

Sadrists revolt provides lessons for counterinsurgency in Iraq

The rebellion by forces aligned to Moqtada al-Sadr in Iraq demonstrated to the Coalition the value of combining military pressure with a political strategy that endeavoured to undercut al-Sadr's appeal to the Shi'ite community. **Jeffrey White** and **Ryan Philips** examine the revolt and the Coalition's response.

janes.com

This article was first available online on 16 July 2004.

Related Articles

- 1 Short-term stabilisation in Iraq could have long-term costs
- 2 Marching valiantly into the quagmire
- 3 Internal affairs/Iraq

Search for these articles at www.janes.com

The first serious challenge to Coalition forces in Iraq from Shi'ite elements began on 4 April 2004. Moqtada al-Sadr's organisation and its militia, the Mahdi Army, initiated demonstrations and attacks on Coalition forces and facilities in Baghdad's Sadr City and across southern Iraq.

Coinciding with the siege of Falluja and increased activity by Sunni resistance elements, US fears of a two-front insurgency materialised as al-Sadr's revolt posed a serious political and military challenge to the Coalition. At a tactical level, Coalition commanders had to defend threatened positions, respond to threats to the main supply routes through the south, and redeploy US forces from as far north as Mosul, to contain the challenge. At the strategic level, the Coalition faced the test of suppressing the rebellion without causing a serious breach with the Shi'ite community, or letting al-Sadr's political influence and military power expand dramatically. In particular, the Coalition had to weigh carefully the role of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the effective arbiter of Shi'ite politics and an uncertain ally, in any attempt to control al-Sadr. Without at least the tacit support of the Shi'ite community and al-Sistani there was, and there remains, no chance for the Coalition and the new Iraqi government to succeed.

Under the combined influence of Coalition military action and mainstream Shi'ite political pressure, al-Sadr has swung to a less confrontational stance, emphasising political co-operation and a



◆ Iraqi Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr calls for insurrection against Coalition forces in Iraq during Friday prayers in Kufa, Friday 21 May. He was speaking the day after nine people were killed and 11 injured in overnight clashes between Iraqi militia and occupation forces in Karbala. The Mukhaim mosque, where al-Sadr has an office, was destroyed.

reduced military profile. In doing so he has given up little, while working to convert the increased popularity he achieved as the leader of the revolt into political advantage. His militia and organisation, while damaged in the course of the revolt, are largely intact and will support whatever course he ultimately decides upon.

Background to the revolt

The al-Sadr revolt appeared to break out suddenly, but in fact it had been long in the making. Almost immediately after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, al-Sadr, the son of revered Shi'ite cleric and victim of the regime, Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, emerged to challenge the occupation. By the summer of 2003, al-Sadr's organisation was politically active in Baghdad's Sadr City, Najaf, Basra and elsewhere in southern Iraq.

In August 2003, al-Sadr's adherents clashed with US troops for the first time in Baghdad, and he announced the formation of the Mahdi Army, a militia ostensibly tasked with the mission of protecting Shi'ite religious shrines. In reality, the militia was formed to add a capacity for armed violence to al-Sadr's organisation. By late 2003, al-Sadr was in a position to begin challenging Coalition forces directly. In October 2003, armed al-Sadr elements clashed with US forces in Baghdad in what was described by US commanders as a deliberate ambush. In this incident, two soldiers of the US 1st Armored Division were killed and four wounded. Later that month, three US soldiers were killed in a clash probably involving Sadrists elements in Karbala. At this point the Coalition was, according to senior military officials, close to arresting al-Sadr, but deferred a decision because of appeals from Shi'ite political

PA/0575934

figures to let the community deal with al-Sadr in its own way.

Between October 2003 and March 2004, a surface quiet prevailed with no major clashes between al-Sadr and the Coalition. Al-Sadr's group used this period to organise, expand its reach and develop the military capabilities of the Mahdi Army. On 12 March 2004, Mahdi Army elements razed Qawliya, a gypsy village near Diwaniyah in southern Iraq. In this action the Mahdi Army demonstrated a substantial increase in military proficiency. Witnesses described an infantry-style operation, supported by mortars, to drive the population out, followed by the systematic demolition of houses in the village with bulldozers.

