

US assault kills hundreds of Iraqis in Najaf

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The US and allied occupation forces in Iraq have launched a bloody attack on densely populated urban areas where support is strongest for the Shiite movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Fighting has raged for four days in the impoverished Sadr City suburb of Baghdad and cities across the country's south, with the most intense combat taking place in Najaf—the site of the holiest Iraqi Shiite shrine, the Shrine of Imam Ali.

Over 5,000 American marines and Iraqi interim government troops are involved in the assault on Najaf. Fighter-bombers, helicopter gunships and ground artillery are being used against the poorly armed Iraqi defenders, who are seeking to prevent an American entry into the city. US marine spokesmen claimed Friday they had killed more than 300 of Sadr's Mahdi Army militiamen and captured over 1,000, at the cost of just two American dead.

Sadr City, one of the most densely populated urban areas on the planet, has been subjected to aerial bombardment.

The aim of the assault is not only to wipe out Sadr's militia in Najaf and other cities, but to terrorize and intimidate the entire Iraqi population into accepting the interim government the Bush administration installed in June. In the Orwellian language of the US military—which is being uncritically repeated in the American media—the US puppet regime of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, which has no popular support and is increasingly resorting to police state methods, is the representative of “democracy”. The Iraqis who are resisting the US invasion and occupation of their country are “anti-Iraqi forces” and “terrorists”.

Journalists on the scene are reporting that much of the center of Najaf, as well as the Shiite cemetery on the city's outskirts, are already in ruins due to US bombing. The Imam Ali shrine has been damaged, electricity has been cut off, and there are reports of dozens of civilian casualties. In Baghdad, the Iraqi health ministry reported that at least 22 people were killed in fighting on Saturday alone in Sadr City.

A spokesman for Moqtada al-Sadr, Ali Yassiri, told the press: “A huge terrorist activity is being imposed on Najaf and Sadr City. We put responsibility on the US government and the occupation and the governor of Najaf.”

Allawi claims that he and the Najaf governor ordered the US assault—which sparked the fighting elsewhere in the country—in response to an attack on August 5 on a Najaf police station by “bandits and gangs trying to hide behind Moqtada al-Sadr”. US military spokesmen say they entered Najaf only in response to a request from Allawi and the governor.

Allawi is claiming that the target of the attack is not Sadr and his movement, but rather criminals who are posing as supporters of the Shiite cleric. The interim prime minister went so far on Saturday as to issue an invitation to the cleric to stand in the elections that are ostensibly to take place in January 2005.

The claims of Washington and its stooge regime in Iraq are refuted by the events leading up to the clashes on August 5. The fighting now underway is the outcome of a calculated decision by the US military to provoke Sadr's movement into a confrontation.

On July 31, leading members of Sadr's organization were seized in late-night raids, led by US troops, in the city of Karbala. Two days later, on August 2, American and Iraqi interim government troops attempted to surround Sadr's personal residence in Najaf, and only withdrew after hours of fighting with the Mahdi Army militia. The Mahdi Army then reestablished open control over the city and set up stronger defensive positions to repel the next attack.

In Sadr City and other areas, the militia did the same. These defensive actions by Sadr's movement have since been used as the justification for the US assault.

The pretense that the decision to launch the US offensive was made by the “sovereign” Iraqi government headed by Allawi, a long-time CIA stooge, is yet another bald lie peddled by Washington and uncritically parroted by the American media.

Allawi and his government have no independence from the US government and military, which invaded the country, toppled the previous regime, and installed the interim government in order to do Washington's bidding. Allawi and his fellow American puppets are performing the same function for US imperialism that the various regimes installed by the Nazis in occupied Europe performed for

German imperialism: providing a fig leaf of local support for war crimes carried out against conquered peoples. World public opinion recognized the Nazi-installed regimes for the political obscenities they were. Allawi and company are no better.

