

Iraq: Agreement struck to end fighting in Sadr City

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Representatives of the Iraqi government and the Shiite Sadrist movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr announced on Saturday that an agreement had been reached to end the six-week siege by US and government forces of Sadr City—the Baghdad working class district of over two million people that is the Sadrists’ most important stronghold.

Meetings to negotiate the agreement were organised by the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the coalition of Shiite parties that dominates the US-backed government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and to which the Sadrists belonged until last September. Iranian officials also reportedly played a role in brokering the deal.

The agreement represents a back down from confrontation by both rival Iraqi Shiite factions. It was reached amid rumours of a major offensive into Sadr City by US and government troops and political moves in the parliament to prohibit the Sadrists from participating in the October provincial elections. Had either attack on the Sadrists proceeded, its leadership would have come under enormous pressure from its working class, anti-occupation social base to call for a wholesale uprising against the US forces and the Maliki government.

The 14-point terms stipulate that the Sadrist Mahdi Army militia must leave the streets by Tuesday and cease all rocket and mortar attacks on occupation and Iraqi government forces. The militiamen, however, do not have to hand in their weapons—one of the central demands previously made by Maliki for an end to the siege. Roadblocks will be lifted to allow food and other emergency aid into the suburb, and the checkpoints monitoring traffic in and out of Sadr City will be manned by Iraqi police, not American troops. For the moment, all talk of politically disenfranchising the Sadrists has ceased. The Sadrist movement holds 30 of the 275 seats in the national parliament and is expected to poll well in provincial elections, particularly in areas like Sadr City.

A leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the largest Shiite party in the government and the main political rival of the Sadrists, publicly thanked Iran for its “sensitive and vital role” in reconciling the Shiite parties in Iraq—however temporarily. The Iranian regime was also involved in negotiating an end to Sadrist resistance to the Maliki’s government’s offensive to take control of the southern port city of Basra and the main southern oilfields. The Basra operation triggered the fighting in Baghdad.

Tehran’s efforts to stave off a Shiite uprising in Iraq highlight its sensitivity to the intense hatred of the US occupation among the country’s millions of Shiite working class and urban poor. It has

no more desire to see an uprising than do the representatives of the Iraq Shiite elite. As well as threatening wider regional unrest, including in Iran, an uprising would almost certainly result in the Bush administration seeking to put the Iraqi state in the hands of Sunni-based parties and militias that are hostile to Iran, rather than sympathetic Shiite parties such as ISCI and Maliki’s Da’wa Party.

The basis for a shift toward Sunni elements was established during last year’s “surge” by US troops. Over the past 18 months, American commanders have struck agreements with various Sunni groups that were opposed to the occupation but felt more threatened by Shiite control over the Iraqi government. More than 80,000 Sunni militiamen are now working with the US occupation and, in many cases, are being paid by the US military.

The agreement in Sadr City allows the Sadrist leadership to claim to the Shiite working class and urban poor that it has won something of a victory. After more than 40 days of fighting, the Mahdi Army has not been destroyed in Baghdad, it will not be disbanded and the Sadrists have not been banned. According to media reports, militia fighters are obeying the instructions to cease attacks on the occupation forces and have abandoned their barricades and firing positions.

For its part, the Bush White House has sent out signals that it is far from satisfied with the Maliki government’s agreement to a ceasefire that was worked out with Iranian participation. A US military spokesman, Rear Admiral Patrick Driscoll, told a press conference on Sunday: “It is premature to say there is a truce, but a process of negotiations is on.”

Another spokesman, Lieutenant Colonel Steven Stover stated: “This agreement really doesn’t change anything for us. If we see criminal activity—a guy with a rockets, mortars or planting an IED (improvised explosive device)—we will kill him.”

US objectives

The coming days may well see deliberate US actions to sabotage the agreement and reignite fighting. The Bush administration’s objective is not a settlement with the Sadrists and the Mahdi Army, but the shattering of their political and military strength.

While Moqtada al-Sadr ended a short-lived uprising and came to a political accommodation with the US occupation in August

2004, the Mahdi Army was kept by the Sadrists as a rival body to the US trained and armed Iraqi security forces. It has functioned both as a security apparatus in Shiite areas and as one of the deadliest protagonists in the sectarian Shiite-Sunni civil war that raged across Iraq in 2006-07.

