Siege continues in Iraq as US escalates threats against Iran

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The United States military's brutal offensive in Sadr City continued this week, with overnight raids killing dozens of people, including many civilians. The US offensive against the impoverished Baghdad neighborhood of 2 million people is entering its second month.

The direct target of US operations in Sadr City is the Mahdi Army militia led by Moqtada al-Sadr. Sadr's followers are drawn from the largely working class Shiite population in Sadr City. He also has substantial support in southern Iraq, including Basra. The recent wave of violence in Iraq was triggered last month, when the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki launched an offensive, backed by the US, against Sadr's forces in Basra.

According to media reports, the US military killed at least 11 people in Sadr City on Thursday night, and wounded another 74. "Criminals" have replaced "terrorists" as the label affixed by the US military to those it has slaughtered, but many are ordinary civilians. According to a report by Agence France-Presse (AFP), a Sadr City medic "said the dead included four old men, two women and a child" and that women and children were among the wounded.

The US military is employing helicopters armed with Hellfire rocket missiles to terrorize the population of Sadr City and target anyone it claims may be preparing rockets or roadside bombs.

According to figures tabulated by AFP from reports by the Iraqi government and the US military, at least 383 people have been killed in Sadr City over the past month. This figure, however, substantially underestimates the real death toll, since it is based only on official reports.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has reported that the main market in Sadr City has been severely damaged in the fighting, exacerbating food and water shortages. Several hospitals have also run out of supplies while attempting to treat the wounded.

Concurrent with the siege on Sadr City, Bush administration and military officials are also escalating their threats against Iran. On Friday, a ship contracted by the US military fired warning shots at what it said were Iranian boats in the Persian Gulf. Iranian officials denied that any of its vessels were involved.

Referring to the claim that the boats were Iranian, a military official said, "We don't have complete confirmation of that, but we suspect it." The incident mirrors an earlier one in January involving US Navy ships near the Strait of Hormuz. The military claimed then that two Iranian boats headed towards its ships, threatening to blow themselves up. These claims were later debunked, but the incident was used to ratchet up pressure on Iran.

Earlier this month, a US coastal patrol ship fired a flare at an Iranian boat, and in December the USS Whidbey Island fired warning shots at another Iranian vessel.

The administration has also claimed that Iran is behind most of the attacks on US forces in Iraq, creating the pretext for some form of possible military action. On Friday, Navy Admiral Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, claimed at a press conference that the US had acquired evidence of weapons in Iraq that had been recently manufactured in Iran.

An article published in the *Wall Street Journal* on Friday reported, "Officials in Washington and Baghdad said the purported Iranian mortars, rockets and explosives had date stamps indicating they were manufactured in the past two months. The US plans to launch a public campaign over the alleged weapons caches in coming days. A pair of senior commanders said a presentation was tentatively planned for Monday."

"I believe recent events, especially the Basra operation, have revealed just how much and just how far Iran is reaching into Iraq to foment instability," Mullen declared. "Their support to criminal groups in the form of

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munitions and training, as well as other assistance they are providing and the attacks they are encouraging continues to kill coalition and Iraqi personnel."

The head of a military that has carried out a five-year occupation of Iraq, killing over 1 million people and turning 4 million into refugees, denounced Iran for continuing to "meddle" in the country.

Mullen said that the US was not planning a military operation in the immediate future, and that any such action would pose problems for the strained US military. He said, however, "It would be a mistake to think we are out of combat capacity." He added, "We have military options. That kind of planning activity has been going on for a long time. I think it will go on for some time into the future."

Mullen's press conference is only the latest in a series of provocative statements and actions directed against Iran. On Wednesday, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said, "What the Iranians are doing is killing American servicemen and women inside Iraq." This month, Gates said for the first time that he thinks Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad knew about the alleged arms transfers.

Bush announced this week that he would nominate General David Petraeus to fill the position of head of US Central Command, which oversees US military operations throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. Petraeus is currently the top commander in Iraq and is overseeing the US offensive in Sadr City.

If confirmed by the Democratic-controlled Congress—a virtual certainty—Petraeus will replace Admiral William Fallon, who announced his resignation last month after coming into conflict with the Bush administration over military policy, including in relation to Iran. An *Esquire* magazine article published shortly before Fallon resigned stated that the admiral was the main obstacle to war against Iran.

Petraeus, on the other hand, has associated himself with the hard-line policy against Iran promoted within the administration. In congressional testimony earlier this month, Petraeus said that he believed Iran was responsible for killing hundreds of American soldiers.

Petraeus also helped develop the theory of "special groups" operating in Iraq—a term invented to designate rogue factions within Sadr's militia who are supposedly taking orders from the Iranian government. In his Congressional testimony, Petraeus said that the "special groups" "pose the greatest long-term threat to the viability of a democratic Iraq."

The theory of the "special groups" has been developed to justify the contradictory character of US policy in Iraq. Of the major Shiite organizations, the Sadr militia is the most distant from Iran, or at least from the principal organs of the Iranian government and military. Sadr is traditionally associated with Iraqi nationalism rather than Shiite sectarianism.

In fact, Iran has supported the operations of the Iraqi government and US military in Basra. The Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki told a press conference this week, "Weapons should be only in the hands of the Iraqi army," supporting the disarmament of the Sadr militia.

The Iranian government is more closely tied with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which is itself closely integrated into the Maliki government and the Iraqi military.

The US is carrying out an offensive against Sadr's militia not because of ties with Iran, but because of its base among the more impoverished sections of the Shiite working class, which is deeply opposed to the US occupation and the selling off of the country's oil. Following the operations in Basra, the Iraqi government has moved quickly to open up the region's oil and gas resources for exploitation by international companies.

At the same time, the US is seeking to undermine Iran as part of its overreaching plan to control the energy resources of the entire region. For these reasons, American imperialism finds itself in the position of supporting Iranian-backed political factions in Iraq even as it beats the drums for war against Iran.

For his part, Sadr is caught between an increasingly restive popular base, furious over the offensive launched by the Iraqi government and the US military, and his own desire to reach some form of accommodation with this same Iraqi government and the US occupation. Earlier this week, Sadr threatened "open war" against the US, but he has since backtracked. On Friday, Sadr asked his followers to continue to observe a ceasefire.

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