

US onslaught on Najaf triggers protests and fighting across Iraq

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A tense standoff in the Iraqi city of Najaf is underway between hundreds of poorly-armed supporters of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and several thousand US troops backed by tanks, attack helicopters and warplanes. The US military has consolidated its cordon around Najaf's old town centre and the Imam Ali mosque—regarded by Shiites as one of the sect's most sacred shrines—and is preventing not only armed militants, but also food and other essential supplies from entering the area.

After more than a week of savage fighting, in which hundreds of civilians and militiamen have been killed and injured, the US-installed Iraqi interim regime was negotiating on Friday to convince al-Sadr and his Madhi Army to quit the area. Interior Minister Fallah al-Naqib declared yesterday that the cleric “will not be touched if he leaves the shrine peacefully” but insisted that the military would continue to go after the “criminal elements” in his movement.

Al-Naqib's comments mark an abrupt change of tone from Tuesday, when Prime Minister Ayad Allawi insisted that he would “teach these criminal outlaws the lesson they deserve... Your government has decided to hit back with an iron fist [against] all these desperate criminals that are attempting to hinder the bright future of the people of Iraq.”

There is no doubt that the real criminals—the US and its Iraqi collaborators—are poised to use their vastly superior military means to finish off the Madhi Army in a massacre. What has forced a temporary pause in the fighting is concern, in Baghdad and Washington, over the political backlash such a bloodbath would cause.

Outrage over the US actions in Najaf has led to a series of public protests as well as open armed conflict in other cities in the predominantly Shiite south of Iraq. Even the loyal defenders of the US occupation have been compelled to acknowledge the extent of public hostility. Saad Jawal, a spokesman for the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), declared yesterday: “The people feel anger. They feel the [Shiite community] has been attacked by American forces.”

On Thursday, about 5,000 protesters took to the streets of the southern city of Basra, demanding the withdrawal of US forces from Najaf and condemning Allawi for working for the US. A Madhi Army commander Sheikh Saad al-Basri warned: “If peaceful demonstrations do not work we will take the path of jihad in defence of our country.”

Protester Hasan Ali Abdul-Wahid told the media: “We condemn the criminal acts done by the occupation forces and the Najaf police against our people in Najaf.” Abed Jassim angrily denounced the prime minister declaring: “Allawi and the governor of Najaf are responsible for this massacre. They provided protection for the Americans to kill the Shiites.”

Basra's deputy governor Salam Uda al-Maliki condemned the Allawi regime for allowing the US military onslaught in Najaf and called for the formation of a breakaway government in the south. He was joined by al-Sadr's representative in Nassiriya, Aws al-Khafaji who denounced “the crimes against Iraqis committed by an illegal and unelected government, and occupation forces.” He said: “We have had enough of Baghdad's brutality. The authorities in Nassiriya will no longer cooperate with Baghdad.”

Protests took place in towns across Iraq on Friday. In Diwaniya, thousands of demonstrators attacked the offices of Prime Minister Allawi's Iraqi National Accord. At a protest in central Baghdad, a spokesman for al-Sadr urged the thousands of participants to march to Najaf, 160 kilometres to the south, to show their support for the rebel fighters. Another thousand marchers set out from Karbala for Najaf. Al-Sadr representative Sheikh Abdulrazaq al-Nadawi told the media: “We're going to Najaf to break the siege on our brothers.”

After Friday prayers in Kufa, about 2,000 people marched to Najaf, just 10 kilometres away, pushing through the US and Madhi Army frontlines to reach the Imam Ali shrine. They chanted: “All of us are soldiers of Moqtada Sadr. With our blood and soul, we serve you Ali.”

Demonstrations were not confined to Shiite areas. In

Fallujah, the largely Sunni centre of anti-US resistance, around 3,000 protesters marched in the town centre, shouting “Long live Sadr. Fallujah stands by Najaf against America.” They carried pictures of al-Sadr and denounced the US attack on Najaf. In the Sunni town of Samarra, about 100 kilometres north of Baghdad, some 700 demonstrators chanting “Long live al-Sadr!” demanded that US troops leave Najaf.

