

US and Iraqi military continue push into Sadr City

Peter Symonds
16 April 2008

US and Iraqi troops are continuing operations against strongholds of the Mahdi Army—the militia aligned with cleric Moqtada al-Sadr—in Baghdad and the southern port city of Basra. The vast working class slums of Sadr City, home to more than two million people, have been under siege for the past fortnight despite an announcement by Sadr on March 30 calling his militiamen off the streets.

While the US military and the Iraqi government claim to be suppressing “criminals”, the chief target is undoubtedly the Mahdi Army. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki announced on Sunday that cabinet had approved legislation that would prevent parties with militias from standing in provincial elections in October—in line with his previous demand that Sadr disband the Mahdi Army. Other parties, including Maliki’s Da’wa and its ally, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), have their own private armies.

Fighting in Sadr City continued yesterday. According to the American military, at least six people were killed in a clash between US soldiers and militiamen during a US operation in the As Sudayrah area. Air support was called in as the fighting continued. The spokesman claimed that “no civilian casualties [were] reported”. Such encounters have become routine as US and Iraqi security forces have entrenched themselves in southern portions of Sadr City.

A sharp rise in the number of US soldiers killed points to the intensity of the fighting throughout Iraq. Nineteen died last week in the worst week for US casualties this year.

In Sadr City itself, the official death toll of Iraqis has been put at around 95, but hospital staff say the figure is much higher. Dr Qassem Mudalai, director of the Imam Ali hospital, told the *Times* last Sunday: “There are 230 killed, I can confirm, in the hospitals of Sadr City. I’ve been living in the hospital for two weeks. I can’t leave because of the siege and it’s too dangerous to be on the streets because of the snipers and bombs.” More than 1,000 have been injured, and, according to other doctors, only a minority were militiamen.

Housewife Um Ali told the *Times* by phone: “Children, women and old men have been injured and killed and there are no ambulances. The hospitals have no first aid supplies and there are so few doctors.”

The government briefly lifted the blockade on Saturday and

allowed about 20 trucks with supplies of food, blankets, and medical supplies to enter the suburb. Residents were able to stock up during a lull in the fighting over the weekend, but the state of siege resumed over the past two days.

A report in the *New York Times* described the scene in Sadr City last weekend: “Signs of recent fighting were everywhere. Rusty yellow Iraqi tanks had rolled up Fallah Street, one of Sadr City’s main avenues, in an unprecedented foray. The soldiers, wearing ski masks to hide their identities, sat beneath a billboard for Gauloise cigarettes that boasted the slogan, in French, ‘Freedom always’. Not far from Sadr’s main office, buildings were scarred by bullet holes. Black flags of mourning were staked in dirt plots, a reminder of those lost in nearly three weeks of fighting.”

Ayad Felah Hassan told the *Los Angeles Times* he had been penned up in his home for days. He cursed the situation, saying his family had trouble sleeping amid the sound of US helicopters and the blast of missile attacks. Scornful of the Maliki government, he declared: “I want to cut off the finger I voted with... We don’t get anything. Before you had to belong to the Baath Party. Now you have to be in Da’wa or Badr.” Previously Hassan sold cold drinks, but now had no income. His house had been without electricity for more than a week.”

Government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh declared on Sunday: “We will continue until we secure Sadr City. We will not come out, we will not give up until the people of Sadr City have a normal life... [The security forces] will do what they have to do to secure the area. I can’t tell you how many days or how many months but they will not come out until they have secured Sadr City.”

Citing Mahdi Army sources, the *Washington Post* reported that the US and Iraqi forces had split up a portion of Sadr City into at least two sections and were placing concrete barriers at a major intersection. Snipers were positioned on the rooftops of nearby buildings. “The city is still under siege,” Ghofran al-Saidi, a Sadrist parliamentarian, told *Time* magazine this week. “The Iraqi troops stopped me twice from going out although I told them who I am.” Access to the suburb is strictly controlled through a handful of checkpoints.

An article in the *New York Times* last Friday explained that Sadr City was being used by the US as “testing ground for the

Iraqi military”. The article explained: “Whether they like it or not, Iraqi troops are hundreds of yards ahead of the farthest American position and in the thick of the fight.” The newly-trained Iraqi troops “have often been firing wildly, expending vast quantities of ammunition to try to silence the militias.” In the course of a discussion with American advisers, one trigger-happy Iraqi soldier declared: “In case I see a bad guy I will not arrest him. I will kill him immediately to get revenge for my guys who were lost.”

