

Huge protest in Baghdad against US-Israeli war in Lebanon

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Chanting slogans such as “no, no to the occupiers” and “death to Israel, death to America”, more than 100,000 Iraqis marched in Baghdad on August 4 to oppose the US-backed Israeli war in Lebanon. The protest, held in the predominantly Shiite and working class neighbourhood of Sadr City, has revealed deep anger over the criminal onslaught on Lebanon and continuing widespread hostility to the US occupation of Iraq.

Busloads of protesters poured into Baghdad from southern cities such as Najaf and Basra in response to a call by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr to assemble after Friday prayers to protest in support of “your struggling and patient brothers in Lebanon and Iraq”.

The US military attempted to downplay the protest, claiming only 14,000 people had marched, but Agence France Presse reported that hundreds of thousands took part. Iraqi police and the rally organisers said more than one million people participated.

The one-kilometre column of protesters streamed from Sadr City to Firdos Square in central Baghdad, waving Lebanese, Hezbollah and Iraqi flags and carrying large effigies of George Bush, Tony Blair, Ehud Olmert and Saddam Hussein. Marchers stomped on Israeli and US flags, which were painted on the ground above the words “these are the terrorists”. Many in the crowd, which was dominated by young men, wore white shrouds indicating their willingness to fight and die in Lebanon.

Last week a number of senior Iraqi leaders, including Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, Vice President Adel Abdul-Mahdi and President Jalal Talabani made comments critical of the Israeli action in Lebanon. Speaking at an event to mark the anniversary of the assassination of a Shiite cleric, Abdul-Mahdi condemned the “horrible massacres carried out by

Israeli aggression”.

The rally has provoked concern in Washington that Israel’s crimes in Lebanon have the potential to ignite a mass political movement against the US occupation in Iraq. Two days after the protest, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was asked on American television’s “Meet the Press” program whether Iraq was turning into a theocratic state along the lines of Iran.

While expressing concern about the protest and its slogans, Rice assured the interviewer that the Iraqi prime minister and government remained assets “on the right side in the war on terror”. The Bush administration’s main fear is not the ministers, who have collaborated from the outset with US occupation, but masses of ordinary people who readily identify with the suffering of the Lebanese people.

US and British officials have increasingly targetted al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army as a prime enemy. In a report leaked to the media last week, outgoing British ambassador to Iraq, William Patey, stated that “preventing [al-Sadr’s] Jaish al-Mahdi from developing into a state within a state, as Hezbollah has done in Lebanon, will be a priority”.

For his part, al-Sadr has increasingly accommodated to the US occupation. His supporters hold 30 seats in the Iraqi parliament and five cabinet posts, providing a crucial political prop for the Maliki government, which is widely despised as a stooge of the Bush administration. The US hostility to the Sadrist movement is primarily to its social base, which lies in impoverished sections of the Shiite working class in Baghdad and southern Iraqi cities.

The sentiments of these layers were expressed in comments to journalists from *McClatchy Newspapers* on August 1. “The government formed after the fall of the regime hasn’t been able to do anything, just make

many promises. And people are fed up with the promises,” said Sheik Bashir al Najafi, a senior Shiite leader said. “One day we will not be able to stop a popular revolution.”

Amman al Janafi, a 39-year-old dentist from Najaf, criticised Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani for urging Shiites to vote for the US-backed Iraqi constitution and participate in the last elections. “The failure of the Islamist political parties broke the trust between the Marjaiyyah [the Shiite Leader’s Council] and the people. Even if Ayatollah Sistani himself were nominated in the next elections, I would not vote for the slate.”

It is not surprising that just days after the mass protest in Baghdad, the US-led troops carried out a provocative operation yesterday in the slums of Sadr City. While the US military claimed that it was targetting “individuals involved in punishment and torture,” the purpose was clearly to attack the Mahdi army and to intimidate the local population. At least three civilians, including a three-year-old girl, were killed in the attack, which was accompanied by air strikes. Another 18 were injured.

In a statement on government television, Prime Minister Maliki sharply criticised the US operation, saying he was “very angered and pained” and promised, “this won’t happen again”. President Talabani, a Kurd, reportedly met with the top US commander, General George Casey, and told him, “it is in no one’s interest to have a confrontation” with the Sadrist movement.

These comments represent a rather desperate attempt by Maliki and his government to retain some credibility amid widespread anti-US sentiment that has been compounded by the US-Israeli atrocities in Lebanon as well as the deepening social and economic disaster in Iraq.



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