The razing of the village was seen by Coalition officials as a direct challenge, and by late March the Coalition appeared to have decided to move against al-Sadr. On 28 March, *Al Hawza*, one of his newspapers, was closed for inciting violence. On 3 April, Mustapha al-Yacoubi, a key al-Sadr lieutenant, was arrested in Najaf. These actions, whether intended to provoke a major confrontation with al-Sadr or not, directly precipitated the 4 April rebellion.

The Sadrist rebellion

Al-Sadr's organisation responded vigorously to the moves by the Coalition. The scope of his rebellion came as a surprise, allowing al-Sadr to seize the military and political initiative across much of southern Iraq.

The near simultaneous outbreak of the rebellion on 4 April in Baghdad and numerous places in the south indicated advance preparation. A combination of Mahdi Army assaults on Coalition posts, Iraqi government offices and police stations, violent demonstrations and attacks on lines of communication placed the Coalition position in the south at risk. It also quickly became evident that a substantial portion of Iraqi security forces in the south were either actively or passively supporting al-Sadr, or were simply not up to the task of dealing with the Mahdi Army. Al-Sadr's supporters rapidly seized control of Kufa, Kut, portions of Najaf and Karbala, and contested control of key points in Nasiriyah, Hilla, Al-Amarah, Diwaniyah, Basra and other locations.

The Mahdi Army displayed a willingness to directly engage Coalition forces, despite the risk of casualties. The 'high-water mark' of the rebellion occurred on 7 April when Kut fell to Mahdi Army elements after the

withdrawal of the Ukrainian contingent. In addition to attacking Coalition footholds in urban areas, al-Sadr's supporters also began to harass the long Coalition supply line from Kuwait to Baghdad, seizing foreign hostages.

A decentralised threat

The actions by the Mahdi Army and other armed supporters of al-Sadr represented a broad and decentralised threat to the Coalition. The numerous attacks across a wide area served to confuse and dislocate any concerted response. Coalition forces were put on the defensive in some locations, trying to hold their positions rather than taking the offensive to regain the initiative.

Despite substantial early successes, not everything went al-Sadr's way. Although some sections of the Shi'ite community rallied to his cause, the majority did not. In part this was due to the unpopularity of his organisation in many areas, and to the fact that no senior Shi'ite leadership figure overtly supported him. Al-Sistani initially adopted a very cautious public position,

At a strategic level, the Coalition faced the test of suppressing the rebellion without causing a serious breach with the Shi'ite community, or letting al-Sadr's political influence and military power expand dramatically

neither supporting nor condemning either side in the confrontation, while watching carefully which direction the Shi'ite community was moving in. Although al-Sadr was supported by some tribal elements, others urged calm and exercised a restraining hand, helping to limit the scope of the rebellion.

Al-Sadr's forces also proved unable to withstand determined and aggressive Coalition military action. Where Coalition forces stood and fought, they held. Where they acted aggressively, as the Italians did early in Nasiriyah, al-Sadr's militia lost, and lost heavily, or, in a pattern that was to become established over the course of the rebellion, simply disappeared.

From 4 April to 7 April, al-Sadr held the initiative. In response, the Coalition began to re-take Iraqi police and government facilities in Baghdad; deployed US combat elements from as far north as Mosul;

reoccupied Kut with elements of the US 1st Armored Division on 9 April; and at least held on elsewhere. By 9 April US forces began concentrating on the outskirts of Najaf, awaiting a decision to clear the city of Mahdi Army elements. For his part, on 13 April al-Sadr began speaking of a negotiated settlement while continuing armed action; employing a political tactic that was to become standard.

The seriousness of the rebellion varied from place to place, but by mid-April Coalition forces had contained the revolt. The Mahdi Army remained entrenched at a number of critical points, including Najaf, Kufa, Karbala and Sadr City. In addition, al-Sadr's forces and organisation remained active, if not in control, in other locations in the south. The Mahdi Army, while taking substantial casualties, was able to remain in the field against the Coalition - reinforcing, digging in and re-supplying. Sadr's forces were contained and pushed back, but not suppressed.

The Coalition moved to improve its military posture in the south, particularly with the deployment of major combat elements of the experienced US 1st Armored Division and 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment to stabilise or restore precarious situations at Kut, Karbala, Najaf and Kufa. The 3rd Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division also repositioned elements to the south. The arrival of these forces south of Baghdad gave the Coalition an offensive capability that it had previously lacked, with the 1st Armored Division playing the leading role in operations against the Sadr strongholds in Najaf, Kufa, and Karbala.

