

Iraqi government offensive in Basra threatens to trigger Shiite uprising

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Fighting between Iraqi security forces, backed by the US military, and militia loyal to Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr continued unabated yesterday following a government offensive launched in the southern port city of Basra on Tuesday. Up to 200 people have been killed, many of them civilians, in clashes over the past three days in Basra, as well as the southern towns of Kut, Diwaniya, Hilla and Amara, and the sprawling slums of Sadr City in eastern Baghdad.

A great deal is at stake for Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who has moved to Basra to take personal charge of the operation. He has been under pressure to act against the Sadrists, not only from Washington, but from the two Shiite factions on which he rests—his own Da'wa party and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). The latter in particular has been engaged in a protracted power struggle with the Sadrists across southern Iraq in preparation for provincial elections due in October.

ISCI regards the Sadrist movement as a barrier to its ambition to establish an autonomous Shiite region in southern Iraq similar to the Kurdish region in the north. The Sadrist movement, with its large base of support in Baghdad, supports a strong central government and is opposed to ISCI's plans. Basra, which is Iraq's second largest city, a major port and adjacent to the country's southern oil fields, is at the centre of this rivalry.

In a statement on national TV yesterday, Maliki rejected calls by Sadrist leaders for him to leave Basra and start negotiations. "We entered this battle with determination and we will continue to the end. No retreat. No talks. No negotiations," he declared. Maliki issued a 72-hour ultimatum on Wednesday for militiamen in Basra to surrender their weapons or face the consequences. However, the Sadrist militias have ignored the deadline, which was due to expire today, and entrenched themselves in large areas of the city.

In a speech at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base yesterday, US President George Bush hailed Maliki's "bold decision to go after illegal groups in Basra". He declared that the operation demonstrated the progress made by Iraqi security forces, who had planned and led the operation. The offensive, Bush claimed, was one more sign that the "surge" of US troops "was bringing America closer to a key strategic victory in the war against these extremists and radicals".

In fact, as a number of US analysts have nervously noted, the assault in Basra has the potential to destroy what has been one of the key factors in the comparative lull in fighting in recent months—a ceasefire announced by Sadr last August, and renewed for another six months in February.

Time magazine, for instance, commented: "Could Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's attempts to reestablish control over Basra backfire? There is a growing possibility that it could become a wider intra-Shiite war, drawing in the forces loyal to radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose ceasefire has been key to the success of the US 'surge'. If so, the consequences for American military strategy in Iraq in an all-important political year will be grave."

As for claims that the Basra operation is Iraqi-led, Bush's speech makes clear that the impetus came from Washington, rather than Baghdad. There is no doubt that the entire offensive was planned, well in advance, in the closest collaboration with US generals. US advisors and "transition teams" are embedded with Iraqi soldiers in Basra. The US military is providing air support and intelligence to troops on the ground.

US military spokesman Major General Kevin Bergner refused to comment on what would happen if the Iraqi government failed to complete the Basra operation, saying only that it was "a very hypothetical question at this time". However, the Pentagon and the White House undoubtedly have contingency plans and are watching the situation very closely. The *Christian Science Monitor* noted that the US-funded television station Al Hurra reported that a contingent of US marines was in Basra, involved mainly in sniper operations.

Despite American military support and superior firepower, the Iraqi offensive in Basra, which involves nearly 30,000 soldiers and police, appears to have stalled. According to a *New York Times* article, as much as half the city was under militia control yesterday. "Witnesses said that from the worn, closely packed brick buildings of one Madhi stronghold, the Hayaniya neighbourhood, Mahdi fighters fired mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, automatic weapons and sniper rifles at seemingly helpless Iraqi army units pinned on a main road outside, their armoured vehicles unable to enter the narrow streets," it stated.

The newspaper noted that hospitals in parts of the city were reported full. Most casualties were civilians caught in the crossfire, according to hospital officials. Violence was continuing to spread, including to areas south of the city. One of the two major pipelines from the southern oil fields was blown up yesterday, cutting capacity by one third and sending international oil prices spiking to more than \$US106 a barrel.

The *Christian Science Monitor* reported: "Al Sharquiya TV, a private Iraqi station often critical of the Iraqi government, showed what it said were exclusive images of masked militiamen—some of them in military fatigues—parading Humvees they had seized from Iraqi government forces in Basra... Yahya al-Taiee, a Basra-based lawyer and member of the Sadr movement, said many Iraqi soldiers have surrendered themselves and their vehicles to the Mahdi Army."

