

After mass protest in Iraq: US forces press attack on Sadrist movement

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American and Polish troops are continuing the offensive in the Iraqi city of Diwaniyah after cleric Moqtada al-Sadr specifically denounced the military operation during Monday's mass anti-occupation demonstration by hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Shiites in Najaf. The target of the offensive, according to a US military spokesman, is "rogue elements" of al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia, who are in control of parts of the city. Major Eric Verzola told the *Washington Post* on Saturday: "We're looking to round up those folks and to again return stability and safety and the rule of law back to the government of Iraq."

Diwaniyah, a city of approximately 400,000 people on the Euphrates River some 180 kilometres south of Baghdad, is the capital of Qadissiyah, one of Iraq's most fertile agricultural provinces. US forces from the 4th Brigade, 25th Infantry Division were moved to the city last week, reinforcing some 900 Polish troops, who are garrisoned in the area, and elements of two Iraqi government army divisions.

Codenamed Operation Black Eagle, the attack on five Sadrist-controlled neighbourhoods of Diwaniyah began last Friday. The entire city is under an ongoing curfew. The US military preceded its assault with an aerial leaflet drop, threatening to shoot any police officer seen on the streets in the targeted areas. The local police stations are loyal to the Sadrist network.

The initial fighting involved street-to-street combat, air strikes and the destruction of several American vehicles by rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), as the Mahdi Army tried to block the advance of the occupation forces. Outgunned by US armour and helicopter gunships, however, the militiamen effectively went to ground by Saturday morning.

Since the weekend, US, Polish and Iraqi troops have launched an undisclosed number of raids on the homes of alleged Sadrist loyalists in Diwaniyah, provoking resistance in some cases. On Monday, a Polish military spokesman, General Pawel Lamla, told Agence France Presse (AFP) that the operation had thus far "killed or captured more than 60 of the terrorists". Local sources claimed that the operation had also resulted in the deaths and injury of dozens of civilians. On Sunday, one city hospital reported that it had taken in 13 dead and over 40 wounded in the preceding 48 hours.

According to General Lamla, the operation against the Sadrist

movement in Diwaniyah is an extension of the "surge" of US troops being carried out in Baghdad. He implied that a number of those detained were militiamen who had taken refuge in Diwaniyah to escape the intensified US operations against the Mahdi Army in the capital. The Sadrist leadership ordered the militia not to resist the entry of US forces into its main stronghold in Baghdad—the working class district of Sadr City. Many of the top leaders are believed to have left Baghdad for safe havens elsewhere. Sadr's exact whereabouts are unknown.

Apart from the initial clashes last Friday, the Sadrist tactics in Diwaniyah have paralleled those in Baghdad. The *Washington Post* cited a militiaman on Saturday who claimed that the fighters were not engaging US forces on the orders of the local Sadrist office to "defend ourselves in our houses, not in the streets".

Despite the lack of open resistance, Diwaniyah is a microcosm of the crisis that confronts the US occupation of Iraq and which led to the Bush administration's decision to deploy tens of thousands of additional troops in a desperate bid to retain control over the country.

Provincial elections are due to be held in Iraq. The Sadrists, who oppose the presence of foreign troops and whose support base is steadily growing throughout the country's predominantly Shiite southern provinces, are positioning themselves to supplant the main pro-occupation Shiite party—the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).

As in many areas of southern Iraq, the political infighting for control over Diwaniyah and the Qadissiyah provincial government has passed over into armed conflict between the rival Shiite factions.

Last August, Iraqi army units allegedly loyal to SCIRI arrested a Sadrist leader, provoking two days of bloody clashes with Mahdi Army militiamen. The Iraqi army only avoided being driven from the city due to the intervention of US air strikes and Polish ground forces. A hasty truce was struck in which the arrested Sadrist leader was released and which left both sides in control of their original positions.

In October, US forces launched another assault on the Sadrists in Diwaniyah, sending a column of armoured vehicles into the city to attempt to arrest a Mahdi Army leader, Kifah al-

Greiti. While an estimated 30 militiamen were killed, they were not dislodged from the districts they commanded.