Politically, both sides sought the advantage by appealing to other Iraqi elements. The Coalition looked to the involvement of mainstream Shi'ite clerics, politicians and tribal leaders to bring al-Sadr under control and draw the teeth of his militia. Al-Sadr appealed more broadly to the Iraqi population, including Sunnis, and to Shi'ites in other countries, especially Hizbullah in Lebanon, for support. For many Iraqi Shi'ites, and even some Sunnis, al-Sadr has the clearest message of opposition to the Coalition and occupation. No Shi'ite political or associated militia element was willing to confront al-Sadr directly. The relative weaknesses of both the Badr Brigades and the Dawa militia were exposed by their passivity in the face of the revolt. By late April the situation was essentially a stand-off, one which could not last.

While al-Sadr's objective of a broad-based Shi'ite rebellion had not been

TERRORISM AND INSURGENCY

accomplished, Coalition forces had not been able to achieve their declared objectives of bringing him to justice and dismantling or destroying his militia. A new phase of the confrontation began on 26-27 April, with Coalition forces launching a deliberate offensive against al-Sadr's organisation and militia. This offensive, undertaken with support from mainstream Shi'ite political, religious and tribal establishments, ground down al-

Sadr's military capabilities and weakened the leadership cadre of his organisation. It is less clear that it has critically damaged his personal political strength and the long-term prospects for controlling him at acceptable cost and risk remain uncertain.

Coalition strategy

In the period between containing al-Sadr's revolt in mid-April and the end of April, the

Coalition appears to have developed a relatively effective, yet cautious, approach in dealing with al-Sadr, at least from a military perspective. Recovering from the surprise and early setbacks of the initial phase of the revolt, the Coalition acted to isolate him and neutralise his political and military power. This approach was based on recognition of the complex phenomenon al-Sadr embodies, including his strengths and weaknesses, and depended on combined political and military operations in the Shi'ite 'theatre'.

Coalition forces were to suppress and break up al-Sadr's militia and remove its leadership cadre, thereby providing the opportunity to wrap al-Sadr in a political solution supported and implemented by the mainstream Shi'ite community. Major-General Martin Dempsey, the commander of the US 1st Armored Division, pointed to the military component of this approach in an 11 May interview, stating: "...essentially we want to eliminate [Moqtada] al-Sadr's ability to intimidate."

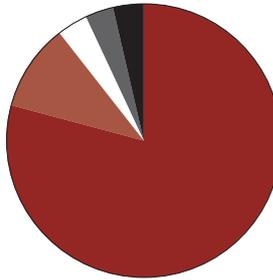
Coalition political and military operations against al-Sadr have been mutually supporting, in that the reduction of his military capability makes him less of a threat to other Shi'ite political and religious elements. The increasing opposition of these elements to him reduces his ability to mobilise active support, especially armed support, from the broader Shi'ite and Iraqi communities. The Coalition's success, in conjunction with the mainstream Shi'ite community, in isolating al-Sadr's resistance stands in marked contrast to the situation in Falluja. The political operation against al-Sadr has had two major elements:

- Winning over Shi'ite elements with a stake in order and security in the south. This appears to have led to increased co-operation with tribal leadership, an emerging hallmark of the US military approach to establishing security in Iraq. Maj Gen Dempsey has referred to these people as "stakeholders".
- Encouraging moderate Shi'ite religious and political figures to limit al-Sadr's influence and press him to comply with Coalition demands.

The Coalition has applied inducements along with military pressure in order to promote religious and tribal support. Although the overt backing of mainstream Shi'ite leaders was not deemed absolutely necessary, mainstream Shi'ite clerics have reportedly been supportive of military action as long as the Coalition does not attack shrines. This combination gave US forces a degree of freedom of action in the south, including to the very walls of holy

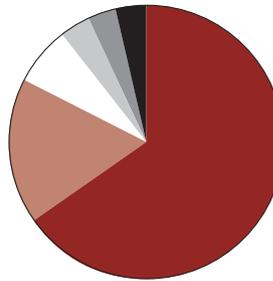
Reported killed in action by Coalition Country

United States	23
Ukraine	3
Bulgaria	1
Poland	1
El Salvador	1
Total	29



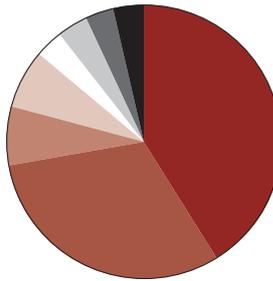
Reported Coalition killed in action by Type of Attack

