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Why Basra is in revolt against occupation

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 Iraqis have accused British special forces of planning a terrorist attack on Basra.

An Iraqi resistance leader speaks out

Sheikh Hassan al-Zarqani, a spokesperson for rebel Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, told Socialist Worker that the two undercover soldiers seized by Iraqi police last Monday were armed with explosives and a remote control detonator.

The soldiers were disguised as members of Sadr's militia, the Mehdi Army. The arrests sparked protests after British troops backed by tanks attempted to free the soldiers from an Iraqi police station.

Sheikh Hassan said trouble started when a senior Sadr official, Sheikh Ahmad Fartusi, was arrested on Sunday.

"We called a protest outside the mayor's office on Monday demanding the Sheikh be released," Sheikh Hassan said. "This protest was peaceful.

"But events in our city took a sinister turn when the police tried to stop two men dressed as members of the Mehdi Army driving near the protest. The men opened fire on the police and passers-by. After a car chase they were arrested."

Basra, Iraq's southern oil city, had been held up as a model of successful occupation by British authorities.

But many of the promises made in the wake of the 2003 invasion never materialised.

Discontent has also been building over a policy that favours some tribes above others.

The largely Shia city feared it would be a target of a bombing ahead of an important religious festival. The explosive find sparked rumours that British troops were about to commit an atrocity.

"What our police found in their car was very disturbing — weapons, explosives and a remote control detonator," Sheikh Hassan said. "These are the weapons of terrorists. We believe these soldiers were planning an attack on a market or other civilian targets, and thanks be to god they were stopped and countless lives were saved."

The arrest of the two soldiers brought discontent to the boil.

"The two men were taken to the police station to answer questions about their activities. That afternoon the British army came in tanks and armoured cars demanding the two be released.

"The police refused as they were considered to be planning terrorist attacks, and as they were disguised as members of the Mehdi Army, the police wanted to know who their target was.

"Thousands of people gathered to defend the police station. British troops opened fire and the crowds responded with stones and firebombs."

Residents in Basra are now demanding the British authorities answer questions about the activities of the two men.

"Why were these men dressed as Mehdi Army?" Sheikh Hassan said. "Why were they carrying explosives and where were they planning to detonate their bomb?"

"Were they planning an outrage so that they could create tensions with other communities? Were they going to kill innocent people to put the blame on Al Qaida, who do not have any support in our city?"

The questions were never answered. Instead British troops returned that night.

"The soldiers drove a tank into the police station and threatened to kill the police officers if they did not hand over the two terrorists," Sheikh Hassan said. "It is only then, to save any further loss of life, that the men were released."

Sheikh Hassan appealed to the British people to demand the withdrawal of all troops.

"We have only the warmest regards for the British people, who have protested in their tens of thousands against the occupation of our country.

"We fear than the British government plans to send more troops. We appeal to the British people to oppose this as it can only deepen our problems"

Hear the man who provided Socialist Worker's exclusive on Fallujah...

Stop the War Coalition rally

Friday 23 Sept, 7.30pm

Friends Meeting House, Euston Road, London (opp Euston station)

With veteran US anti-war campaigner Tom Hayden, Reg Keys, Tony Benn, eyewitness from Iraq Dr Salam Ismael and others

Demonstrate this Saturday 24 September

March for peace and Liberty

Assemble 12 noon, Parliament Square

Rally in Hyde Park

Called by Stop the War, CND and the Muslim Association of Britain

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