

Iraqis oppose US plan to divide Baghdad into ghettos

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The US military's plan to seal off an entire suburb of Baghdad behind a three-metre high concrete wall has produced widespread opposition among Iraqis of all religious and ethnic backgrounds. Several thousand residents of Sunni-populated Adhamiyah demonstrated against the wall on Monday behind banners declaring "No Shiite. No Sunni. Islamic Unity" and "No to the sectarian barrier". Shiite leaders in neighbouring suburbs have also condemned the barrier.

The wall is regarded as a symbol of the hated US occupation, which has brought nothing but daily indignities, hardship and violence to Iraqis. One of the protest banners declared "separation wall is a big prison for Adhamiyah citizens". Local residents see the structure as a means, not of protecting, but of controlling them. According to a survey conducted by the suburb's city council on Sunday, 90 percent of respondents were strongly opposed to the barrier.

As part of the Baghdad security plan, US commander General David Petraeus has ordered that at least 10 of the most volatile areas of Baghdad be entirely sealed off by such walls. Five extra US brigades and additional Iraqi Army units are currently deploying to Iraq's capital to carry out the operation. Once an area is enclosed, Petraeus's tactics call for American and Iraqi government forces to maintain bases and conduct aggressive patrols aimed at flushing out and killing or capturing insurgents.

The western Baghdad district of Ghazaliyah has already been turned into what US officers have dubbed a "gated community". "Ghetto," however, like those established by the Nazis for Jews in Eastern Europe during World War II, would be a far more accurate description. The 15,000 residents of the area are subjected to curfews and can only enter and leave through one checkpoint, where they are subjected to repeated identity checks and searches. According to the *Washington Post*, the US military intends to begin using scanners to record the fingerprints and eye patterns of everyone who passes through.

Adhamiyah, with a population of several hundred thousand, was the next area slated for encirclement. Located close to the city centre on the east bank of the Tigris River, the suburb was a popular address for lower-income Sunni Arabs. It is the only eastern district of Baghdad that has a majority Sunni population. Since the US invasion, it has been one of the strongholds for anti-occupation guerrillas and a base of operations against American and Iraqi government forces.

Adhamiyah is also arguably the frontline of the sectarian civil war that is raging in Baghdad between rival Sunni and Shiite extremists. The areas adjoining the suburb are

overwhelmingly Shiite and are politically controlled by the fundamentalist movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which has its headquarters in the densely populated working class district of Sadr City, to the east of Adhamiyah.

Iraqi police commandos and the Sadrist Mahdi Army militia have allegedly carried out killings in Adhamiyah in revenge for the indiscriminate bombings that have been carried out against Shiite civilians by Sunni fanatics. Adhamiyah locals have formed their own militia to defend themselves against the incursions of the police and the Mahdi Army. The suburb is periodically attacked by rockets and mortars fired from positions inside Sadr City.

US troops began building the wall and sealing in the people of Adhamiyah on April 10, claiming it would protect them from militia attack. Lengthy stretches of the concrete wall and barbed wire obstacles are already place. As in Ghazaliyah, the intention is to leave only a few entry and exit points and strictly control all movements in and out. Young Sunni men face the prospect of being detained for interrogation on suspicion that they have been involved in the insurgency. The escalation of US operations in recent months has already seen 5,000 more Iraqis detained. Petraeus is believed to be expecting to detain tens of thousands more over the coming months.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki belatedly called for a halt to the project at a press conference in Cairo on Sunday, saying, "I oppose the building of the wall and its construction will stop." In a clear reference to the security fence that the Israeli government has erected to imprison the Palestinian people in the West Bank, Maliki stated: "This wall reminds us of other walls that we reject."

Maliki's opposition to the wall, well over a week after construction began, was a response to a stream of condemnations by a range of organisations in Iraq. Heads of the local government insisted the American military had begun the wall without their permission. An Adhamiyah resident, Ahmed al-Dulaimi, told the *Guardian*: "This will make the whole district a prison. This is collective punishment on the residents of Adhamiyah. They are going to punish all of us because of a few terrorists here and there."

Another resident, Khadija Kubaissy, told the IRIN newsagency: "Surrounding our neighbourhood with concrete barriers will make it clear that when we're out of our area we're going to be in danger. We're being forced to live inside just one area. Our lives will have to be limited to a few square kilometres of houses and shops. Rather than isolate us, they have to find a logical solution to the violence and not cause more suffering and hostility."

The Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party, which sits in the parliament and cooperates with the occupation, issued a scathing attack on the wall: "Isolating parts of Baghdad with barbed wire and concrete walls will inflict social and economic damage and it will lead to more sectarian tension. This measure will harm residents and it will have a negative impact instead of solving problems."

The Shiite Sadrists, whose six ministers in Maliki's cabinet resigned just over a week ago, also denounced the plan. A representative in Najaf declared: "The Sadr movement considers building a wall around Al Adhamiyah as a way to lay siege to the Iraqi people and to separate them into [sectarian] cantons. It is like the Berlin Wall that divided Germany. This step is the first step toward dividing the city into cantons and blockading the people there.

Today it happens in Adhamiyah, tomorrow it will happen in Sadr City.”

Confronting growing popular opposition, the position of the Maliki government is becoming increasingly tenuous. Qasim Dawood, a member of Maliki’s Shiite coalition, told *USA Today*: “The present government is not competent. It’s more or less paralysed, inactive. I doubt very much that this government can continue in power much longer.” Prominent Kurdish parliamentarian Mahmoud Othman, who supported the government until recently, criticised Maliki as “a weak prime minister” and added: “This government hasn’t delivered and is not capable of doing the job. They should resign.”

It is by no means clear, however, that the US military will pay any attention to the Iraqi prime minister’s instruction to stop construction on the Adhamiyah wall, which is a central component of the Baghdad security strategy. “Obviously we will respect the wishes of the government and the prime minister,” US ambassador Ryan Crocker told a press conference on Monday. But when specifically asked, US military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Garver refused to state if Maliki’s instruction would be followed.

Brigadier General Qassim al-Moussawi, the Iraqi Army commander working with US forces in the area, bluntly stated on Monday: “We will continue to construct the security barriers in the Adhamiyah neighborhood.” Moussawi claimed the concrete slabs ringing the suburb were not a wall, but “moveable barriers that can be removed”. He dismissed opposition as “reaction by some weak-minded people”. Adhamiyah residents have told the IRIN newsagency that construction is continuing.

If the wall proceeds, in the face of Maliki’s public statement, it will be one more nail in the political coffin of his government

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