ABF	19
Ambush	5
ABF (sniper fire)	2
Explosion	1
Explosion/ABF	1
Unspecified Hostile Action	1
Total	29

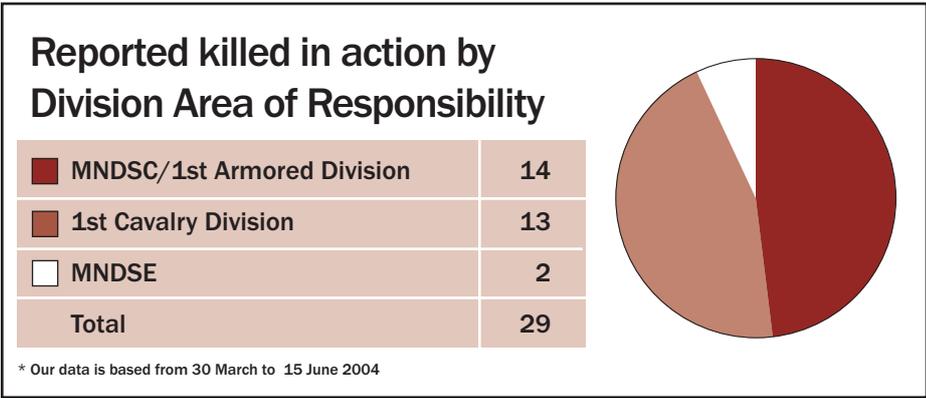


Reported Coalition killed in action by Weapon

RPG/Small Arms	12
Small Arms	9
Sniper Fire	2
RPG	2
ED	1
ED (roadside)/SA	1
Mtr./RPG/SA	1
Unspecified Hostile Action	1
Total	29



* Our data is based from 30 March to 15 June 2004



sites, that could not have been anticipated when the crisis in the south began in early April.

Military action has powered the Coalition's approach to dealing with al-Sadr. Importantly, while reportedly as many as 1,500 militiamen have been killed since the beginning of the revolt, alongside localised destruction, military force has been employed in a precise, even cautious and carefully orchestrated way, avoiding potentially disastrous false steps.

Unlike Falluja, US forces operating against al-Sadr had clear objectives, used forces highly experienced in the Iraqi insurgency milieu, and employed a mix of appropriate tactics. The objectives of military action were to destroy or attrite militia elements and break up al-Sadr's organisation by physically demolishing its offices and removing its leaders while reinserting Iraqi security services into areas freed from al-Sadr's control.

US 1st Armored Division tactics

A key to the success of US operations has been the employment of the right force. The US 1st Armored Division, with a year's experience in the difficult urban security environment in Baghdad, including numerous brushes with al-Sadr's supporters and operating in the political and social warren of Sadr City, was able to take the offensive in the south without creating an irreparable breach with the Shi'ite population through inflicting large numbers of civilian casualties or putting key religious sites at unnecessary risk.

Tactics employed by the 1st Armored Division were varied and appropriate to its objectives:

- A 'war of posts' featuring the seizing and sometimes holding of key positions in and around cities or areas held by the Mahdi Army, as well as the destruction of Sadrism offices. These actions served to isolate and break up militia elements, reduce their hold on symbolically important facilities

such as government offices and police stations, and reduce their freedom of action, including their ability to move forces from place to place.

- Precise small-unit actions based on intelligence and precision weapons, including the use of airborne systems in close proximity to sensitive sites, to destroy militia elements, seize key terrain and arrest leaders. While accurate, these actions employed devastating firepower at the point of attack, resulting in local destruction and severe casualties for the militia. Militia members killed in action have numbered in the tens of hundreds, in contrast to the relatively limited, although not trivial, Coalition deaths in action.

- Aggressive patrolling and mini 'thunder runs' with heavy combat vehicles to highlight the Coalition's presence, overawe the resistance and the population, and to draw militia forces out so they could be engaged.

The Mahdi Army has proven adept at mounting organised attacks, exploiting urban terrain, employing the now standard Iraqi resistance tactic of mortar fire, patrol convoy ambushes and improvised explosive device attacks

According to a senior Coalition source in Iraq, these cautious tactics actually upset Shi'ite clerics who were looking for US forces to act more aggressively to destroy al-Sadr's militia. While offensive operations were largely a US show, British forces acted to eliminate militia elements that had seized government offices in the Multinational Division Southeast area of operations, while Italian forces fought to clear the main supply routes through Nasiriyah and to destroy al-Sadr's offices

there.

