Provocative US attack on Shiite militia in Iraq

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An attack over the weekend in Diwaniyah, a city to the south of Baghdad, signals a major intensification in the operations of US forces in Iraq against the Mahdi Army, the armed wing of the Shiite fundamentalist movement nominally headed by the cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

In the early hours of Sunday morning, a convoy of tanks and armoured vehicles converged on the Diwaniyah home of a Mahdi Army leader, Kifah al-Greiti. A six-hour pitched battle ensued, with hundreds of militiamen defending their commander with rocket-propelled grenades and small arms. The US military claims that 30 Shiite fighters were killed. While there were no reported American casualties, the ferocity of the fighting is indicated by the rare destruction of a heavily armoured Abram tank.

In August, Diwaniyah was the scene of two days of fighting between units of the Iraqi military and the Mahdi Army, which controls large parts of the city. At least 23 Iraqi soldiers and 50 militiamen died before a ceasefire was worked out that required the government troops to withdraw from the Sadrist neighbourhoods.

The Sadrist leader in Diwaniyah, Abdul Razaq al-Nadawi, accused the occupation forces of violating that ceasefire by their raid on Sunday. He told Associated Press: “We had an agreement with representatives of the prime minister [Nouri al-Maliki].... The agreement states that the American forces do not enter our cities or residential areas in Diwaniyah and all over Iraq. This has been followed until now. We don’t attack [American troops], but when we are attacked, we respond.”

Sadrist representatives have warned that the events of the weekend are the harbinger of a nationwide crackdown against their organisation, particularly their main powerbase, the Sadr City district of eastern Baghdad. Nadawi declared on Sunday: “The American forces intend to launch a wide-scale operation against the Mahdi Army and will attempt to enter Sadr City.”

Sadr City is home to close to 2.5 million predominantly working class Shiite Iraqis. The Sadrists hold sway in the area through a network of mosques, charities, health clinics and the Mahdi Army, which is estimated to have up to 10,000 well-armed fighters in the capital alone. Since early September, US troops in Baghdad, whose numbers have been significantly bolstered, have been conducting provocative intrusions into the suburbs adjoining Sadr City, while staying out of the Shiite stronghold itself.

Tensions are being raised to fever-pitch by the stepped-up repression. American patrols into Shiite areas are being confronted by hundreds of youth, who chant opposition to the occupation and hurl rocks and petrol bombs at their vehicles. American commanders claim the Mahdi Army is behind the unrest in order to prevent US forces approaching important militia facilities or to divert them into ambushes. An officer whose convoy was being pelted with rocks by children told Associated Press: “There’s probably one or two snipers out there waiting for us to get in range”.

Ali al-Yassiri, a Sadrist spokesman, dismissed the allegation, declaring that the street clashes were the “spontaneous and the natural reaction from innocent children who are witnessing horrible deeds committed by the occupation forces in Iraq”.

Any full-scale US military assault on the Mahdi Army in Sadr City would inevitably lead to hundreds and potentially thousands of civilian deaths, as well as a sharp rise in US casualties. There are ample indications, however, that such an offensive is being prepared.

US troop numbers in Baghdad have been doubled to 15,000. One of the main units deployed to the capital is the 4,000-strong 172nd Stryker Brigade, whose armoured vehicles are primarily intended for urban warfare. The brigade was due to leave Iraq in July but had its tour extended for 120 days until the end of November. Another armoured unit, the 4th Brigade of the Texas-based 1st Cavalry Division, is replacing it later this month. The overlap will potentially allow American commanders to use both brigades to spearhead operations in Sadr City shortly after the US elections on November 7.

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The Bush administration and US military strategists have viewed the Sadrists as a threat since the first months of the occupation. Contrary to predictions by figures like Vice President Dick Cheney that Iraqi Shiites would welcome the invading American troops with garlands of flowers, the Shiite working class and urban poor, who make up the social base of the Sadrist movement, have been overwhelmingly hostile to the presence of foreign forces.

Within months of the invasion, Moqtada al-Sadr, a young and relatively unknown cleric, consolidated his position as the principal spokesman for the Shiite opposition, making regular demands for the immediate withdrawal of all American forces. In April 2004, after an attempt was made to arrest Sadr and other key Sadrist leaders, thousands of young Shiites took up arms across southern Iraq to fight the US and other occupation forces, with major battles being fought in Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf.

The Shiite uprising in 2004 was ended by a compromise. In exchange for an end to armed resistance, the occupation forces agreed to allow the Sadrists to function as an open political movement. As a consequence, the Sadrists have emerged as the largest faction within the present Shiite-dominated government of Nouri al-Maliki, with 30 seats of the 275-member parliament and control over key ministries such as health and education. At the same time as serving in the US puppet regime, however, they have refused to disband the Mahdi Army and continue to issue populist denunciations of the occupation to maintain support among the Shiite population.

From Washington's standpoint, the Sadrist presence in the government and the existence of thousands of armed Shiite militants is an obstacle to its long-term agenda in Iraq: a stable regime in Baghdad to allow US energy companies to dominate the country's oil and gas resources and to permit permanent US military bases on its territory.

Shiite militia like the Mahdi Army are fighting a bloody civil war against Sunni Muslim rivals to ensure that political power remains in the hands of the Shiite parties. The escalating sectarian carnage has prevented any viable compromise being struck to end the largely Sunni insurgency that has been fought against the US military since 2003. Instead, American officers are alleging that their troops are coming under a growing number of attacks from Shiite militias, as well as Sunni guerillas. An American officer told *USA Today* that as the Mahdi Army "claims they control Sadr City and attacks are coming from Sadr City", then "either they are doing the attacking or allowing others to".

US preparations for possible military action against neighbouring Iran have only heightened pressure for a confrontation with the Mahdi Army. Sadr has openly threatened that the Shiite militia would take up arms to defend Iran. In August, as many as one million Iraqi Shiites, many of them Sadr loyalists, marched in Baghdad to express their support for the Shiite Hezbollah movement against the US-backed Israeli attack on southern Lebanon. The Sadrists have since been demonised by US officials and generals as a "state within a state" and a potential Iranian fifth column in Iraq.

The Maliki government is under intense pressure from the Bush administration to give the go-ahead for a crackdown on Mahdi Army, possibly by declaring it illegal. To date, it has refused. Maliki and the other Shiite factions are in a political alliance with the Sadrists and their dominant position within the Iraqi state relies to a great extent on their support.

The reluctance of Maliki to sanction a move against the Sadrists is a major element in the increasingly open US recriminations against his government and implicit threats to dispense with it. The possibility cannot be ruled out that an assault on the Sadrists will be accompanied by a move to oust Maliki and install a regime headed by elements of the Iraqi elite that are prepared to endorse a bloodbath against the Shiite masses.

The prospect that a new and even bloodier phase of the Iraq war may be imminent has not produced any opposition from the Democratic Party or the broader American political establishment. Three-and-half years after the US invasion, there is a consensus in US ruling circles that extracting the American military from the quagmire in Iraq, while preserving US interests in the Middle East, will require a massive escalation in the violence against the Iraqi people.

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