

The battle for Najaf and the US crisis in Iraq

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The ongoing siege of Najaf has graphically underscored the crisis of US imperialism in Iraq. Whatever the immediate outcome of the confrontation between the US military and the militia of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, the occupation has turned into a nightmare for the American ruling elite. Having invaded Iraq to plunder its oil and dominate the Middle East, the US faces a widening popular uprising that is having a profoundly destabilising impact on the region and indeed on world capitalism.

Armed opposition to the US occupation is not composed of a few “Hussein loyalists”, “foreign fighters” or “terrorists”, as the Bush administration would have it, but a growing movement involving both Sunnis and Shias that has the sympathetic backing of broad layers of the population. Far from al-Sadr and other militia groups being an isolated minority, it is the US and its quisling regime led by Prime Minister Iyad Allawi that has no significant base of support in Iraq.

Even according to conservative estimates by the US-based Brookings Institute, the number of armed insurgents in Iraq jumped from 5,000 to 20,000 between April and July. Many, but not all, of the fighters come from impoverished layers of youth, for whom the US occupation has proven an unmitigated disaster. They have no education, no job and are prepared to sacrifice their lives in a war of attrition against the US military machine.

Kenneth Katzman, a researcher at the Congressional Research Service, commented to *USA Today*: “There never will be a final offensive because the militia tends to melt away to fight another day. We are fighting a population, not a small faction. One battle will not solve the problem.”

A rare interview in the *Washington Post* on August 15 put a human face on a member of the anti-US militia. Ahmed Eisa, 34, worked in a small printshop before sending his wife and two young children out of Najaf and joining al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army at the Imam Ali Shrine. Armed with an old Kalashnikov, he told the newspaper: “I know the Americans have better weapons. They have better plans. They have uniforms that cost \$3,000, and we have only our clothes. But I have principles. I have a holy land to defend. I have family to protect, so I feel stronger than them.”

According to US military spokesmen, hundreds of al-Sadr’s militia have been killed in recent fighting in Najaf, not counting the civilian deaths and the many more who have been injured. Yet thousands of people have defied the US military and Iraqi security forces and flocked into the city to demonstrate their support for the Madhi Army. The confrontation in Najaf has spurred protests and armed attacks not only in southern Shiite towns but in Sunni strongholds elsewhere in the country.

For all of the Bush administration’s denials, Iraq has become an

American quagmire. The only means for propping up the US occupation and the puppet Allawi is repression and terror. But the resort to such measures only creates fresh wellsprings of anger and opposition. Tens of thousands of Iraqis have died and hundreds of US and allied soldiers have been sacrificed at a cost of billions of dollars without any end in sight.

Only two months in power, Allawi is being exposed for what he is: a thug and long-time stooge of Washington, who was installed to put an Iraqi face on police-state measures to stamp out any opposition. Denouncing al-Sadr’s supporters as “criminal outlaws”, Allawi declared that the government would “hit back with an iron fist” to teach them the lesson they deserve. Having given the green light for a massacre, he was compelled to pause to try and avoid triggering a broader Shiite rebellion across Iraq.

As an editorial in *USA Today* commented: “For the US, the [Najaf] crisis offers only lose-lose options. An Allawi-ordered, American-led attack that destroys the shrine might produce a tactical win but a strategic loss that turns Iraq’s majority Shiites against the US-backed government. If Allawi backs down, he will prove his government is powerless to halt factional fighting and broaden support for al-Sadr.”

The *Los Angeles Times* editorialised that, “He (al-Sadr) has become a nightmare not just for the US occupation forces but also for the interim Iraqi government of Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, which has talked tough but acted weak.” The *Times* offered no answers, however, merely hoping that a bolstering of Iraqi security forces and an elected government would be able to defeat the resistance and allow the US military to withdraw into the background. “That dispiriting path is no sure thing,” it opined, “but the alternatives are immensely worse.”

The editorials reflect a growing pessimism in US ruling circles. Iraq has become a disaster for which the American bourgeoisie has no remedy. One after another, all of the lies and calculations on which the invasion was based have been shattered.

* The absurd claim that cheering crowds of Iraqis would welcome US-led forces as liberators collapsed immediately. Most welcomed the collapse of the Hussein dictatorship but, from the outset, were deeply suspicious of Washington’s motives. The reasons are obvious: deep-seated and bitter memories of Iraq’s colonial past combined with resentment towards US actions in the Middle East over decades, including support for Israeli repression and the 1990-91 Gulf War and its aftermath.

