

Iraq: Mass detentions in Mosul as troops move into Sadr City

By [James Cogan](#)

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More than 1,300 men have been detained by the US military and the Iraqi government in the northern city of Mosul over the past 10 days, as part of an operation ostensibly aimed at smashing the Sunni fundamentalist insurgent organisation, Al Qaeda in Iraq.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki announced in January that a major offensive would be unleashed in Mosul and throughout Nineveh province, declaring at the time that it would be the “final” and “decisive battle” against Al Qaeda. The offensive was delayed until this month, however, due to US demands that the Iraqi government first wrest control of the major oil fields and ports around the southern city of Basra from Shiite parties and militias opposed to the US presence in the country and plans for privatising the oil industry.

The assault into Basra began in March and also triggered more than six weeks of fighting in Baghdad between occupation forces and the Mahdi Army militia loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. A ceasefire has been in effect in Sadr City since May 10, enabling the Iraqi security forces to divert manpower and resources into an offensive in Mosul. Maliki personally travelled to the city to oversee the first days of the operation.

US commanders have alleged that insurgents had fled to Mosul from other parts of the country to escape from the surge of American troops last year in Anbar province and Baghdad. The US military also enlisted the support of Sunni “Awakening” militias that were established last year by various tribal groups as part of deals with the occupation forces.

The virtual absence of fighting in Mosul suggests that if insurgents were in the city they moved out long before the offensive. *USA Today* reported on May 20 that an American unit did not find any of 53 alleged Al Qaeda leaders and explosive makers during targeted house raids last weekend. A young sergeant told the newspaper: “There wasn’t anyone around. They knew we were coming.”

An Al Qaeda leader told the *Washington Post* that the detainees were not members of his movement, but just “men with long beards who attend mosques”. He claimed that just eight insurgents had been captured and that the bulk of Al Qaeda’s fighters had moved to “quiet areas”.

On May 16, Maliki announced an amnesty for anyone in Mosul who had not killed civilians provided they turned in their weapons within 10 days. Only a handful of fighters have reportedly accepted the offer. An interior ministry spokesman told *Voice of America* the following day that house raids had only uncovered 80 roadside bombs, 45 rockets, 600 kilograms of explosives and 200 rifles. One senior Al Qaeda leader was reportedly captured.

The mass detentions therefore amount to little more than state terror against the Sunni population of Mosul, a majority of whom sympathise with the insurgency and many of whom are former members of Saddam Hussein's Baathist Party.

The city was under total curfew until May 19 as the arrests were taking place. Vehicles and people were banned from the streets, imprisoning hundreds of thousands of residents in their homes. In a statement issued on May 14, the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS)—an umbrella organisation for several thousand Sunni clerics—opposed the “indiscriminate arrests”. A tribal chief told *Azzaman*: “Their arrests and raids are arbitrary”.

The Arabic web site *Fatehoon* published an exclusive report on May 20 alleging that a special operations unit of the Badr Brigade was in Mosul and had directed the mass arrests. Its sources claimed that the Badr operatives “specialised in assassinations, kidnappings and intelligence investigations” and had a 60-page list containing the names of “former officers, commanders, pilots and intelligence and security members of the former armed forces”. They also alleged that Kurdish pesh merga militia made up a substantial proportion of the government troops carrying out the house raids.

The Badr Brigade is the Iranian-trained militia of the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI), which infiltrated large numbers of its members into the Iraqi army and into the Interior Ministry police. ISCI and Maliki's Da'wa Party, the Shiite parties that dominate the pro-US government along with Kurdish nationalist parties, were bitter enemies of the former regime. Thousands of Sunnis and ex-Baathists were murdered allegedly by pro-occupation Shiite death squads operating from within the security forces during the sectarian civil war that raged in Iraq during 2006 and 2007.

An AMS statement published several days after the offensive made similar claims to *Fatehoon*, reporting that 120 officers of the former Iraqi Army had been seized from their homes. It also alleged that occupation forces “proceeded to arrest a number of university professors and students at random in different parts of Mosul”.

The clerics' statement, published in English by Al Jazeera, said the arrests “clearly indicates that the military campaign has further dimensions than those announced and that its goal is to crack down on the sons of this governorate (Mosul is the capital of Nineveh province) who reject the occupation and its allies... The AMS denounces this brutal operation which aims to liquidate all of the city's people who reject the occupiers and their destructive plans.”

A similar operation is now beginning in Baghdad's Sadr City—the working class stronghold of Shiite opponents of the occupation. News agencies reported yesterday that as many as 10,000 Iraqi government troops, backed by US air support, launched a pre-dawn drive into the two-thirds of the district that was still controlled by the Mahdi Army. The Associated Press reported that the government forces were “taking positions on main roads, rooftops and near hospitals” and had occupied virtually the entire suburb by the end of the day.

As in Mosul, the occupation forces did not come under attack. Shiite militiamen at this point are obeying directives from Moqtada al-Sadr to honour his agreement with Maliki to allow government troops and police to enter the area. Residents suggested to *New York Times* correspondents that the Mahdi Army had moved its commanders and heavy weapons out of the district. Rank-and-file fighters, who only two weeks ago were clashing each day with US troops, were reportedly sent out to distribute copies of the Koran to the government forces.

A Sadrist leader in Sadr City told the Associated Press that the situation was nevertheless tense. Sheik Salman al-Freiji said: "We were surprised by the size of the force... Their entry in such size has sparked fears that there could be violations of mosques and homes. There must be respect. We are attempting to maintain restraint so there is no retaliation, [but] this force is bigger than we expected, with tanks, and it could create a provocation".

The offers of "restraint" by the upper echelons of the Sadrist movement in exchange for "respect" from the Iraqi military are simply to obscure its growing capitulation to and collaboration with the US occupation. The deal made on May 10 by the Sadrists with their rivals in Maliki's government effectively handed Sadr City and its population over to the American and government forces. The next stage of the operation will reportedly involve the same type of searches and raids that have taken place in Mosul.

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