

US military launches offensive against “Iranian-backed” militia in Iraq

James Cogan
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The US military announced on Monday it had begun a new offensive against alleged “Iranian-supported extremist elements” within Iraq’s Shiite population. Without bothering to square its latest claims with Washington’s “war on terror” propaganda, the Pentagon is asserting that rogue Shiite militias backed by Tehran are now a far greater danger to the occupation forces than Al Qaeda-linked Sunni radicals.

The operation has been planned with one date in mind—September 15. That is when American commander General David Petraeus is scheduled to address the White House and Congress on the progress of the troop “surge” that Bush ordered in January. The US military has already hinted that the report will highlight the emergence of Shiite militias as the most potent challenge to the US-led occupation, while noting military successes in Sunni areas against “Al Qaeda in Iraq”.

Last week, Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno, Petraeus’s second-in-command, claimed that Shiite militias were carrying out 73 percent of all attacks on American troops. Without providing any evidence, he subsequently asserted that Iranian-supplied roadside bombs were responsible for one-third of US deaths in Iraq during July. He also implied that Iranian-supplied rockets and mortars were giving Shiite insurgents the ability to target the Baghdad Green Zone headquarters of the occupation and US and British military bases with growing accuracy. An image purportedly showing Shiite insurgents firing Iranian-made 107mm rockets at an American base east of Baghdad on August 5 was provided to the media last week.

Shiite militias, particularly elements of the Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) or Mahdi Army militia loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, are also accused by the US military of murdering thousands of Sunnis and forcing tens of thousands more from their homes during the bloody sectarian violence that has wracked Iraq over the past 18

months.

To carry out the new offensive, Petraeus has more troops at his disposal than at any time during the four-and-a-half year war—over 162,000 troops—due to the overlap of units arriving in country and those preparing to leave at the end of their tour-of-duty. The air power available has been boosted by the presence of two US aircraft carriers and support vessels off the coast of Iran, as well as by upgrading of Balad air base in central Iraq to support greater traffic and land all classes of American military aircraft.

For the next 30 days, the US military will undoubtedly try to bolster the anti-Iranian case for the congressional report. The first few days of the offensive have already produced three claims of alleged Iranian involvement with Iraqi Shiite militias and attacks on US troops—none of which have been substantiated with evidence:

* On Tuesday morning, the US military reported it had raided a Shiite militant cell in the Sadr City stronghold of the Mahdi Army, which was “coordinating and conducting attacks against coalition forces and moderate Iraqis within the Baghdad area,” allegedly with Iranian-provided weapons. Four men were killed and eight detained. Helicopter gunships were called in to strafe the area after Mahdi fighters attacked the raiding party as it attempted to withdraw.

A US spokesman declared that the raid had smashed a network that used explosives “smuggled from Iran to attack the Iraqi people and the security forces that protect them.” Locals in Sadr City held angry funeral processions for a five-year-old girl and her father who were killed by US fire.

* On Monday morning, a military press release reported that a raid in western Baghdad had led to the detention of a “key financier” of the so-called Mahdi Army Special Groups. The US military alleged that the groups “are believed to have direct ties to the Iranian Revolutionary

Guards Corps-Quds Force” and “are suspected of killing Iraqi citizens, directing attacks against coalition forces and promoting sectarian violence.”

* On Sunday, an alleged “high-value rogue Jaish al-Mahdi Special Groups facilitator” was seized during a raid in the southern city of Najaf. The man was accused in a military press release of “recruiting foreign fighters, training rogue JAM operatives in lethal attack tactics and trafficking illegal weapons from Iran.”

The three raids come in the wake of a major incursion into Sadr City by American forces on August 8, in which they claimed 32 “Special Groups’ cells terrorists” were killed by ground fire and air strikes. Twelve others were detained. *Time* magazine reported the raid as evidence that “even as they press their campaign against Al Qaeda aligned Sunni militants, US forces are ramping up operations against what they see as a more serious long-term threat: Shiite militias supported by Iran.”

The shift in military emphasis, from Sunni extremists to the Shiite militias, coincides with the political crisis engulfing the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Sunni parties have walked out of his cabinet, accusing Maliki of sectarian sympathies with militias like the Mahdi Army, as well as the Iranian regime.

Adnan al-Dulaimi, the leader of the Sunni Iraqi Accordance Front, which quit the government on August 1, issued a vitriolic press release on Monday that went even further than the US accusations of hostile Iranian acts in Iraq. He alleged Iraqi Sunnis were facing a “campaign of genocide carried out by militias and death squads under Iranian direction, planning, support and weaponry”. In an appeal for regional Sunni Arab powers such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia to openly repudiate Maliki, he called for “all Arabs—Muslims, presidents and kings and people—to stand beside Iraqis against the violence and the oppression that come to us from Iran and its agents.”

Coming from a political figure who has bitterly denounced the US occupation, Dulaimi’s claims are of considerable significance. It is the United States, after all, not Iran, which invaded Iraq and bears responsibility for the deaths of over 700,000 Iraqis, the displacement of over four million and the destruction of the country’s infrastructure, economy and environment. Sunnis, many of whom opposed the overthrow of the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, have borne a great deal of the US violence and oppression. As a result, their suburbs and towns have been the focus of the resistance to the

occupation.

Contained in Dulaimi’s statement is the implicit offer of a quid pro quo. If the US backs the Sunni establishment at the expense of the Shiite-dominated Maliki government, Sunni parties will not only support the continuing US occupation but also any American confrontation with Iran. Dulaimi’s deliberate inflaming of anti-Shiite sentiment further undermines the Maliki government, whose relations with Iran are increasingly regarded in Washington as an obstacle to more aggressive moves against Tehran.

A number of Sunni tribal leaders have already entered sordid alliances with the US military, accepting bribes and local political authority in exchange for not attacking US forces and opposing the more radical elements who continue the anti-US insurgency. This week, Sunni tribes are assisting US troops to launch attacks against so-called Al Qaeda forces in Baqubah, Ramadi, Fallujah, Samarra, Tikrit and Mosul. In the near future, there is no reason to doubt that they may be assisting US forces against Shiite militias, or, ultimately, in a military confrontation with Iran.

US accusations of Iranian involvement in attacks on American forces in Iraq dovetails with the Bush administration’s broader campaign of lies, exaggeration and provocation against Tehran, including over its alleged nuclear weapons program. There is an ominous sense of déjà vu: the Iranian regime is being demonised as clear and present danger in much the same fashion as the lies over Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction” were used to prepare the way for its illegal invasion in 2003.

Moreover, accusations that Iran is responsible for killing American troops may suit Washington more than ongoing manoeuvres in the UN over Iran’s nuclear programs. The Bush administration could well use “evidence” of such attacks as the bogus justification for unilaterally launching a “defensive war”. As with the invasion of Iraq, the real motive is to extend US dominance over the energy resources of the Middle East and assert US hegemony against its global rivals.



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