

Clashes and tensions in southern Iraq

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Fighting has broken out in major cities in southern Iraq amid rising tensions between the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the main Shiite party within the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and rival Shiite parties and militias. US forces are openly aligning with ISCI.

The chief target of both the US military and ISCI are elements of the Shiite fundamentalist Sadr movement and its Mahdi Army militia, which have now split with cleric Moqtada al-Sadr over his collaboration with the occupation and refusal to oppose ISCI's claim to hegemony over the Shiite population.

Last August, Sadr prohibited members of his organisation from resisting operations against them by either US forces and or Iraqi government security apparatus—which proceeded to exploit the ceasefire to launch unprecedented raids into Sadr-controlled areas. Hundreds and possibly thousands of Mahdi militiamen were killed or detained in Baghdad and the ISCI-held Shiite religious cities of Najaf and Karbala.

On February 23, Sadr ordered a continuation of the ceasefire. His decision appears to have been rejected by a significant faction of his movement. The British military suffered its first fatality for the year on February 29, when suspected Sadrist militiamen carried out a rocket attack on the British base at Basra airport. Last Monday, alleged Sadr-linked militiamen mortared a US base on the outskirts of the city of Kut. On Tuesday, an improvised explosive device (IED) killed one American soldier and wounded two others near Diwaniyah. The following day, three US troops were killed and two more wounded by a rocket attack on their base near Nasiriyah.

American special forces units, ISCI-controlled police and Iraqi army units have responded with a major assault since Tuesday to drive members of the Mahdi Army out of their strongholds in the working class suburbs of Kut. At least 13 people were reported to have been killed. A police commander told Reuters: “We have purged four neighbourhoods and arrested a group of Mahdi Army gunmen, including a senior leader.” A fifth neighbourhood, he claimed, had been “sealed off”. Militiamen on Wednesday fired as many as 11 Katyusha rockets at the US base from one of the suburbs which police had declared under their control. American troops fired mortars into the residential area in retaliation.

More clashes took place in Kut over the weekend. Wire reports indicate that dozens of alleged Sadrists supporters have

been rounded up during police raids.

Sadr issued a statement on Thursday denouncing the militia resistance and demanding that they honour his ceasefire. It is doubtful his orders will be obeyed. Peter Harling of the International Crisis Group, which published a study on the frictions within the Sadr movement in February, told Reuters: “There is tremendous frustration among Sadrists at the rank-and-file level.” Harling observed that many Sadrists fear the US military is assisting ISCI to destroy them. Sadr's ceasefire is rendering even greater assistance.

The conflict between ISCI and the Sadr movement has deep roots. ISCI represents a faction of the Shiite clerical and propertied elite which, following the crackdown on the Shiite fundamentalist movement by Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime in 1980, turned to Iran as a means to gain political power in Iraq. ISCI's Badr militia fought alongside Iranian troops against the Iraqi army in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. Following the 2003 US invasion, ISCI offered its full collaboration to the occupation and has participated in every government formed in Baghdad since.

The Sadr wing of the Shiite establishment, by contrast, supported an Iraqi victory in the Iran-Iraq war, on the basis of Arab nationalism. It initially rejected any participation in the puppet regimes formed under the US occupation. In 2004, it fought a short-lived uprising against American forces and the Iraqi “transitional government” of ex-Baathist Iyad Allawi. After suffering heavy losses, Moqtada al Sadr accepted a US ceasefire and abandoned armed resistance in September 2004. His movement proceeded to form an alliance with ISCI and Da'wa to ensure Shiite dominance over the governments in Baghdad formed since elections in 2005.

Two issues continue to bitterly divide ISCI and the Sadrists, however. They are in a power struggle over which clerical faction should control the major Shiite shrines in Karbala and Najaf and the huge revenues that come from donations by pilgrims from around the world. The Sadrists resent the domination over the cities of Iranian-born and ISCI-backed Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, believing the Sadr wing of the clergy would be in control if it were not for the 1999 assassination of Sadr's father, Mohammed Sadeq Sadr, by the Baathist regime. During the failed Sadrist uprising in 2004, the Mahdi Army temporarily seized the shrines from ISCI forces, but was forced to hand them back as part of the ceasefire terms.

