

Iraqi resistance rejects interim government, fighting continues

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While news reports from Iraq have focused on the announcement and UN endorsement of a puppet interim government, much of the country remains a battleground between US and allied forces and the Iraqi resistance seeking to free the country from occupation.

The 10-week uprising by Iraqi Shiites under the leadership of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr shows no signs of abating in either the working class districts of Baghdad, the Shiite religious centre of Najaf or other areas of predominantly Shiite southern Iraq.

On Monday, the US Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the US-installed Iraqi prime minister, Iyad Allawi, issued a new decree proscribing al-Sadr's movement as an illegal militia and banning him and other key figures in his Mahdi Army from holding public office for three years. A spokesman for Sadr, Omar Ahmed Shaybani, rejected the declaration. "The Mahdi Army is not a militia," he told journalists. "It is Iraqis legitimately resisting the occupation. The Mahdi Army exists as long as the occupation does."

In Najaf, despite the announcement of a ceasefire on May 27 under which the Mahdi Army was to allow Iraqi police back into the city centre, al-Sadr's militiamen are still in control of the area surrounding the main Shiite shrine of Imam Ali.

In a graphic demonstration that they remain in charge, members of the Mahdi Army attacked two police stations in Najaf on Wednesday night. On Thursday they seized one of the stations, freed prisoners and set eight police cars ablaze. The Iraqi police claimed the fighting was triggered after they were shot at while trying to arrest alleged thieves. A Mahdi Army spokesman, however, Qais al-Khazali, told Associated Press the police had opened fire on a group of militiamen protecting offices of Sadr's organisation, killing a young fighter. The attacks on the stations, he said, were carried out by his enraged family and other militiamen.

US troops on the outskirts of the city did not come to the assistance of the Iraqi police. Shiite leaders have repeatedly warned that American military action near the main icon of

the Shia faith could trigger a generalised uprising among Iraqi Shiites and unrest in other parts of the Middle East.

Tensions continued in Najaf on Friday. Scuffles, followed by exchanges of gunfire, reportedly took place between Sadr's militiamen and several hundred supporters of the pro-occupation Shiite party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), who were attempting to approach the shrine. The US military has been pressuring SCIRI to launch such physical attacks on Sadr's supporters. A senior member of SCIRI's now disbanded militia, the Badr Brigade, was assassinated in Baghdad on Monday by unknown assailants.

On Thursday night, US troops and Shiite fighters clashed in the Baghdad working class district of Sadr City. The area was renamed after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in honour of Sadr's father, who was murdered by the Baathists. While the intensity of the clash is unclear, it ended with the US military once again calling in helicopter gunships to fire into the densely populated and impoverished neighbourhood. The Sadr City hospital reported that two children were killed and at least 23 other civilians wounded.

Thursday's fighting in Baghdad comes in the wake of a series of incidents over the past week in and around the capital. On Wednesday, one US soldier was killed and four wounded in an attack near Sadr City. Last Sunday, Mahdi Army militiamen took control of a police station in Sadr City, ordered the police to leave and destroyed the building after the occupation forces attempted to use it to mount increased patrols into the suburb.

Two Poles, three Slovaks and a Latvian were killed on Tuesday in the town of Suwayrah, 25 miles south of Baghdad, when insurgents mortared their vehicle which was carrying a cargo of explosives.

Yesterday, US troops were wounded in attacks in Baghdad's southern suburbs and in the Shiite town of Hillah.

There has also been no decrease in the number of attacks on occupation forces in the Sunni Triangle—the predominantly Sunni Muslim areas of central Iraq. Dozens

of US troops and Iraqi police have been killed or wounded in the last week in Mosul, Ramadi, Balad, Baqubah, the Sunni suburbs of Baghdad and the city of Fallujah, which was the site of intense fighting in April.

Last Saturday a car filled with explosives exploded outside a US base 12 miles north of Baghdad, killing nine people and wounding three American troops. The same day, a police station was attacked in the town of Musayyib, 45 miles south of the capital, by unknown insurgents. Seven US-recruited Iraqi police who resisted were killed and the building destroyed. A car bombing on Tuesday in Baqubah killed one American soldier and five Iraqi police, and wounded 10 Americans and 15 Iraqis.

Two American and two Polish mercenaries working for US firm Blackwater Security were ambushed and killed last Saturday while escorting a convoy between a US base and Baghdad airport. A British mercenary working for the company ArmorGroup was killed and three others wounded in the northern city of Mosul. Three Nepalese mercenaries working for the British firm Global Risk Strategies were wounded in Mosul on Sunday.

Leaders among Iraq's Sunni population, which has supported a guerrilla war against the occupation since it began, vocally rejected the interim government this week and called for continued resistance. Mohammed Bashar al-Faidhi, a spokesman for the Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars, preached on Friday: "We cannot trust the occupation forces after all their lies. We cannot imagine people getting freedom and sovereignty with the presence of 150,000 soldiers stationed on their land. We cannot expect any success for any political process under the thumb of the occupation, whether as the Governing Council or interim government."

The leading Sunni cleric in the restive Baghdad suburb of Adhamiyah, Hassan al-Taha al-Samarai, used his Friday sermon to denounce former members of the Iraqi military who had not taken up arms against the occupation as being guilty of "treason" and demanded they help train the youth who were carrying out resistance attacks on US forces.

The statements of the Sunni clerics follow the joint statement issued by 18 resistance groups based in Fallujah last week, pledging to continue armed struggle until the US military leaves. The deal struck between the US military and former Iraqi generals in the city has effectively collapsed. The generals have been unable to establish any authority over the guerrillas that have operated from the city since the first days of the occupation and conducted a continuous campaign against US forces.

US troops have not entered Fallujah since May 10. However, they have come under continual attack and regularly suffered casualties in the surrounding province of

Al Anbar. The Fallujah Brigade itself was attacked by insurgents for the first time on Tuesday. At least 12 of its members were killed and 10 wounded in a mortar strike on one of its camps. A column of 15 US tanks and armoured vehicles approached the outskirts of the city, but did not advance any farther. According to an Agence France Presse (AFP) correspondent, "armed men gathered in the street, toting assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades bracing for an attack."

A report by *Washington Post* correspondent Daniel Williams, who visited Fallujah last week, helps explain the reluctance of the American forces to enter the city. Six weeks after the US military announced that a "Fallujah Brigade" would enforce the authority of the interim government in the city, the latter remains totally under the control of the resistance groups.

After he passed through a checkpoint manned by the brigade, Williams reported, "It became apparent who was really in charge." "A few yards in," he wrote: "Wild-eyed young men in masks pulled cars over at will, searched them and demanded identification documents. No-one could leave or enter without passing muster. Other groups of fighters in masks roamed side-streets and alleys, brandishing rifles at all sorts of angles.... The brigade stays outside of town in tents, the police cower in their patrol cars and the civil defense force nominally occupies checkpoints on the city's fringes but exerts no influence over masked insurgents who operate only a few yards away."

No regime in Iraq that owes its origins to the US invasion will ever be accepted as legitimate by the Iraqi people. It will exist only as long as American troops remain, and as long as they remain, the human and fiscal cost of the Bush administration's colonial aspirations in the Middle East will escalate. In just the past 10 weeks, at least 249 American and coalition troops have been killed in Iraq and well over 2,000 wounded—far more casualties than were suffered during the three-week invasion and the first two months of the occupation.



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