Baghdad protest demands an end to US occupation of Iraq

By Peter Symonds
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Tens of thousands of Iraqis marched in Baghdad on Saturday in one of the largest political demonstrations of the past two years to demand the withdrawal of all US and foreign troops. While the protest was organised by the militant cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, small groups of Sunnis and Christians, determined to express their hostility to the continuing US occupation, joined his Shiite supporters during the rally at Firdos Square in the city centre.

The demonstration punctures the lie, assiduously cultivated by the Bush administration and the US press, that opposition to the US occupation is limited to small segments of the Sunni population connected to the ousted Baathist regime and Islamic extremists. The protest reflects widespread anger not only at the US military presence and its flagrant trampling on basic democratic rights, but also the deep economic and social crisis facing the majority of Iraqis.

The international media has deliberately downplayed the protest. In contrast to the extensive coverage of anti-Syrian demonstrations in the Lebanon, which were trumpeted as the beginning of the so-called Cedar Revolution, the Baghdad demonstration was relegated to secondary news. It was an obvious embarrassment to the Bush administration, which has been seeking to promote the installation of a new Iraqi president and prime minister last week as a step toward democracy.

The choice of Firdos Square was not accidental. Following the capture of Baghdad two years ago, the US military, together with small numbers of Iraqi supporters of then US favourite Ahmed Chalabi, staged the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in the same square for the media cameras. At Saturday's demonstration, protestors mocked this piece of contrived propaganda by pulling down effigies of US President George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, as well as Hussein.

Unlike the Pentagon's theatrics in 2003, last weekend's protest had broad support. The exact numbers are not clear. While the media generally reported that tens of thousands took part, the figure could have been much higher. The *Los Angeles Times* noted in passing that estimates were up to 300,000. Most protesters were Shiite supporters of al-Sadr, either from the impoverished slums of Sadr City in Baghdad, or who travelled by bus from southern cities such as Kut, Amara, Basra and Nassiriya.

Other organisations took part, however. Samir Naim, the leader of a group of Christian demonstrators, told the media that Iraqis, Muslim and Christian, wanted to be left alone to rebuild their country. Supporters of the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), the influential Sunni organisation that called for a boycott of the January election, also participated.

On Friday, AMS leader Sheik Harith al-Dahri denounced US forces for "killing the Iraqi people daily" and called on all Iraqis to join the protest the following day. "The people must speak with one voice and say: 'No to the occupation; the occupiers must leave'. Two years have passed and all we see is bloodshed, destruction and looting," he said.

In the city of Ramadi to the west of Baghdad, a predominantly Sunni demonstration of 5,000 also called for a deadline for the withdrawal of US and other foreign troops. Some marched to a US military checkpoint to demand an end to curfews and checkpoints.

Conscious of the widespread international opposition to the US invasion, many of the Baghdad protesters carried banners and signs in English to make their message clear to a wider audience. Some of the banners read: "Leave Our Country", "Force the occupiers out

of our country" and "Yes for Islam, yes for Iraq. No to occupation, no to terrorism."

As they marched through the streets, the protesters chanted: "No, no to the Americans. Yes, yes to Islam". A number of the Iraqi police on duty raised their fists in a sign of solidarity.

As well as demanding the withdrawal of US forces, the protesters called for the release of thousands of Iraqis arbitrarily detained without charge. Some of the demonstrators dressed up in orange prison jumpsuits and acted out the torture inflicted on Iraqi detainees by US soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison. "We have emerged from the jails of Saddam, only to enter the jails of the Americans," cleric Muayad al-Khazraji told the press.

The third demand was for a speedy trial for the "American agent" Saddam Hussein, a reference designed to highlight Washington's close collaboration with the Iraqi dictator during the 1980s. Some of the protesters condemned "the Triangle of Death"—Bush, Blair and Hussein—a pun on the Pentagon's reference to "the Sunni Triangle" of anti-US resistance.

The comments of participants to the media indicate the depth of feeling. Ali Abboud, 21, declared: "We're defending our country, our people, our sacred places and our beliefs. We have one set of beliefs and the Americans another. We won't let them stay."

Munaf Abbas, a chemical engineer from Amara, blamed the US presence for continuing violence in Iraq: "America is the mother of all terrorism. All the explosions are happening because they are here."

Reflecting frustration over high unemployment and the lack of basic services, Ali Abdallah, a shop owner said: "After two years of occupation, the process of government formation has been so slow. When will they be able to secure the country, to bring us electricity, water, health services, and schools?"

Al-Sadr was not present at the rally, but his statement, read in Arabic and English, declared: "We want a stable Iraq and this will only happen through independence. There will be no security and stability unless the occupiers leave... The occupiers must leave my country."

Supporters of al-Sadr fought protracted battles twice last year in Sadr City and Najaf against heavily-armed US troops. The cleric has been largely silent since reaching an informal truce with US forces last October. While not participating in the election himself, al-Sadr tacitly supported the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)—a coalition of mainly Shiite parties that won a majority of assembly seats.

The substantial political protest on Saturday underlines the fragile character of the next Iraqi government, even before it has been completely formed. In order to appeal to mass popular sentiment, the UIA had to campaign on the basis of calling for a timetable for US withdrawal and promises to improve living standards. Given that the major UIA parties openly supported the US invasion, the coalition relied on al-Sadr's support to give it credibility among the Shiite majority.

Having won the election, UIA leader Ibrahim al Jafaari, who was installed as prime minister last Thursday, has backed away from demands for an end to the US occupation. Al-Sadr, who draws his support from layers of the urban poor in Sadr City and other centres, is clearly under popular pressure to oppose this backdown. About two dozen national assembly members who support al-Sadr were present at the rally.

Saturday's demonstration is a sign of things to come. Incapable of fulfilling its election promises, the new government will inevitably confront growing hostility that will intensify divisions within its own ranks. Al-Sadr's supporters told the media that the protest was the beginning of a non-violent campaign to oust US and other foreign forces from Iraq.