

On eve of Petraeus testimony, US launches raids on Baghdad's Sadr City

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On the eve of congressional testimony by the top US military commander in Iraq and Washington's ambassador to the country, US military forces launched bloody raids in Sadr City, the crowded Shia slum in northeast Baghdad. At the same time, the Iraqi puppet regime threatened to bar the Sadrists, the only mass political movement in the country, from participation in upcoming provincial elections.

Gen. David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker are scheduled to testify Tuesday before the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees. The membership of the two panels includes all three of the remaining Republican and Democratic candidates for US president—Republican John McCain and Democrats Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama.

The appearance, coming six months after the pair last appeared on Capitol Hill, in September 2007, is nominally for the purpose of providing an updated progress report on the military escalation ordered by the Bush administration over a year ago, which sent 30,000 additional US occupation troops into Iraq.

Until recently, the testimony was expected to consist of a glowing account of the decline in both US military casualties and Iraqi deaths from the horrific levels recorded in 2006 and 2007. This reduction was only partially attributable to the beefed-up US deployments in Baghdad and Anbar Province. More significant were three factors that have little to do with the increase in American troops.

The first is the truce observed until recently by the Mahdi Army, the militia loyal to Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr. The second is the contracting out of security in Anbar to US-paid Sunni militias that were formally part of the insurgency, and which, for their own tactical reasons, have accepted US arms to build up their forces against a perceived threat from the predominantly Shia US-backed government. The third is the fact that the wave of sectarian violence unleashed by the US occupation's divide-and-rule tactics has already largely separated Iraq's ethno-religious populations, turning millions into refugees.

The first of these conditions has now broken down as a result of the US-backed military campaign against the Mahdi Army initiated last month in the southern port city of Basra as well as Baghdad's Sadr City and other parts of the Iraqi south.

This assault, conducted by US-trained Iraq forces backed by American air strikes and US Special Forces units, ended in a debacle. Whole Iraqi units refused to fight and, in some cases, went over to the Mahdi Army. After days of fighting failed to bring the Iraqi puppet forces any gains, the leading parties within the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki turned to Iran to broker a truce.

Now, a week later, US forces have renewed this offensive in Sadr City, sending thousands of troops backed by Abrams tanks, Stryker

and Bradley fighting vehicles, and helicopters firing Hellfire missiles into the sprawling neighborhood, home to some 2.5 million people.

During the fighting Sunday, at least 22 Iraqis were reported killed and at least 80 wounded. Local hospitals reported that the dead and wounded included women and children.

The fighting set fire to the area's biggest wholesale food market, deepening already severe shortages for the besieged population. According to one report, food prices had already doubled in Baghdad since the first round of fighting began on March 25.

Both local and international aid organizations have warned that the continuing attacks on Sadr City, which remains encircled and sealed off by the US military, is threatening to unleash a humanitarian catastrophe. Hospitals have run out of blood and basic supplies and ambulances have been unable to get through the streets.

The US military operation appeared to be aimed in the first instance at suppressing rocket and mortar fire that has been striking with deadly accuracy at the Green Zone, the heavily fortified enclave that includes the US Embassy and other government buildings.

The offensive appeared to fail in meeting this objective. On Sunday, as US troops took up positions in Sadr City, missiles and mortar shells continued to pour into the zone, killing two American soldiers and wounding at least 17 others. Another US soldier was killed in the shelling of Baghdad's Rustamiya military base, and four others died in separate attacks, bringing Sunday's American death toll to seven. Three more US troops were killed on Monday.

While Sunday's attacks represented the first fatalities for US soldiers in the Green Zone since last July, two American civilians were killed in shelling barrages on the enclave during the clashes with the Mahdi Army at the end of last month.

The Green Zone attacks are politically troubling for the Bush administration, coming on the eve of Petraeus's testimony. They clearly call into question whether the American occupation, after five years, has succeeded in establishing clear control over any part of the country.

Al Jazeera reported that in Basra "at least eight people were killed in a blast, which local residents said was caused by a US air raid." The news agency continued: "Police and residents said the raid occurred in the Hayy al-Asdiqa neighborhood and a house was reportedly destroyed."

The military operations clearly have a broader political objective, which was bluntly announced by Maliki on Sunday. A 15-point statement issued by the government's security council—which includes Maliki; President Jalal Talabani, Speaker of the Parliament Mahmoud al-Mashidani and representatives of the government's major political parties—demanded the disbanding of militias, while

insisting that all Iraqis “appreciate the role of the army in imposing security and order in Basra and the rest of the provinces.”

