

# Iraq: British troops battle Shiite militia in Basra

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British troops have been hurled into the bitter power struggles taking place between the Shiite movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and rival Shiite parties for control over the oil-rich southern city of Basra and other centres in southern Iraq.

On Monday, British troops engaged in a series of street battles with alleged Sadrists militiamen near the provincial governor's office. The Sadrists, in an alliance with other parties and local strongmen in Basra, are seeking to supplant the governor, Mohammed al-Waili, a leader of the mainly Basra-based Fadhila faction. The Sadrists accuse Waili and Fadhila of being complicit in oil smuggling rackets, while most Iraqi people are enduring catastrophic living conditions.

Last month, the provincial legislature voted to remove Waili but he has refused to give up power. A standoff has resulted, with British-backed Iraqi security forces loyal to Waili opposed to the Sadrists Mahdi Army and other Shiite militias. Monday's fighting suggests that British troops are being used in an attempt to shore up Waili, in order to prevent the Sadrists strengthening their grip over Basra.

One of the main aims of the deployment of 30,000 additional American troops to Iraq was to launch major operations in Baghdad against the Mahdi Army. By June 1, these troops will be in place. The *Washington Post* reported on Monday that the US military intends to make a major push into the Sadrist stronghold of Sadr City in Baghdad over the coming weeks.

Sadr is considered a wildcard by the Bush administration and the Pentagon. His movement demands a timetable for the withdrawal of all foreign troops and the maintenance of state ownership of the oil industry, and denounces the social conditions produced by the US occupation. In 2004, the Sadrists led a short-

lived armed uprising against the occupation, and the US military fears they may do so again.

As the US "surge" got underway, Sadr went into hiding and in February ordered his supporters to resign their cabinet positions in the Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. His militia has generally gone to ground and tried to avoid confrontations, despite hundreds of its members being detained by American and British troops.

In Basra, the British military appears intent on provoking a major battle with the Sadrists, coinciding with the preparations for an American offensive in Baghdad. On Saturday, British troops at Basra airport detained a key Sadrist leader, Sheik Aws al-Khafaji, as he attempted to board a plane for Syria. Khafaji heads the Sadrist movement in the city of Nassiriyah. Last month, he was sent by Sadr on a tour of the Middle East to try to assure Sunni Arab regimes such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan that the Mahdi Army was not responsible for the sectarian violence against Iraqi Sunnis. Since walking out of the government, the Sadrists have made populist appeals for unity between Shiites and Sunnis and held out the possibility of an anti-occupation alliance with Sunni-based parties.

Last week Mahdi Army militiamen fought a series of battles in Nassiriyah with police said to be loyal to the Supreme Islamic Council in Iraq (SICI)—the main rival of the Sadrists in southern Iraq. The fighting erupted on May 16 after police refused to release two detained militiamen. According to a local police colonel, the Sadrist fighters took over the centre of the city and set dozens of government vehicles on fire.

Khafaji's detention has further inflamed tensions. The airport was targetted by Iraqi mortars on Saturday, precisely as British Prime Minister Tony Blair made an unannounced visit to the military headquarters at the

airport. Militiamen, with apparent inside knowledge of Blair's schedule and whereabouts, landed mortar rounds within 40 metres of where he was meeting officers and officials.

On Sunday, the Iraqi newspaper *Azzaman* reported that Basra erupted into a "volcano of violence" when a British raiding party attempted to arrest alleged insurgents in the city's west. Militiamen armed with rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns attacked the British. *Azzaman* stated that at least two armoured vehicles were destroyed. Roadside bombs targetted other vehicles elsewhere in the city.

The British military issued no statement about casualties or equipment losses. On Monday, however, it confirmed that a roadside bomb attack against a supply convoy had killed one British soldier and the civilian driver of an oil tanker. Three British troops have been killed this month, bringing total British casualties in Iraq to 149 dead and more than 350 wounded. There were no reports of casualties from Monday's clashes around the governor's office.

The escalation in violence comes days after the British military command barred Prince Harry, the third in line to the British throne, from serving in Iraq. Announcing on May 16 that the prince would not be deploying with his armoured unit to Basra, General Sir Richard Dannatt told a press conference: "There have been a number of specific threats—some reported and some not reported—which relate directly to Prince Harry as an individual. These threats expose not only him but also those around him to a degree of risk that I now deem unacceptable."

Charles Heyman, a former British soldier and editor of the book *Armed Forces of the UK*, told Associated Press that the decision to exempt the prince from the fighting in Iraq "will have a tremendous effect on morale right across the army". Heyman noted: "Soldiers will say 'If it's too dangerous for Prince Harry, then it's too dangerous for me. Is his life worth more than mine?'"

The Blair government has repeatedly claimed that the southern provinces, which it has occupied since 2003, are steadily coming under the firm authority of the Baghdad government and the new Iraqi security forces. The fact that British troops are facing heightened risks and rising numbers of casualties is a clear sign that, in reality, the occupation forces have little control across

the south of Iraq.



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