

# Iraqi government claims Mahdi Army on verge of collapse

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An Iraqi intelligence assessment provides a chilling estimate of the slaughter of members of the Shiite Mahdi Army militia during the US military and Iraqi government offensives this year into Basra, Baghdad's Sadr City and the Marsh Arab city of Amarah. According to the *Gulf News*, it states that "more than 2,000 cadres from the Mahdi Army leadership were killed recently".

The contents of the assessment were leaked to the *Gulf News* last week. It asserts that a further 1,300 Sadrist militiamen have fled Iraq to "safe houses in Iran". The report assesses that the offensives have "led to the almost complete collapse" of the militia and that the operations currently underway in Amarah will see "the end of the Mahdi Army". "The number of [militia] members doesn't exceed 150 to 200, hugely down from the total estimated number of 50,000 in the past two years," it stated.

There is no reason to doubt the veracity of the assessment. Since Moqtada al-Sadr ordered the Mahdi Army to offer no resistance to US and Iraqi government operations last August, its membership has been systematically hunted down. The total number of "Special Groups criminals" and "rogue" militiamen that the US military claims to have killed or arrested during the one-sided ceasefire would easily run into the thousands.

"Special Groups criminal" is the term used to describe the Mahdi Army fighters who are allegedly conducting armed resistance to the US occupation with assistance from Iran. The phrase was initially employed to disassociate them from Sadr—who was respectfully referred to by American officers as "Sayyed Moqtada" after he ordered the ceasefire, in deference to his descent from the Prophet Mohammed. The 35-year-old cleric is believed to be in the Iranian city of Qom,

undertaking studies to raise his religious rank.

The US military's Operation Iraqi Freedom web site has published report after report on the arrest of "Special Groups criminals" and the seizure of "weapons caches" in former Mahdi Army strongholds.

The web site reported last Thursday that 63 "criminals" had been detained in Amarah and 117 caches seized. Between June 19 and 22, Iraqi government forces reportedly confiscated "more than 1,700 mortar rounds, 873 mines, 445 artillery rounds, 347 rocket propelled grenades, 267 rockets, 227 missile launchers, 109 improvised explosive devices, 74 grenades, 35 122 mm rounds, 27 explosively formed projectiles and 14 missiles".

A Sadrist parliamentarian, Ameerah al-Etabi, told a press conference in Baghdad last week that government troops in Amarah were tearing down portraits of Sadr and his assassinated father, Grand Ayatollah Sadiq al-Sadr. She told the Kuwait-based *Arab Times*: "What is happening is that this security operation was transformed from a security offensive to a political offensive. The security forces have targeted persons related to the Sadrist movement, without any charge other than belonging to the Sadrist movement."

A Sadrist leader in Amarah, who is hiding out in safe-houses, told Agence France Presse on June 20: "All over Iraq—Basra and Sadr city in Baghdad—the government has said the same thing: that Sadr and his Mahdi Army are not targets. But after those operations started they changed the colour of their feathers and started going after followers of Sadr and his Mahdi Army. Right now I don't know if I will be able to save my own life."

Some 65 alleged militiamen were detained in Nasiriyah on June 21. In the southern city of Hillah, 44 were reportedly detained on June 22.

US military press releases indicate that at least 24 “Special Groups criminals” were arrested in Baghdad last week and large quantities of weapons seized, including a stockpile of improvised explosive devices in Sadr City. Since Sadr ordered the Mahdi Army to allow government troops into the densely-populated working class suburb in May, thousands of AK-47s, machine guns, RPGs and heavier weapons have been confiscated.

The labelling of people as “criminals” cannot disguise the fact that the arrests are a politically motivated roundup. The “crime” of the Shiite militiamen is that they oppose the US occupation and the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The campaign against the Sadrists has become so blatant that Maliki’s office felt obliged to issue a statement on June 17 that he had “ordered the security forces not to arrest members of the Sadr movement randomly”.

There is no estimate of how many Sadrists are being held as political prisoners in US military or Iraqi government prisons. However, the director of just one Sadrist charitable office in the Baghdad suburb of Ur told journalist Nir Rosen last December that he provided support to the families of 3,000 detained militiamen. The Sadrists pay the families \$60 a month.

A feature in the weekend *Financial Times* (FT) reported that the massive US prison at Camp Bucca holds over 19,000 detainees, with another 3,000 being held at Camp Cropper near Baghdad—double the number before the “surge” of US troops in early 2007. The article noted that “a key strategy” of the surge “seems to have been to scoop up huge numbers of Iraqis”. At least another 25,000 people are being held in Iraqi government prisons.

Under the terms of the UN-sanctioned occupation, the American military can detain Iraqis indefinitely if it deems them to be a vaguely-defined “imperative security threat”. According to information supplied to the FT, the average detention length without charges is 300 days.

The acquiescence of the Sadrist leadership in the shattering of the Mahdi Army means that the Shiite working class districts of Baghdad and cities across southern Iraq are at the mercy of the US military and the US-backed government in the lead-up to the provincial elections scheduled to take place in October.

The elections will take place in a climate of fear and

intimidation. Significant sections of the Iraqi military and police are loyal to the main pro-occupation Shiite parties, the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI) and Maliki’s Da’wa Party, or the Kurdish nationalist parties that share government with them. The offices of Moqtada al-Sadr announced on June 13 that his movement will not stand candidates, but “support independent figures”. Anyone endorsed by the Sadrists will risk persecution—or worse.

The Sadrist movement is also being evicted from the offices and mosques from which they operated the charitable networks that supplied relief to the poor—a main factor in their broad support.

Sadrist officials are also being arrested or removed from their positions and replaced with loyalists from ISCI or Da’wa. Among the so-called “criminals” detained in Amarah was the Sadrist mayor, Rafrea Abdul Jabbar. In Sadr City in Baghdad, US officials pressured the council to remove its chairman, Abdul Hassan Jabara, due to his political affiliations. The June 24 meeting where the vote was scheduled to take place was bombed, killing two American State Department employees, an Iraqi-born Italian interpreter and two marines. The Iraqi chosen by the US embassy to head the Sadr City council was wounded.

The US military blamed the attack on “Special Groups criminals”.



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