

Assaulting Iraq's Shia majority

By Milan Rai
znet.org | August 13, 2004

The United States has launched a war against a large part of the Iraqi people. It is the Bush Administration's desire for total domination, not the militancy of Shia insurgents, that has triggered this latest uprising. The US is trying to tame the Shia majority.

At the time of writing, US forces have surrounded the most holy site in Shia Islam, the Imam Ali mosque in the southern Iraqi city of Najaf, after eight days of fierce fighting with the forces of Muqtada al-Sadr, reportedly leaving hundreds dead. Elsewhere, 'US air strikes and fighting on the ground in the [largely Shia] Iraqi city of Kut have left 72 people dead and about 150 injured,' according to the interim Iraqi government. (BBC News Online, 12 Aug.)

'British troops [have also] fought fierce battles with militants in Amara and Basra... British troops launched an offensive overnight on Tuesday [10 Aug.] against Shia fighters in the southern town of Amara, killing 10 of them, the militiamen said. Hospital officials in the town said four civilians had also died.' (Telegraph, 12 Aug., p. 12)

'The purpose was to regain control of al-Amarah,' said Squadron Leader Spike Wilson, British forces spokesperson. ('British troops kill 10', Times, 12 Aug.) Control is what it's all about.

NEXT STOP: SADR CITY, BAGHDAD

'One of the biggest challenges to the interim prime minister, Iyad Allawi, is to stamp his authority on the capital. Sadr City, as the Shia suburb in north-east Baghdad is known, has increasingly started to resemble 1980s Beirut. Scores have died in the past week as American tanks and fighter aircraft have fought the insurgents.' (Telegraph, 12 Aug., p. 12)

Adrian Blomfield of the Telegraph visited Sadr City: 'That civilians are being killed by US troops is not in doubt. In a pool of blood on a hospital operating room floor yesterday, doctors were battling to save the life of six-year-old Ali Hussain – shot in the belly by soldiers in a US tank. The doctors said, "We have had at least 20 dead brought in today"'

Assaulting Iraq's Shia majority / 2

(Telegraph, 12 Aug., p. 12)

Mehdi Nouri, a shopkeeper in Sadr City, said: 'The Americans can never win us back now. The Americans are frightened of ordinary Iraqi people, that is why they hate us. We are frightened of them, that is why we hate them. In such a situation we can only see death and more deaths. We are begging the Americans to leave.' (Telegraph, 12 Aug., p. 12)

ALLAWI SERVES WASHINGTON

This is a US assault on Najaf. 'Iraqi government troops are also involved, though their participation may be largely for political reasons – not least to signal that this is an operation that has the full backing of Iraq's interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi.' (Jonathan Marcus, Diplomatic Correspondent, BBC News Online, 12 Aug.)

'Iyad Allawi, the interim prime minister, has laid his credibility on the line by promising total destruction of [Sadr's] Mahdi army.' (Telegraph, 12 Aug., p. 12) However, 'Ibrahim al-Jaafari, one of Iraq's two vice-presidents and leader of the biggest Shia party, the Da'awa, yesterday [11 Aug.] said US troops should stop fighting in Najaf and leave the job to Iraqi security forces.' (Guardian, 12 Aug., p. 3)

Jaafari 'has topped opinion polls as Iraq's most popular politician' earlier this year. (FT, 12 Aug., p. 7)

THE US STARTED THIS UPRISING, NOT SADR

'A diplomatic source in Baghdad said yesterday that it was unclear why the cleric was leading the bloody uprising, the second that he has instigated in four months.' ('British troops kill 10', Times, 12 Aug.)

Media reporting has done its best to obscure the origins of the violence. The simple truth is that, as in the case of the first 'Sadr uprising', this violence has been 'instigated' not by Shia militants, but by the United States.

