

Shiite powersharing deal exacerbates sectarian divisions in Iraq

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Under pressure from the US embassy and the military, Iraq's two most powerful Shiite parties are seeking to reach a power-sharing arrangement to end, at least temporarily, the often bloody conflict between them. Representatives of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), the dominant party in the Iraqi government, and the Sadrist movement of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr held talks on January 3 in Kufa—Sadr's home city and religious base in southern Iraq.

Reports of the discussions have been scant, but the context in which the talks took place points to a Sadrist acceptance of SIIC demands for political control over the main centres of southern Iraq, particularly the so-called "shrine cities" of Najaf and Karbala, and Basra, the hub for up to 60 percent of Iraq's oil production. Facing a campaign of killings and arrests against their supporters, Sadrist leaders are using every opportunity to preach a message of appeasement and accommodation with the SIIC and the US occupation. They left the talks last week declaring they were committed to the "end of political and military violence".

Several days before the talks, Sadr personally instructed his supporters in Karbala to engage in "reconciliation" with the local security forces. The order was given amid an ongoing crackdown on Sadrist militants in the city by the SIIC-controlled police. According to a report in the December 26 *Washington Post*, at least 400 have been detained since last August, when Sadr declared a unilateral ceasefire and ordered the Sadrist Mahdi Army militia to end all armed operations against SIIC and other political rivals, as well as against US and Iraqi government forces. A guard at one of the few remaining Sadrist offices told the *Post*: "Now, there is no Sadr trend in Karbala. Everyone has fled."

In a sermon at the Kufa mosque on January 4, cleric Abdul Hadi al Mohammadawi told his congregation: "We Sadrists are moving in the way of Moqtada's peaceful initiatives in the provinces and especially in the ones that have witnessed violence. We think that the best way to solve existing problems and provide all with a chance to reach the shores of peace is a comprehensive dialogue, instead of acts of violence."

The Sadrist ceasefire has not been reciprocated by either SIIC or the US military, which have utilised it to unleash wholesale repression. Numerous arrests and killings of Sadrist-linked militiamen have been taking place in SIIC-controlled cities, including Najaf, Diwaniyah, Nasiriyah and Hilla. US forces have also killed hundreds of Mahdi Army fighters in its Baghdad stronghold of Sadr City, claiming that they were "rogue elements"

or Iranian-backed "special groups".

Given the US military's previous difficulty in launching incursions into Sadrist-controlled areas of the Iraqi capital, the success of recent operations suggests that Sadrist leaders have functioned as finger-men—identifying the more militant elements for extra-judicial execution.

At last Friday's prayers in Sadr City, where as many as 2.5 million people live in utter squalor and the US military has killed thousands, a Sadrist cleric accused militiamen who have continued fighting the occupation of "defaming" Sadr's promise of a ceasefire. The collaboration has become so close that US military spokesmen have taken to referring to Sadr as "Sayed", a title indicating descent from Mohammed. US commander General David Petraeus hailed the Sadrists in December as "constructive partners in the way ahead".

The Sadrist leaders have made another significant shift that has won praise in Washington. They have largely abandoned their populist threats to come to the defence of Shiite Iran if the US launches an attack. According to a January 5 press release, Republican congressman Christopher Shays, who has just returned from Iraq, was told by Sadrists in Baghdad that "we now call you [the US occupation] our brothers because we have uncovered the bad intentions of others"—namely the Iranian regime. In response, Shays has appealed to the Bush administration to pressure the Iraqi government to provide large sums of money for "infrastructure" projects in Sadr City.

While much remains uncertain, an emerging modus operandi is evident. The Sadrists are being permitted to keep Sadr City as a fiefdom, providing they collaborate against the anti-occupation resistance and bow to SIIC rule over the country's south. Petraeus's original surge plans for a forced entry and wholesale confrontation with the Mahdi Army have been taken off the agenda, for the present at least. The US military still has only one security station on the edge of Sadr City. The bulk of its force is kept in and around Sunni-populated enclaves, which are sealed off from Shiite districts by 12-foot blast walls.

The implications are considerable. The SIIC, in alliance with the Da'wa Party of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, is seeking to consolidate its hold on the nine predominantly Shiite-populated provinces of the south. In Basra, the SIIC and Maliki are preparing an intervention to shatter the influence of the Islamic Virtue Party, a Basra-based Sadrist offshoot, and local loyalists of the main Sadrist trend. Control of Basra would provide the essential

economic component for the perspective of SIIC leader, Abdul Aziz Hakim, to hold referenda in the southern provinces on forming a “southern region” that would have the same extensive powers that the Kurdish regional government wields over Iraq’s three northern provinces.