The Mahdi Army was widely blamed for the revenge killings that followed the destruction of the Shiite Al-Askiriya mosque by alleged Sunni extremists and ultimately forced hundreds of thousands of Sunnis and Christians in Baghdad and other cities to flee their homes. The US military regularly accuses “rogue” or “criminal” factions of the militia of receiving equipment from Iranian special forces and continuing attacks on American troops in defiance of a ceasefire ordered by Sadr.

The desire of the US occupation to break up the Mahdi Army, however, is not due to its role in sectarian violence or supposed Iranian links. It is due to the support of millions of Iraqis, particularly in the Shiite population, for the Sadrists’ denunciations of US foreign policy in the Middle East as colonialist; their demand that US troops must leave Iraq; and their opposition to granting contracts over Iraqi oil and gas to American or other foreign transnationals.

Violence and repression are being unleashed, from Basra in the south to Baghdad, in order to suppress such views. Last Thursday, American and government troops stormed the offices of the Sadrist Al Ahad radio station on the outskirts of Sadr City and shut down its broadcasts.

The US military has inflicted horrific death and destruction in the densely populated streets of Sadr City over the past six weeks. Fighting began on March 26 after Sadrist leaders in Baghdad responded to Maliki’s assault on the movement’s supporters in the southern city of Basra with militia attacks on US and government forces and threats of strikes and mass protests. The Sadrists did so with overwhelming support in Sadr City, where tens of thousands of people spontaneously demonstrated in a show of hostility and defiance toward the occupation.

Within hours, American and Iraqi army units had established a cordon around the suburb. Over the following days, they pushed forward from the concrete walls they built last year on the outskirts of Sadr City into the districts of Ishbilayah and Habbibiyah. Mahdi Army militiamen put up determined resistance and were answered with indiscriminate US air strikes and ground artillery bombardments. According to Iraqi police sources cited by *Azzaman*, at least 310 buildings and 625 shops were destroyed or damaged. Large parts of Jamil market, a major shopping area that covers an entire city block, were burnt to the ground.

By April 19, the occupation forces had secured positions along the major Quds Street thoroughfare and had advanced two city blocks to the major 55 Circle intersection in the geographical centre of Sadr City. Since then, American army engineers have been enclosing the area under US control with 3.7 metre (12 foot) high concrete slabs, each weighing over five tonnes. According to Radio Free Europe (RFE), as many as 1,000 slabs had been put into position by May 7.

As work to erect the wall proceeded, US ground forces engaged in daily clashes with militiamen, while aircraft and helicopter gunships launched repeated strikes throughout Sadr City.

Hundreds of civilians were killed or wounded. The Iraqi government released an estimate of 925 deaths and 2,600 injuries up to April 29. The carnage has since continued unabated. On May 3, US missiles slammed into a building next to the Al Sadr Hospital in the north east of the suburb, wounding at least 20 people and destroying at least 17 ambulances.

The US military has made clear that the weekend agreement will have no impact on their plan to transform the south eastern blocks of Sadr City into a ghetto. US commander Brigadier General James Milano told journalists on Sunday that the wall was 80 percent complete and that work would continue.

Claire Hajaj, a United Nations Children’s Fund representative, told the Associated Press (AP) that as many as 150,000 people, including 75,000 children, were trapped within the affected area. How many people were living there before the offensive began has not been reported. Hajaj said that some 6,000 residents had fled their homes and that “some areas of southeastern Sadr City were virtually abandoned”. A city councillor told the AP that at least 8,000 families had left.

The plight of the civilian population across Sadr City is dire. In most areas of the suburb, the April food ration, which many Iraqis depend upon, was not distributed. US bombs have damaged power lines, water pipes and sewerage mains. Hundreds of thousands of people are relying on cisterns, which are being sporadically filled by water tankers. There are concerns that the cisterns could be contaminated by the effluent flowing through the streets. Garbage is also not being collected, raising fears of other diseases.

While two major hospitals are functioning, they are desperately short of supplies. The Zahra Maternity Hospital, which is located just north of Quds Street and is therefore in an area where the Mahdi Army is conducting counter-attacks on occupation forces, is closed.

The US military has not stated what its intentions are once the south eastern sectors have been walled off from the rest of Sadr City. The likely scenario, however, was that it intends to push forward several more city blocks to carve out another ghetto. An Iraqi government spokesman, Tahseen al-Sheikhly, told last week’s *Time* magazine: “There will be a big offensive soon.” According to Sheikhly, two sports stadiums and a military base were being prepared to house a flood of refugees from Sadr City.

According to an Agence France Presse report on Sunday, the US brigades in south-eastern Sadr City are still in place and there has been no reduction in the number of American aircraft, helicopters and Predator drones flying overhead.



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