

US troops storm Iraqi city of Samarra

Peter Symonds
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In a massive show of force, 5,000 US and Iraqi troops backed by tanks, warplanes and attack helicopters marched into the city of Samarra last Friday in a bid to stamp their control on what has been a stronghold of anti-US armed resistance. Far from liberating the town from “criminals” and “anti-Iraqi forces”, as US and Iraqi spokesmen claimed, the purpose of the exercise was to subjugate a hostile population through fear and intimidation.

The US military began its operation late Thursday night by sealing off the city and launching a sustained bombardment using warplanes and tanks. Spearheaded by armoured vehicles, US and Iraqi troops attacked from three sides, overwhelming groups of lightly-armed resistance fighters and taking control of key buildings including the Golden Mosque—a revered Shiite site.

The US-led force imposed a 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. curfew and began house-to-house searches. As described by the *New York Times*: “One by one, the houses in the Jebara neighbourhood in the southeastern edge of the city were kicked open—and sometimes shotgunned open—at one point revealing a bewildered wedding party that had not noticed that American forces were overrunning the neighbourhood. Mostly, though, the houses were empty, and showed signs of a hasty departure.”

Fighting continued throughout Friday and Saturday, with US and Iraqi officials claiming success in seizing three quarters of the city, including the main government buildings, police station and a pharmaceutical factory. By the end of Saturday, they claimed to have killed 125 “insurgents” and captured another 88. US Major General John Batiste told the media he was “very confident that the future of Samarra is good. This is great news for the people of Samarra—200,000 people have been held captive, hostage if you will, by just a couple of hundred thugs.”

These comments bear no relation to reality. The people of Samarra were not celebrating the violent assault. After Friday’s fighting, the British-based *Independent* noted: “Homes were flattened and dozens of cars were set alight

in yesterday’s operation. The people of Samarra, their electricity and water supplies cut off by US and Iraqi government forces, took shelter in their homes, but said that many had been caught in the crossfire.”

In the centre of the city, residents accused US snipers of firing on anyone who appeared in the streets. An ambulance driver told Associated Press (AP): “Dead bodies and injured people are everywhere in the city and when we tried to evacuate them, the Americans fired on us. Later on they told us that we can evacuate only injured women and children and we are not allowed to pick up injured men.”

Mahmoud Saleh, 33, a civil servant, explained to AP: “We are terrified by the violent approach used by the Americans to subdue the city. My wife and children are scared to death and they have not been able to sleep since last night. I hope the fighting ends as soon as possible.” Rahim Abdul-Karim, a retired schoolteacher, commented to the *Independent*: “There has been a lot of deaths, and they have been of ordinary people... They are killing us to save us.”

The exact death toll has not been determined. Media reports indicated that bodies were still lying in the streets on Saturday. The morgue at the city’s main hospital was overflowing, with some of the dead being laid out on the floor in a hall. According to an official, Abdul-Nasser Hamed Yassin, at the Samarra General Hospital, of the 70 dead, 23 were children and 18 were women. Another 160 people were being treated for wounds.

Other casualties were being treated in hospitals in nearby Tikrit or by the Red Crescent, which set up 30 tents on the road to Tikrit to provide medical aid and shelter for fleeing residents. The casualties at the Tikrit Teaching Hospital were mostly women and children. Pointing to a young boy whose stomach was bandaged, Sami Hashem told the press: “His pregnant mother was killed.” In a nearby bed, a young girl had lost one of her feet.

Iraq’s National Security Minister Kasim Daoud claimed to have the support of more than 100 religious, tribal,

political and professional leaders who met with him in Baghdad the previous weekend. He made clear, however, that the attack would have gone ahead even if the delegation had objected. “It is our duty to clean this city,” he declared.

One Samarra leader Naji Khalid al-Samarrai told Agence France Presse that he was surprised by the attack as he believed that a deal was about to be concluded with the Baghdad government. “What we are seeing now is an effort to subdue Samarra by force and to sideline certain political forces to serve the agenda of the United States and that of its allied government. I do not think force is the answer,” he said.

That Samarra has become a hotbed of resistance to the US occupation and its puppet Iraqi administration is a telling indication of the extent of opposition throughout the country. Prior to the US invasion, the city and its tribal leaders were widely regarded as being anti-Hussein—traditionally Samarra has been a rival to neighbouring Tikrit, Hussein’s home town. But after the invasion, anti-US opposition began to grow in response to the heavy-handed repression meted out by occupation troops.

Last weekend’s offensive was not the first time that US troops have mounted a major attack on the city. Last December, after a series of ambushes against US and Iraqi troops, some 2,500 American soldiers sealed it off and smashed their way into homes and factories in search of “insurgents”. At least 86 men were rounded up and detained. Despite US claims of success, armed opposition continued to escalate, forcing US troops out of the city by May.

In early September, after protracted negotiations with local tribal chiefs, the US military again entered Samarra in force. US soldiers, backed by tanks and attack helicopters, set up checkpoints and installed a mayor, police chief and local council. Their commander Major General Batiste grandly declared the operation marked “a significant step forward where the good people of Samarra are taking control of their destiny.” After the troops withdrew, the local council and police rapidly collapsed. Last Tuesday, armed resistance fighters paraded through the centre of the city in a convoy of trucks.

Speaking last weekend, Iraqi Defence Minister Hazem Shaalam boasted to Al Arabiya television: “It is over in Samarra.” Lacking any popular support, however, the only way the US military can maintain control over the city is through fear and coercion. Significantly, National

Security Minister Daoud had no confidence that Iraqi troops would be able to hold the city without a continued US military presence.

The US troops involved in the operation were under no illusion that the fighting was over. “The bad guys are just pulling back to see what we’re going to do,” Lieutenant Jonathan Martin, executive officer of one of the companies conducting the house-to-house search, told the *New York Times*. “Our guess is, this battle is going to get pretty rough and will probably last a long time.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has repeatedly warned that Washington’s only response to growing armed resistance would be ferocious repression. An Editorial Board statement entitled “Stop the war on the Iraqi people” in April 2004 explained: “The tactics employed against both the people of Fallujah and the Shiite rebels are reminiscent of the methods of reprisal and collective punishment perfected by the Nazi regime in occupied Europe 60 years ago. They are aimed at intimidating the population as a whole through the use of overwhelming military violence and the policy of exemplary punishment.”

That is exactly what is taking place in Samarra and it is being prepared for other “no-go” areas like Fallujah and Sadr City, the impoverished Shiite suburb of Baghdad, which are being subjected to relentless and indiscriminate daily aerial bombardment. Like the names of towns in Algeria and Vietnam that embodied the anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century, Samarra and other rebel Iraqi cities are coming to symbolise the resistance to US subjugation in the twenty-first century: both the courage and defiance of the Iraqi population and the barbaric methods of the occupiers.



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