Among the powers of the regions contained in Iraq’s US-drafted constitution, enacted in October 2005, is control over all new oil production. The SCII is seeking to establish itself at the head of a predominantly Shiite southern region, headquartered in Najaf, and to function as the middleman for the transnational exploitation of the country’s largest oil reserves. The Kurdish nationalist parties already enjoy considerable autonomy in the north, welcoming investors to exploit the resources at their disposal and appealing for Washington’s support in their bid to gain control of the city of Kirkuk and the major northern oilfields.

Referenda in the southern provinces on regionalism can be called from April on. No new date has been announced as to when a referendum will take place in Kirkuk to join the Kurdish region.

Having largely abandoned his calls for the withdrawal of US troops and appeals for a joint struggle by all Iraqis against the occupation, Moqtada al Sadr is seeking to shore up his own sectarian power base by improving his religious credentials. Until now, the Shiite clerical hierarchy has regarded him as the upstart head of a plebian rabble. According to media reports, he is now immersing himself in religious studies necessary to raise his status from the relatively low rank of *hojat al-Islam* to that of *ayatollah*, which would give him the power to issue authoritative religious rulings. A Sadrist official told Associated Press last month that he is aiming to complete his studies by 2010.

More generally, the Sadrists are seeking to refashion their organisation from the heterogeneous movement that emerged from Baathist repression and the US invasion into a disciplined Shiite fundamentalist party comparable to the SIIC. Associated Press reported on December 14 that militiamen have been ordered to undertake three hours of religious instruction per day and only those who pass an “exam” are being allowed to remain in its ranks. Combined with US attacks and wholesale desertions from the Mahdi Army due to disgust with Sadr’s growing collaboration with the occupation, the purges are dramatically reducing the active base of the Sadrists.

A feature in the December 13 *Washington Post* noted that the composition of the Mahdi Army had dramatically changed over the past two years. “The Mahdi Army of Shiite cleric Moqtada al Sadr is using a new generation of youth, some as young as 15, to expand and tighten its grip across Baghdad, but the ruthlessness of some of these young fighters is alienating Sunnis and Shiites alike. The fighters are filling the vacuum of leadership created by a 10-month-old US-led security offensive. Hundreds of senior and mid-level militia leaders have been arrested, killed or forced into hiding, weakening what was once the second most powerful force in Iraq after the US military. But the militia still rules through fear and intimidation, often under the radar of US troops,” it stated.

A significant layer of the Mahdi Army now consists of elements that entered its ranks following the destruction of the Shiite Al Askiriya mosque in February 2006, allegedly by Sunni extremists, and the turn by Shiite fundamentalists to wholesale attacks against

Sunnis and Christians. The carnage fuelled by the divide-and-rule program of the US occupation has been most catastrophic in Baghdad. Hundreds of thousands of people have been forced out of the city altogether. The demographic balance in the Iraqi capital is estimated to have shifted from 60 percent Shiite to 80 percent Shiite over the past 12 to 18 months.

The policies associated with the surge of US troops in 2007 have exacerbated the sectarian nightmare. Throughout last year, the US military handed the remaining Sunni suburbs of the city over to Sunni-based militias and gangs that call themselves “awakening councils” or “citizens groups”. With US blessing, they rule with the same methods of intimidation and criminality as the Mahdi Army operates in Shiite districts.

The Sunni militiamen are often directly paid by the US military. In most cases, they are headed by former Baathist-linked insurgents who have turned to the US military for protection from their Shiite rivals and to secure privileges for the Sunni elite. Sunni tribal leaders in the western province of Anbar and cities like Fallujah and Ramadi have gone the furthest down this path, using US and Saudi assistance to lay the foundations for a Sunni autonomous region.

For their part, the Bush administration and the US military view the tens of thousands of armed Sunni militiamen as a useful shock force against popular opposition in the Sunni population and against Iraqi Shiites who cannot be controlled by the Shiite parties.

The carving up of Iraq into sectarian, communal and even tribal spheres—each subordinated to the US occupation, in a state of conflict with each other and denying the working class and oppressed masses their most basic democratic and social rights—underscores the historical impotence of all parties and factions of the Iraqi capitalist elite. Whether Shiite or Sunni fundamentalist, Kurdish nationalist or secular nationalist, none have proven capable of advancing any progressive answer to imperialist oppression and the barbarism being inflicted on the Middle East.



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