

# US military intensifies campaign of intimidation prior to Iraqi referendum

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The US-led occupation forces in Iraq are widening the campaign of repression being carried out against sections of the population who are expected to vote “No” in the October 15 referendum called to ratify a draft constitution.

On September 25, for the first time in over a year, American and Iraqi government troops in Baghdad launched an attack on the Shiite supporters of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in the impoverished working class district of Sadr City.

A Sadr aide told the *Los Angeles Times* that both US and government troops had approached the home of a minor leader of the Shiite movement in the early hours of the morning and opened fire indiscriminately on the Mahdi Army militiamen guarding the area. Witnesses told the newspaper that the militiamen fired first, after their warnings to the occupation forces to leave were ignored.

The US military claimed that government troops attempting to detain three men suspected of involvement in a “kidnapping and torture cell” were ambushed and that American forces went to their assistance. Whatever the exact circumstances, a 90-minute gun battle took place between the local fighters and the US and government forces. According to the Sadrists, four people were killed, including a child, and 15 wounded.

Sadrist leaders immediately denounced the firefight as a calculated provocation. Sheik Abd al-Hadi al-Darraj told Al Jazeera: “They want to provoke al-Sadr people to fight, to stop them from taking part in the political process.” Another spokesman told Associated Press that the occupation forces were trying to provoke a battle “aimed at destroying Iraqi towns, particularly those in pro-Sadr areas” in order to “prevent Sadr followers from voting”.

The Sadrist movement opposed the US invasion in 2003 and has demanded the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops. In 2004, it took up arms twice against the American military. While the Sadrists have observed a ceasefire that was negotiated last September to end the fighting, they have remained critical of the occupation and tensions have been steadily escalating over the past two months.

Sadr has made no clear call for Iraqis to vote down the

referendum. Both he and his associates have, however, issued a number of statements condemning the clauses in the draft constitution that allow for the establishment of federal “regions”, or virtually independent mini-states.

In the face of an entrenched insurgency in the central and western provinces of Iraq, Washington now regards the de-facto partition as the best mechanism for selling off Iraq’s oil and other resources to transnational corporate interests and establishing permanent US military bases. The constitution will facilitate the creation of a Kurdish mini-state in the north and a Shiite-dominated mini-state in the south, with substantial control over oil revenues and internal security. Baghdad, where the Sadrists have their base, and the resource-poor central and western provinces, which have a majority Sunni population, face being marginalised.

A large turnout and “No” vote by the Shiite supporters of Sadr, combined with the votes of Sunni Muslims and other groups that oppose the constitution such as ethnic Turkomen, Christians and secularists, could defeat the constitution in as many as five provinces. A “No” vote by two-thirds of voters in just three of Iraq’s 18 provinces is all that is required for its overall rejection. Over the past several months, hundreds of thousands of Sunnis, who overwhelmingly boycotted the election in January, have registered in response to calls by Sunni political and religious leaders for a mass vote against the draft constitution.

Within that context, the Iraqi Electoral Commission has ruled that a negative vote by two-thirds of *registered* voters—not actual voters—is necessary to defeat the constitution in a province. The US military and the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari are deliberately creating fear and chaos to prevent large numbers of likely “No” voters reaching a polling station, in order to ensure the critical two-thirds is never reached.

An offensive in the predominantly Sunni-populated Euphrates Valley has led to tens of thousands of people fleeing cities such as Qaim and Tal Afar and plunged large swathes of the majority Sunni provinces of Ninewa and al-

Anbar into chaos. There have been reports too of residents fleeing the major Sunni city of Samarra in Sala al Din province and escalating fighting in Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province.

The Iraqi newspaper *Azzaman* reported on September 24 that residents of the Sunni Baghdad suburb of Doura also have begun to leave their homes, after anonymous leaflets warned an occupation assault was imminent. The paper reported that Iraqi government forces were “massing in the district, setting up checkpoints and road blocks, prompting the residents to leave for fear that the troops would soon mount a major attack”.

The displacement of people, the volatile atmosphere and intimidating presence of US and government forces is likely to cause a far lower turnout in key Sunni areas than would otherwise have been the case.

The attack by the occupation forces in Sadr City can only be interpreted as an attempt to prevent Shiite opposition to the constitution from being expressed as well. Until this week, the district, where as many as two million people live, was being widely referred to as the “safest” part of Baghdad due to the ceasefire between the occupation forces and the Sadrist militia. Now, just over two weeks from the referendum, there are fears of a direct confrontation between thousands of young Shiite fighters and the occupation forces.

The clash on Sunday comes in the wake of a series of provocations that have intensified the resentment of Sadr’s loyalists toward both the US military and the rival Shiite parties in the Iraqi government—the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Da’awa organisation of Prime Minister Jaafari.

Tensions are running high in the main southern city of Basra, where the British military arrested three Sadrist leaders and stormed a prison last week to free two Special Air Service (SAS) troops who were captured, disguised as Arabs and allegedly carrying explosives, by local police said to be loyal to Sadr. (See “British troops in pitched battle in Basra”)

On August 24, just weeks after police affiliated with SCIRI gunned down Sadrist demonstrators in the southern city of Samawa, a mob of SCIRI supporters burnt down Sadr’s office in Najaf. The office had been closed since fighting last year and was being reopened as part of the Sadrist efforts to extend their influence. In retaliation for the attack, Mahdi Army fighters attacked SCIRI offices in cities and towns across the south, and Sadrist legislators walked out of the parliament. The situation was defused only by frantic calls for calm by Jaafari, SCIRI leaders and Sadr himself.

Sadr’s response to the recent incidents in Basra and Baghdad has also been to call for calm. The layer of the

Shiite elite he represents has consistently sought to balance between the mass anti-occupation sentiment of its base of support among the working class and urban poor, and using the US presence to enhance their political role and material position.

There are ominous parallels with situation in April 2004, however, when the US occupation confronted a crisis due to the strengthening insurgency in Sunni heartland cities like Fallujah and the agitation among Shiites against the moves to install an unelected interim government headed by pro-US exiles.

The Bush administration’s answer was to provoke a confrontation and attempt to drown the resistance in blood. An offensive was begun against Fallujah while the US military provocatively closed a Sadrist newspaper and tried to arrest one of the movement’s main Baghdad leaders. Spanish troops attacked and killed Shiite demonstrators in Najaf. Within hours, Shiite youth had taken up arms in Sadr City, Karbala, Najaf, Nasiriyah, Basra, Amara, and towns across the south.

Thousands of Iraqis were killed or wounded in the fighting over the following seven months—culminating in the US destruction of Fallujah in November 2004. The American repression and terror was the essential precondition for the installation of Iyad Allawi as interim prime minister in June, and the election on January 30 this year that delivered control of the parliament to the pro-occupation Shiite and Kurdish parties.

The Bush administration calculates it can push through the draft constitution by the same method—vicious reprisals against Iraqis who oppose the US agenda of subjugating the country and plundering its oil. Two-and-a-half years into this bloody neo-colonial war, with over 100,000 Iraqi and close to 2,000 American dead, no credence can be given to the lie that the US occupation is bringing “democracy” to Iraq.



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