Over the months since, a fratricidal conflict has ensued. A leading Sadrist and numbers of police have been assassinated. In March, Interior Ministry police commandos and an officer of Iraqi military intelligence—both part of the Iraqi security forces believed to be controlled by SCIRI—were killed by snipers and bombs. The chief suspect was the Mahdi Army.

The SCIRI provincial governor reportedly requested the latest offensive two weeks ago. But it is far more likely to have been ordered by Washington and the US military command in Iraq. Their fear was that the arrival of Mahdi Army militiamen from Baghdad was beginning to shift the balance of forces in Diwaniyah in the Sadrists' favour.

The armed resistance, repeated opinion polls, and Monday's demonstration all highlight the dominant sentiment among the Iraqi masses, which is for the immediate expulsion of all foreign troops. The occupation is viewed as the main factor behind the sectarian conflict raging between rival Shiite and Sunni organisations and the intra-Shiite communalist tensions, as well as the cause of the immense social deprivation and suffering being endured by millions of people.

The reality in Iraq is that any genuinely democratic election would result in the victory of forces opposed to the US presence, with the Sadrists being one of the main beneficiaries. While Sadr's movement has largely cooperated with the US occupation since ending a short-lived rebellion during 2004, it has retained and expanded its support only by continuing to articulate the anti-occupation sentiment of its predominantly working class social base.

The Sadrists demand a timetable for the withdrawal of all foreign troops and have repeatedly opposed one of the key objectives of the US invasion of Iraq—the opening up of country's oil industry to foreign ownership. As a result, the Sadrist influence in Baghdad and the southern provinces grew considerably throughout 2006, as did the Mahdi Army, which ruthlessly enforces its authority against its rivals.

The aim of the so-called surge announced by President Bush on January 10 is to once again try to use “shock and awe” to terrorise the Iraqi masses into submission and shore up US control over Iraq. The Mahdi Army has been labelled “the greatest threat” to US interests and, along with Sunni Arab insurgent groups, is the prime target of the American offensive.

While Sadrist leaders form part of the US puppet government in Baghdad, the US concern is that Moqtada al-Sadr cannot be relied on to suppress popular outrage. His attempts to appeal to anti-occupation sentiment while seeking to restrain and control any opposition movement have led to recriminations and divisions within his social base over his organisation's passivity in the face of the US offensive.

In Diwaniyah, Hider al-Antis, a local Sadrist leader obeying the orders not to engage US troops, told the *Washington Post* on the weekend: “If Sayyid Moqtada were to order a

confrontation with the occupation forces, we would have wiped out those forces you see on the street now.” Another Diwaniyah Sadrist, Abdul Rasa al-Naafi, warned: “Of course we obey the orders of our leader, Sayyid Moqtada al-Sadr, but there is a limit to our patience and self-restraint.”

If the sentiment articulated at Monday's demonstration in Najaf is a gauge, the limits of Shiite self-restraint are rapidly approaching. An article in yesterday's *Washington Post* provided a glimpse of the tensions being generated by the surge. The *Post* reported from one of the US bases established just inside Sadr City. It is being regularly mortared from launch sites that the American military allege are located deep inside the Shiite district.

Another motive for the crackdown on the Sadrist militia was hinted at in a *Los Angeles Times* report on the operation in Diwaniyah. On Saturday, the *LA Times* reported that a facility had been found in the city where several “explosively formed projectiles” (EFPs) were in various stages of production.

One of the pretexts being fabricated in Washington for a war with Iran is the claim that the regime in Tehran is supplying Iraqi Shiite militias with EFPs that have killed at least 170 American troops. As the WSWS has warned previously, allegations that evidence has been found supporting these claims could be used to quickly escalate tensions and try to generate domestic support for a military confrontation.

At the same time, such claims provide justification for the all-out offensive being prepared to destroy or at least cripple the Mahdi Army and thereby remove concerns in the US military that, in the event of war with Iran, it would have to deal with an uprising by the Sadrists.



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