

"As America failed in Vietnam, so we will make them fail here as well." Imam Abdul Fatah Al-Musawi is angry. "We are fighting the Americans now. And we will win."

Thursday to the Al-Husseini Mosque down a dirty, back street in a poor section of Kirkuk. It is where Imam Al-Musawi preaches in a dilapidated building jammed next to crumbling houses. But despite the poverty of the surroundings – Al-Musawi's faction in the mosque is making a lot of people very nervous. They are Moqtada Sadr's people in Northern Iraq, one of the centres of public protests against the Americans and Al-Musawi is one Sadr's top aides.

The atmosphere around the mosque is tense. Up on the roof young men put up sandbags and prepare defensive positions. And at the door everyone entering is searched. The local American army base claims that recruiting is going on here for recruits to hurry south and continue the fighting against the Americans. But there is little sign of any active recruiting inside the Mosque. There the air is calm and unhurried. It is just before evening prayers and the room is full of men talking and gossiping. Cleanliness is an important part of Islam. So the worshippers wash their hands and feet in long sinks against the walls. And the room has the feel of pleasant neighbourhood community centre as people get ready for worship.

Abdul Fatah Al-Musawi is a young man dressed in a black turban and long flowing robes. And he is adamant that the American policy in Iraq is completely wrong:

"They have done nothing right. From the very first day - everything they have done is wrong. They bombed innocent women and children. And now they cannot seem to do anything: there is no economy, no reconstruction of our cities and no safety."

Al-Musawi is convinced that the events of the last few weeks - which has seen widespread fighting between the Shia forces loyal to Moqtada Sadr and the Coalition Forces - have entirely been the fault of the Americans.

"All we did was try to protest against them. And then the Americans killed our protestors. Is this the democracy they talk about? They killed them! I don't think that any country or society in the world would allow their own people to be killed like the Americans are killing our people here in Iraq. "

The Imam gives the impression of being unused to attention from foreign journalists. Several times he seems to giggle as he talks. But despite his apparent inexperience his is a movement that is causing lots of waves in this ethnically divided city where the oil riches do not seem to have effected the high numbers of unemployed.

"They are probably our number one problem mosque." Says Sergeant Robert Jennings a tough faced NCO at the local U.S base. "It is the Sadr group. We got word through the

grapevine that there was some type of recruiting to have these guys move south and mass forces. So we have had our eye on them, we have always had our eye on them."

It is not only the Americans who are focusing on the Mosque and its young leader. In Kirkuk, the Kurds, Turcomans and the Arabs have all watched the Sadr group enter this largely Sunni city a few months ago. As Shias they do not have a large presence here. And at first there was fear and allegations that some of the murders which plague this city had been their responsibility.

But now the images being shown constantly on Arabic news networks of the Battle of Fallujah are whipping up popular support for anyone protesting against the American presence in Iraq. And Moqtada Sadr's group, small as it is, is perceived as being the leaders of the most effective protest. Last week 35 buses of Sunni Arabs tried to enter Kirkuk from the outlying regions to join up with their Shia counterparts. It was an event almost without precedence in a country with over a thousand years of enmity between the two groups.

Facing the protestors are the American forces. They are mostly based at the old Iraqi Air Force compound at the edge of the city. It gets hit nightly by mortar and rocket attacks. But scattered around the city are "safe houses". Often in the homes of former Ba'athists, the Americans put one company in these houses to control a neighbourhood. The troops at Sergeant Jennings's safe house - the nearest one to the Mosque - were digging in defensive positions, but Jennings himself was confident:

"If they come looking for something. These people are going to get their asses whipped - plain and simple. We are not going to let them do to us, what they did to our people down South. If we can dominate early. They will see it is pointless. There are the few that say "I will give my life to Allah. " Well - go ahead and give you life to Allah! "

But Imam Abdul Al-Musawi is confident that not only can they handle the Americans, his forces can handle anyone else who disagrees with them.

"We are based all of us on the Sadr law. They have lots of money and weapons - but we have Allah on our side. They can try to do anything to us - but we will win. Why? Because we have God on our side."

For the moment the two sides eye each other warily. But should the Americans move into Najaf It is this absolute faith in being God's specially anointed that worries many secular Iraqis who may not even support the American presence in Iraq. Yannar Mohammed is an architect who lived in Canada for eight years. She returned to Iraq in May of last year to try to struggle for women's rights. But she has found much had changed for a woman in Iraqi society. There had been a dramatic growth in radical Islamic groups like Moqtada Sadr's party.

"When I returned to Baghdad I was shocked by the big number of veils on the street and in the work places. The women friends who had been the most modern and outspoken had changed and were wearing clothes that go back a thousand years."

Ms. Mohammed, under death threat for speaking out for women's rights, represents a large percentage of secular, middle class Iraqis who are apprehensive of the growing power of Sadr's group. Abdul Al-Musawi had few words of comfort or reconciliation for them. He argues that Iraq should be ruled by Sharia law - a strictly Islamic legal system that takes a woman's testimony as only worth half of a man's - and that people who disagree with him are bad.

"When Iraq will be pure Islamic country, then we will know how to manage the bad people. We can deal with them properly as God intended."

Secular Iraqis like Ms. Mohammed, may not like the American presence in their country, but they are equally terrified of the views of Sadr's group. This makes them less sure of what to do. And in a society full of ambivalence, Sadr's group has the advantage of absolute certainty of their cause. Abdul Al-Musawi has a warning for any Iraqi who may be tempted to side with the Americans against their views:

"If they are Iraqis like us then we are with them definitely. But if they are with the Americans then they should be afraid. We will be against them. They should be afraid. They should be afraid. They should be afraid."