US-backed Iraqi security forces are also continuing operations in Basra. *Agence France Presse* (AFP) reported yesterday that “the city is flooded with troops, innumerable checkpoints constantly snarl the traffic, residents are scared to go out at night despite the curfew being relaxed, and the sound of sporadic gunfire can still be heard”. Military officials claim that two Mahdi Army strongholds had been cleared of weapons. Three other northwestern suburbs have been encircled by Iraqi troops.

US military spokesman Rear Admiral Patrick Driscoll claimed that more than 430 “criminals” had been arrested in Basra, saying Iraqi troops were targeting “individuals who illegally carry weapons and launch attacks on law-abiding citizens and security forces”.

The purpose of the operations in Basra and Baghdad is not to suppress “criminals” and allow residents to lead a normal life. The Maliki government has targetted the Sadrist movement because of its broad following among the Shiite working class and urban poor, who are overwhelmingly hostile to the US occupation and its devastating impact on living standards. In the short-term, Maliki and his allies faced the prospect of defeat in provincial elections later this year, particularly in the Shiite south, including Basra.

The vicious character of the political infighting was highlighted by the assassination last Friday of Riyadh al-Nuri, a senior aide to Sadr and a relation by marriage. He was gunned down in Najaf after leaving prayers in the nearby town of Kufa. Sadr’s office issued a statement blaming “the occupiers and their tails”—a reference to the Maliki government. The murder of someone so close to Sadr is clearly meant as a threat to the cleric himself.

US Defence Secretary Richard Gates brushed aside suggestions last Friday that the US military was attempting to arrest Sadr, declaring he was “a significant political figure” who should “work within the political process”. Sadr rejected Gates’s comments, declaring: “You will always be an enemy and you will remain so until the last drop of my blood. If you don’t withdraw from our land or set a timetable for withdrawal acceptable to the Iraqi people, we will resist in any way we see fit.”

Despite this rhetoric, Sadr has increasingly accommodated to the US occupation. His decision to call the Mahdi Army militia off the street has only assisted the US and the Maliki government in stabilising their position amid widespread

turmoil within Iraqi army units. The Interior Ministry announced on Sunday that 1,300 soldiers and policemen in Basra and Kut, including 37 senior police officers up to the rank of Brigadier General, had been sacked for performing badly or refusing to fight. In a further boost for Maliki, Sadr called off a “million-man” demonstration planned in Najaf last week to protest against the US occupation.

For the Bush administration, the offensive against Sadrist strongholds in Basra is essential to controlling the large southern oil fields. Along with its anti-US stance, the Sadrist movement has opposed legislation to open up the Iraqi oil industry to foreign corporations. One of the Iraqi army’s first objectives was to secure the neighbouring port of Umm Qasr, which is the major outlet for oil exports from the south of the country. The operation also gave a pretext for a major intervention into Sadr City, which has largely been a no-go area for US troops.

At the same time, US officials have exploited the confrontation with the Mahdi Army to issue a new barrage of threats against neighbouring Iran. Washington claims that Iran is arming and training renegade Mahdi army militia or “special groups”. Rather than offering evidence, the US simply escalates the rhetoric. Allegations of Iranian interference featured prominently during congressional testimony last week by the top US commander in Iraq, David Petraeus, and US ambassador to Baghdad, Ryan Crocker.

Asked in a media conference last Friday if the US and Iran were engaged in a proxy war Iraq, Crocker replied: “I don’t think a proxy war is being waged from an American point of view... [But] when you look at what the Iranians are doing and how they are doing it, it could well be that.” He also accused Iran of meddling in Afghanistan, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. His remarks echoed President Bush, who commented to ABC News last week: “The message to the Iranians is: we will bring you to justice if you continue to try to infiltrate, send your agents or send surrogates to harm our troops and/or Iraqi citizens.”

The warning is another menacing indication that the Bush administration continues to maintain “all options on the table”, including a military strike on Iran, despite the ongoing quagmire in Iraq.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact