

As thousands march to demand end to siege

US pulls back from Najaf

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A ceasefire has been declared in Najaf and American and Iraqi interim government troops have begun pulling back, following the arrival in the city of Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and thousands of unarmed Shiite demonstrators demanding the withdrawal of foreign troops from the area surrounding the Shrine of Ali Mosque—the most important Shiite holy site.

The Mahdi Army fighters of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who have held parts of the city against a US assault over the past three weeks, are reported to have left the mosque and handed its keys to clerics associated with Sistani. On Friday, for the first day since fighting began on August 5, Najaf was relatively quiet.

The ceasefire was called as Sistani arrived in Najaf on Thursday from the city of Basra, accompanied by a convoy of over 1,000 civilian vehicles. Thousands of demonstrators marched to Najaf from the neighboring city of Kufa and tens of thousands more had begun marching from Baghdad and the city of Karbala, to Najaf's north.

Agence France Presse (AFP) reported: "With military operations called off, an enormous crowd forced its way into Najaf's revered Imam Ali mausoleum, which had been trapped off from the outside world by heavy US bombardment and tank fire since Wednesday morning.... 'We answered the call of Sistani who ordered us to follow him to Najaf to break the siege. Police sort of tried to arrest us, but there was nothing they could do. It's the end of the siege,' said one demonstrator, Kazem Hamid."

Another AFP report described the events in the areas around the mosque: "Further up the stream of at least 20,000 demonstrators, in the Al-Jadida neighborhood outside the Old City, a surreal scene unfolded as bewildered American soldiers trapped in their tanks watched as posters of Sistani and Moqtada posters were waved in their faces."

Akir Hassan, 63 years old, told AFP: "This is democracy, this is the new Iraq, this is the greatest defeat we could have inflicted on the Americans. It's the most beautiful day in my life."

The day did not pass without considerable bloodshed. Interim government troops fired on demonstrators coming from Kufa in an attempt to force them back, and a Shiite crowd preparing to

march from the main Kufa mosque was mortared. At least 74 people were killed and over 376 wounded in the two incidents. Demonstrators coming from the city of Diwaniya, to the east of Najaf, were also fired on.

US military and interim government spokesmen have issued statements welcoming the truce and Sistani's return. Nothing can disguise the fact, however, that the events of the past 48 hours constitute a humiliation for the US-led occupation of Iraq—with potentially greater long-term implications than the deal struck in Fallujah to end the siege of that city at the end of April.

In the eyes of millions of Iraqis, Sadr—despite his vacillations and numerous attempts to forge a compromise with the occupation forces—has defied the might of the American imperialism, prevented Najaf coming under US control, and lived to fight another day. His influence has likely increased across the country, and particularly in cities such as Basra and Amara, where his movement's main political rival, the pro-occupation Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), traditionally dominated.

After weeks of vows and threats by the US military and American-installed interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi to destroy the Mahdi Army and establish control over Najaf, Sistani's "peace plan" demands considerable concessions from the occupation forces. All US and other foreign forces have to withdraw from Najaf; Najaf and Kufa are to be declared "weapons-free cities" and secured by the Iraqi police; and the interim government is to pay compensation to all those who suffered physical or financial harm due to the US attack.

To secure Sadr's agreement, the interim government has offered both the Mahdi Army fighters and Sadr himself a full amnesty, providing they agree to hand in their weapons to Iraqi police. Interim government minister Qasim Dawood told the media that Sadr is "as free as any Iraqi citizen to do whatever he would like in Iraq."

The *Washington Post* reported: "Scores of Sadr's militiamen were seen dropping off their weapons at Sadr's offices near the shrine. People were observed pushing wooden carts through the streets to collect weapons from militiamen. Many of them changed out of their fighting uniforms, black shirts and trousers, changed into normal clothes and joined the throng of

people.” An unnamed interim government official told the *Post*: “We’re going to let most of them get away.”