Al-Sadr's revolt posed a serious challenge to the Coalition, and almost any course of action aimed at suppressing it entailed risk. US forces faced substantial difficulties in fighting irregulars in urban environments and in developing and exploiting a clear understanding of the situation. The most obvious hazard faced by the Coalition was that, through accident, miscalculation, provocation, or a combination of these, Coalition forces would do something that resulted in an incident serious enough to mobilise widespread active support for al-Sadr. Such an action could include inflicting serious damage to one of the key religious sites, the death or injury through Coalition action of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, or significant loss of civilian life in a single incident. The Coalition has conducted operations in such a way as to minimise the risk of such incidents; but the potential for a mobilising incident exists whenever military operations are underway in the complex military, religious and social environment of the Shi'ite theatre of operations.

Less obvious risks derived from the potential accretion of problems over time. The campaign against al-Sadr has been based on a limited political mandate from Shi'ite authorities and antipathy toward the Mahdi Army. The slow pace of Coalition operations, with mounting and disproportionate casualties suffered by militia elements and accumulating physical damage, risked shifting support away from the Coalition, and creating a basis for long-term hostility to the Coalition and its Iraqi allies.

Al-Sadr's modus operandi

During May, al-Sadr's revolt became increasingly problematic in the face of Coalition military operations and rising political pressure from the mainstream Shi'ite community.

Although al-Sadr's personal popularity increased, based on polling data, his militia position deteriorated. His militia was on the defensive, clinging tightly to defensive positions near key holy sites or disappearing off the streets when Coalition military operations became overwhelming. Nevertheless, al-Sadr was far from a passive opponent, attempting both political manoeuvre and military action to at least maintain his position as a significant player in the Iraq situation.

By mid-May al-Sadr probably realised that he was not going to be able to generate widespread active support for his rebellion and that centrist Shi'ite political and

religious forces were working to limit his influence. By this time al-Sadr had ample evidence that the Coalition was prepared to use sustained military force to destroy his militia and break up his organisation, even if that entailed taking risks. Al-Sadr responded to the increasing pressure with a combination of political and military actions, designed to deflect political pressure and impede Coalition military progress against his forces. His actions demonstrated the ability to operate in a complex political/military setting, playing both political and military cards and avoiding any decisive action on the Coalition's part, such as his arrest, while conceding nothing of importance.

In this context, al-Sadr employed a number of political tactics to thwart the Coalition and his political enemies. He attempted to exploit the desires of moderate Shi'ite political, religious and tribal figures to achieve a 'peaceful' or negotiated settlement to escape Coalition demands that his militia be dismantled and that he face Iraqi justice. These Shi'ite figures were primarily interested in limiting the fighting as it approached key holy sites in Karbala and Najaf and wreaked havoc with the economy of the south. Many probably also feared al-Sadr's growing personal popularity which, according to some polling data, had made him the second-most popular man in Iraq, after Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. According to one senior source, al-Sadr employed as many as 11 different conduits to conduct political talks or try to open talks with the Coalition. Al-Sadr also employed a well-conceived and responsive 'information operations' campaign to get his message out across the Shi'ite theatre and Iraq.

This aggressive use of many venues and means forced the Coalition into a reactive political stance. Al-Sadr's willingness to talk, even if cynical, served multiple purposes. It retarded Coalition military operations, which required some mandate from the Shi'ite mainstream. It also preserved his growing image as the one man in Iraq prepared to challenge the Coalition. Finally it allowed him to characterise failure or lack of progress in negotiations as principally the fault of Coalition intransigence. The success of his methods could be seen in his rising personal popularity.

All of al-Sadr's manoeuvring has been consistent with this tactical approach. From the beginning of his political activity with the fall of the Saddam regime, he has sought to avoid a decisive defeat by the Coalition and to avoid firm agreements

that hold him accountable for what is done in his name. His willingness to propose a ceasefire, negotiate, or declare peaceful intentions – all on his terms – has tended to come at moments of acute pressure from Coalition forces and rising Shi'ite concerns about the risks to the holy sites in Najaf.

