

US-backed assault on Basra ends in humiliation for Maliki government

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Relative calm returned—at least temporarily—to the southern Iraqi city of Basra on Monday after a week of fierce fighting was ended by an Iranian-brokered ceasefire declared by the nationalist Shia cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr.

Baghdad was also mostly quiet, although the Green Zone, the heavily fortified compound that includes the US Embassy and government buildings, came under repeated mortar and rocket attacks.

In both major cities, as well as elsewhere in Iraq's south, residents buried their dead, cleared away rubble and stocked up on food and water in anticipation of renewed fighting. Official tallies put the number killed since the US-backed government of Nouri al-Maliki launched its abortive military offensive last Tuesday at close to 500, though the real death toll may well be considerably higher. At least 1,200 people are known to have been wounded.

The results of the offensive—hailed last week as a “defining moment” by US President George W. Bush—and the way in which it has been brought to a close represent a humiliating defeat for both Washington and its Iraqi puppet, Maliki. The episode has served only to confirm the failure of US forces, five years after the invasion of Iraq, to establish genuine control over any area of the country. It has also exposed the virtual irrelevance of the Maliki government, which is widely reviled by a population that sees it as nothing more than an instrument of foreign occupation.

Launched last Tuesday, the offensive failed to wrest control of the majority of Basra—Iraq's strategic oil port with a population of 1.5 million—from the Mahdi Army, the militia loyal to Sadr. While publicly presented as an independent operation by the Iraqi security forces, US fighter jets and helicopter gunships were called in for repeated air strikes in Basra, Baghdad and elsewhere, and US Special Forces troops joined in the fighting. British occupation troops, which are based outside Basra, also supported the Iraqi government forces with artillery fire.

The failure of the offensive was due in part to the refusal of large sections of the US-trained security forces to fight the Sadrists. In a highly publicized incident over the weekend, police and members of an elite commando unit publicly surrendered their weapons to the Mahdi Army. And the Iraqi Interior Ministry announced Monday that it was dismissing thousands of Iraqi policemen who had refused to fight.

The Baghdad daily *Azzaman* noted that several Iraqi army units had joined forces with the Mahdi Army in Baghdad during the fighting, and it predicted that many of those who are being relieved of duty will join the Sadrist militia.

What brought at least a temporary ceasefire was a statement issued Sunday by Sadr calling upon his followers to leave the streets and

cooperate with the government in “achieving security.” The statement also demanded that the government halt “illegal and random raids and arrests” of his followers and release those now held prisoner.

Leading figures in the Sadrist movement made it clear that the Mahdi Army had no intention of complying with the Maliki government's ultimatum that they lay down their arms—first in 72 hours, but then, as the government's security forces made no headway, in 10 days.

And the insistence of Maliki and his aides that there would be no negotiations with the Sadrists was ignored.

It is unclear whether Maliki himself played any role in the agreement to end the hostilities, and many knowledgeable observers of Iraq are describing him and his government as increasingly irrelevant in a situation in which control over the country is divided between various sectarian-based militias.

The initiative was apparently taken by senior members of the two Shia political organizations that dominate the government—Maliki's own Dawa Party and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which directs an armed militia, the Badr Organization.

According to a report published Sunday by the McClatchy Newspapers, the arrangement was brokered by elements within the Iranian government after members of the Iraqi parliament traveled to Iran on Friday and appealed to Brig. Gen. Qassem Suleimani, commander of the Quds (Jerusalem) brigades of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. The Bush administration has branded the Quds force as a terrorist organization and has repeatedly alleged that it is behind attacks on US occupation troops in Iraq.

“We asked Iranian officials to help us persuade him that we were not cracking down on the Sadr group,” an Iraqi official told McClatchy reporters.

The same official voiced skepticism that the ceasefire will hold, warning that continued conflict between Mahdi Army militia members and security forces could convince Sadr that the aim of the government remains that of destroying his movement.

“I will not be surprised if the whole thing collapses,” the official said.

The article noted: “The Qom discussions may or may not bring an end to the fighting, but they almost certainly have undermined Maliki—who made repeated declarations that there would be no negotiations and that he would treat as outlaws those who did not turn in their weapons for cash. The blow to his own credibility was worsened by the fact that members of his own party had helped organize the Iran initiative.”

The *New York Times* sounded a similar note Monday, reporting, “Many Iraqi politicians say that Mr. Maliki's political capital has

been severely depleted by the Basra campaign and that he is in the curious position of having to turn to Mr. Sadr, a longtime rival, for a way out.”

Citing the comments of Qassim Daoud, a former national security advisor to Maliki, the *Times* reported, “The muddle that has emerged from what was supposed to be a decisive assault has serious consequences for the prime minister.”

Daoud told the newspaper: “The government now is in a weak position. They claimed that they are going to disarm the militias and they didn’t succeed.” Asked if the debacle in Basra could bring down Maliki’s government, he responded, “Everything is possible.”

