

US military tightens siege of Sadr City as cleric warns of war

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Scores of people have died over the past week as US and Iraqi forces tightened their noose around the huge working class suburb of Sadr City in Baghdad and pressed into the remaining strongholds of the Madhi Army loyal to cleric Moqtada al Sadr in the southern city of Basra. The actual death toll is likely to be far higher as US air strikes continue to pound the densely populated slums.

In a statement late Saturday night, Sadr threatened an “open war until liberation” if the Iraqi government did not “take the path of peace and abandon violence against its people”. He lashed out at the regime, likening its repressive methods to those of Saddam Hussein. Referring to the pitched battles in 2004 between the Madhi Army and the US military, he asked: “Do you want a third uprising?”

Sadr’s “final warning”, however, was more a pathetic plea to the Iraqi government, than a declaration of war. “This government has forgotten that we are their brothers and were part of them,” he said, alluding to the fact that the Sadrist movement helped Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki into office. Military operations were continuing, he declared, “despite our freeze of the Madhi Army, our initiatives to defuse the tension and our calls for peaceful protests and strikes”.

Sadr is well aware of the deep frustration and anger among Madhi Army fighters who fought Iraqi and US forces to a standstill in Basra and the suburbs of Baghdad, only to be ordered off the streets by the cleric on March 30. Far from ending the fighting, the deal struck between Sadrist leaders and the government enabled the US and Iraqi security forces to regroup and consolidate their positions after their initial offensive into Basra, launched on March 24, collapsed.

In Basra, Iraqi forces claimed to have seized the last major Sadrist stronghold—the district of Hayaniyah—on Saturday. The operation began at 6 a.m. with US warplanes and British artillery blasting the area in what was described as “a demonstration of the firepower available, if required,” according to a British military spokesman. Clashes erupted as Iraqi soldiers, bolstered by US and British advisers, entered the suburb. The *Scotsman* reported up to a dozen people dead and 130 wounded.

The previous day, Iraqi army forces surrounded a Sadrist office in Basra, demanded that it be evacuated and prevented people from attending Friday prayers. Sadr’s spokesman in Najaf, Saleh al-Obeidi branded the siege a provocation, saying: “The objective of the security forces is to further aggravate tensions and it shows the government’s claims that it is not targetting Sadr supporters to be false.” By Sunday, the Sadrists had surrendered the building.

In Baghdad, the US military is tightening its siege of Sadr City, home to more than two million urban poor. Construction began last week on a massive concrete wall designed to seal off the southern quarter of the suburb, which is now under American control. Even

though heavily protected by M-1 tanks, Stryker vehicles and Apache attack helicopters, construction crews have come under fire, resulting in US retaliation with missiles and bursts of tank rounds.

Sadrist MP Maha al-Dori drew the comparison with the Israeli siege of Gaza. “They have now completely surrounded Sadr City. The media is talking about Gaza, while we now have a second ‘Rafah crossing’ in Sadr City,” she said. “The hospitals are jammed with dead bodies... The occupation forces completely ban and open fire at any convoy trying to deliver humanitarian aid. People here suffer from shortage of food supplies. The occupation forces have burnt the city’s markets,” she told Al Jazeera.

American military spokesmen insist that the operation is aimed at halting rocket and mortar attacks on the Green Zone, headquarters of the US occupation, but the broader aim is to crush the Madhi Army and establish complete control over Sadr City. A Madhi Army fighter, Abu Ameer, told the *Washington Post* that Iraqi and US armoured vehicles had entered Sadr City from three sides on Friday and appeared to be trying to divide the area into four.

After a sandstorm grounded US helicopters, Ameer explained: “Now it’s turning. The whole city is defending themselves. It’s a gift from God [the sandstorm]. It serves us in an unbelievable way because they don’t have air cover.” Expressing his frustration at being forced to fight defensively by Sadr’s March 30 statement, he added: “If only Moqtada gives us an order, we will set fire and burn them wherever they are.”

Iraqi troops have been thrust into the forefront to take the brunt of the fighting. Last week, an entire Iraqi company abandoned its position, leaving a gaping hole in the frontline. An army captain explained to the *New York Times* that his unit was down to less than half its strength of 150, lacked ammunition and its machine guns were not working. “Most of my soldiers have family inside Sadr City. Their tribes and cousins and relatives are there. They can’t fight in Sadr City,” he explained.

The Sadr City episode gives another glimpse into the turmoil inside the Iraqi security forces during the first days of the Basra offensive when hundreds of soldiers and police refused to fight or openly went over to the Madhi Army. The government has since dismissed 1,300 soldiers who took part in the operation. Last week, it replaced the top army and police commanders in Basra, recalling them to their posts in Baghdad.