Another of al-Sadr's political methods was to employ a threat-and-bluff strategy to appear more menacing than his real capabilities justified. This posturing took the form of threats to unleash suicide bombers, inciting violent resistance if Coalition forces approached holy sites and sparking still wider resistance in Iraq. Dressing in the robes of martyrdom and using his Friday sermons in Kufa as the occasion for vitriolic attacks on the Coalition, al-Sadr employed the resources of a 'theatre of resistance' to buttress his supporters and deter his enemies.

Al-Sadr's most serious potential threat was to mobilise the Shi'ite community and Iraqis more generally against the Coalition. From the start of his revolt on 4 April, he attempted to elicit active support from Iraqi Shi'ites, but with only limited success. He appealed to the Sunni community, also with limited success, and to external Shi'ite communities in Iran and Lebanon. Al-Sadr did not limit his actions to the Shi'ite theatre. An attempt to spread his influence to Kirkuk was blunted by a US forces and Iraqi police raid on one of his offices there and the arrest of supporters.

Actions by the Mahdi Army and other armed supporters of al-Sadr represented a broad and decentralised threat to the Coalition

Irregular warfare

The Mahdi Army proved willing to engage Coalition forces, even at the risk of appalling losses, and to take the initiative where circumstances offered some prospect for success.

The Mahdi Army's military actions displayed five broad characteristics:

- Opportunistic attacks on exposed Coalition elements, including ambushes of convoys and patrols; the use of improvised explosive devices; and harassing fire against Coalition and Iraqi government facilities. In addition to inflicting casualties, these actions were probably intended to show that the Mahdi Army was active and

present in many areas; to keep the Coalition off balance; and to demonstrate the relative weakness of Iraqi security forces supporting the Coalition.

- A geographically widespread rebellion, one not confined to al-Sadr strongholds in Baghdad and Kufa. Mahdi Army elements turned up to fight in many locations in the south, including Najaf, Karbala, Nasiriyah, Amarah, Kut, Basrah, Samawah and Diwaniyah. While strengths and capabilities varied from place to place, the rebellion was not confined to a limited area or a few locations. Najaf, Karbala and, to a lesser extent Nasiriyah, proved especially difficult military problems. Najaf and Karbala required persistent hard fighting by US forces. In Nasiriyah, Italian forces were put on the defensive for a time, at one point even abandoning one of their facilities to the Mahdi Army.

- 'Mini-uprisings' in Baghdad's Sadr City and other cities in the south in response to increasing Coalition military pressure against the Mahdi Army and al-Sadr's organisation. These actions, while contained, demonstrated that al-Sadr's forces remained capable of taking the initiative, even in areas where they had previously suffered serious losses from the Coalition. While suffering attrition, the Mahdi Army has been able to avoid decisive defeat or annihilation. It remains to fight another day.

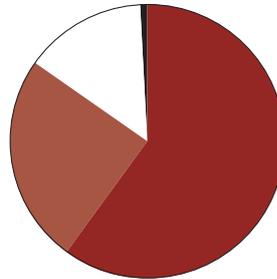
- Fighting from within the population, the Mahdi Army exploited the reluctance of Coalition commanders to inflict civilian casualties. Mahdi elements were able to use the cover of urban terrain and the presence of civilians to reduce the firepower advantage of Coalition forces. Coalition forces have yet to devise a military solution for this problem in Iraq.

- A willingness to utilise the shrines for cover from Coalition attack. This was especially evident in Karbala and Najaf where Coalition operations were constrained by the desire to avoid actions that could prove provocative to the mainstream Shi'ite community. As one Iraqi in Karbala said: "The Mahdi Army, they were using the shrines as shields." Suppressing armed opposition deployed close to religiously sensitive sites and within urban population centres without causing provocative damage was a major military and political challenge for the Coalition.

The Mahdi Army has proven adept at mounting organised attacks, exploiting urban terrain, employing the now standard Iraqi resistance tactic of mortar fire, patrol convoy ambushes and improvised explosive device attacks. For a militia force

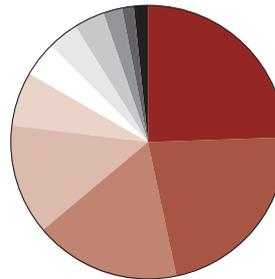
Relative Concentration of Resistance Activity by Division Area of Responsibility

MNDSC/1st Armored Division	83
1st Cavalry Division	34
MNDSE	20
1st Infantry Division	1
Total	138



Relative Concentration of Resistance Activity Based on Reported Incidents

Baghdad	34
Najaf	31
Kufa	24
Karbala	18
Amarah	9
Nasiriyah	6
Basra	5
Kut	5
Diwaniyah	3
Hillah	2
Other	2
Total	139



* Our data is based from 30 March to 15 June 2004

senior source in Iraq, al-Sadr was being driven by the actions of his lieutenants rather than directing the course of events. Nevertheless, al-Sadr is the symbol of the rebellion and the only man in his organisation capable of mobilising and motivating its members and supporters. In that sense alone he is the leader of the rebellion.

