

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

Background and Context

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Brief Analysis

The fractious and dangerous Iraqi Shi'i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr is once again attempting to foment a rebellion. In scenes virtually identical to those of his April-May 2004 uprising, his militia is in the streets, Shi'is are demonstrating en masse, and he is alternately talking peace and vowing to fight to the death. Iraq has changed since the April rebellion, however, with al-Sadr now pitted against the coalition as well as the new Interim Iraqi Government and its expanding security forces.

Much is at stake in the latest round of al-Sadr brinkmanship. The cleric has issued a direct challenge to the new government; failure to respond strongly, yet adroitly, will undermine the credibility of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi and the rest of the transitional administration. Coalition forces are once again betting that they and their allies in the Iraqi security services (whose competence has increased somewhat) can manage the conflict and avoid a general Shi'i uprising. Indeed, the Iraqi security services are now being tested in a heated political setting. As with the spring revolt, the outcome is unclear and laden with short- and long-term implications.

Context

The current crisis stems directly from the unstable truce that ended the previous round of fighting. In early June, al-Sadr began to head down a path toward a legitimate role in the political process that would also allow him to retain the capacity for armed violence. He never went very far down this path, however. Despite ordering his militia, the Mahdi Army, to leave Najaf and Kufa, he refused to disband it. Mahdi militiamen broke the ceasefire as early as June 10 when they attacked the Ghari police station in Najaf, freeing prisoners and burning eight police cars. In a sermon delivered the following day, one of al-Sadr's senior aides indicated that the cleric would accept the forthcoming interim government on the condition that it set a timetable for the withdrawal of coalition forces. Yet, this announcement was followed by a Mahdi attack on Shi'is participating in a peaceful march in support of the ceasefire. Al-Sadr's hostility continued after the interim government assumed authority on June 28. In addition to initially mocking the interim authorities, he openly called for them to resign on August 13. Moreover, he refused to attend the National Conference that began this weekend.

Several other important developments of the ceasefire period have affected the current crisis as well. First, the

Mahdi Army was not truly defeated, despite coalition claims to the contrary. Even as it left the streets, the militia was preparing for the next round, rearming, recruiting, organizing, and training. Second, coalition forces underwent significant changes of their own. The highly effective 1st Armored Division, which had done much of the fighting in April-May, returned to Germany and was replaced by the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). On July 31, the 11th MEU was given operational control over Najaf and Qadisiyah provinces, originally under the direction of the Polish-led Multinational Division Central-South. These changes amounted to a reduction in coalition military capability in the area and may have contributed to al-Sadr's willingness to resume armed conflict.

At the same time, the Iraqi security services have been expanded and upgraded since the previous confrontation with al-Sadr. The extensive collapse of these services in the spring spurred the coalition and Iraqi officials to reenergize the process of training and equipping them. Backed by U.S. firepower, they have assumed a significant role in the current conflict, at least on the surface.

Perhaps more important than the military changes was the political change embodied in the transfer of sovereignty to the Interim Iraqi Government. This meant that any subsequent response to al-Sadr would be seen as cooperative action by the Iraqi government and the coalition, not as the coalition acting alone. Such cooperation serves a dual role, allowing the interim government to employ coalition forces for missions that the Iraqi security services are currently incapable of fulfilling, and allowing coalition forces to operate under the cover of requests for assistance from the Iraqi government.

Another difference in the political context is that Grand Ayatollah Ali Husayn al-Sistani is no longer sitting exposed in Najaf. The possibility that al-Sistani could have been injured in the fighting or seized by Mahdi Army forces was a constraining factor for coalition forces during operations in April-May. On August 6, however, he traveled to London for heart surgery and is now recovering, removing him as a potential pawn or flashpoint in the current conflict.

The National Conference in Baghdad has also begun to influence government decisionmaking regarding al-Sadr. For example, concerns expressed by Shi'i delegates to the conference led the interim government to postpone a purported Iraqi-led assault on the Mahdi Army in order to allow more time for negotiations with al-Sadr. Although this may not have been the only reason for the delay (e.g., Iraqi security forces simply may not be ready for such a mission), it illustrates how the political situation has become much more complicated than it was during the spring uprising. It also suggests that the interim government is sensitive to pressure from the Shi'i community.

The Current Crisis

In early August, al-Sadr's relationship with the interim government and the coalition reached a crisis state. Tensions flared as Iraqi police arrested one of his representatives and U.S. troops skirmished with Mahdi militiamen. On August 5, Mahdi militiamen attempted to take over the Najaf police station three times. These and other actions demanded a strong response. U.S. Marines were sent to support the Iraqi police and Iraqi National Guard forces defending the station, setting off more than a week of violence. During the first two days of hostilities in Najaf, two Marines and as many as 300 Iraqis were killed in intense firefights in the sprawling cemetery adjacent to the Imam Ali Mosque, one of the holiest of Shi'i sites. Fighting spread quickly, and the revolt took on the character of the spring uprising.

Geographically, the current fighting involves many of the same areas as the spring revolt, although it appears to extend a little more broadly. The center of the fighting has been in Najaf, which the coalition and Iraqi government probably see as key to al-Sadr's continued political influence. Yet, serious fighting has also occurred in Kut, Baghdad's Sadr City, and, to a lesser extent, in Hilla, Diwaniyah, Nasiriyah, Amarah, Basra, Kufa, Karbala, al-Hayy, and Rumaythah.

Casualty figures from the current round of fighting are in dispute, with the coalition claiming hundreds of

militiamen killed and al-Sadr admitting to only tens. Coalition and Iraqi government casualties have been much lighter but not inconsequential. At least four Marines, four U.S. soldiers, one British soldier, and approximately twenty members of the Iraqi security services have been killed. Given the disparity in firepower and tactical skill, the Mahdi Army is likely taking severe casualties as it did in the spring, although perhaps not on the scale estimated by the coalition. In general, then, three of the major components of stability in Iraq are now being tested. Two of these -- the interim government and its security forces -- are unproven, while the third -- the coalition military -- is operating in the uncharted environment created by the transfer of sovereignty to Iraqi authorities. The implications of, and outlook for, these developments will be explored in [Part II \(templateC05.php?CID=1770\)](#) of this article.

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[Read Part II of this two-part series. \(templateC05.php?CID=1770\)](#) ❖

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