The bitter fighting over the past three weeks in Najaf, Baghdad and other cities between occupation forces and Sadr’s Mahdi Army militia was deliberately provoked by the US military, with the aim of wiping out Sadr’s movement once and for all and intimidating Iraq’s Shiite majority into accepting the interim government that the Bush administration put in place in June.

Najaf, which has been held by Sadr’s supporters since the truce declared to end the uprising in April and May, has been the site of the most intense combat since the US invasion. If the US military body counts are correct, at least 1,000 Iraqi fighters have been killed defending the city from the occupation forces. The US government does not even provide an estimate of civilian casualties, but they are reportedly in the hundreds.

Jet fighters, helicopter gunships and tanks have been used to pound militia defensive positions and reduce much of the center of Najaf to ruins. US marines and soldiers reportedly fought traumatizing hand-to-hand battles with militiamen in the massive cemetery west of the mosque. At least 11 American troops have been killed, and over one hundred wounded, in Najaf.

Despite the enormous casualties suffered by Sadr’s militiamen, the US military and the interim government have achieved none of their objectives.

It was apparent from the first days of the attack on Najaf that it was not breaking the Shiite element of the Iraqi resistance. Instead, it inflamed the deeply felt anti-colonial sentiment among the oppressed people of Iraq and intensified their contempt for the US-installed interim government.

The Mahdi Army, with broad sympathy among the Shiite population, has stepped up its attacks on occupation forces from Basra to the Sadr City suburb of Baghdad. Another American soldier was killed Thursday in Baghdad in a guerilla attack, bringing the total of US casualties to at least 970 dead and over 6,500 combat wounded.

Across the Middle East, the US assault on the holy Shiite city provoked mass demonstrations and discontent. Of greatest concern to world financial markets, the southern Iraqi oilfields were hit with strikes by oil workers and sustained sabotage. The reduction in exports from Iraq has been a significant factor in the rise in oil prices to well over \$40 a barrel.

Strident warnings were made by Iraqi and international commentators that any entry of US or puppet Iraqi forces into the Shrine of Ali Mosque could be the last straw, bringing hundreds of thousands of Shiites onto the streets against the occupation. For over two weeks a bizarre standoff ensued, with US troops as close as 100 feet to the mosque, but under orders not to storm the complex.

US forces in Iraq confront the demoralizing fact that while they are militarily capable of prevailing over the poorly armed Iraqi resistance, they are, in reality, fighting the vast majority of

the Iraqi people, who will never accept rule from Washington.

There is little doubt that considerable pressure has been applied to the Bush administration from corporate circles and Republican Party strategists concerned about the impact of Iraq on the November US elections to bring the standoff in Najaf to an end. The Iraq invasion has become a catastrophe for American imperialism, weakening its world position, amplifying its economic crisis and stretching its military to breaking point.

The gamble in Washington is that the 74-year-old Sistani can be used as an instrument to stabilize southern Iraq. The leading cleric was rushed back from London, where he had been receiving treatment for heart problems, to lead yesterday’s march into Najaf and give the US military and interim government a cover for pulling back from the center of the city.

To the Iraqi people, Sistani portrayed his march on the city as an anti-US initiative to save Najaf from the foreign assault. This was calculated to reverse the decline in his public support resulting from his refusal to endorse armed struggle against the occupation. Shiite politician Ali al-Lami told *Al Jazeera* this week: “The Ayat Allah [Sistani] is trying to set things right. The popular forces in Iraq have been astonished by his silence over the American use of brute force.”

Many of the Shiite fighters have kept their weapons or hidden them in caches in various parts of the city in the expectation that fighting will resume again in the near future. A Sadr militiaman told AFP: “The battle is over, but I will put my weapon in a safe place because I have a feeling I could need it again soon.” A spokesman for Sadr declared: “The Americans thought they could exterminate the Mahdi Army, but our fighters are still here. They will be able to go back to their work while remaining an army.”



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