More Danger in the Future with Moqtada al-Sadr

by **Jeffrey White (/experts/jeffrey-white)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jeffrey White (/experts/jeffrey-white)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.

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Najaf, after three weeks of fighting, has more or less settled down from a military standpoint. The sometimes-fierce combat has ended. Anti-US Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army has left the streets and the Shrine of Ali is under the control of moderate religious elements. Sadr is again talking rather than shooting, signaling he is willing to join the political process in Iraq. Politicians and pundits are defining winners and losers. However, the new situation is complex and uncertain. The fighting did not end Sadr's threat to the government of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, and his participation in any political process will certainly have a violent aspect. The dynamics for another confrontation remain in place.

Sadr loses every battle, but stays in the fight. He and his militia retain much of the capability with which they entered the latest round of fighting. The losses among Sadr's fighters, even if on the scale claimed by coalition forces (as many as 1,000 killed), can be readily made up, at least in terms of numbers. Weapons lost, expended, or turned in can be replaced through the thriving Iraqi arms market. Sadr's organization and militia have not been driven from Baghdad's Sadr City (where a disarmament deal appeared to fall apart on Tuesday) or other key cities in southern Iraq. As we saw during the fighting last spring, when military pressure on the Mehdi Army becomes unbearable, its elements simply fade away into the urban environments. And at least for now there is little prospect of any concerted Iraqi government or coalition effort against them.

The conflict in Najaf was only resolved by the intervention of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. The image of the old and revered cleric returning to Iraq to save the situation could hardly have been more powerful -- and instructive. At the end of August, the situation in Najaf had degenerated into a prolonged stalemate, with the Iraqi government, coalition forces and Sadr unable to bring it to an end. Sistani was able, by the mere expression of what he wanted done, to resolve the crisis. His weapons are religious authority, moral force and popular support, and these proved more useful than the arms of the coalition and the blustering of the Allawi government. Perhaps the most important force on Iraq's political scene, Sistani further enhanced his influence, especially vis-a-vis the government. Allawi, a secular Shiite, could not deliver, even with the military backing of the coalition.

While some will probably try to portray the outcome as a success for Allawi, this seems contrary to what actually happened. The prime minister and other government figures proved inconsistent in dealing with Sadr, alternating between dire threats that they were in no position to back up, and peace talks. The wind from Baghdad blew both hot

and cold and eventually left an impression of impotence and posturing on the government's part. Allawi, Iraq's "strongman," appeared indecisive when confronted with his first real test.

This image of impotence was reinforced by the failure of the new Iraqi security forces to play any significant role in the fighting. Americans did all the heavy fighting, despite numerous reports of imminent assaults by Iraqi units and public relations videos of Iraqi units performing in Najaf. The demands of any mission involving serious operations against Sadr appeared beyond the capabilities of the new security services, and would have strained the fragile cohesion of the Iraqi units committed to action. The, at best, marginal capabilities of the Iraqis probably contributed to the government's hesitation to act decisively against Sadr. As the end of the crisis approached, the security forces may also have been involved in serious incidents of firing on pro-Sadr demonstrators. This suggested that at least some Iraqi elements are undisciplined, raising concerns about their future employment in sensitive situations.

Accounts of the fighting in Najaf, Sadr City and elsewhere in Iraq, where American troops engaged the Mehdi Army, reveal huge disparities in tactical skill and firepower, although not courage. Mehdi Army losses were many times those of US forces, possibly on a scale of 100 to 1 in terms of those killed in action. Tactically skillful and highly disciplined, the American soldiers and Marines employed devastating firepower that Mehdi Army forces were completely unable to match.

However, despite the military advantages enjoyed by the coalition, it was unable to bring these to bear rapidly and decisively. As at Fallujah, and last spring, the urban nature of the fighting, involving difficult terrain and combatants intermixed with civilians, proved difficult, leading to protracted operations and the negative publicity accompanying them. This time, coalition forces also found themselves operating in a constricting political web created by the transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqi government. Coalition leaders and commanders were at pains to demonstrate that Allawi was "calling the shots," which suited US political objectives, but at the same time constrained the freedom of action of American commanders. Planned actions were delayed or cancelled based on which way the wind was blowing from Baghdad. This impeded operations, allowed the Mehdi Army respite and reinforced the impression of a lack of clarity and purpose.

The Najaf crisis was perhaps inevitable. The fighting in April and May was ended inconclusively by a cease-fire and promises of good behavior, but there was little chance that this would last. In many areas the Mehdi Army simply disappeared, ready to be called forth again. In recent weeks, while Najaf captured much of the attention, it represented only part of the story of the uprising. As in the spring this was a widespread revolt, with even more cities apparently involved, and with the Mehdi Army introducing some new tactics, such as attacks on the oil industry. Sadr City, Kut, Nasiriyyah and Basra were again troublesome, as well as Najaf, suggesting that Sadr's organization is spread across Shiite areas of Iraq.

Sistani deserves much of the credit for resolving the Najaf crisis, but it remains to be seen whether he or anyone else can resolve the Sadr problem. Sadr is the leader of an armed and violent political faction, and there is no sign that it is going away or will really join the political process as a legitimate party employing peaceful political means. His is a "revolutionary" party with an armed wing that is a match for any force in Iraq except for the coalition. The history of Sadr's actions since the summer of 2003, when he first began emerging as a political power, has been one of repeated violent confrontation and the use of force, both on a large scale, as in the latest round, and more intimately, in the murder, torture, kidnapping and intimidation of those he has defined as enemies. Each round in what has become an extended confrontation has proven more dangerous and more intricate.

Sadr may be talking peace and politics now, but another and still more dangerous round should be anticipated.

Jeffrey B. White is an associate at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a former Defense Intelligence Agency analyst. He wrote this commentary for the Daily Star. ❖

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