

Fighting in Najaf exposes an unpopular, isolated Iraqi regime

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The current battle for Iraqi city of Najaf has exposed just how isolated and dependent on Washington the interim government of Prime Minister Ayad Allawi is. While popular support for rebel Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr has been visibly growing over the weekend, Allawi confronted angry protests at the UN-sponsored three-day national conference which began on Sunday. Delegates demanded an end to US attacks on the Old City of Najaf and the Imam Ali Shrine where al-Sadr's militia forces are entrenched.

The conference organised with Washington's backing was to be a showpiece designed to demonstrate support for the Allawi regime and the US occupation. Its 1,000 delegates were all carefully vetted. The whole affair was so obviously unrepresentative that the UN insisted a fortnight ago on a delay to encourage another 300 people to take part. Al-Sadr's supporters and a number of other Iraqi organisations denounced the gathering as a sham and refused to take part.

The conference is being held in siege-like conditions in the heavily fortified Green Zone in central Baghdad. US tanks guarded the zone, a curfew was imposed in surrounding areas and journalists were told to wear helmets and flak jackets when entering the building. Even with these elaborate security measures, several mortar rounds rocked the conference building on Sunday.

Absurdly hailed as a "step towards democracy" by UN and US officials, the purpose of this stage-managed meeting was to select a national assembly with limited powers to review government policy and to prepare for national elections in January. Yet the first two days of the conference have been dominated by the events in Najaf and the resistance to the US occupation of the country. Even in this rarefied atmosphere the anger of ordinary Iraqis over the bloodbath being prepared in Najaf by the US and its political stooges made itself felt.

As soon as UN special envoy to Iraq Ashraf Jehangir Qazi finished speaking on Sunday, dozens of delegates leapt to their feet, chanting "Yes to Najaf" and raising their fists in the air. "As long as there are air strikes and shelling we can't have a conference," some shouted. Speaker after

speaker demanded that Allawi halt the fighting and a group of some 100 delegates threatened to walk out.

Falah Hassan from the Shiite Political Council declared: "The Iraqi government bears responsibility for what is going on in Najaf. It has brought US forces to hit our people in Najaf. Our demand is to halt the military operations in Najaf and other parts of Iraq. We will withdraw from the conference within 24 hours if our demands are not met."

In the end, the protesters relented, agreeing to dispatch a delegation of 50 to Najaf to attempt to convince al-Sadr to disarm his militia and take part in the "political process"—in other words, to accept the US-imposed regime and its institutions. Falah Hassan dismissed the proposal as "smoke and mirrors" but remained in the conference with his supporters.

The resolution was not, however, what Allawi wanted. In the midst of bitter fighting in Najaf last week, Allawi gave the green light for the US military to crush al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia, declaring he would "teach these criminal outlaws the lesson they deserve". Negotiations on Friday and Saturday rapidly broke down, setting the stage for an all-out offensive. Now Allawi has been compelled to prevail on the US military to put the operation on hold, very temporarily at least, while the conference delegation travels to Najaf today.

The criticisms in the national conference are just a pale reflection of far broader opposition to the US occupation and support for al-Sadr and other resistance groups. While Allawi was sheltering behind US tanks in the Green Zone, support was arriving in Najaf for al-Sadr from other towns and cities over the weekend.

Ten minibuses with armed al-Sadr loyalists arrived from the impoverished Shiite suburb of Sadr City in Baghdad. A convoy of 40 trucks brought food, water and medicine from Fallujah. Spokesman Ghalib Yusuf al-Eisawe explained: "We came here to express real brotherhood for the people of Najaf and to support the people here." Protection for the convoy was provided by the Fallujah police. Other supporters have arrived from southern Iraqi towns.

On Monday, some 2,000 volunteers gathered in the courtyard of the Iman Ali mosque pledging to act as human shields to defend al-Sadr and the shrine. They shouted: "Allawi you coward, you agent of the Americans. Allawi we don't need you." Ugel Abdel Hussein, a Turkomen from the northern city of Kirkuk, told Reuters: "We will not leave the shrine until the Americans get out of Najaf. We will kill." Fadil Hamed declared: "I will lie on the ground in front of the tanks, or I will kill the Americans to defend Sadr and Najaf."

Sheikh Ahmed Shaibani, a senior militia commander, told the media: "These people are a deterrent to the Americans because they are civilians. They are here so that the Americans won't attack the Imam Ali Shrine.... The Americans are applying military pressure on us to try and make us weak so they can get concessions. It will not happen. We are ready to fight and we are very patient."

In statements to the Al Jazeera network on Saturday, al-Sadr repeated his demand for the Allawi government to resign. "This is the desire of the Iraqi people and I am here fighting for them," he said. "This is a government propped up by the Americans. I refused to participate in their so-called national meeting which is why we are targeted. I will not participate in any political discourse as long as there is an occupation."

Whatever the outcome of negotiations in Najaf today, Washington is not willing to accept anything less than al-Sadr's unconditional surrender. A one-sided massacre of al-Sadr's outnumbered and ill-equipped militia and supporters is being prepared. Over the last two days, the US military has moved tanks into the Old City to within 500 metres of the Imam Ali Shrine. Two US soldiers and an unknown number of militia members and civilians have died in sharp clashes in and around the mosque and surrounding cemetery.

To date the US military has avoided a direct attack on the shrine, which is revered by millions of Shiites around the world. Concerned at its potentially explosive political ramifications in Iraq and throughout the Middle East, Washington has been keen to put an Iraqi mask on such an assault. Allawi dutifully declared over the weekend that Iraqi security forces would lead an attack to take the Old City and the mosque.

The interim government, however, has already run into problems in implementing its plan. According to an article in the *Detroit Free Press*, more than 100 Iraqi National Guardsmen and a battalion of Iraqi soldiers have already refused to fight. A high-ranking defence ministry official told the newspaper: "We received a report that a whole battalion threw down their rifles. We expect this, and we expect it again and again."

Military preparations are proceeding. Electricity has been

cut off to the area and local residents are fleeing. In a particularly menacing sign of what is in store, Iraqi police ordered all journalists out of the city on Sunday. While officials claim the measure was for their own safety, the police actions make clear that the US military does not want any eyewitnesses to the crimes being organised in Najaf.

The British-based *Telegraph* newspaper reported that journalists had been bluntly given two hours to leave the city or face arrest. Shortly after the deadline expired, bullets began hitting the Sea Hotel, where 30 or so reporters were staying. Police then appeared at the hotel and attempted to arrest those present. The local governor refused to see a delegation of journalists who have been repeatedly harassed and threatened. According to the *Independent*, a police lieutenant declared at the hotel yesterday that he had stationed snipers around the building and would kill anyone who attempted to leave.

Nervousness over the presence of journalists is just one indication of concerns about the political implications of a massacre in Najaf. There is no doubt that the Pentagon has the military capacity to level the Imam Ali Shrine and much of the surrounding Old City in a matter of hours. But any assault, whether with an Iraqi face or not, is certain to trigger a storm of protest and opposition throughout Iraq and the region.

The US attacks in Najaf have already provoked fighting in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities and towns including Fallujah, Baquba, Samarra and Amara. Attacks have intensified in the capital on the US embassy and ministry buildings as well as the Sheraton and Palestine hotels that are commonly used by foreigners. In Sadr City, a US tank was attacked and burst into flames, forcing its crew to escape. A local militia commander told the *Christian Science Monitor*: "If the Americans continue to attack Najaf, we will make life in Baghdad a living hell."



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