

US makes tactical retreat before Iraqi uprising

James Conachy
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Nearly a month after the US military pulled back from its assault on the city of Fallujah, an uneasy ceasefire was negotiated on May 27 with the Mahdi Army militia of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in the city of Najaf. While the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) is seeking to put the best possible light on the deal, Iraqis are widely interpreting it as a tactical retreat by the US in the face of the uprising in the Shiite south that has raged since early April, and a victory for Sadr.

The truce in Najaf was worked out between Sadr, representatives of the main Shiite clerical hierarchy and Shiite members of the US-installed Iraqi Governing Council (IGC)—including former US favourite Ahmad Chalabi. Its terms include a US agreement not to deploy American troops in the city, the site of the revered Shiite shrine of Imam Ali.

In exchange, Sadr has agreed that those of his militiamen who are not from Najaf will leave. The remainder will put away their weapons and allow Iraqi police to take over security and enforce law and order in the city. According to reports from Karbala, an identical arrangement is now in place around the two Shiite shrines there, following an end to fighting on May 22. US forces have not entered Karbala for nearly a week.

If the ceasefires hold, the US has effectively accepted that Najaf and Karbala, like Fallujah, will not be under the control of the US occupation authority in Baghdad. Most of the Iraqi police who will be patrolling the cities were openly sympathetic to Sadr's uprising or took part in it. The Mahdi Army militiamen in the cities have left the streets, but they have kept their weapons and remain on call.

Sadr has not been killed or captured, which was the stated US objective in April. According to the CPA, US

demands that he disband his militia and face trial over accusations that he was responsible for the murder of a pro-occupation Shiite cleric last year will be negotiated with Shiite religious leaders. Sadr has denied the accusation and declared he will not submit. He told *Al Jazeera* on Friday: "I will not obey the occupation. Never."

Sadr's militia retains a strong presence in Najaf, as a skirmish on Sunday demonstrated. The clash took place in the sprawling Shiite cemetery on the outskirts of the city, after a US patrol attempted to enter the area. CPA spokesman General Mark Kimmitt claimed that those responsible were militiamen who had not heard of the ceasefire or Iraqi fighters not under Sadr's control. Sadr's representative, however, reported that an American force had "violated the truce by approaching Najaf" and "members of the Mahdi Army confronted it with rocket-propelled grenades and gunfire, forcing it to retreat".

A Najaf local, quoted in Sunday's *Washington Post*, declared: "I don't know what truce they are talking about. The Mahdi Army is still in the streets carrying guns and the US forces are still shooting."

Since the ceasefire was struck in Najaf, clashes have also taken place every day in the nearby town of Kufa. Sadr has used the main Kufa mosque to deliver regular sermons and speeches calling on Iraqis from all religious and ethnic groups to unite together to fight against the US occupation. He has also issued appeals to the American people to support the Iraqi struggle. On Sunday night, a major battle was fought when 100 US troops in tanks and armoured vehicles converged on the town centre. After an hour of fighting, the US forces withdrew to their base. Two American soldiers were killed.

The last eight weeks have boosted the standing and

authority of Sadr among the Iraqi masses. A recent poll carried out by the Iraq Centre for Research and Strategic Studies found he registered 68 percent support, up from just a few percent before April.

Major General Martin Dempsey, the commander of the US First Armored Division, spelt out the reasons for the US acceptance of a ceasefire in Najaf—the fear that any US assault on the site of the holiest Shiite shrine would cause more fighters to join Sadr. Dempsey stated: “It was pretty clear he [Sadr] was trying to take what was a fairly small uprising and trying to expand it to a popular uprising. The principal goal in return was to not allow this thing to become a popular uprising, because if he gained broad support in the Shiite population, there truly would have been nothing we could we have done.”

It may, however, be too late for deals and manoeuvres by the occupation forces to prevent Sadr’s movement emerging as the central political voice of Iraq’s majority Shiite population. A supporter of Sadr, Sheik Ahmed Shibani, told the *Los Angeles Times*: “Iraqis now feel there is only one enemy against them—the Americans. It has caused the rise of one Shiite leadership.”

Sadr’s rivals in the Shiite establishment have discredited themselves by cooperating with the CPA and by their refusal to support the uprising. Repeated calls for an end to armed resistance by leading Shiite cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the Shiite parties with IGC representatives have had next to no impact.

On Friday, an attempt was made to assassinate a Najaf representative of the pro-occupation Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). SCIRI blamed Sadr and called a demonstration in Najaf to denounce him. Less than 100 people attended.

The Bush administration and American military drastically underestimated the depth of resentment and hostility among Iraqi Shiites toward the occupation when they launched a crackdown on al-Sadr’s movement in late March. On March 28, the Baghdad office of Sadr’s newspaper *Al Hawza* was raided by American troops and the paper declared illegal. On April 3, after days of growing demonstrations against the censorship, Sadr’s leading supporter in Baghdad was detained and accused of involvement in the killing of a Shiite cleric in April 2003. On April 4, a demonstration in Najaf against the arrest was fired on

by coalition troops, killing 21 Iraqi protestors and wounding over 200, and an arrest warrant issued against Sadr himself.

Washington believed that it could intimidate the Shiite establishment into withdrawing their opposition to the transfer of “sovereignty” to an un-elected government on June 30 by provoking a confrontation with the Mahdi Army and drowning it in blood.

Instead, the attack on Sadr’s organisation triggered an insurrection. Shiite militiamen and youth took up arms in the working class suburb of Sadr City in Baghdad, in Najaf and Karbala, Kut, Nasiriyah, and the British-controlled cities of Amara and Basra. They seized government buildings, took over city streets, and forced US and allied forces to retreat into fortified compounds.

It is unknown how many casualties the Shiite fighters have suffered during the fighting. It is possible that as many as 1,000 died and several thousand were injured in completely unequal clashes with American and British tanks and helicopter gunships. There are no indications, however, that the armed resistance is coming to an end.

As well as continuing to hold Najaf, the Mahdi Army is still in de-facto control of Sadr City in Baghdad—named after Sadr’s uncle and father. US forces only enter the area in armoured convoys.

A further 370 British troops with additional armoured vehicles are being rushed to Iraq to reinforce the occupation forces in the British zone, where fighting is escalating in the marsh area between Basra and Amara. According to the *Telegraph*, British troops are “stunned by the level of violence” they are now facing. They are reportedly coming under daily attack.

While the Bush administration and UN try to portray an un-elected and unrepresentative puppet regime as a legitimate “sovereign” Iraqi government, the sympathies of millions of Iraqis lie with those fighting to drive the occupation forces out of the country. The ceasefires are unlikely to last very long.



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