

US atrocity in Najaf

By the Editorial Board
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The US assault on Najaf is a war crime. The spectacle of the world's foremost imperialist power unleashing its overwhelmingly superior military might against poorly armed opponents of foreign occupation recalls the most notorious crimes of the twentieth century, including the fascist bombardment of Guernica in Spain, Mussolini's rape of Ethiopia, and the Nazi blitzkrieg against Germany's European neighbors in World War II.

The US military, in the name of Washington's puppet government under Iyad Allawi, is carrying out the slaughter of supporters of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr who have taken up arms against the attempt to turn Iraq into a de-facto American colony.

The coverage by US television networks and the American press conveys none of the true horror of what is being perpetrated by the 11th Marine Expeditionary Force and First Cavalry Division in Najaf. US bombers, helicopter gunships, field artillery and tanks are being unleashed against Iraqi fighters armed only with small arms and grenade launchers that are next to useless against American armored vehicles.

If the US body counts from Najaf are accurate, at least 500 of the Iraqi fighters have been killed, and thousands more wounded, in a week of bitter fighting to drive Sadr's Mahdi Army militiamen from their defensive positions in the cemetery to the west of the Imam Ali Mosque—one of the most sacred of Shiite Muslim shrines.

Describing the conduct of the US forces, a Marine spokesman told the Associated Press on August 11 that they had "pretty much just been patrolling and flying helicopters all over the place, and when we see something bad, we blow it up."

No estimate is being given by the US attackers of civilian casualties, but given the massive firepower being thrown against urban centers—including the Shiite slum of Sadr City in Baghdad and other southern Iraqi cities besides Najaf—they must number in the thousands.

Earlier this week, the US military told tens of thousands of Najaf residents their homes were a "military zone" and ordered them to evacuate. Thousands chose to defy the invaders, or were prevented from leaving by the fighting raging all around them.

Electricity, water and medical services have ceased to function in the city of 600,000. Thousands of shrines and graves in the revered cemetery have been destroyed or damaged. Much of the historic old city, dating back 1,300 years, which surrounds the mosque has been reduced to rubble.

The US media has failed to take note of the bitter irony in the American military laying waste to the religious and cultural center of Iraq's Shiite population. The "no-fly zone" enforced by the US over southern Iraq from 1991 until last year's invasion was justified as a measure to protect the Shiite population from repression by Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime. The US invasion was propagated as an act of "liberation" of the oppressed Shiites.

Now the American "liberators" are unleashing the most savage repression the Shiites have suffered since 1991. The Shiite masses have responded with large demonstrations against the slaughter in Najaf in cities such as Baghdad, Basra, Nasiriya and other predominantly Shiite cities in Iraq. Demonstrations have also been held in other Middle Eastern countries.

Following a US push into the city center over the past 24 hours, hundreds of Sadr's militiamen, and possibly Sadr himself, are making a last stand inside the compound of the Imam Ali Mosque. They are surrounded by tanks and thousands of American troops, as well as a largely symbolic presence of Iraqi troops under the nominal command of the US-installed interim government. The US forces are demanding the surrender of Sadr's militia and threatening to storm the complex or starve out the defenders. Isolated pockets of the Mahdi Army are believed to be trapped inside the cemetery and buildings in the old city.

The looming massacre underscores an irrefutable political fact: the entire charade of installing a "sovereign" interim government was a smokescreen behind which Washington prepared a bloodbath against the Iraqi resistance. For all the cynical claims in the US media that the puppet regime under Prime Minister Allawi represented a "transition to democracy," its real function all along was to provide an indigenous face for a homicidal onslaught that Washington had wanted to carry out last spring, but felt obliged to delay for political reasons.

The physical destruction of the Shiite movement led by Sadr was first ordered by the Bush administration in March, when the US authority in Iraq ordered the arrest of Sadr himself and other leaders of the Mahdi Army. At the same time, the White House ordered an assault on the city of Fallujah, the center of the Sunni-based insurgency against the occupation.

The repression, however, provoked an uprising that rapidly engulfed most of Iraq. The official US lie that resistance to the occupation was limited to supporters of the former Baathist regime was exposed by the entry into struggle of tens of thousands of Iraqi Shiite and Sunni youth from the working class and most oppressed areas of the country.

In the United States, the scenes of indiscriminate bombing of Iraqi cities, soaring American casualties, and the revelations of torture at Abu Ghraib prison led to a groundswell of antiwar sentiment. In polls conducted in the US in late April, 58 percent said the war "was not worth the loss of American life," and 50 percent supported the withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq "as soon as possible."

The Bush administration responded to the growing political and military crisis by ordering US forces in Iraq to make a series of tactical retreats. Truces were struck, first with the Sunni insurgents in Fallujah, and then with the Mahdi Army in Najaf, Karbala and the Sadr City suburb of Baghdad.

