

Iraq: clashes mount between US forces and Sadrist militia

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9 May 2007

US and Iraqi government troops launched further attacks on the Shiite movement loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in its Baghdad stronghold last weekend. The Sadrist movement, which has a broad base of support in the Shiite working class, demands the withdrawal of US forces, and has a large armed militia, is viewed in Washington as a threat to the long-term US domination of Iraq.

One of the primary reasons for Bush's "surge" of additional US troops was to destroy or at least substantially weaken the Sadrist militia, particularly in Baghdad. With four of the five additional brigades now in position, and the last scheduled to be in place by June 1, US commander General David Petraeus and the Iraqi government are escalating operations against the Sadrist political leadership and its armed wing, the Mahdi Army.

The US military carried out attacks against the Sadrists last Friday and on Sunday. The homes of some of the movement's leaders in the predominantly Shiite working class suburb of Sadr City were raided in the early hours of the morning.

According to the US military, the raids were against an alleged "secret cell terrorist network" bringing "explosively formed penetrators" (EFPs), a type of remotely detonated bomb that can pierce armour, into Iraq from Iran and using them against American troops. During Friday's raid, 16 alleged "terrorists" were detained.

Sunday's raid sparked a firefight in the streets of Sadr City. Militiamen engaged the attacking forces with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades. US helicopter gunships were called in to strafe buildings where the defenders were believed to be located.

As many as eight people were killed and hospitals reported at least 20 wounded. Some 40 families who

lived in the neighbourhood fled to a displacement camp on the outskirts of the district.

According to Major General William Caldwell, US and Iraqi forces later found 150 mortar rounds, ammunition, "components" to make roadside bombs and "what appeared to be a torture room" in one of the homes. He told the press: "Intelligence reports indicate that the secret cell has ties to a kidnapping network that conducts attacks across Iraq, as well as interactions with rogue elements throughout Iraq and into Iran."

The house was subsequently blown up, ostensibly due to "concerns" about moving the captured munitions. At the same time, the demolition conveniently ensured that US claims could not be independently verified.

Sadrist spokesmen immediately rejected the US allegations that the people detained were Iranian-linked "terrorists" and operating torture chambers—claims that have been published uncritically throughout the American and international media.

Alwan Hassan, a Sadrist parliamentarian, told the newspaper *Azzaman*: "The operations by the occupation troops in Sadr City, which have resulted in the arrest of many of our members, and US allegations that there are armed and violent groups in the Sadr City, have not a grain of truth. The occupation troops are targeting the movement's leaders under the pretext that they are heading death squads and kidnapping gangs. This is an attempt to distort the image of the Sadr movement, which represents the national trend of rejecting the occupation."

Ahmad al-Sharifi, a Sadrist leader in Sadr City, denounced the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) coalition, which dominates the government, for collaborating with the attacks on the Mahdi Army. The Sadrists are still formally part of the UIA, though Moqtada al-Sadr instructed the six members of his

movement to quit the cabinet of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki over the government's failure to demand a date for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Iraq.

Sharifi singled out the rival Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) for criticism. SCIRI and the Sadrists are engaged in a struggle for political control in a number of Shiite population centres across the south of the country. *Azzaman* reported that the Iraqi security forces participating with the US troops in the Sadr City operations were members of SCIRI's militia—the Badr Organisation.

Sharifi declared: "These clashes are a result of the contrast between the local [Iraqi] agenda of the Sadrist current and SCIRI's agenda, which is supported by foreign parties... The UIA has become an alliance rife with incompatibilities. Every party in it is waiting for an opportunity to destroy the other."

These comments and the resistance to Sunday's raid are further signs of rebelliousness among the Sadrist rank-and-file over Moqtada al-Sadr's instructions not to challenge or be provoked by US or government troops. The detention of dozens of Sadrist leaders and hundreds of young men on suspicion of being Mahdi fighters has provoked outrage, especially as Sunni extremists have continued to carry out a wave of horrific suicide bombings against Shiite civilians and mosques.

Militiamen had already begun to fight back prior to Sunday. On April 29, Mahdi fighters drove off an attempt by US and Iraqi government forces to dislodge them from their defensive positions around a revered Shiite mosque in the Kazimiyah suburb of Baghdad. Eight militiamen and one Iraqi soldier reportedly died in the clash.

Both Iraqi and American sources told Associated Press that some government troops ordered to take part in the attack mutinied and joined the Shiite fighters. The following day, thousands of Shiites demonstrated in the streets and Sadrist legislators successfully moved a motion in the Iraqi parliament banning foreign troops from coming within one kilometre of the sacred site.

The response to the incursion forced the US military to leave the mosque in Sadrist hands for the time being. Lieutenant Colonel Steve Miska, the American commander in the area, told Associated Press on the weekend: "There are a lot of people affiliated with JAM [the Mahdi Army] and if we made them all

enemies, we'd be in trouble."

In Najaf, the site of the country's most important Shiite shrine and the base of the Shiite clerical establishment, Mahdi Army militiamen temporarily seized control of the city centre on May 4. The mobilisation was in response to a rumour that government security forces had killed Najaf's leading Sadrist cleric, Salah al-Ubaidi, when he attempted to enter the city. Militiamen reportedly surrounded and disarmed Iraqi soldiers and the personal bodyguards of Ammar al-Hakim, the son of the SCIRI leader Abdel Aziz Hakim. A tense standoff between government reinforcements and the Mahdi Army was only ended after negotiations between the local Sadrist office and the Najaf governor.

Since the weekend, the Iraqi press has reported that government forces have come under attack in Diwaniyah, to the east of Baghdad, and in the major southern cities of Basra and Amarah—all areas where the Sadrist support is growing. Far from stabilising the US occupation, the Bush administration's targeting of the Mahdi Army is only inflaming the Shiite masses and setting the stage for a further expansion of its bloody, neo-colonial war.



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