

US military escalates confrontation with Shiite militia in Iraq

By Peter Symonds
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Two days of fierce fighting in the Iraqi city of Diwaniyah is one more sign that the US military is preparing for a bloody showdown with the militia forces of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The target of any new offensive will be not just Sadr's Mahdi Army, but the Shiite urban poor who are overwhelmingly hostile to the US occupation and who demonstrated in their tens of thousands on August 4 against the US-Israeli war on Lebanon.

The clashes in Diwaniyah, 180 kilometres south of Baghdad, erupted on Sunday after government troops arrested a member of the Sadrist movement for allegedly planning a bomb attack. According to the army, 23 soldiers and 30 militiamen, as well as a number of civilians, died in the fighting. Major General Othman al-Ghanimi accused the militants of publicly executing a number of soldiers, a claim that the Sadrists denied.

Nasir al-Saadi, a spokesman for Sadr's parliamentary bloc, told the *New York Times* that the army had attacked Mahdi-dominated neighbourhoods late on Sunday night, damaging homes and killing civilians. Iraqi soldiers were backed by Polish troops and US warplanes, which bombed at least one alleged militia position. According to the army, the Mahdi fighters were joined by other militia groups in continuous fighting that lasted into Monday afternoon.

The US-led military command in Baghdad issued a statement declaring that the Iraqi army and police had successfully "fended off" an attack by a large number of "terrorists" in three districts of Diwaniyah. In comments to Associated Press, however, army captain Fatik Aied said the gun battles had broken out when Iraqi soldiers launched raids in the city's southern suburbs to flush out militants and seize weapons. Asked about the clashes with Iraqi soldiers, one Mahdi

militiaman involved in the fighting told the *Times*: "We know they are our brothers, but the Americans are pushing them against us."

While the US military claimed a victory in Diwaniyah, the fighting was inconclusive, even after the army brought in reinforcements, and only ended after a truce was negotiated. Sadr, who was personally involved in the negotiations with provincial officials, tried to distance himself from the clashes. Saheb al-Ameri, a spokesman in Najaf, blamed the fighting on the "personal behaviour" of some Mahdi Army members. However, the efforts of the Sadrist movement to downplay the battle in Diwaniyah will not prevent a broader confrontation with the US military.

A series of articles have appeared in the US press vilifying Sadr, blaming his Mahdi Army for the escalating sectarian conflict in Iraq and urging the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to take a tougher stance. In early August, in the aftermath of the mass protest in Baghdad against war on Lebanon, outgoing British ambassador William Patey declared in a leaked memo: "Preventing the Jaish al Mahdi from developing into a state within a state, as Hezbollah has done in Lebanon, will be a priority."

Patey's remarks echoed General John Abizaid, US commander in the Middle East, who told National Public Radio in late July that a confrontation with the Mahdi Army was inevitable. "If you don't do this, you will end up with a situation like you have in Lebanon, where the militia becomes a state within a state." In comments to the US Senate Armed Services Committee, Abizaid declared: "In my opinion, there are groups within the Mahdi Army that are under the pay of the Iranian government [and] are terrorist organisations."

Paradoxically, of all the Shiite organisations in Iraq, the Sadrists, who espouse Arab and Iraqi nationalism, are the least likely to rely on Iranian assistance. The party with the closest links is the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which, with Tehran's tacit support, backed the US occupation from the outset and is a linchpin for the Maliki government.

A *Washington Post* article entitled "Sadr's militia and the slaughter in the streets" accused the Mahdi Army of the arbitrary murder of Sunnis. US Lieutenant Colonel Mark Meadows told the newspaper: "I have no doubt... they hold trial courts and execute people." He described the Mahdi Army as "probably the largest, most aggressive militia in the country... They are a terrorist organisation. They terrorise people."

In the wake of the Diwaniyah clashes, *Time* published an article yesterday entitled "Failing the test against Iraqi militias". Pushing for a sustained offensive, it commented: "For weeks the US and Iraqi militaries have been striking piecemeal at an enemy they are not even allowed to name: Moqtada al-Sahr's Mahdi Army. And after fierce clashes Monday, it appears that Iraq's government and military is only willing to go so far in their efforts to rein in the powerful Shiite militia."

The US-backed attacks in Diwaniyah are clearly a dress rehearsal for further attacks on the Sadrist movement—particularly on the huge slums of Baghdad's Sadr City. These Shiite suburbs have virtually been a no-go area since the Mahdi Army fought pitched battles with US forces in 2004 in the capital and the southern cities of Najaf and Karbala. During the current US operations aimed at winning back control of Baghdad, the American military has so far avoided Sadr City.

Any offensive against the Mahdi Army will rapidly provoke a crisis in the Maliki government, which rests on a coalition of Shiite fundamentalist parties. The Sadrist movement has 30 parliamentarians and five cabinet ministers, including key portfolios controlling government services. More importantly for Maliki, the support of the Sadrists has enabled his government to deflect growing anger among the Shiite poor over its failure to end the US occupation and improve living standards.

A military assault on Sadrist strongholds would also rupture the country's highly factionalised security

forces. Shiite soldiers, many of whom are ex-militiamen, may simply refuse to fight against the Mahdi Army. The *Los Angeles Times* noted on Tuesday that 100 Iraqi soldiers from a battalion of 550 stationed in the southeastern province of Maysan refused last weekend to deploy to Baghdad. The refusal of the Shiite troops to move was particularly embarrassing as the unit and its commander were regarded by the US military as among the best in the Iraqi army.

Since the 2004 clashes with the US military, Sadr himself has attempted to maintain an increasingly difficult balancing act—between his social base among impoverished Shiites, on the one hand, and support for the US puppet government, on the other. While he felt compelled to condemn the US-Israeli war on Lebanon and to warn the US against any attack on Iran, Sadr has tried to rein in his Mahdi Army and dissociate himself from more radical elements in the ranks of his movement.

Sadr's manoeuvrings will not prevent an all-out offensive by the US military. As the US occupation sinks further into the quagmire, the Bush administration will be driven to more desperate measures. The denunciations of Sadr's "state within a state" reflect the fear that Shiite working class enclaves such as Sadr City can become the focus for the eruption of a radical movement directed at the US occupation of Iraq and its militarist policies throughout the region. The danger for Washington is all the greater as it escalates its confrontation with Iran.

It is these considerations that are propelling the US military into reckless and bloody operations against the Mahdi Army, regardless of the consequences.

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