

Iraqi prime minister pledges new offensives in Basra and Baghdad

By Peter Symonds
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Despite last week's humiliating setback to the US-backed offensive into Basra, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki vowed yesterday that operations would continue "to liberate" areas of the country held by "criminals" and "outlaws". "Basra was a prisoner and now it has been freed," he absurdly claimed. "Other cities need the same battle, and also in Baghdad in areas where people are still in the hands of these gangsters."

Maliki identified Sadr City and Shula—both working class suburbs of Baghdad dominated by the Mahdi Army militia loyal to Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr—as being among the targets for "liberation". In a crude attempt to stem widespread anger and opposition, he promised that his government would spend \$100 million in Basra and create 25,000 jobs.

Maliki's comments were reinforced by top US officers and officials who insisted that, despite obvious weaknesses, the government's determination to wield its security forces to suppress militias and a hostile population was a positive sign. Estimates put the number of dead in six days of fighting at more than 600, but the figure could be far higher.

US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Mike Mullen declared on Wednesday that it would take a while to figure out who had won and who had lost in Basra. But he emphasised: "We have been looking forward to a time when the Iraqi security forces would in fact take the lead and be aggressive in terms of providing for their own security. So from that standpoint, that strategic intent was very positive."

In a similar vein, US ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker told the media yesterday he was impressed that Maliki had acted "decisively", and encouraged that the Iraqi government was willing to take on Shiite militias. "I had an understanding that this was going to be an effort to get down, show they were serious with additional forces, put the squeeze on, develop a full picture of conditions and then act accordingly," he explained. "I was not expecting, frankly, a major battle from day one."

All these comments contain a strong element of self-justification. Having gone to Basra last week to take personal charge of the offensive, Maliki is seeking to shore up his position. Despite the involvement of 30,000 Iraqi troops and police backed by US and British air strikes and artillery barrages, the operation failed to make any significant inroads into Mahdi Army strongholds. The clashes spread to the sprawling working class slums of Baghdad, such as Sadr City, and other southern towns and cities.

While Maliki claimed to be targeting "criminals", the only neighbourhoods attacked were those controlled by the Mahdi Army. Areas under the domination of its rivals—the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which is closely aligned to Maliki, and the Al Fadila al Islamiya party—were left untouched. While Sadr has increasingly accommodated himself to the US occupation, he draws support from sections of Shiite workers and the urban poor who are deeply hostile to the American military presence and its catastrophic social consequences.

After six days of fighting, government soldiers were confined to central Basra and were under sustained attack. Morale had plummeted, with groups of police and soldiers refusing to take part and publicly handing over their weapons to the Mahdi Army. In Basra, Interior Ministry spokesman Abdul Kareem Khalaf acknowledged this week that 407 police officers had been fired for working with militias during the fighting. Speaking to the *Los Angeles Times*, a Western security official estimated police desertions at more than 50 percent in Mahdi Army strongholds such as Sadr City and in parts of Basra.

The fighting only subsided after Sadr issued a statement on Sunday ordering the Mahdi Army off the streets. The truce was the product of behind-the-scenes negotiations between senior government figures and Sadrist representatives in Najaf and Iran. A report in the *McClatchy Newspapers* indicated that a deal was brokered by elements within the Iranian government after Iraqi parliamentarians travelled to Iran on Friday and appealed to Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani, commander of the Quds brigades of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, for assistance.

The comments by Mullen and Crocker are clearly designed to put the best possible spin on an outcome that is deeply embarrassing for the Bush administration, which has branded the Quds force as a terrorist organisation responsible for arming and training anti-US militias in Iraq. In the midst of the Basra operation, Bush declared that it marked a "defining moment" for Iraq. Crocker and General David Petraeus, the top American commander in Iraq, are due to testify before the US Congress next week.

Washington claimed that the offensive was Iraqi-led and organised, but the US was deeply involved from the outset. The operation was launched soon after US Vice President Dick Cheney visited Baghdad, where he pressed the Maliki government to do more to open up Iraqi oil reserves to US corporations. Control of Basra is central to any plans to expand production in Iraq's

southern fields. Pipeline networks, pumping stations, refineries and loading terminals are all concentrated near the city and neighbouring port.