A British officer described last month’s disaster in yesterday’s *Telegraph*. “There were literally thousands of troops arriving in Basra from all over Iraq. But they had no idea why they were there or what they were supposed to do. It was madness and to cap it all they had insufficient supplies of food, water and

ammunition. One of the newly formed brigades was ordered into battle and suffered around 1,200 desertions within the first couple of hours—it was painful to watch.”

While the Bush administration insisted that the Basra offensive was an Iraqi operation, it was launched in the immediate wake of Vice President Dick Cheney’s visit to Baghdad. American analyst Gareth Porter wrote in the *Asia Times* on Saturday that one of Cheney’s objectives “was to get [Prime Minister] Maliki to go along with the [US General] Petraeus plan to eliminate the commanding position of Moqtada’s forces in Basra. Maliki has told Iraqi officials that Cheney put pressure on him to go along with the Basra operation.”

According to Porter, Maliki apparently rushed into the operation and shunned US support, fearful that it would provoke widespread opposition to his already despised government. “The Shiite south has become the most anti-occupation region in the country,” the article stated. “The British polling firm ORB, which has been doing opinion surveys in Iraq since 2005, found in March that 69 percent of respondents in the south believed that security would improve if foreign troops were withdrawn, and only 10 percent believed it would get worse.”

As fighting with the Madhi Army has intensified, the Bush administration has stepped up its anti-Iranian rhetoric, accusing Tehran of arming and training anti-occupation militia. Along with the allegation that Iran is intent on building nuclear weapons, the accusation that Tehran is waging “a proxy war” in Iraq is being cultivated as a pretext for a US military attack.

For all their occasional anti-American bluster, Iranian authorities have backed the US puppet regime in Baghdad and held talks with US officials to assist in stabilising the American occupation. In an unusually direct statement last weekend, Iran’s ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi Qumi, strongly supported the Iraqi army drive into Basra, while criticising US operations in Sadr City. “The idea of the government in Basra was to fight outlaws,” he said. “This was the right of the government and the responsibility of the government. And in my opinion the government was able to achieve a positive result in Basra.”

Qumi’s statements are another political lifeline for Maliki who was floundering as the initial offensive into Basra crumbled. Top Iranian officials were reportedly involved also in pressuring Sadr to call his militia off the streets on March 30. Maliki had placed its reputation on the line by personally taking charge of the Basra operation and demanding that Sadr disband the Madhi Army as a condition for participating in provincial elections. No such ultimatum has been given to Maliki’s Da’wa party or its ally, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which would use their militia to secure political dominance in the Shiite south prior to the October poll.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who flew into Baghdad yesterday, expressed satisfaction at the Maliki government’s “remarkable progress” toward achieving “political unity”. It was in part, she said, a by-product of Maliki’s “very good decision” to try to wrest Basra from the control of “criminals and militia”. The military crackdown on the Shiite urban poor has garnered support from Kurdish and Sunni political leaders. Massoud Barzani, head of the northern Kurdish autonomous region, has offered Kurdish troops to fight the Madhi Army. Sunni vice-president Tariq al-Hashemi, who has been sharply critical of Maliki’s pro-Shiite bias, has agreed to a joint statement expressing support for the Basra operation.

What is routinely presented in the international media as inter-Shiite infighting in fact reflects sharpening class divisions among the Iraqi

population as a whole. Da’wa and ISCI, which have backed the US invasion from the outset, reflect the interests of layers of the Shiite clerical and merchant elite who have increasingly come into conflict with the vast majority of the Shiite population, whose lives have been devastated by the impact of the US occupation. Sadr has increasingly accommodated himself to the US occupation and, while seeking to maintain his popular base, is just as fearful as the rest of the Shiite establishment of a social explosion.

As for Iran, Tehran’s latest assistance for the US occupation will not prevent an American military attack. What is driving Washington’s continuing threats against Iran are the same strategic and economic considerations that led to the 2003 invasion of Iraq—in particular, American ambitions to secure its dominance over the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. At every turn, the Bush administration has taken any concession offered by Tehran but continued to warn that “every option is on the table”. The latest statement by the Iranian ambassador will only encourage US military operations to suppress the Shiite working class in Baghdad and Basra, which is an important precondition for any strike on Iran.

Sharp clashes continued in Sadr City on Saturday and Sunday. US spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Steve Stover announced yesterday that a further 12 Madhi Army fighters had been killed in fighting, in what he described as an “uptick in violence in comparison with the past couple of weeks”. Sharp fighting also took place yesterday in the predominantly Shiite city of Nasiriyah, south of Baghdad, where the US military claimed to have killed 40 militiamen and arrested 40 more.

The casualty figures are in all likelihood a gross underestimate. Sadr MP, Salah al-Ugaili told Agence France Presse on Friday that 398 people had been killed and 1,331 wounded since March 25 in Sadr City alone. Doctor Wiyam Rashhad, head of one of Sadr City’s three hospitals, told the news agency that his facility had registered 135 killed in the clashes and another 800 wounded.



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