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Iraqi regime shaken by storming of Baghdad's Green Zone

By Thomas Gaist

2 May 2016

Hundreds of Iraqi demonstrators flooded out of Baghdad's fortified Green Zone Sunday, ending dramatic protests that saw crowds storm the central government compound, destroying property, assaulting an Iraqi lawmaker and prompting the imposition of a state of emergency throughout the capital by Iraq's military.

The demonstrators, whose storming of the militarized compound on the previous day had, as even the *New York Times* acknowledged, "hinted at revolution," maintained silence and ceased the attacks against government property they had carried out on the previous day as they left the Green Zone, doing so under orders from Shia leader Moqtada al-Sadr.

In a speech to supporters Saturday, Sadr issued populist denunciations of the country's political elite, declaring: "The main political blocs in this country want a partisan government of sectarian quotas so they can keep their gains and keep stealing."

Sadr said that the cessation of protests was only temporary and that another round of demonstrations is scheduled to begin Friday. He vowed that his own sizable parliamentary faction would cease participation in legislative proceedings indefinitely.

The Sadrists had earned popular sympathy through their armed struggle against the US occupation forces. In 2004, the Shia movement was drawn into the anti-American insurgency after being outlawed by US proconsul Paul Bremer for delivering aid to residents during the blood-soaked siege of Fallujah by US Marines.

The opposition of the Sadrist party to US imperialism is, however, ultimately a tactic aimed at bolstering the movement's sectarian interests within Iraq. Sadr, the representative of a powerful Shia clerical and political family, is firmly bound to sections of Iraq's political establishment. Reports indicate that he is engaged in behind-the-scenes discussions with Abadi.

The *New York Times* reported that Sadr hopes "to nudge politicians who have opposed Mr. Abadi's efforts" and is seeking "to reinsert himself into Iraq's political mix."

"This isn't necessarily al-Sadr positioning himself against Abadi, they are both looking for the same sort of process," Baghdad-based investment analyst Stephen Royle told Bloomberg.

"It works in favor of Abadi to use Moqtada al-Sadr and public support to push through with these reforms," Royle said.

Though quickly reined in, the demonstrations are an acute manifestation of the fact that the US-backed government stands completely discredited and hated in the eyes of the Iraqi population. Eleven years after being installed in power through elections held as hundreds of thousands of American soldiers still patrolled Iraqi streets and towns, and under a transitional administrative law authorized by US bureaucrats employed by the Coalition Provisional Authority, Iraq's government stands on the verge of collapse.

The crisis of the Iraqi state has only intensified since the official US withdrawal in 2011, as Iranian influence in the country has grown, and sectarian conflict has intensified.

In the summer of 2014, large portions of the country, including its second most populous city, have fallen under the control of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an Al Qaeda-linked militia that emerged out of the insurgency against the Syrian government organized by Washington and its Gulf allies. ISIS subsequently consolidated control over portions of northern and western Iraq, including the cities of Mosul, Hit and Ramadi. In the past week, a wave of terror bombings claimed by ISIS rocked cities in southern and central Iraq, killing dozens of civilians.

Faced with a steep decline in economic growth, which fell to only 2.4 percent in 2015, down from 12.7 percent on average between 2000 and 2012, Abadi's government is seeking to stabilize its rule under conditions in which the fall in world oil prices has placed massive strain on its revenues. In recent weeks, demands by Washington for an escalation of military operations, fought by Iraqi troops accompanied by US "advisors," have intensified the diversion of resources away from civilian functions and forced a virtual shutdown of government operations.

The deliberate stoking of Sunni-Shia divisions under the US occupation as a divide-and-rule strategy has insured that central areas of Iraq remain contested by the government troops, backed by US “advisors,” and various militant groups. Armed violence continues to rage throughout Iraq on a daily basis, with at least 800 Iraqi civilians killed last month alone, on top of 1,100 killed in March, according to UN figures.

At least 55,047 Iraqi civilians were killed between 2014-2016, the UN found, with 3.2 million displaced during the same period, including more than 1 million school children.

In recent weeks, the Pentagon announced new deployments of US ground forces, Apache helicopter gunships, and artillery to combat bases in northern Iraq, where US forces are preparing a brutal assault against Mosul. In a desperate effort to prop up its ailing puppet regime, Washington is preparing to meet any opposition to the American-backed order with, as Defense Secretary Ashton Carter put it in remarks last week, “the full might of the US military.”

Class and geopolitical tensions are mounting throughout the region. The emergence of strike movements among Kuwaiti oil workers, the revival of protests in Egypt and the accelerating buildup of US combat forces on both sides of the Iraq-Syria border underscore the fact that the entire Middle Eastern political order is becoming unstuck, under the impact of a developing revolutionary crisis and wars that are increasingly coalescing into a region-wide conflagration.