* All of the pretexts used to justify the war have proven to be lies and fabrications. No evidence of any weapons of mass destruction or a connection between the Hussein regime and Al Qaeda has been found. Now the widening resistance to the American

occupation is exploding the myth that the US is bringing “democracy” to Iraq. Al-Sadr’s denunciations of Allawi as “worse than Hussein” and “an agent of the Americans” resonate for a reason. Like the preceding Iraqi Governing Council, the Iraqi people had no say in the installation of the Allawi regime, which is composed of loyal handpicked supporters of the US invasion.

* The US has sought to pacify the Iraqi population with a mixture of brute military force and political confidence tricks. Neither has worked. The White House insisted that the phony handover to the Allawi administration in June would mark a new beginning. But the new Iraqi “sovereignty” has rapidly been exposed as a fig leaf for the continued US occupation of the country. The national conference held on August 16-19 was meant to bolster support for the puppet administration. Instead the affair was completely dominated by debate over Najaf and exposed Allawi’s isolation. The basic conundrum confronting the US is the impossibility of convincing millions of ordinary Iraqis that a regime installed by American military might has any legitimacy.

* Washington counted on support, or at least toleration, from the country’s Shiite majority, which suffered savage repression under the Hussein dictatorship. But Shia and Sunnis are increasingly engaged in a common fight to end the US occupation. The US military is now involved in operations that parallel the brutal methods used by Hussein to quell the Shiite uprising in 1991—actions that will only further inflame anti-US sentiment throughout the country and more broadly. The US administration and media are trying to make Iran into a scapegoat for the Shiite rebellion, claiming Tehran is supplying fighters and guns. But the Shiite organisations closely aligned to Iran—the Dawa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—are part of the Allawi regime.

* The Bush administration wanted to transform Iraq into a base of operations to wield broader power and influence and establish undisputed US hegemony throughout the Middle East. Instead the US is bogged down in a classic colonial war against an insurgent population and its actions are having a profoundly destabilising effect throughout the region. Escalating resistance in Iraq will only encourage opposition to the autocratic regimes on which the US has previously relied. The nervousness in regional ruling circles has been signalled by expressions of concern over Najaf by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Last week Iran called for emergency meetings of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and of Iraq’s neighbours to discuss the crisis.

* Unpinning the entire occupation was the crude calculation that the seizure of Iraq’s vast oil reserves would solve many problems: pumping oil would pay for the US invasion and prove an economic boon for American corporations as well as undermine OPEC and bring lower oil prices. Summing up the brimming optimism in US ruling circles, media mogul Rupert Murdoch baldly declared just prior to the invasion that “the greatest thing to come out of this for the world economy... would be \$20 a barrel for oil.” Instead, Iraqi oil production has been plagued by attacks on facilities and pipelines and the consequent uncertainty has been one of the key factors driving the cost of oil to nearly \$50 a barrel. The huge price hikes have already sent shockwaves through the world economy, not least of all in the US.

The Bush administration has created a catastrophe in Iraq. It has done so with the complete complicity, not only of the Democratic Party in the United States, but of governments around the world. The lack of opposition is summed up in the role of the United Nations, which endorsed the pretext for war and the US occupation of the country following the fall of Saddam Hussein. If the UN Security Council stopped short of formally rubberstamping the invasion itself, it was only because America’s imperialist rivals—France and Germany in particular—were concerned that their interests were being endangered by Washington’s plans to subjugate Iraq and dominate the Middle East.

Far from causing Washington to rethink its basic strategy, the crisis in Iraq will only provide the spur for further reckless adventures and new catastrophes. The driving force for the US occupation of Iraq is the profound crisis of American and world capitalism. The Bush administration’s plans to secure US control in the oil-rich Middle East and Central Asia is, in the final analysis, an attempt to overcome the fundamental contradiction of the profit system between world economy and the nation state system by establishing America’s untrammelled global hegemony over its rivals.

The siege of Najaf is a sharp warning not just for the Iraqi people, but for working people around the world. US imperialism will stop at nothing in pursuit of its global ambitions. It has transformed Iraq into an economic and social disaster, is seeking to suppress all opposition using the most ruthless methods and will do the same elsewhere. The only way to defeat Washington’s predatory designs is to unify workers in Iraq and the Middle East with their class brothers and sisters in the US and internationally around a common socialist perspective to abolish the profit system that is the root cause of imperialist war and colonial oppression.



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