Maliki indicated that any party failing to disband an affiliated militia would be barred from participation in the provincial elections scheduled for October. The transparent aim of this order is to politically outlaw the Sadrists in order to prevent a widely anticipated sweep of the south by the organization if it is allowed to contest the elections.

The parties represented on Iraq’s national security council, such as the Kurdish organizations and other Shia parties like the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), all have their own armed militias and have no intention of disbanding them. Indeed, the ISCI’s militia—the Iranian-trained Badr Brigade—fought alongside government troops against the Sadrists in Basra. Much of the Iraqi army is itself composed of elements whose first loyalty lies with militias, like the Kurdish Peshmerga or the Badr organization.

The only way that the Iraqi puppet regime backed by Washington can retain its grip on power is to undemocratically ban the largest opposition group, thereby politically disenfranchising a large section of the population.

Falah Shenshal, a member of the Sadrist bloc in the Iraqi parliament, called Maliki’s order an “unjustified escalation.” Running in the elections, he said, “is a right guaranteed by the constitution and no one has the right to prevent anyone.” He added, “This is a political war against the Sadrists and the aim is clear.”

There is little doubt as to what Petraeus will tell Congress this week. He was handpicked by the White House—and then given a unanimous endorsement by the Democratic-led Senate—because he is a political general who supported the administration’s policy of military escalation. He was brought forward under conditions in which other commanders were openly skeptical that the “surge” could succeed, and were expressing concern that continuation of the expanded deployments in Iraq could produce a “broken army.”

Petraeus is certain to lay out the already announced policy of imposing a “pause” on troop withdrawals after the last of the five combat brigades sent to Iraq in the surge leaves, as planned, in July. After that, further withdrawals would be postponed, indefinitely keeping in Iraq 140,000 US soldiers and Marines—more than the number deployed before the surge began.

As for the rival factions within the American political establishment and their respective candidates, there is little mystery as to what positions they will put forward as they attempt to prove themselves best qualified to succeed Bush as “commander-in-chief.”

McCain provided a preview of his remarks in a speech on Monday in Kansas City, Missouri to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, in which he warned against “a hasty, reckless and irresponsible withdrawal” from Iraq.

“We have before us a hard road, but it is the right road,” the Republican candidate said. “Those who disregard the unmistakable progress we have made in the last year and the terrible consequences that would ensue were we to abandon our responsibilities in Iraq have chosen another road.”

Obama issued a statement calling it “a failure of leadership to support an open-ended occupation of Iraq that has failed to press Iraq’s leaders to reconcile, badly overstretched our military, put a strain on our military families, set back our ability to lead the world, and made the American people less safe.”

As with similar criticisms by his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton, Obama’s critique of the war addresses it as a strategic error that has

damaged the interests of US imperialism, not a criminal war of aggression that has claimed the lives of over a million Iraqis. Like his colleagues in the Senate, Obama passes over in silence the killing and wounding of civilians in Sadr City and the subjection of a population of millions to a barbaric state of siege.

At a White House press conference Monday, the president’s spokesman provided a glimpse of a shift by the administration from the earlier claims that the fall in casualties had proven the surge was working. With the number of Iraqi casualties climbing to 980 in March (this is only those reported in the media—the real toll is far higher) and the number of American troops killed last month rising to 38, the boasts of military success have become less tenable.

White House spokesman Tony Fratto was asked about both the rising violence and the effect that Muqtada al Sadr’s call for a mass demonstration against the occupation on April 9—the anniversary of US troops entering the Iraqi capital—would have on Petraeus’s credibility in touting the surge.

“Well, I think we’ve thrown out all of the rose-colored glasses in how we look at Iraq, and try to look at it through clear lenses as to what is actually going on in the country,” Fratto replied.

Pressed along similar lines, Fratto repeated the phrase about throwing out the “rose-colored glasses.”

The implications of this formulation are unmistakable and will form the real content of Petraeus’s recommendations. The time for measuring the success of the surge by the yardstick of reduced casualties and relative calm in Iraq is over, as is that of pretending that the US is engaged in some kind of democratizing mission in the occupied country.

The realization of the US war’s real aims—conquering Iraq and its immense oil reserves—can be completed only through a brutal escalation of the violence and methods of open political dictatorship.



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