Clashes spread

Fierce fighting has also occurred on other southern Iraqi towns. The Associated Press cited local officials as saying that 40 people had been killed and 75 wounded in clashes in Kut. On Wednesday, a US air strike on an alleged Mahdi Army base in Hilla resulted in a large number of casualties. A police source told Reuters that 29 people had been killed and 39 wounded during an attack that lasted an hour and destroyed six houses.

Tensions are high in Baghdad's largely working class Shiite suburb of Sadr City after sporadic clashes between Madhi Army fighters and Iraqi and US forces. Militiamen have erected barricades and patrol the streets. Iraqi and US troops have thrown up a cordon

around the suburb. A *New York Times* photographer, who managed to get into Sadr City, reported “more layers of checkpoints, each one run by about two dozen heavily-armed Madhi Army fighters clad in tracksuits and T-shirts. Tyres burned in the city centre, gunfire echoed against shuttered stores, and teams of fighters in pickup trucks moved about brandishing machine guns, sniper rifles and rocket propelled grenade launchers.”

The heavily-fortified Green Zone, which houses the US embassy and the Iraqi government, has come under repeated rocket and mortar attack in recent days. Two American officials have been killed over the past week and a number of US and Iraqis wounded.

Yesterday gunmen in Baghdad seized Tahseen al-Sheikhli, a member of the Maliki government and the chief spokesman for the Baghdad security plan. The Iraqi military has now imposed a three-day curfew on the capital, banning any unauthorised vehicles or pedestrians from the streets from 11 p.m. on Thursday to 5 a.m. on Sunday

As fighting continued, Iraqi and US spokesmen continued to claim that the Sadrist movement was not the real target of the assaults. Maliki’s adviser Sadiq al-Rikabi told the media: “The battle in Basra is not really a political battle. It’s purely security—against the criminals and all the murderers.” In a similar vein, Major General Bergner denied that the actions were against the Mahdi Army. It is the government of Iraq taking responsibility and acting to deal with criminals on the streets,” he said.

Few people are fooled by this fiction, least of all Madhi Army militiamen. A commander in Sadr City, Abu Mortada, told the *New York Times*: “The US, the Iraqi government and SCIRI [now known as ISCI] are against us. They are trying to finish us. They want power for the Iraqi government and SCIRI.” Sadrist parliamentarians in Baghdad issued an appeal yesterday for an end to the assault in Basra, stating: “We call on our brothers in the Iraqi army and the brave national police not to be tools of death in the hands of the new dictatorship.”

The attempt to maintain the lie that the fighting is directed against “criminals” or rogue elements of the Mahdi Army is aimed at encouraging Moqtada al-Sadr not to tear up the ceasefire. For months, the cleric has been walking an increasingly precarious political tightrope between his tacit acceptance of the US-led occupation—as signified by the truce—and mounting anger among his supporters. US and Iraqi forces have exploited the ceasefire to round up Madhi Army militiamen and attack their bases. After effectively turning a blind eye for months, Sadr finally protested in recent weeks and demanded the release of Mahdi Army detainees.

In response to the offensive against the Madhi Army in Basra, Sadr has called for a campaign of civil disobedience, but has kept the ceasefire in place. He is, however, sitting on top of a political volcano. In the working class Shiite suburbs of Baghdad, Basra and other southern towns, there is deep-seated hostility to the Maliki government’s close relations with the Bush administration and collaboration with the US military occupation, which has brought nothing but death, destruction and plummeting living standards.

Anger welled over in protests by Sadr’s supporters in Baghdad yesterday. A *Guardian* report put the numbers involved at tens of thousands in separate rallies in Sadr City and the Baghdad suburb of Kadhimiyah, where protestors carried a coffin with a picture of Maliki and chanted “Maliki, keep your hands off. People do not want you.” Placards and signs also demanded the execution of ISCI head Abdul Aziz al-Hakim. Both men were denounced as US

stooges.

While Sadr is appealing for negotiations to defuse the situation, the Maliki government backed by Washington appears determined to continue the offensive in Basra and other areas against the Mahdi Army. Far from consolidating the US occupation, these operations have the potential to trigger a Shiite uprising that would rapidly engulf the Maliki government.

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