

# Iraq: New offensive targets Sadrist movement in Amarah

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Thousands of Iraqi government troops and interior ministry national police have deployed in force over the past four days into the southern city of Amarah, a stronghold of the Shiite movement loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and its Mahdi Army militia. The US military is backing the offensive with jet fighters, helicopter gunships and advisors.

The government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had set today as the deadline for Mahdi Army militiamen to hand over all heavy and medium weapons, explosives and sniper rifles, in exchange for a cash payment. The government forces intend to conduct house-to-house searches of the entire city of 450,000 people, starting tomorrow. A local resident told Reuters on the weekend: “The army and police have fanned out all over the city in a way we haven’t witnessed before; on the main streets, roads and bridges.”

Amarah is the capital of Maysan province, which is best known for its network of marshes between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and is home to fiercely independent Marsh Arab tribes. The Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein drained marsh areas in an attempt to crush resistance to its rule by the Marsh Arabs, forcing over 200,000 people from their traditional villages. Many ended up in Amarah.

After the US-led invasion, Maysan was occupied by British troops. The Sadrist movement, however, which has broad support among the Marsh Arabs, always exerted de-facto control over Amarah, often in a bloody power struggle against supporters of the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI), the largest Shiite party in Maliki’s government.

The offensive into the city is the latest chapter in the campaign by the US military and pro-occupation Iraqi government to shatter the organisational apparatus of the Sadrist movement and break up the Mahdi Army.

In late March, full-scale assaults were carried out against the Sadrists in Basra and Baghdad. In Basra, Mahdi Army fighters inflicted heavy blows against the government troops, triggering wholesale desertions. Entire army units refused to fight. After six days of fighting and an estimated 600 casualties, however, Moqtada al-Sadr ordered the militiamen to end their resistance. In the weeks since, hundreds of Sadrist supporters have been rounded up and detained.

In Sadr City, the main Sadrist base of support in Baghdad,

militiamen fought on until May 10 to try to prevent a combined force of over 10,000 US and government troops enclosing the entire southern section of the district behind a 12-foot high concrete wall. The occupation forces unleashed air strikes and artillery bombardments into the densely-populated suburb, destroying hundreds of homes and shops. The Iraqi government estimated that 925 people were killed—including 400 to 500 militiamen—and over 2,700 injured.

Sadr also ordered an end to the resistance in Baghdad and agreed that the Iraqi government could deploy troops throughout Sadr City for the first time since the 2003 US invasion. As in Basra, hundreds of alleged militiamen have since been arrested in the Shiite districts of Iraq’s capital and large quantities of Mahdi Army weapons have been seized.

The government forces have not faced any resistance thus far in Amarah, despite rumours that many Mahdi Army fighters had moved to the city from both Basra and Baghdad. Iraqi police general Dhafer Abed al-Mohammadawi told *USA Today*: “Our intelligence says that the militias have removed all the IEDs (improvised explosive devices) they had placed. Their leaders have told them not to fight this time. They don’t want to enter a battle they know they’re going to lose.”

A source told Reuters on Monday that militiamen had been dumping weapons in “rivers, on streets or on farms”. The newsagency reported that Iraqi police were “gathering up all kinds of abandoned weapons, such as mortars, machine guns, sniper rifles and rocket-propelled grenades”.

Sadrist leaders have issued statements declaring that they support the “demilitarisation” of Amarah and would cooperate with the operation. As in other cities, however, the disarming of the Mahdi Army will simply be the prelude to mass arrests. Iraqi prisons are now overflowing with Sadrist supporters who have been effectively handed over to the pro-occupation government by their own leaders.

There are two major motives for the crackdown on the Sadrists. Firstly, ISCI and Maliki’s Da’wa Party are seeking to weaken their main political rival among the Shiite population ahead of provincial elections later this year. They hope to win control of all nine predominantly Shiite southern provinces. Secondly, the Bush administration and US military commanders are not prepared to coexist with a large Shiite

militia that models itself on Lebanon's Hezbollah. In the event of a US war on Iran, there are fears in the Pentagon that the Mahdi Army could carry out large-scale attacks against American forces and supply lines inside Iraq.

