The Latest Challenge from al-Sadr (Part II):

Implications and Outlook

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Brief Analysis

Muqtada al-Sadr has placed the Interim Iraqi Government in a difficult position, forcing it to demonstrate both strength and skill. His challenge exploits the political and military seams between the interim government and the coalition, and within the Iraqi political system. He has also exploited popular hostility toward the coalition and, in some quarters, the suspect legitimacy of the interim government.

In measuring Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, al-Sadr may have concluded that there is less there than meets the eye. Repeating a mistake made by coalition commanders in spring 2004, Allawi talked tough but was then drawn into ceasefire negotiations, breaking the momentum of military operations that had pushed al-Sadr to the wall in Najaf. In moderating his initial tough stance, Allawi showed that he is either not as strong as some observers thought or is adapting rapidly to political reality. The history of negotiations with both al-Sadr and the Sunni insurgents in Fallujah indicates that, once talks begin, the phase of decisive military action is over.

The breakdown of negotiations in recent days has brought renewed threats of force against al-Sadr, this time to be led by Iraqi units. Coalition commanders, clearly eager to beat the Mahdi Army once and for all, now find themselves in the position of having to respond to an Iraqi government that is sailing very close to the political winds in Iraq, especially the Shi'i political wind. The renewed threats of military action suggest that Allawi is having trouble maintaining a steady course.

The Fighting

The recent violence is highly reminiscent of previous battles with al-Sadr. Engagements are usually lopsided (though indecisive) affairs, with al-Sadr's militia taking disproportionate casualties. Coalition troops rely heavily on precise and overwhelming firepower, while the militiamen employ hit-and-run tactics featuring mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and small arms to harass and inflict casualties on coalition and Iraqi units. The Mahdi Army has learned from the spring revolt. Its militiamen choose to fight in the most difficult urban terrain, staying as close as possible to the shrines. They know that this kind of warfare imposes significant limitations on U.S. and, to a lesser extent, Iraqi security forces. Moreover, scenes of fighting in and around the shrines and other holy places galvanize Shi'is (as well as some Sunnis) across the region.

The Iraqi security forces are being given a much more prominent role in the current fighting. Although they have not undergone a general collapse beneath the weight of this role, as they did in the spring, their record in the current hostilities is mixed. Some elements appear to be at least marginally capable, while others have chosen not to fight, have indicated a preference for al-Sadr, or have apparently been deemed incapable. Some measure of improved performance has been expected, given the intensified efforts to train and equip Iraqi units as well as the number of U.S. Special Forces "advisors" and combat units working closely with the Iraqis. In fact, Iraqi units in Najaf were subordinated to U.S. commanders, and U.S. Special Forces elements have been directly involved in actions featuring so-called Iraqi "commandos." These commandos (possibly from the Kurdish-dominated 36th Battalion) have proven more capable than other Iraqi forces. On August 13, the 36th Battalion, accompanied by U.S. Special Forces, played the major role in raiding a mosque north of Kufa. Unfortunately, the Iraqi police once again seem to be the weakest link, though the Iraqi National Guard has improved somewhat.

Implications

The interim government, backed by the coalition, is now locked in a test of wills and capabilities with al-Sadr. Allawi has staked his political future on being the man most capable of dealing with Iraq's multiple security crises. Although he appeared strong at the beginning of the current crisis, he is now vacillating between negotiations and force, taking half-measures that serve to keep al-Sadr on the political scene. Al-Sadr has been somewhat successful in depicting Allawi as a tool of the occupation and a threat to religious Shi'is. He has once again prolonged the conflict to the point that it has become increasingly risky for those opposing him. As in the spring, negotiations with al-Sadr are proving tortuous. Talks broke down on August 14, and a threat looms of major fighting on the doorstep of the Imam Ali Mosque. A small delegation from the Iraqi National Conference arrived in Najaf today in an effort to renew negotiations toward a peaceful solution.

Militarily, there seems to be no clear end to the fighting in the short term. Although the Mahdi Army is suffering substantial losses, it appears capable of recovering, at least in numbers. Accounts of the fighting suggest that the militia has improved somewhat in tactical skill and lost nothing in terms of its willingness to fight and die. One press account revealed a highly articulated militia structure operating within the Sadr City neighborhood in Baghdad. On August 15, militiamen employed a new tactic by setting an oil well near Amara on fire. Coalition forces are still having difficulty finishing off militia units, especially as the fighting approaches religious sites. Iraqi security forces remain questionable in terms of their ability to carry out offensive missions. This inability has accounted for at least one operational delay. Cohesion and responsiveness also appear to vary widely across the Iraqi security services. For example, one police commander in Sadr City reportedly declared that he would not order "even one bullet" to be fired at Mahdi Army fighters.

Every violent confrontation with al-Sadr carries the risks of degenerating into a more general conflict with the Shi'is. Even if such an escalation can be avoided, the interim government and the coalition will likely face persistent armed resistance from Sadrist elements. These repeated crises also raise the potential for collusion between the Sunni resistance and Shi'is opposed to the interim government. Al-Sadr is already receiving support from Sunnis in Fallujah, who recently sent a convoy carrying food supplies and 200 men to Najaf. Moreover, although claims of Iranian support to al-Sadr seem overstated, he is probably receiving some military and financial aid, as well as "volunteers," from Iran. Tehran has also publicly condemned military action in Najaf. The Iranian Foreign Ministry called the U.S. forces in the city "inhumane and horrifying," and Ayatollah Ali Hossein Khamenei declared that Muslims would not forgive the United States for the atrocities. On August 13, thousands marched in Tehran demonstrating anti-American sentiment.

Outlook

Whatever the outcome of the current crisis, this is not the last act of the Muqtada al-Sadr drama. He will continue to

be a thorn in the side of the new government and the coalition under almost any foreseeable circumstances. His death or arrest would transform only the nature of his influence, not the fact of it. Nevertheless, having openly engaged al-Sadr for a second time, the coalition and its Iraqi allies need to finish the job. This task is far broader than wresting control of the Imam Ali Mosque from his forces. It will entail breaking his hold on Sadr City and eliminating, or at least significantly curtailing, the Mahdi Army and his political organization elsewhere in southern Iraq. Even with the assistance of coalition forces, both Prime Minister Allawi and the new Iraqi security services will be severely tested, and it is not at all clear that they will be up to the task. Allawi may lack the personal and political strength to pursue such a course, and the security services appear too brittle and uneven in capabilities to sustain serious fighting and the consequent casualties. This means that the burden of carrying out such a campaign, even if Iraqi forces are given a lead role, will revert to coalition forces.

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