

Repeated US air strikes in Basra and Baghdad

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Hundreds of people have died in six days of fierce fighting as the US puppet regime in Baghdad has sought to stamp its control over the port city of Basra, centre of Iraq's southern oil fields. As operations by some 30,000 Iraqi security personnel stalled, US and British air strikes repeatedly hit densely populated areas of Basra, as well as other strongholds of supporters of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in Baghdad and southern towns and cities.

Far from winning a quick victory, Iraq troops and police were confronted by determined resistance in Basra by Sadrists militiamen from the Mahdi Army, armed with nothing more than automatic rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and improvised bombs. By Saturday, Mahdi Army members controlled large areas of the city and were staging raids against government forces holed up in the city centre. Iraqi Defence Minister Abdul-Kader Jassem al-Obeidi conceded: "We were surprised by a very strong resistance that made us change our plans."

American warplanes bombed "enemy strongholds" in Basra for a third day on Saturday, killing at least eight civilians, according to Iraqi police. British artillery opened up on an alleged militia mortar position in the city. The US military acknowledged for the first time that American ground troops joined the fighting in Basra on Saturday, alongside US advisers embedded with Iraqi forces. Clashes between Mahdi Army fighters and American troops continued in the huge working class slums of Sadr City and other neighbourhoods in Baghdad. Two US soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb. Intense fighting also continued in the southern city of Nasiriya and the neighbouring town of Shatra, claiming the lives of at least 28 people.

There have been signs of discontent and demoralisation in the ranks of the Iraqi security forces. The British-based *Independent* reported yesterday: "About 40 police handed over their weapons to the Mahdi Army in Sadr City. 'We can't fight our brothers in the Mahdi Army,' one said. In another incident, a dozen police were shown on television handing over their guns and ammunition to Sheikh Salman al-Ferajji, Mr Sadr's chief representative in Sadr City."

Large protests by Sadr's supporters last Friday again denounced Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki as a stooge of the Bush administration. His government is increasingly isolated and despised as a neo-colonial tool. Ali Hussam, a teacher, told the *New York Times* that people had hoped for peace after the fall of Saddam Hussein. "But unfortunately with the presence of this new government and this democracy that was brought to us by the invader, it made us kill each other," he said.

Reporting of the dead and injured is sketchy as the government has imposed a media blackout. Basra's top health official Riad Abdul-Amir told the *Christian Science Monitor*: "We are prohibited from saying anything, only the military command can release information about casualties." Media estimates put the number of dead at more than 300 since last Tuesday, but the real toll from the US and British bombardment of closely-packed housing could be far higher. Residents told the *Christian Science Monitor* that two of Sadr City's two largest markets—Jamila and Mraidi—have been mostly destroyed.

In a statement released yesterday, Sadr called on his militia to end "armed appearances" in Basra and other areas. He demanded that the Iraqi government end the "illegal detention" of his supporters and release those who have not been convicted of any crime. Even though the statement reportedly followed negotiations between the government and Sadrists leaders, it is not clear that a truce will hold.

On Saturday, Maliki, who has taken personal charge of the Basra offensive, branded the government's enemies in the south as "worse than Al Qaeda". Last week, he declared there would be no negotiations and let-up in the offensive. While government spokesmen welcomed Sadr's announcement, and a round-the-clock curfew in the capital has been eased, clashes persisted in Basra and Baghdad yesterday. US helicopter gunships were reported to have made two more strikes in Baghdad, on the suburbs of New Baghdad and Ghazaliya, killing at least eight people. Rocket and mortar attacks on the Green Zone—the hub of the American occupation—continued.

Sadr's comments produced consternation among Mahdi Army fighters. Abu Munadhil al-Tamimi, a Mahdi Army group leader, told Reuters that he respected Sadr, but added: "We will not lay down arms until government forces stop chasing and arresting Mahdi Army fighters. We have been fighting for six days and some of our fighters lost their lives along with innocent civilians. We are not ready to stay home waiting to be arrested by the army."

