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Battles wrack Basra, threatening success of U.S. surge

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BAGHDAD — With Iraq's top leaders directing the battle, Iraq's army and national police pressed a major operation Tuesday to wrest control of the southern port city of Basra from the Shiite Mahdi Army militia. Fighting between government forces and the militia quickly spread through Iraq's south and into Baghdad.

Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki and his defense and interior ministers took charge of the 15,000 Iraqi army troops and police units, which were deployed for what aides said was to be a three-day operation against militias in the city.

The battle at the oil-rich port began before dawn Tuesday and lasted into the early evening before subsiding slightly as the Mahdi Army, headed by firebrand cleric Muqtada al Sadr, defended positions in several neighborhoods. In the dead of night, residents reported artillery shelling, mortar rounds and guns being fired outside their homes.

In the al Timimiyah neighborhood, government forces surrounded a Mahdi Army stronghold and the home of the Rwaymi family, who residents said are well-known oil smugglers and supporters of the militia.

In al Qibla, just west of the city center, the Mahdi Army repelled attacks by Iraqi security forces, burned military vehicles and took weapons, residents said. The militia also briefly took control of a police station.

In the al Jamiyat neighborhood, gunmen seized the Iraqi army headquarters near al Manaseer Mosque, a few miles west of the city center.

In central Basra, gunmen took control of some of the main streets and spread out on rooftops.

Medical officials estimated that 10 to 20 people were killed and that 100 were wounded in the fighting. But with most hospitals and the morgue barely functioning amid the fighting, it was impossible to get an accurate tally of the casualties. Militiamen carrying rocket-propelled grenades took over many of the streets, preventing residents from leaving their homes.

In the al Hussainiyah neighborhood, bodies were stored in the mosque. "It is not possible to evacuate them now," said Abdul Zahra Shghati, a 60-year-old resident.

In Baghdad, the Mahdi Army all but closed down the neighborhoods it controls in an act of protest against the government. Militiamen attacked the headquarters of a rival Shiite group, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and its military wing, the Badr Organization.

In west and south Baghdad and in the southern city of Najaf, Sadrists took to the streets in protest against the government.

In Najaf, protesters chanted, "Oh Nouri, you coward. You spy of the Americans" and "The army is with America..."

Maliki is taking a major political risk in attempting to recover Basra, which was virtually handed over to militias when the British military withdrew late last year. That risk was heightened by his presence at the start of the operation. His critics were quick to portray his decision as a political gambit.

Formally, Sadr is still observing a cease-fire he announced last August and renewed in February. But in fact his Mahdi Army has dominated several critical parts of Iraq, including in Basra, the heart of a major oil-producing region.

The operation was portrayed by Sadrists and some analysts as an effort by Maliki to consolidate power in the south for the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq before the election in October.

But a lawmaker close to Maliki said Sadr's cease-fire and freeze on operations were something of a fiction. "If you talk to Muqtada, they say we are freezing Jaysh al Mahdi (the Mahdi Army), but the bombing and the kidnapping and even hitting the Green Zone continues," said Sami al Askari, the lawmaker. "How can we believe the cease-fire when we continue to see this?"

Askari denied that the security operation was directed solely at Sadrists, but Sadr followers said they were being targeted. Askari acknowledged that if the government's operation in Basra fails, the consequences would be "severe."

Sadrist lawmakers walked out of parliament Tuesday after condemning the operation as a political move to hand the south to Abdul Aziz al Hakim, the head of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq.

The Supreme Council is the most powerful Shiite party in Iraq, but it trails the Sadrist movement in popularity among Shiites.

Sadr ordered calm and asked his followers to distribute Qurans and olive branches to Iraqi police checkpoints. Local police in Sadr-controlled neighborhoods largely sympathize or work with the militia.

In some 13 Baghdad neighborhoods, police abandoned their checkpoints after militiamen spread through the streets, burned tires, attacked two Iraqi checkpoints and kidnapped at least six police officers.

In Basra, schools and businesses were shut and hospitals were crippled because doctors and medical staff couldn't get to work. A curfew was imposed as pitched battles were fought.

There was also a curfew throughout most cities in southern Iraq.

"We called for calm. But the government has used the security plan to liquidate the Sadr movement," said Harith al Athari, an official in the Basra Sadr office. "So we call on the government to abandon this plan and impose self-restraint. Otherwise the Sadrists have a right to defend themselves."

(Fadel reported from Baghdad. McClatchy special correspondent al Basri reported from Basra. McClatchy special correspondent Mohammed al Dulaimy contributed from Baghdad.)