In contrast, the Sunni-based resistance has been more diffuse and more military in character from the beginning. Leadership of the Sunni resistance has been obscure, and its organisational structure shadowy. One senior source has indicated that Sunni resistance command and control is now excellent, with a 'board of directors'-type structure extending inside and outside of Iraq. Sunni-based resistance only now appears to be developing a political wing, involving associations of anti-Western Sunni clerics operating out of mosques, but with strong ties to the Ba'athists.

Al-Sadr's revolt also differed from the situation in Falluja in that the Sunni resistance achieved a degree of unity with the population and its religious and political leadership. The mainstream Shi'ite community either opposed al-Sadr or stood by, preventing a truly popular uprising from developing.

Potential outcomes of the revolt

Al-Sadr's challenge has yet to run its course although it seems to have entered a third round, characterised by political posturing and negotiations, punctuated by clashes between militiamen and reinserted Iraqi security services, and occasional Coalition operations.

As in all campaigns, there is a dynamic between the participants, and al-Sadr has not been just a passive recipient of Coalition blows. He is an adaptive and learning opponent, actively seeking to not only avoid defeat for himself and his army, but to enhance his political position.

Over the course of the rebellion, the situation has often appeared confusing, amid numerous small-scale military actions, ephemeral ceasefires and political agreements, and counter claims about specific incidents; but there is military and political logic to al-Sadr's rebellion. He is gambling that he can persist, even prosper, in the face of the Coalition. He has long-term political goals and is positioning himself for the upcoming elections.

Al-Sadr has given up little to reduce Coalition military pressure against him, and it has yet to be demonstrated that mainstream Shi'ite elements can bring him under control, much less to account for his

less than a year old, these capabilities suggest some type of expert assistance.

While the Mahdi Army did not seriously threaten the Coalition's military position in the south after the arrival of the US 1st Armored Division, it proved strong enough to prevent the Coalition from eliminating al-Sadr as a political force in Iraq. Mahdi Army elements earned the grudging respect of US forces engaged against them, if not for their military skill then for their willingness to stand and fight. In almost all the engagements of the rebellion, Coalition tactical skill and firepower overwhelmed militia forces and resulted in very heavy militia casualties while inflicting only light Coalition losses. Nevertheless, in the two months of the revolt the US 1st Armored Division lost 19 soldiers killed in action.

Two faces of resistance

The al-Sadr rebellion differs widely from the Sunni-based resistance that flared so dramatically in Falluja in April.

His movement itself began as a combined religious and social enterprise, only subsequently gaining a military component. From the beginning it had an organisation with material and financial resources, and leadership centred around al-Sadr, but with a number of other highly visible and active figures. Al-Sadr's rebellion may have been either a miscalculation forced upon him by Coalition moves or an over-reaction by some of his lieutenants to the same events, with al-Sadr essentially riding the spreading wave of rebellion. According to a

TERRORISM AND INSURGENCY



PA/0575935

◆ US troops stand guard in Baquba city on 24 June 2004. Insurgents launched co-ordinated attacks against police and government buildings across Sunni Muslim areas of Iraq, killing dozens of Iraqis and three US soldiers.

activity or to dismantle his militia. His recent decisions to emphasise politics and to send his militiamen home probably do not reflect a fundamental change in his motivation or intentions.

The apparent emerging outcome is that al-Sadr will be allowed to enter the Iraqi political process. Al-Sadr appears to be taking his militia off the streets and has curbed his rhetoric, but he has gained an increasingly legitimate role in the new Iraqi politics with his organisation largely intact, and his militia awaiting orders to re-emerge. If events continue along this path, al-Sadr will be enhanced as a political force and probably become still more difficult to deal with in the future. According to one poll taken by an Iraqi research organisation, while only one per cent of Iraqis supported him in December, some 68 per cent supported him at least to some degree in May 2004. Over the long term, al-Sadr's organisation may be able to exploit this popularity as the political process in Iraq unfolds.

