

US military attempts to reignite fighting with Mahdi Army

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27 May 2008

The order by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr that his Mahdi Army militiamen offer no resistance to the US occupation is being exploited by the American military and the Iraqi government to repress his supporters in the working class districts of Baghdad and other major cities.

For more than six weeks from late March, Mahdi Army fighters launched rocket barrages against the main US base in Baghdad and attacked US units that were building a concrete wall around the south-eastern sectors of Sadr City. The working class suburb of more than two million people in eastern Baghdad is the main base of support for the Sadrists. On May 10, Sadr declared a ceasefire and agreed that government forces could deploy into the district. Well over 1,000 militiamen and civilians were killed by the US military during the fighting.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ordered 10,000 Iraqi troops into Sadr City on May 20, backed by US helicopter gunships and other air power. The Mahdi Army melted into the civilian population and did not attack the government forces as they defused booby-traps, established roadblocks and barricades and occupied strategic buildings, including hospitals and telecommunications hubs. An American infantry brigade and an armoured regiment are still occupying the walled-off south-eastern sector.

On Friday, the occupation forces, now in a strong position inside Sadr City, began what can only be interpreted as an attempt to provoke a confrontation with the Sadrist militiamen.

The Sadrist offices in the south-western Baghdad suburb of Amil were stormed by government troops as hundreds of people gathered to attend evening prayers at the adjacent mosque. More than 500 people were interrogated and more than 120 were handcuffed,

blindfolded and detained. Forty men were taken away in US military vehicles. An assembly of Sadrist supporters in the neighbouring suburb of Bayaa was also dispersed. At least 25 men were reportedly seized.

Children were among those arrested, according to witnesses. An Amil resident told Agence France Presse: “My three brothers, one of whom is only 12, were picked up, and so was my cousin.”

In Basra, government troops fired into a crowd that had gathered to hear Sadrist speakers following Friday prayers. One person was reportedly killed and three others wounded. A Sadrist member of parliament, Aqeel Abdul Hussein, told a press conference that their supporters had also been prevented from assembling for their normal Friday rally in Nasiriyah.

Hussein accused the US occupation and the Maliki government of “moving forward in its project to liquidate opposition in a more savage way than the previous regime”—a reference to Saddam Hussein. He stressed though that the Sadrist leadership would continue to instruct their supporters to observe the ceasefire, despite the attacks against them.

The Sadrists are a faction of the Shiite ruling elite who have considerable support due to their provision of limited charity to the poor and opposition to the US occupation. Increasingly, however, Sadr has accommodated to the occupation in a bid to secure a place within the puppet state created by the US in Iraq. The most recent order for his supporters to end resistance was partly in response to a move to bar the Sadrists from standing candidates in the provincial elections that are scheduled to take place in October.

Despite Sadr’s overtures, the US military has never relented in its determination to break up the grassroots Sadrist organisation. For an occupying power, a political movement that demands that American troops

leave, opposes the sale of Iraqi energy resources and can mobilise tens of thousands of armed men is intolerable. Moreover, amid continuing US threats against Tehran, Washington is concerned that an attack on Iran could provoke an uprising in Iraq among the Sadrists. At times, the Mahdi Army has claimed to have as many as 60,000 fighters, though thousands have been killed or wounded in largely one-sided clashes with US troops.

Since last August, the US military and the pro-occupation Shiite parties that dominate the Iraqi government have exploited Sadr's declaration of a ceasefire to systematically crack down on the Mahdi Army. Wholesale killings and arrests of alleged "rogue" militiamen—men accused of disobeying Sadr's directives—have taken place in cities such as Najaf, Karbala, Kut, Diwaniyah, Hillah and Basra, as well as in Baghdad.

A leading Sadrist, Sheik Salman al-Fraiji, accused the army units in Baghdad of seeking to extend the purge to Sadr City. He told the *New York Times*: "We believe there are many officers, commanders and soldiers who do not submit to their official leaders. They submit to political parties which push them to arrest al-Sadr followers."

Fraiji's statement is without question a reference to the supporters of the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI) within the Iraqi armed forces. ISCI is the mouthpiece of the main Shiite clerical establishment in Najaf, which has used the US occupation to secure power and wealth that they did not have access to under the Sunni-dominated Baathist regime. ISCI is the largest party in Maliki's government and also currently heads most of provincial authorities in the majority Shiite provinces of southern Iraq.

The crackdown on the Mahdi Army in the south has been used to bolster ISCI's control and dramatically weaken the Sadrists and other opponents prior to the coming provincial elections. Voting in Shiite areas will take place in a climate of fear and with people being intimidated to vote for ISCI-aligned candidates.

The Maliki government last week sacked four leading members of the Sadrist-breakaway party Fadhila from management positions in the southern oil industry. Fadhila currently holds the governorship in Basra province. A political analyst, Ahmed al-Sharifi, told the Voice of Iraq radio station that since the end of a

military offensive in Basra in late March, there had been "accelerating" efforts "to isolate the Sadrist political trends and parties like Fadhila".

Sadr's agreement to allow government forces throughout Sadr City was presented to his supporters as a political victory which enabled the organisation to avoid illegalisation and keep the Mahdi Army largely intact. In reality, it is enabling the US and Iraqi military to break up the Mahdi Army and secure its most important stronghold.

Iraqi officers are not expecting the ceasefire to last now that they have begun to carry out raids and arrests. Colonel Abdul al-Wahab, an infantry commander, told a *Los Angeles Times* correspondent: "This agreement is only temporary. Most of the Mahdi Army isn't happy with it. They need chaos so they can take money from the people... The only way we will fix this is through power and force."

American troops have also clearly been told that fighting is going to break out soon. *Stars and Stripes* interviewed soldiers on the outskirts of Sadr City on the weekend. Specialist Alden Rodriguez said: "I wouldn't be surprised if was a short pause." Another soldier, Christian Teuta, declared: "These people [the Mahdi Army] aren't going to change." Private Jeff Pisonero, in a comment the military newspaper described as a "widely held" view, said: "The militias are just refitting. I don't think it is going to stay quiet at all."

The preparations for a confrontation are a warning that even greater violence and repression is about to be unleashed against the working class and urban poor of Sadr City.



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