

Iraq: Protests against US operations in Sadr City

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Several thousand people protested last Friday following evening prayers in the first public expression of hostility toward the US military operations now taking place inside the densely-populated Shiite working class district of Sadr City in Baghdad. Demonstrators chanted “No occupation” and “No America” as they marched in opposition to the announcement by American commanders that they were establishing their first permanent base inside Sadr City’s limits, at an Iraqi police station.

The protest was called by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose political movement and armed wing, the Mahdi Army militia, have effectively controlled Sadr City since the US invasion four years ago. The suburb—once officially known as “Saddam City”—was re-named in memory of Sadr’s father, a leading Shiite cleric who was assassinated by Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime in 1999.

In a statement published by Sadr’s office in the southern city of Kufa, Sadr called on his supporters to “raise your voices... against your enemy”. He denied that he had agreed to the deployment of US troops into Sadr City, accusing the occupation forces of “spreading false propaganda and rumours and claiming that there are negotiations and collaboration between you and them”.

Since the start of regular US patrols inside Sadr City on March 4, American officers have insisted they are doing so with the blessing of the Sadrist movement. Every indication on the ground has suggested this to be the case. The Mahdi Army, which has as many as 10,000 fighters in Baghdad, has disappeared from the streets and American troops have encountered no resistance. BBC TV filmed unarmed Mahdi army militiamen this week collaborating closely with US and government troops and officials in Sadr City.

The top US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, has publicly stated that Sadr agreed to the deployment after discussions with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and that, in exchange, US forces agreed to conduct searches and raids in a “respectable manner”. Petraeus’s subordinate, Major General Joseph Fils, has declared Sadr’s cooperation to be a “factor in the way we’ve been able to go into Sadr

City this early, so quickly”.

Sadr’s latest statement reflects growing anger in Sadr City over the actions of American troops. Within days of entering the district, US soldiers were accused of indiscriminately opening fire on a civilian car, killing a man and his two daughters and seriously wounding a young boy. Dozens of alleged Mahdi Army fighters have been detained, driving the number reportedly arrested in the last six months to more than 700.

With the Shiite militiamen ordered off the streets by Moqtada al-Sadr, suspected Sunni extremist suicide bombers have been able to infiltrate Sadr City and other Shiite districts and inflict horrifying carnage in markets and near mosques. Last Friday, the Sadr City mayor, a close ally of Sadr, was nearly killed in an assassination attempt. Bitterness over US operations and the heightened risks from Sunni extremists is compounded by disastrous living conditions produced by years of neglect under Hussein’s regime and four years of US occupation.

An Associated Press correspondent reported on March 14: “An estimated 2.5 million people, nearly all of them Shiites, live in the northeastern Baghdad community. Many of them lack running water and proper sewerage. Hundreds of thousands have no jobs and subsist on government food rations, a holdover from the international sanctions of the Saddam Hussein era. Streets in some parts of Sadr City run black with sludge. Damaged power lines provide at best only four hours of electricity a day... During a patrol last week, American troops brushed flies from their faces as they drove through rotting heaps of refuse and excrement piled outside houses. One soldier opened the door to his Humvee and vomited...”

The Sadrist movement has its social base among the Shiite oppressed but represents the interests of members of the Shiite clerical and propertied elite who have sought to enhance their social position under the US occupation. As a result, Sadr and other leaders have been involved in a delicate balancing act—at times voicing the anti-occupation sentiments of the masses, while increasingly forming a key

prop for the Shiite-dominated US puppet government in Baghdad.

In 2003, Sadr and his backers quickly established control over Sadr City and sought to challenge openly pro-occupation Shiite clerics and parties, such as the Iranian-linked Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), for control over the Shiite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala and the lucrative revenues generated from Shiite pilgrims.

By late March 2004, the US officials, concerned over Sadr's anti-occupation agitation and the growth of the Mahdi Army, imposed a crackdown. Paul Bremer, the US pro-consul in Iraq, ordered the shutting of the Sadrist newspaper and the arrest of Sadr on charges of murdering a rival cleric, Abdul Majeed al-Khoei. In retaliation, the young cleric called on his supporters to take up arms against the US military. For the next four months, Shiite militiamen fought American forces in Baghdad, Najaf, Karbala and across southern Iraq until a ceasefire was struck.

In return for calling off the fighting, the Sadrists were granted a political role. In the December 2005 elections, they joined the United Iraqi Alliance with SCIRI and other Shiite fundamentalist parties, and assisted in winning the largest bloc of seats in the parliament. Sadr's supporters within the Shiite alliance provided the key votes to install Maliki as prime minister, against a candidate nominated by SCIRI and favoured by the US. In return, they were given five ministries in Maliki's cabinet.

Sadr's verbal opposition to the presence of US forces in Iraq has never fully ceased. But as part of the Maliki government, the Sadrists have played a pivotal role in directing the anger among Shiites over their economic and social problems into a sectarian conflict against Sunni Muslims, who formed the main support base for the former Baathist regime. While avoiding clashes with the occupation forces, the Mahdi Army has been blamed for many of the death squads that are terrorising Sunni communities in Baghdad and other cities.

The US has remained hostile to Sadr and his movement, however. While the American military has been preoccupied in dealing with the mainly Sunni-based insurgents, it has never accepted the continued existence of a substantial Shiite militia that has operated as a law unto itself in Sadr City. Moreover, despite the presence of his supporters in the Maliki cabinet, Sadr is still something of a loose cannon, as far as the US is concerned, susceptible to pressure from the impoverished Shiite masses.

Calls for action against the Mahdi Army have intensified as US strategists have turned their attention to planning a confrontation with the Shiite theocratic regime in Iran. In the event of a war, the US military is concerned that Sadr's

militia could become a danger, rousing opposition among the Shiite masses and attacking US forces inside Iraq.

The Sadrist movement apparently calculated that the best tactic for preserving its forces was to offer no resistance to US operations inside Sadr City. But the actions of the American military, which appear to be targetting the command structure of the Mahdi Army, are generating tension within the ranks of the Shiite militia. There is already speculation that disgruntled Mahdi Army fighters were responsible for the attempt to kill the Sadr City mayor in revenge for his collaboration with the occupation forces.

The US military is clearly anticipating a major escalation of violence over the coming weeks. Some 2,200 additional US military police are being rushed to Iraq to cope with the thousands of new detainees that General Petraeus expects to be dealing with.

The top Sadrist leadership may be directly targeted. Amid the protest over the US operation in Sadr City, the widow of the Abdul Majeed al-Khoei has again accused Sadr of personally ordering her husband's killing in 2003. She told the Iraqi newspaper *Azzaman* on March 16: "The Iraqi government and US troops would like to overlook the case and have been postponing it indefinitely, saying that Iraq's current condition does not warrant a trial."

The revival of these allegations suggests that the issue of arresting Sadr over the murder is being actively discussed in Iraqi and US circles in Baghdad as a possible pretext for provoking a bloody showdown with his Mahdi Army.



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