the fighters in Karbala did not have the sympathy of the city's population, there have been no reports of residents assisting the US military to identify either Shiite militiamen or the Sunni fighters who joined the defence of the city.

The focus of US military operations is now shifting to Najaf and the nearby city of Kufa—the last areas under the control of Sadr's uprising. Many of the Iraqi fighters from Karbala are expected to make their way to Najaf to reinforce al-Sadr and the thousands of militiamen who are entrenched around the Shrine of Imam Ali—the most revered Shiite religious site.

On Friday, US troops captured Mohammed Tabatabai, a leading aide of al-Sadr while he was traveling between Najaf and the nearby city of Kufa. It appears likely the US believed the vehicles were carrying al-Sadr himself. He had spoken just hours earlier to a defiant audience of 1,500 militiamen at the main Kufa mosque, telling them "don't let my killing or arrest be an excuse to end what you're doing, supporting the truth and standing up to the wrong".

On Sunday, US troops and an Iraqi unit stormed the Sahla mosque in Kufa. A tank was used to smash down the gates to the mosque. While the US military claimed to have killed 20 militiamen in the operation, the main hospital in Najaf told Reuters it had received 14 bodies and 37 wounded, who were mainly non-combatants.

Other fighting raged on Sunday in the massive Shiite cemetery on the edge of Najaf, which militiamen have

been using to launch mortar strikes on American positions. US forces are now closing in on the centre of the city.

The prospect of a US assault on Najaf is unleashing tremendous passions across Iraq and the Middle East. The working class Shiite suburbs of Baghdad, Sadr's main base of support, are in a state of high tension and could erupt again at any time.

A Shiite demonstration was held on Friday in Bahrain—a US client-state and the main American naval base in the Persian Gulf. More than 20 people were injured in clashes when police attempted to disperse the rally. Highlighting the explosive situation, the king of Bahrain sacked his interior minister for ordering the police attack and issued a statement declaring he shared "the anger of our people over the oppression and aggression taking place in Palestine and in the holy shrines".

In Lebanon, up to 300,000 people took part in a demonstration on Friday in Beirut called by the Shiite Hezbollah movement "in defence of the religious holy Shiite shrines in Karbala and Najaf against the US-led occupying forces in Iraq". Tens of thousands of Lebanese Shiites wore white funeral shrouds and carried portraits of al-Sadr. Thousands of Palestinians also marched, denouncing the Israeli military atrocities in Gaza.

Hezbollah secretary-general Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah told the mass rally: "The Iraqis can decide when, how and where to fight for the liberation of their country. However, when it comes to Najaf and Karbala, we consider ourselves directly involved. In wearing our death shrouds, we show the enemies our readiness to fight and die in defence of the holy shrines and sites."



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