Many Iraqis clearly blame the Coalition for the loss of life and destruction incurred during the rebellion, even while acknowledging al-Sadr's involvement. With hundreds of militia dead, localised destruction of property, damage to shrines, and repetitive images of relentless US use of firepower along with heavy combat vehicles and aircraft in urban fighting, it is

hard to argue that hearts and minds were being won, at least by US elements of the Coalition.

One almost certain outcome of al-Sadr's rebellion will be further violence. As al-Sadr's forces cannot be completely eliminated and some elements may not be under his full control (perhaps as a convenience), violence is likely to persist; although its intensity and frequency is likely to vary from place to place and time to time, as al-Sadr variously emphasises talking or shooting to further his objectives.

It is very improbable that the south will return to the relative quiet of pre-April. The UK's decision to strengthen its contingent in Iraq with additional mechanised forces and engineers for fortification work suggests its view of the future in its area of responsibility. Yet more pessimistically, the Coalition still faces the prospect of further mini-uprisings, and a full-blown Shi'ite revolt remains a possibility under some circumstances.

There appear to be two positive outcomes from the rebellion. First, it seems that the Coalition has found a path that may allow it to win with the Shi'ite population instead of against them. Coalition military operations served the political advantage of some mainstream Shi'ite political and religious elements and encouraged them to rein in al-Sadr, in effect establishing that they could work together for mutual advantage. Secondly, the Coalition appeared to learn a great deal about fighting in the complex religious and political environments of the urban areas of the south. While unable to act with a free hand, US and other Coalition forces displayed the ability to conduct operations in built-up and densely populated areas without causing massive collateral damage. While limiting the risk to the sensitive holy sites, US forces were able to exploit the political mandate they had, to close with the Mahdi Army and inflict substantial attrition on it, contributing to al-Sadr's decision to ask for a ceasefire and reduce the visibility of the militia. These outcomes stand in marked contrast to the conclusion of the siege of Falluja. If Falluja taught the Coalition how not to conduct such operations, perhaps the campaign against al-Sadr is teaching the Coalition some more positive lessons.

Long-term implications

The revolt of Moqtada al-Sadr appears as an important moment in the post-war history of Iraq. For the first time, the Coalition faced organised and armed opposition

from Shi'ite forces and, inevitably, there are significant long-term implications for the security and political situation in Iraq.

Al-Sadr's organisation is likely to develop as a political faction with an armed and violent component, a component that can be conjured up whenever it is necessary to resort to political violence. It operates comfortably on the violent edge of politics – murdering, intimidating, suborning and, when deemed necessary, fighting, to achieve its objectives. It is not at all clear that the new Iraqi government will have the means or the will to deal with such a group.

Increasingly, the new Iraqi security services will have the responsibility for coping with armed factions such as al-Sadr's, and here there is not much reason for optimism, especially in the short term. The April collapse of much of the security forces, including the successful intimidation or subversion of some Iraqi Police Service (IPS) elements by al-Sadr's organisation, and the apparent involvement of some IPS members and Iraqi Civil Defence Corps personnel in Sunni-based resistance activity, suggest that it will be some time before these can be counted on to control armed and dangerous militiamen.

The rebellion demonstrated, as did the siege of Falluja, that the US military still has problems in fighting insurgents in populated and sensitive urban environments. US operations, while precise and sensitive to collateral damage, were protracted and indecisive, giving al-Sadr time and opportunity to manoeuvre politically and wage his own campaign for public support. To an extent, the protracted and indecisive US challenge has energised him as a political power in Iraq.

More broadly, the revolt has demonstrated to the Shi'ites, the Coalition, the Kurds and the new Iraqi government that force is a real option if negotiations or the new politics do not meet Shi'ite political objectives. Many Shi'ites, both organisations and individuals, stood on the sidelines in this crisis; but they could hardly fail to note the difficulty the Coalition had in meeting al-Sadr's challenge, and this challenge represented only a fraction of the potential power of the Shi'ite community. ●

Author

Jeffrey White, a retired US government intelligence analyst specialising in military and security affairs, is an associate of The Washington Institute. Ryan Phillips is a research assistant at the Institute. Both participated in a 12-day Institute fact-finding mission in Iraq in February.