Secondly, the two tendencies have opposed standpoints toward the Iraqi nation-state. While the Sadrists insist on the maintenance of Iraq as a strong central state, ISCI has the sectarian perspective of dissolving Iraq into a loose federation of autonomous regions. The unstated objective of regionalism is to create conditions in which as much as possible of the revenues generated by oil and gas in Shiite southern Iraq is kept in the hands of the Shiite elite and not paid to a central government. The Sadrists draw the bulk of their support from the Shiite population in Baghdad, and so insist that the national state should have the sole jurisdiction over oil and gas developments and decide the distribution of the revenues.

From next month, a federalism law enacted in October 2006 takes effect. The legislation enables provinces to hold referendums on whether they wish to combine with other provinces to form a “region”. ISCI’s stated plan is to combine the nine majority Shiite provinces in the south into one autonomous federal state.

ISCI faces obvious obstacles. In the first provincial elections under US occupation on January 30, 2005, ISCI or the Da’wa Party of Maliki won control of seven of the nine Shiite provinces, primarily due to the fact that the Sadrists did not contest the ballot as an organised faction. Sadrists supporters, however, won control of the Marsh Arab province of Maysan.

In an even greater setback to ISCI, the Basra-based Sadrist breakaway Fadhila, or Islamic Virtue Party, wrested control of the governorship of the oil-rich Basra province, where Iraq’s largest oil fields and only port are located. Tendencies within Fadhila advocate the establishment of Basra as a region on its own—apart from the rest of southern Iraq. No government it controls will agree to a referendum on a southern region. Without the inclusion of Basra, however, ISCI’s ambitions to marry its political control of Karbala and Najaf with the resources of the oil industry cannot be realised.

ISCI is left with few options. It can defer its plans until the holding of new provincial elections and seek to take control of all nine southern provinces. The provincial election law passed by the Iraqi parliament last month set down October 1, 2008 as the date for new elections.

Reliance on a democratic vote is problematic. There is mass disaffection with ISCI due to its association with the US occupation and the catastrophic living conditions the Shiite masses face. Sadrists—with or without the blessing of Moqtada al Sadr—will contest the next ballot and may well win not only in Maysan, but also in provinces such as Qadisiyyah (capital at Diwaniyah), Dhi Qar (capital at Nasiriyah) and Wasit (capital at Kut). Fadhila would potentially retain control of Basra.

ISCI’s alternative, and the one it appears to be pursuing, is to ensure that no elections take place under anything resembling free and fair conditions.

On February 25, Iraqi vice president and ISCI leader Adel Abdul al Madhi used his vote on the Iraqi presidential council to veto the provincial election legislation on the grounds it gave

too much power to the central government over the provinces. The parliament will now have to re-debate the law when it resumes sitting on March 18. The Sadrist delegation in Baghdad has threatened to call for a general strike if the legislation is not enacted in its original form.

Amid political confusion and tensions, this week’s operation in Kut is a sign that moves are underway to physically drive the Sadrists underground in southern Iraq. There are also hints at efforts to shatter the Sadrists and Fadhila in Basra and Fadhila-linked trade unions in the oil fields and the port.

ISCI representatives in the city have organised daily demonstrations over the past week demanding action against “criminal gangs” and “militias”—coded references to Fadhila’s paramilitary forces and Madhi Army cells. The *New York Times* published an article on March 13, which foreshadowed military operations in Basra by ISCI-dominated divisions of the Iraqi army, backed by US and British troops, to meet these demands.

The *Times* report began: “Several senior Iraqi officials said on Wednesday that the government might soon deploy Iraqi government Army troops to seize control of this city’s decrepit but vital port from politically connected militias known more for corruption and inciting terrorism than for their skill in moving freight.”

Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih, a Kurdish ally of ISCI, told an investment conference in the city: “There must be a very strong military presence in Basra to eradicate these militias.” National security advisor Mowaffak al-Rubaie—who threatened Fadhila last December with military intervention—declared Baghdad would “launch a campaign to rid us of the bad elements” and denounced the “weakness of the local government”.

The *Times* article specifically referred to “a militia-controlled union” at Basra’s Um Qasr port that would have to be “subdued”. Rubaie issued a pointed warning to the Fadhila governor, Mohammed al-Waili, who ISCI has been trying to remove since early 2007, saying: “Whoever gets in the way will be dealt with swiftly, decisively and with no mercy.”



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