While the Maliki government had claimed that the siege launched against Basra and the attacks on the Sadrist forces in the slums of Sadr City were aimed at rooting out “criminal gangs” and asserting the rule of law, the assault was clearly a politically motivated attempt to suppress Sadr’s movement.

In Basra, only the strongholds of the Mahdi Army—particularly the Hayaniya and Qibla neighborhoods—were attacked, while those under the control of the militias of the Badr Organization and the smaller Fadila Party, which controls the local government, were left alone.

The aim of the operation was to break the power of the Mahdi Army in advance of provincial elections scheduled for October. While Sadr and his followers boycotted elections held in 2005, they are participating this year and widely expected to gain major victories throughout the south of Iraq, where there is intense anger against the corrupt, repressive and incompetent authorities put into power by the dominant parties in Maliki’s coalition.

The timing of the offensive—as well as Maliki’s subservience to Washington—leaves no room for doubt that the offensive was carried out to satisfy US demands. Barely one week before 30,000 members of the army and police were sent to lay siege to Basra, US Vice President Dick Cheney made a surprise visit to Baghdad and held talks with Maliki and other Iraqi officials on the October provincial elections and proposed legislation that would open up Iraq’s rich oil reserves to exploitation by US-based energy conglomerates.

Control of Basra is decisive for realizing the objective that has driven the US war of aggression against Iraq from its outset: securing colonial-style domination of Iraq and its oil wealth in order to achieve a strategic advantage over Washington’s major economic rivals in Europe and Asia.

The port city is home to Iraq’s Southern Oil Company. With its pipelines, pumping stations, refineries and loading terminals the city constitutes the principal artery for draining Iraq of its oil wealth.

ISCI and its Badr Organization militia, which have battled the Sadrists for control of Basra, has indicated its support for legislation opening up Iraqi oil to foreign exploitation, while the Sadrists have opposed it.

There is little doubt that the intense violence of the past week will erupt once again, given the immense interests at stake both for US imperialism and the rival political elites within Iraq.

“The stand-off is not over yet, it’s only a truce,” Baghdad-based political analyst Hazem al-Nuaimi told the Reuters news agency. “Provincial elections will trigger the battle again.”

Within the Sadr movement, many have also voiced skepticism about the ceasefire holding, if not outright opposition to the clerical leader’s order to stand down.

While Sadr, a clerical-bourgeois politician, maneuvers between Washington, Teheran and the various political factions within Iraq, his followers, drawn largely from among Iraq’s Shia working class and

oppressed, have reached a point where they can no longer tolerate the conditions created by the US occupation.

“I’m glad that our cleric decided to call for the militia to withdraw, but I’m not sure it will work out,” Ala’a Salah, a Basra resident, told the Al Jazeera news agency. “When you cease fire without addressing the main issues facing our society, the wound will be open and ready for any new infection. I’m sure clashes will return but on a much worse scale.”

Abu Ali, a fighter for the Mahdi Army, told Al Jazeera he did not believe all of the militia’s members would stop fighting.

“Some fighters are feeling used as they were told to fight for recognition and now to stop without any concessions being made to them,” he said. “If we stop [fighting], we are going to be seen as losers and a weak group and the possibility to be politically recognized will be less likely.”

The defeat of the offensive by the Iraqi puppet forces and the US military has exposed the fraudulent claims of the Bush administration that the so-called surge, the escalation that brought US troop levels in Iraq up to 160,000, has suppressed resistance or secured the country for US interests.

A key pillar of the relative decline in violence in recent months has been the eight-month-old ceasefire decreed by Sadr beginning last August, which broke apart under the pressure of the government’s attacks.

What was exposed was the intense hatred of masses of Iraqi workers and the most oppressed layers of society for the US occupation.

A report filed by *Washington Post* correspondent Sudarsan Raghavan, who spent 19 hours on a residential block in the Sadr City slums during the fighting, provides a glimpse of the combative mood that prevails within broad sections of the Iraqi population.

“After nearly a year of relative calm,” he writes, “US troops and Shiite militiamen engaged in pitched battles this week, underscoring how quickly order can give way to chaos in Iraq. On this block in Sadr City, the cleric’s sprawling stronghold, men and boys came out from nearly every house to fight, using powerful IEDs and rockets.”

One of the fighters there told him, “People have reached a point that they will sell their refrigerator to buy a rocket launcher to shoot and kill the Americans.”

Whatever decisions are made in the coming weeks about future US troop levels in Iraq, the conditions that have prevailed during the previous months of the “surge”—characterized by a decline in US casualties as well as Iraqi deaths—are coming to an end.

The events of the past week in Basra and Sadr City have made it clear that the predatory objectives that gave rise to the US invasion of Iraq cannot be realized without the renewal of violent confrontation and the shedding of far more blood—both Iraqi and American—than has already occurred in five years of occupation.



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