An article in yesterday's *New York Times* indicated just how heavily the US was involved in the military operation. American and Iraqi officials developed a detailed proposal, "which involved the establishment of combat outposts in the city and the deployment of Iraqi SWAT teams, Iraqi Special Forces and Interior Ministry units, as well as Iraqi brigades." General Petraeus met with national security adviser, Mowaffak al-Rubaie, and other senior Iraqi officials on March 21 and Maliki himself the following day.

While claiming that Maliki had rushed in ill-prepared on March 24, the *New York Times* noted that Rear Admiral Edward Winters, experienced in special operations, was sent to Basra on March 25. Two days later, Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin III, American operational commander in Iraq, went to Basra. On March 28, Austen's senior deputy, Major General George Flynn, was dispatched to the Basra Operations Centre along with a team of American planners and other personnel.

"The United States also sent air controllers to call in air strikes on behalf of Iraqi units and moved additional helicopters and drones down to Basra and nearby Tallil. There were not enough military advisers for all the Iraqi reinforcements who were rushed south. So the United States took a company from the First Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division. It was divided into platoons, which were augmented with Air Force controllers and assigned to help the Iraqi forces," the article explained.

Ambassador Crocker was involved in providing political direction. "We strongly advised him [Maliki] to use his most substantial weapon, which is money, to announce major jobs programs, Basra cleanup, whatnot," Crocker told the *New York Times*. "And to do what he decided to do on his own: pay tribal figures to effectively finance an awakening for Basra." The "awakening" refers to the efforts of the US military to bribe key Sunni tribal leaders and their followers in Anbar province and other areas to join the American payroll as mercenaries against anti-occupation groups.

In the wake of the Basra operation, Washington is obviously considering the balance sheet. However, as the statements of US officials make clear, there is to be no backing down by the Maliki government. Whatever the deficiencies, the Pentagon and the White House are celebrating the fact that their puppet forces have been blooded in their first major battle. Already the uneasy truce in Basra is strained as government police and troops use the opportunity to consolidate their position, conduct probing operations into Mahdi Army strongholds and round up Sadrist militants.

On Wednesday, the Iraqi army put on a show of force in the Sadrist-dominated district of Hayaniyah. A convoy of a dozen vehicles entered the area, set up checkpoints, searched for several hours and then left. Cameraman Mazin al-Tayar said the soldiers had faced "many roadside bombs and mortar rounds". Another clash erupted in the Qibla area when soldiers detained two militiamen. Fighting also occurred during an army raid in the Maakal district. Sadrist officials accused the government of

violating the truce.

On Wednesday night, an air strike destroyed a house in Basra that the US military claimed was being used to attack Iraqi soldiers. Haj Juwad, however, told Associated Press: "While we were preparing for evening prayer, US aircraft bombed this house. We rushed to save survivors but in vain. The father, mother and a young boy were killed and three others buried under rubble. We evacuated two people and one is still under the rubble."

US military spokesman Major General Kevin Bergner told a news conference on Wednesday that two Iraqi army battalions and a company of Iraqi marines had moved into Basra ports to establish control. In Baghdad, US and Iraqi troops continue to ring the Sadrist strongholds of Sadr City and Shula, where a ban on vehicle movement has remained in force even after it was lifted elsewhere in the capital.

Sadr issued a statement yesterday complaining that the army and police were still making illegal arrests and attacks against his followers. He did not, however, blame the Maliki government. Instead he called on it to purge "corrupt elements" from the security forces. He has also called for a million Iraqis to march in the southern city of Najaf against the US occupiers on April 9—the fifth anniversary of the fall of Baghdad to US forces.

Significantly, Washington quickly dismissed Iran's assistance in brokering the truce with Sadr. US embassy spokeswoman Mirembe Nantongo declared that the United States was "not aware of what involvement Iran may or may not have had in brokering the ceasefire.... So far Iran has played a negative and unhelpful role in Iraq by financing and training extremist groups and we need to see a change in that behaviour."

A comment entitled, "The Second Iran-Iraq War" by the right-wing analyst Kimberly Kagan in the *Wall Street Journal* yesterday struck a more aggressive note. After accusing Iran of being behind the fighting in Basra, she concluded: "Above all, the US must recognise that Iran is engaged in a full-up proxy war against it in Iraq. Iranian agents and military forces are actively attacking US forces and the government of Iraq.... The US must defeat al Qaeda in Iraq and protect Iraq from the direct military intervention of Iran."

This contorted logic not only justifies Washington's criminal invasion of Iraq, but uses it as the pretext for a war of aggression against neighbouring Iran.

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