The Norwegian puppet government of Vidkun Quisling, whose name became the generic term for those who collaborate in the suppression of their own population, signed the orders for the deportation to Nazi death camps of over 1,000 Norwegian Jews and hundreds of communists, socialists and resistance fighters. Quisling was tried and executed for his crimes in October 1945, following Norway's liberation.

The claim that the current attack on Najaf is a response to actions by the Iraqi resistance is further belied by the fact that the American marines spearheading the operation are a specialized assault force from the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). The marines of the 11th MEU are among the reinforcements rushed to Iraq in July to increase American troop strength from 138,000 to over 145,000 by the beginning of August. The additional troops were initially deployed around the city of Fallujah.

The *World Socialist Web Site* drew attention to this deployment on June 29, in an article headlined, "Is the US military preparing another massacre in Fallujah?"

At the time there were numerous indications that Fallujah would be the target of the first major US offensive following the ostensible transfer of sovereignty to the interim Iraqi government. The resistance organizations in the predominantly Sunni Muslim city held off a US assault in April, and Fallujah has been outside the control of the occupation forces ever since.

While the initial target of the US bloodbath is Najaf, rather than Fallujah, the basic point of the WSWS article has been vindicated: the so-called transfer of sovereignty was to serve as the cover for new US massacres of Iraqis, which would be the centerpiece of an intensified effort to suppress the anti-colonial resistance by means of violence and terror.

The basic motive for the renewed crackdown is the fact that a series of truces worked out in May to end the fighting in Fallujah as well as the Shiite uprising sparked by Sadr's call for resistance, and the subsequent installation of Allawi's puppet government in June, have not stemmed the growth of organized resistance to the US occupation. In recent months, the resistance has established effective control over large swathes of the country.

Despite having 145,000 troops in Iraq and overwhelming firepower, the US military does not have sufficient forces to overcome the opposition. Sadr's Mahdi Army has emerged as the main political force across southern Iraq. In Baghdad, Sadr's movement controls Sadr City, and it has retained

control over parts of Najaf, Karbala, Nasiriya, Basra, Amara and other southern cities. In opinion polls, the cleric registers close to 70 percent support or sympathy, while Allawi's interim government is reviled by the majority of the population.

British journalist Robert Fisk commented on July 31: "[W]atching any Western television station in Baghdad these days is like tuning in to Planet Mars. Doesn't Blair realise that Iraq is about to implode? Doesn't Bush realise this? The American-appointed 'government' controls only parts of Baghdad—and even there its ministers and civil servants are car-bombed and assassinated. Baquba, Samarra, Kut, Mahmoudiya, Hilla, Fallujah, Ramadi all are outside government authority. Iyad Allawi, the 'Prime Minister', is little more than mayor of Baghdad. 'Some journalists,' Blair announces, 'almost want there to be a disaster in Iraq.' He doesn't get it. The disaster exists now."

A US military attempt to reverse the erosion of its control was inevitable. One factor in the decision to target Sadr's movement first, instead of Fallujah, may be the illness of the leading Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Sistani, 73-years-old, is currently in Britain, receiving emergency medical treatment for serious heart problems. In April, Sistani, while refusing to condemn Sadr's uprising, also refused to issue a call on Iraq's majority Shiite population to join the struggle against the US occupation. His refusal to support an uprising gave the Bush administration and the US military sufficient breathing space to temporarily calm the situation.

Washington undoubtedly fears that if Sistani were to die or become physically incapacitated, the 31-year-old Sadr could step into the power vacuum and emerge as the most authoritative religious and political leader of Iraqi Shiites. His rivals in the Shiite establishment, such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), have been discredited by their participation in the interim government and its predecessor, the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council.

While Sadr himself has at various points indicated his willingness to come to some kind of accommodation with the interim government and its US masters, he has directed his anti-American appeal to the most impoverished sections of the Shiite population—an explosive force that could potentially escape the control of the Shiite clergy and seek to forge a united struggle with the Sunni masses.



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