

Mahdi Army Draws Supporters

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Fallujah fighters provide military training for Sadrist forces.

On the road leading to Najaf, six black-clad members of the Mahdi Army scrambled to set up three light-gauge mortars along the edge of a palm grove.

Aiming at a walled compound they said was a US military base, they fired off 11 rounds at leisure – until two American helicopters appeared and sent them scrambling for cover.

This type of hit-and-run attack is typical of fighting in the streets, suburbs, and cemeteries of Najaf between US troops and Iraqi paramilitaries on one side, and the Mahdi Army militia of Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr on the other.

But this time there was a key difference – the presence of Col Rifaat al-Janabi.

Dressed in the uniform of Saddam Hussein's Special Republican Guards, Janabi had come from his home in Fallujah to show Najaf's poorly-trained Mahdi militiamen how to use their weapons.

"The Fallujah Consultancy Council of Mujahedin holy warriors sent me with nine other officers and forty soldiers who are well trained in using mortar and the RPG-7 grenade launcher," said Janabi, who unlike many Iraqi insurgents had no qualms about giving his name.

"We had to stand by our Shia brothers in Najaf, who stood by us in Fallujah," he said, referring to the long-running battle in that town with US troops.

"It is an honourable stance of Fallujah people who sent us experts in using weapons," said one Mahdi militiaman, who added that "we are in need of military training".

Meanwhile, outside the Mahdi Army's base in the main mosque in Kufa, Najaf's twin city, other officers and soldiers from Fallujah could be seen drilling the Sadrist fighters in the use of RPG-7 grenade launchers.

"We welcomed the mujahedin of Fallujah who came, without being asked to come, to help us out in training the fighters who lack experiences in using weapons," said Sheikh Kudair al-Ansari, in charge of Sadr's office in Kufa.

While he spoke, militiamen offloaded AK-47 assault rifles from trucks, where they had been smuggled into the city under a load of watermelons.

Volunteers got out of minibuses recently arrived from the southern towns of Amara, Kut, and Diwaniya, gathering outside the mosque and chanting, "By our blood and souls, we sacrifice for you, Muqtada."

"I left a wife and three children to come and defend Muqtada," said one volunteer from Diwaniya who

refused to give his name.

"We could not protect his father Mohammed al-Sadr from Saddam, but now we can protect his son from the Americans and the Jews," he said, referring to the charismatic ayatollah killed in 1999 by alleged agents of the regime.

Kufa appeared to be under full Mahdi Army control.

Checkpoints, spaced about 200 metres apart, were manned by black-clad fighters, their foreheads wrapped in green cloths emblazoned with the name of the seventh-century Imam Ali.

"I am not a kid ... I can kill many Americans," said 13-year-old Hassan Kamel, a preparatory school student who stood guard with his rifle at one of the checkpoints.

Not far away, fire engulfed the local police station.

In addition to their forces in Kufa, Mahdi Army officials said they had troops fighting the Americans in Sahla, in the centre of Najaf near the shrine of Imam Ali, and in the cemeteries outside the holy city.

In central Najaf, Sadrist fighters hid in the alleys behind the hotels formerly used by pilgrims. The sky was hidden by a pall of wind-borne dust and smoke from burning buildings.

In the al-Ameer neighbourhood, four uniformed policemen stood with three Mahdi Army fighters beside their car.

Hidden behind a building, they were listening to their radios and informing the militiamen of their fellow officers' movements.

"I have four cousins in the al-Mahdi army," one of the officers said.

He went on to explain, "According to the proverb, 'my brother and I are against my cousin, but my cousin and I are against the foreigner. Thus, I can't fight against my cousins and stand beside the Americans."

Soon after, one of the fighters emerged into the street, and shouting "Ali!" he fired his RPG at a concrete barrier erected up the road by the Americans.

Then he ran back into the alley, climbed into the police car, and was driven away.

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