

Hundreds die as US military steps up operations in Iraq

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The US military is stepping up its attacks on both Sunni and Shiite opponents of the occupation of Iraq as the Bush administration's plan for an increase in US troop numbers and an offensive in Baghdad is put into motion.

American and Iraqi government troops are continuing the bloody operation launched at the beginning of the year to seize the Haifa Street district of Iraq's capital from Sunni guerillas. The compact area of offices and housing along the Tigris River, just several kilometres from the Green Zone headquarters of the US occupation and the Iraqi puppet government, has been a centre of resistance since the March 2003 invasion.

Intense fighting took place last Wednesday during "Operation Tomahawk Strike 11"—an assault aimed at clearing insurgents from residential areas adjacent to Haifa Street. As was the case earlier this month, American troops called in air strikes and helicopter gunships against guerilla positions in the once densely populated streets. More than 30 fighters were allegedly killed and 35 arrested.

There was no report on civilian casualties. Adnan Dulaimi, however, a leading Sunni parliamentarian, denounced the operation as a "barbaric" attack on an area "filled with poor people and lower-class families". A resident told the *Los Angeles Times*: "What kind of security plan is this? They are destroying us, pounding an area less than one square kilometre with mortars, and shells from helicopters and their tanks." Most of the district's inhabitants are reported to have fled their homes, adding to the country's estimated 1.7 million internally displaced persons.

The attack on Haifa Street is part of a sweeping operation authored by the new American commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, to try to wrest control of Baghdad from an array of anti-US opponents. To do so, he requested extra forces. An additional 17,500 US troops will be deployed to the city over the next few months, as

well as two or three brigades of ethnic Kurdish troops from northern Iraq.

Bush's national security advisor Stephen Hadley argued in yesterday's *Washington Post* that there was no alternative. Headlined "Baghdad is key," the op-ed comment declared: "Any plan that limits our ability to reinforce our troops in the field is a plan for failure—and could hand Baghdad to terrorists and extremists before legitimate Iraqi forces are ready to take over the fight. That is an outcome the president simply could not accept."

The first 3,200 American reinforcements—a brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division—arrived in the capital over the weekend.

For the first time, the US military intends to move in force into Sadr City, the Shiite working class district of two million people in eastern Baghdad, and attempt to destroy the Mahdi Army militia formed in 2003 by followers of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The prospect is looming of bitter and protracted urban warfare between the occupation forces and the thousands-strong militia. Civilian casualties will be considerable.

Top US officers have denounced the Mahdi Army as "the greatest threat" to the occupation. It is recruited from among the urban working class and poor, who are overwhelmingly opposed to the US presence and the Bush administration's perspective of opening up Iraq's oil resources to transnational corporations. The militiamen are also hostile to US threats of aggression against Iran. Even though the Sadrist leaders are desperately seeking to avoid a confrontation, it is by no means certain that they could prevent Mahdi Army fighters from attacking US troops within Iraq if Iran were attacked.

The official US pretext for the crackdown is the claim that Mahdi Army fighters are responsible for the killing of Sunni Arabs in Baghdad in what is an escalating sectarian war. The initial stages of US operations to disarm and

break-up the militia are well underway. Last week the US military announced that raids over the past 45 days had led to the arrest of 600 Mahdi Army militiamen and five key leaders. Among them is Abdel Hadi al-Daraji, one of Sadr's main lieutenants, who was seized by American troops and detained on murder allegations.

Despite the targeting of their own supporters, Sadrist parliamentarians, who make up a key faction of the Iraqi government headed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, voted over the weekend to support the Baghdad security plan. Sadr has made no public statements condemning the offensive or the arrests. On January 19, he told the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* he had moved his family into safe houses and was not calling for resistance.

The London-based *Sunday Times* reported on the weekend that some leading militia commanders have left the country. Other media reports indicate that sections of the Mahdi Army have gone to ground and hidden their weapons. The US ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad warned earlier this month there was a danger the militiamen were "lying low, avoiding conflict now in order to fight another day".

More militant factions of the Mahdi Army are likely to bitterly resist any US entry into Sadr City, regardless of Sadr's stance. An article in the *New York Times* on January 18 indicated that the Sadrist leadership was becoming discredited in the eyes of some supporters. The article commented: "Iraqis who live in the neighbourhoods where the Mahdi Army is strong say the primary motivation for avoiding full-scale confrontation with the Americans is money. Members have grown rich on political channels of financing from Iran as well as from Iraqi government ministries, the residents say, and the militiamen do not want to fight the Americans directly for fear of losing their new found status."

Disaffection among Shiites with the clerical and political establishment is already widespread. While the elites have been hoisted to political power and gained economic privileges from the US occupation, millions of ordinary people face catastrophic living conditions, police state repression and a fratricidal civil war between Iraq's religious and ethnic groups.

Events over the past several days near the southern city of Najaf are one indication of the growing disaffection of sections of the Shiite masses with the Shiite parties that dominate the Iraqi government

On Sunday, Iraqi government troops, supported by US tanks, helicopter gunships and jet-fighters, carried out a bloody massacre of adherents of the "Soldiers of

Heaven," a small Shiite sect that had taken control of several villages close to Najaf. Between 200 and 300 members of the organisation were slaughtered and hundreds more were reportedly wounded and captured. Women and children are believed to be among those killed.

The fighting against the Soldiers of Heaven was the most intense in southern Iraq since the end of a Mahdi Army uprising in 2004. In the course of the battle, two American pilots were killed when their helicopter was shot down.

The sect was allegedly plotting to assassinate the top Shiite clerics in Iraq, including grand ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and seize control of the Imam Ali mosque in Najaf—the most important shrine of the Shiite faith. The conspiracy was timed to coincide with the Ashura festival, during which thousands of Shiite believers march from Najaf to the nearby city of Karbala. The killing of the clerical hierarchy was apparently intended to trigger a generalised Shiite uprising against both the US occupation and its puppet government in Baghdad.

Najaf's deputy-governor told the *New York Times* that the Soldiers of Heaven had attracted "naïve people" to its ranks with doomsday declarations that the Imam Mahdi had returned. In Shiite theology, the Mahdi—a Shiite leader who disappeared in the ninth century—will return in a time of great evil and bring peace and justice to the world. If people are being attracted to such beliefs, however, it is one reflection of the widespread hostility to the US occupation, its Iraqi supporters and the nightmare it has created.

The 24 hours of fighting against the Soldiers of Heaven point to the type of the carnage that can be expected when US troops try to root out and destroy the Shiite militias in the warren-like and densely populated streets of eastern Baghdad. The surge of troops ordered by the Bush administration will inevitably lead to a sharp escalation in both Iraqi and American casualties.



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