The Sadrist leadership's acquiescence in the repression is the outcome of the class and social interests it represents. While Sadr continues to employ anti-occupation demagoguery to retain support among the working class and urban poor, his main concern is reconciling with the Shiite establishment that was placed in power by the US occupation. His demands that his supporters not offer resistance are intended as evidence that he is a reliable candidate for inclusion in the establishment's ranks.

The Sadrist leaders constitute a layer of the Shiite ruling elite who were generally ignored by the US military after the 2003 invasion and whose access to wealth and privilege has been blocked thus far by their rivals around Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and ISCI leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim.

ISCI, from exile in Iran, collaborated with the US plans for "regime change" in Iraq with the perspective of establishing Shiite dominance over the Iraqi state, at the expense of the Sunni ruling stratum favoured by the Baathist regime. Its leadership was rapidly inserted into key positions by the US military after the invasion—including control over the shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf and the considerable wealth that flows from the millions of annual pilgrims expected to visit the main holy sites of the Shiite faith. ISCI's Iranian-trained Badr Brigade militia was incorporated into the new Iraqi army and police.

In 2003, Moqtada al-Sadr was the symbolic leader of a powerful Shiite opposition inside Iraq to Baathist rule, based largely in Sadr City. The Sadrists bitterly resented the elevation of ISCI loyalists and Sistani's hold over the shrine cities. Sadr's father, Grand Ayatollah Sadiq al-Sadr, would have been the most senior cleric in Iraq, and therefore custodian of Karbala and Najaf, if he had not been murdered by the Baathists in 1999.

The Sadrist leadership quickly began to use denunciations of the US occupation and Sistani's and ISCI's collaboration with it to prepare a move to supplant them. Sadr appealed to the deeply-felt opposition among the Shiite masses to the neo-colonial character of the regime established by the Bush administration. He announced the formation of the Mahdi Army shortly after the invasion. Largely in reaction to the Sadrist agitation, Sistani came out in opposition to US plans to install a government without holding elections and called for mass demonstrations in the first months of 2004.

The US military began to belatedly pay attention to the growing ferment among Iraqi Shiites. In March 2004, steps were taken to illegalise the Sadrists and arrest or kill Moqtada al-Sadr. In response, Sadr called for an uprising against the occupation. Thousands of Mahdi Army fighters were killed between April and September in failed attempts to seize control

of the shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf from US troops.

Under the terms of a ceasefire in September 2004, Sadr agreed to end armed resistance to the occupation in exchange for the US accepting the right of his organisation to exist and function politically. From that point on, Sadr's demagoguery against the occupation and demands for a timetable for US troop withdrawals have become increasingly hollow. In late 2005, the Sadrists openly entered into a coalition with ISCI and Da'wa and subsequently took six ministries in Maliki's government.

The collaboration has done little to advance the Sadrists' aspirations and has produced a break-up in its ranks. Large sections of the Mahdi Army have defied Sadr's ceasefires and continued armed resistance. Sadrist officials have alienated their supporters by assisting the US military to identify hundreds of so-called "rogue" militiamen. At the same time, Sistani's grip over Karbala and Najaf has strengthened while ISCI has used the occupation to insert its personnel into the main political positions in most of the southern provinces. ISCI's perspective is to form an autonomous region that will give it control over not only the shrine cities, but the revenues from the major oilfields.

Sadr has responded to the setbacks of his movement over the past months by further distancing himself from a struggle against the US occupation. Under conditions of mass Iraqi opposition to a proposed Status of Forces Agreement giving the US military indefinite access to Iraq's territory and air space, he announced this week that the Sadrists will not even stand candidates in the upcoming provincial elections. The opposition to ISCI will therefore be dissipated, enhancing the likelihood that it or allied parties such as Da'wa will win the governorship of the nine Shiite southern provinces.

Sadr also announced that he was instructing the Mahdi Army to give up its weapons and focus on religious and charitable activities. He declared that a small armed force of "special companies" would be kept intact to conduct unspecified operations against the "occupier", but not against the Iraqi government forces being used by the US military to carry out the repression of Sadrist supporters in Shiite districts. Sadr himself is believed to be in Iran, undertaking studies to improve his religious credentials and his status within the Shiite clerical elite.



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