The aim of the truces was always to give US imperialism the time to prepare the political and military conditions for the bloodbath that has now begun. The Bush administration pushed ahead with the installation of a “sovereign” interim government, with the sanction of the United Nations, in order to provide a fig leaf of Iraqi support for mass US repression.

The White House ensured that Allawi, who had been on the payroll of the CIA for a decade, was named as prime minister. Allawi’s qualifications were his total subservience to American imperialism and his well-known penchant for brutality. He has not hesitated to place his imprimatur on the renewed US offensive against the Iraqi resistance.

To spearhead the offensive, 7,000 extra Marine assault troops were rushed to Iraq by mid-July, taking up positions outside Fallujah and Najaf. These military preparations were carried out in conjunction with crucial political preparations within the US. In this, the American media and, even more critically, the Democratic Party, played an indispensable role.

The corporate conglomerates that control the American media are in full agreement with the real war aims behind the invasion: the installation of a puppet government to sanction permanent US military bases in Iraq and the takeover of the country’s oil resources by US corporate interests.

From right-wing publications to so-called liberal publications such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, the press has worked to suppress the antiwar views of the majority of the American population and censor any questioning of the legitimacy of the war.

But the greatest service to the war criminals responsible for the events now unfolding was provided by the Democratic Party and its presidential candidate, John Kerry. It is no accident that the current offensive comes in the wake of the Democratic National Convention, which was a non-stop spectacle of militarism and chauvinism. The Democratic Party hierarchy and Kerry have made every effort to marginalize antiwar sentiment. Opposition to the Iraq invasion has been excluded from the official discussion in the lead-up to the November presidential election.

Kerry himself has declared that any administration he heads will keep US troops in Iraq until “stability” is established—a euphemism for the total suppression of the Iraqi resistance.

The willingness of the American ruling class to employ the most savage and brutal methods to achieve its imperialist aims cannot be underestimated. More than three million Vietnamese died before US imperialism finally accepted defeat. Washington and Wall Street are more than prepared to inflict similar carnage in Iraq.

The authors of the Iraq invasion are deluding themselves, however, if they believe that the mass murder being committed in Najaf will consolidate the country as a US colony. It has already intensified the resistance to the US-led occupation forces and further inflamed the popular hostility toward Allawi’s regime.

Fearing the retribution of the masses, the Najaf province deputy governor and 16 of the 30 members of the US-vetted Najaf provincial council have resigned in protest. The US military has been forced to deploy thousands of troops on the fringes of Sadr City in Baghdad to prepare for major battles with the thousands of Iraqis who have taken up arms among the suburb’s two million residents. Fighting is taking place in Kut, Nasiriya and other Shiite cities.

The British forces occupying southern Iraq are confronting the prospect of a mass uprising in the predominantly Shiite southern cities of Basra and Amara. The deputy governor of Basra province, Hajj

Salam Awdeh al-Maliky, called Tuesday for the shutdown of oil exports from the city’s port “in response to the crimes committed against Iraqis by an illegal and unelected government, and occupation forces who claimed they came to liberate Iraq, but it turned out have come to kill Iraqis.”

Workers in the southern Iraqi oil fields have walked out on strike, shutting down operations.

An estimated 1,000 British-recruited police and paramilitary troops in Basra have declared their allegiance to Maliky and hailed his threats to join forces with Sadr.

The main Sunni Muslim religious organization, the Association of Muslim Scholars, has issued a *fatwa*, or instruction, prohibiting all Sunnis in the interim government’s military and police forces from assisting the US military in the attack on Sadr’s movement. Fighting is once again flaring in the Fallujah area.

Across the Middle East and beyond, the US occupation of Iraq is inflaming the masses and intensifying their outrage over the venality and impotency of their own bourgeois governments. The popular sentiment in Iran—the most populous Shiite Muslim nation—for an open struggle against the US is such that the country’s theocracy has been compelled to issue threats of intervention. A question mark hovers over the survival of some of the key regimes upon which US imperialist interests in the region depend: in particular, those of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan, the Saudi royal family, and the Pakistani military dictatorship of Pervez Musharraf.

Above all, US imperialism is on a collision course with the American working class. While the criminality of the occupation of Iraq may be excluded from official discourse, it is sowing increasing discontent and revulsion among tens of millions of Americans.

Against the attempts of the Democrats and the media to drown out the mass opposition to the crimes being committed in the name of the American people, the demand must be raised for the immediate withdrawal of all US and allied forces, the payment of reparations for the immense suffering inflicted on the Iraqi people, and the prosecution of the organizers, planners and propagators of the invasion of Iraq for war crimes.

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