Go back to the beginning, 2 Aug.: 'US forces in Iraq went on the offensive against two Islamist political groups yesterday [2 Aug.], arresting an influential Sunni cleric in Baghdad and breaking a two-month ceasefire with followers of Shia radical Moqtada al-Sadr, based in Kufa. Sheikh Mahmoud al-Sudani, a spokesman for Mr Sadr in Baghdad, told journalists that US soldiers had surrounded Mr Sadr's house. Reuters news agency quoted witnesses saying that US forces had moved into Mr Sadr's neighbourhood in Kufa, next to Najaf, and were exchanging fire with members of Mr Sadr's Shia militia, the Mehdi Army.' (FT, 3 Aug., p. 9)

Interestingly, despite later denials, it was clear in first reports that the mission was to arrest Sadr: 'The US military says an Iraqi arrest warrant has been issued for Sadr in relation to

Assaulting Iraq's Shia majority / 3

the killing of a rival cleric in Najaf last year.' The Independent also noted that 'during truce negotiations earlier this year, Iraqi officials said Sadr would not face arrest.' (Independent, 3 Aug., p. 25) Another lie.

A few days later Sabah Khadim, a senior adviser to the Allawi government, indirectly confirmed that arresting Sadr is a priority: 'Asked whether Mr Sadr would be arrested, Mr Khadim said: "We don't know exactly where he is, but we will fight all criminals. It does not matter how big they are.'" (Guardian, 7 Aug., p. 1)

The 2 Aug. raid was followed by 'days of mounting tension during which Mr Sadr's supporters seized 18 Iraqi police officers in response to the arrest of several of the cleric's senior aides.' Full-scale violence in Najaf came on 4 Aug. (Guardian, 6 Aug., p. 2)

It wasn't until 5 Aug. that 'Militants linked to the firebrand cleric Moqtada al-Sadr declared holy war on British forces'. In Basra, British forces had arrested four Sadr supporters on 3 Aug. Fighting broke out on 5 Aug. 'after the expiry of a noon deadline to release them.' (Telegraph, 6 Aug., p. 14)

All this is very like the start of the spring 'Sadr uprising', which was triggered 'after the US-led occupation authorities closed his newspaper, arrested a key aide and called for his arrest over the killing of a moderate Shia leader.' (BBC News Online, 16 June)

On 5 Aug., a Sadr spokesperson in Amara said of this latest violence, quite accurately, 'The ceasefire is over because of the actions of the occupation forces.' (Telegraph, 6 Aug., p. 14)

SADR CALLS FOR A CEASEFIRE

Despite all this, on the same day, 'a spokesman for Mr Sadr called for the restoration of a truce agreed in June between Mr Sadr's forces and US troops.' (FT, 6 Aug., p. 5)

The governor of Najaf, Adnan al-Zurufi, responded to this appeal with the statement that, 'There is no compromise or room for another truce.' (Times, 7 Aug., p. 18)

A US diplomat said, 'This is one battle we really do feel we can win.' (Telegraph, 7 Aug., p. 12)

The reason Sadr wants a ceasefire is because he wants to become part of the political process. As part of the first truce, 'Mr Sadr issued a statement calling on his men who are not from Najaf to "do their duty" and go home... [and] announced he would set up a political party to contest elections next year.' ('Sadr orders militia to quit Najaf', BBC News Online, 16 June)

The BBC's Dumeetha Luthra in Baghdad suggested that the order for non-resident fighters to leave Najaf might be 'a tentative step to secure a place in a future Iraqi government.' Sadr 'urged supporters not attack Iraqi security forces, and said the recently formed interim government was a opportunity to "build a unified Iraq".' ('Sadr orders militia to quit Najaf', BBC News Online, 16 June)

Assaulting Iraq's Shia majority / 4

Sadr was no longer calling the interim government a puppet of the US; he was preparing for political, not military, mobilisation.

It is precisely the political strength of the Shia majority that the Allawi government and the Bush Administration fear and wish to destroy. That is why they launched the raid to capture Sadr. That is why they are willing to invade Najaf and kill hundreds. That is why they are assaulting Shia communities all over Iraq.

It is not Sadr's guns, but his votes that pose a threat to US domination. Elections (even the national assembly conference) cannot be held until the opposition has been co-opted or crushed.

Private Lee O'Callaghan, who was killed in fighting in Basra on 9 Aug. was due to return to the UK the following week. His aunt, Margaret Evans, said, 'My message to Tony Blair is we should not be there. Why are we in Iraq? My message would be, get the rest of the kids out.' (Telegraph, 11 Aug., p. 10)

Milan Rai is the author of War Plan Iraq: Ten Reasons Against War (2002) and Chomsky's Politics (1995).