Angry protests erupted elsewhere in the Middle East yesterday. Thousands marched through the Iranian capital of Tehran carrying banners declaring “Death to the occupiers” and “American democracy = massacre of innocent people”. Demonstrations also took place in other Iranian cities including Qom, Mashad and Isfahan. In the conservative Gulf state of Bahrain, 2,500 protesters marched along a major highway shouting anti-US and anti-Israeli slogans. Protests also took place in Lebanon.

Fighting has also erupted in other southern cities. According to Defence Minister Hazem Shaalan, 400 al-Sadr supporters were killed, injured or taken prisoner in fighting in Kut this week. US Special Forces, as well as Iraqi national guardsmen, were rushed to the town on Wednesday after the Madhi Army took over positions in the city. That night US and Iraqi troops, backed by an AC-130 gunship, conducted a series of raids on suspected resistance strongholds. The following night the US carried out a two-hour bombing raid against an alleged al-Sadr militia base.

Clashes with US and Iraqi government troops have also taken place in Amara, Diwaniya and Shia districts in Baghdad, including Sadr City, Shula and parts of the capital’s downtown area. In the city of Hilla, a group of 20 Polish soldiers were surrounded at a police station by several hundred militants loyal to Sadr. According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, hundreds of militants have been detained by Iraqi police while attempting to join al-Sadr’s fighters in Najaf.

At this stage, there are conflicting reports about the negotiations in Najaf. According to one of al-Sadr’s spokesmen, Sheik Ali Smeisim, the cleric may be prepared to withdraw his fighters from the city if the US does likewise and places the Imam Ali Mosque under the control of religious authorities. Smeisim is also reported as saying that al-Sadr wanted to take part in the country’s “political process”.

However, in a sermon read on his behalf at the Kufa mosque on Friday, al-Sadr defiantly declared that the United States was intent on occupying the whole world. “The presence of [the] occupation in Iraq has made our country an unbearable hell,” he stated, calling on all Iraqis to rebel “because I will not allow another Saddam-like government again.”

Whatever the outcome of negotiations, it is clear that Washington intends to make an example of al-Sadr, in order to terrorise the Iraqi people as a whole. If the cleric fails to agree to anything less than abject surrender, the US military is preparing to carry out a bloody massacre.

In a chilling statement yesterday, US Secretary of State Colin Powell declared: “Our forces in Najaf are squeezing the city, frankly, to help stabilise the situation and deal with [the] Mahdi army... The violence is being perpetrated by outlaws and by former regime elements and by terrorists who respect no truce, who respect nothing except force.”

The US military is using the temporary break in fighting to tighten its grip around the Iman Ali shrine and to destroy any other pockets of resistance in the city in what a senior military spokesman described as “clearing” operations. On Thursday night, US troops stormed a complex of buildings alleged to be a base for al-Sadr supporters.

The *New York Times* described the attack: “Backed by American warplanes that pounded the area and unleashed a huge plume of black smoke, a Marine strike force battled through to a house used by Mr Sadr, which the Americans said had been abandoned before the attack, and to a school and a hospital taken by the militiamen. About 50 rebels were inside, said Major David Holahan, second-in-command of the Marine unit involved, and nearly all were killed.”

The situation in Najaf makes a mockery of US claims that its Iraqi “national conference”, due to begin on Sunday, represents a step towards democracy. Those who take part in this stage-managed charade, while American military forces are preparing to annihilate al Sadr and his followers, will be rightly regarded with contempt and revulsion by the vast majority of Iraqis who oppose Washington’s seizure of their country.

Regardless of the immediate outcome of the confrontation in Najaf, the criminal actions of the US and its lackeys will only intensify the resistance to the American occupation and plunder of Iraq.



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