A low-level commander in Baghdad, Abu Haidar, told the newsagency: "We don't know what to do. If we carry guns the government will oppose us, but if we put them down, the Americans will come, surround our homes and capture us. This is like a trap from the government. They used Moqtada al-Sadr to publish this truce order so they could enter difficult areas which Iraqi forces could not otherwise control in Basra. They are bluffing and cheating us."

Despite efforts to present the Basra offensive as Iraqi-planned and -led, the real driving force behind the operation from the outset has been the Bush administration. As a US official in Baghdad told the *Washington Post* on Saturday: "Basra's been a mess for a long time and everyone's said to Maliki, 'What are you going to do about it?'" What is immediately at stake is domination over the country's lucrative southern oil fields, which the White House is seeking to open up to American corporations.

The city has been a battleground for months as rival Shiite militia have fought for control. The main competitors to the Sadrists have been the Badr Organisation of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which is closely allied to Maliki, and the Al Fadila al Islamiya party of Governor Mohammed Waeli. In comments cited in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Mustafa al-Ani, a Gulf Research Centre analyst, explained: "The US was involved in the initial decision to move against the Mahdi Army... The Americans are going to help crush the Sadrists by siding with [ISCI leader] Hakim and [Maliki's] Da'wa [party]."

An article in last Friday's *Wall Street Journal* explained that international energy giants refused to invest in southern Iraq until the situation was brought under control. "The violence and [oil] smuggling frustrate major Western oil companies such as Exxon Mobil Corp., BP PLC and Royal Dutch Shell PLC. In his visit last week to the Middle East, Vice President Dick Cheney held one-to-one meetings with Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish leaders in Iraq to speed up the passage of a law opening up petroleum reserves to more efficient production by global oil companies," it stated.

"Last week, before the Maliki government began its offensive, US General David Petraeus said Mr Maliki 'is very keen on getting large Western corporations re-engaged in the oil and electricity sectors'. The security challenges posed by the Basra militias 'have to be addressed in Iraq,'

he added. That 'is something that the government of Iraq very much wants to see happen to increase [oil] production further and increase electricity production as well.'"

There is no doubt that Cheney was intimately involved in discussing not only the oil law, but the military offensive in Basra. While Maliki and US officials insist that the operation is against "criminals" and "terrorists", the only districts being attacked in Basra are those under the domination of the Sadrist movement, not Fadila or ISCI, both of which have been implicated in oil smuggling and other rackets.

The reason for targeting Sadrists is obvious. While Sadr himself has increasingly adapted himself to the US occupation, his movement is based among the Shiite working class and urban poor in Baghdad, Basra and other cities, who are deeply hostile to American military domination and the social disasters it has brought. In comments to Al Jazeera television on Saturday, Sadr himself gave vent to the frustration and anger of his followers, declaring the Maliki government was "far from the people and is dealing with them in a dictatorship way". He reaffirmed that his militia's "strategic objective" was the "liberation of Iraq from the occupier" and warned that the US would be "defeated just the way they were defeated in Vietnam".

The US-backed offensive in Basra has also provided another pretext for intensifying the pressure and military threats against neighbouring Iran. The Bush administration and US military spokesmen have kept up a steady drumbeat, accusing the Iranian regime of providing training and arms to Shiite militia in southern Iraq. Replying to accusations that he was supported by Tehran, Sadr told Al Jazeera: "I am independent in that I am not a political or military extension of Iran or any others."

The Bush administration's reckless criminal adventure into southern Iraq has the potential to undermine the isolated Maliki regime. Maliki's police-state measures and clear subservience to Washington can only fuel resentment and opposition among broad layers of working people—Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds alike. Far from stabilising the US occupation, the assault threatens to generate a broader resistance movement and completely undermine Washington's "surge" strategy.



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