

US military begins operations in Baghdad's Sadr City

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10 March 2007

American and Iraqi government forces have initiated regular patrols this week in northeastern Baghdad's densely populated, predominantly Shiite, working class suburb of Sadr City. More than 1,200 troops have entered the area since Sunday, searching homes and establishing vehicle checkpoints. Thus far, they have encountered no resistance.

The US entry into Sadr City has considerable significance. It is one of the primary objectives of the deployment of over 17,000 additional US troops to Baghdad, which was announced by President George Bush on January 10. Having moved in forces, the intention of the US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, is to establish permanent bases and impose US control over the two million people who live in the district.

A potentially explosive stage of Bush's Iraq "surge" has therefore begun. Sadr City has effectively been a no-go zone for the US military, due to the mass opposition of the Iraqi working class toward the occupation. It is the stronghold of the Shiite fundamentalist movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which developed a mass following in the 1990s by opposing both the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein and the UN sanctions on Iraq. Following the US invasion in 2003, the Sadrists rapidly took control over Baghdad's eastern Shiite suburbs and formed an armed wing, the Mahdi Army militia.

In April 2004, in response to calculated provocations by the US occupation authorities, thousands of Mahdi Army fighters took up arms and fought bloody battles against the US military in Sadr City, as well in the southern cities of Karbala and Najaf. The fighting ended with a negotiated settlement, with the Sadrist leadership agreeing to participate in the US puppet regime in Baghdad. Sadr City was left in the control of

the Mahdi Army and government police loyal to Sadr.

Hundreds of millions of dollars have since been spent on economic projects in the suburb, providing a lucrative pay-off to the Sadrists for ending the short-lived rebellion. With 30 legislators, the Sadrists emerged in 2006 as the largest faction within the Shiite coalition that dominates the Iraqi parliament and were given six ministries in the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The focus of the Mahdi Army over the past year has been a vicious civil war against Sunni Muslim opponents of the US occupation and Shiite rule. The militia is alleged to be directing many of the Shiite death squads that are carrying out sectarian killing and evictions against the Sunni population of the city.

The Sadrist hierarchy has demonstrated its willingness to accommodate itself to Iraq's transformation into a US client state. Nevertheless, there have been incessant calls in US political and military circles for its political influence to be shattered and the Mahdi Army eliminated.

The recriminations against the Sadrists stem primarily from the volatility of its social base. The workers and urban poor of Sadr City are bitterly hostile to the presence of foreign troops and plans to hand over Iraq's state-owned oil industry for exploitation by major transnational energy corporations. This class hostility is fuelled by the mass unemployment, malnutrition and chronic lack of services and infrastructure. Sadr and his lieutenants periodically reflect this mass sentiment with denunciations of the US occupation and rhetorical calls for a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops.

The fear in Washington is that tensions are so acute in Sadr City that the US occupation could find itself confronted with another rebellion by the Shiite working

class and poor, under conditions where its military forces have proven incapable of suppressing the insurgency in predominantly Sunni Arab areas. The Mahdi Army, which has anywhere between 10,000 and 60,000 potential fighters, is considered an unacceptable threat.

The demands for a crackdown against the Sadrists have intensified as the Bush administration has accelerated its preparations for a war against predominantly Shiite Iran. Any US attack on their co-religionists could well unleash an uprising by Iraqi Shiites. The Baghdad “surge” is, in many respects, a pre-emptive strike, aimed at weakening the Mahdi Army and positioning the US military inside Sadr City for any confrontation with the militia.

On Thursday, the Pentagon announced it had approved a request for an additional 2,200 US military police to be rushed to Iraq to help cope with the thousands of prisoners expected as operations in Sadr City escalate. The Iraqi government claimed in January that over 400 Sadrist militiamen had been detained. There have been no subsequent reports on the extent of operations against the militia.

Since being installed as prime minister, Maliki has come under intense pressure to sanction a crackdown on the Sadrists—who were previously his key allies within the Shiite coalition. His persistent refusal in the second half of 2006 provoked a stream of leaks and statements indicating that the Bush administration and its ambassador in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, were actively plotting his removal. Talk of a coup reached its zenith in November, when Maliki ordered US troops to dismantle roadblocks they had set across the main roads leading into Sadr City.

The Iraqi prime minister has since backed down. His government has both authorised the entry of US forces into the Sadrist stronghold and requested that three brigades of Kurdish troops be sent from northern Iraq to take part in operations in Baghdad. Many units of the Iraqi army are made up of Shiite troops who may mutiny if ordered to fight in Sadr City.

The Sadrist leadership has also manoeuvred to avoid a confrontation. In February, Sadr ordered his movement to cooperate with the entry of American and government troops into Sadr City. The Mahdi Army, according to on-the-spot accounts, has effectively gone to ground. US troops who entered the district this week

saw no sign of the militiamen who previously maintained well-defended positions at intersections and in major buildings. The initial deployment was reportedly negotiated with the mayor of Sadr City. Many Sadrist leaders are rumoured to have fled the country to Iran, Lebanon or elsewhere in the Middle East.

However, the current calm may not last much longer. Sadr, who had not appeared in public for more than three weeks, issued a statement on Thursday from Najaf calling on his supporters to use a religious festival on Friday to “demand the occupier leaves our dear Iraq so that we could live in independence and stability”.

Several reports indicate that the Maliki government is preparing to move against the Sadrist leadership. This week, a prime ministerial adviser leaked to Associated Press that Maliki intends to sack the Sadrist ministers from his cabinet. The Arabic website *KarbalaNews.net* has reported that the Iraqi government is preparing arrest warrants against a number of Sadrist parliamentarians, charging them with directing sectarian violence. The last time the US occupation attempted to marginalise the Sadrists was in March 2004, when an arrest warrant was issued against Moqtada al-Sadr and the movement’s newspaper closed down. The result was an armed uprising in Baghdad and southern cities.

The US operation in Sadr City may have an additional motive. One of the pretexts being fabricated in Washington for a war with Iran are unproven US allegations that Tehran has been supplying Shiite militias with arms and explosives used in attacks on American troops. Any arms caches found in Sadr City could well be used to further heighten tensions with Iran and pursue demands for US military retaliation.



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