

Muqtada al-Sadr's Continuing Challenge to the Coalition (Part II):

An Adaptive Enemy

by [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/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.



Brief Analysis

During late May and early June 2004, Muqtada al-Sadr's revolt was challenged by continuing coalition military action and mounting Shi'i political and religious pressure. His militia was increasingly on the defensive, clinging tightly to defensive positions near key holy sites and disappearing from the streets whenever coalition military operations became too overwhelming. In response, Sadr initiated a combination of political and militant actions designed to deflect political pressure, expand his influence, and impede coalition military progress against his forces.

Political Warfare

Sadr has played his hand rather well considering that his chances of military victory declined dramatically once the coalition began to deploy significant combat forces against him. As recently as late May, he remained politically active and still had a hold on Najaf and Kufa. Shi'i politicians and religious figures were approaching him for negotiations, his personal popularity was rising, and his militia was far from defeated. He had also secured key support from tribal elements in southern Iraq, according to a senior source in Baghdad. Meanwhile, the threat of a wider Shi'i rebellion continued to act as a restraint on coalition military action, and the strength of his militia both imposed caution on those Shi'is opposed to him and insured that military action against him would be protracted.

In early June, however, Sadr's military situation -- and, to some degree, his political standing -- deteriorated. Although not prepared to challenge him openly, powerful Shi'i religious and tribal forces were willing to limit his influence and apply pressure in order to constrain his actions. Perhaps most important, senior Shi'i clerics reportedly pushed for aggressive coalition operations against the Mahdi Army up to the very boundaries of holy sites. Moreover, the increased offensive combat power available to the coalition after mid-April (in particular, the deployment of the U.S. 1st Armored Division to the south) tilted the military balance sharply against the Mahdi Army.

In this context, Sadr has employed two key political tactics to frustrate the coalition and his political enemies. First, he has attempted to exploit the desires of certain mainstream Shi'i political, religious, and tribal figures to achieve a negotiated settlement. In doing so, he hoped to escape coalition demands that his militia be dismantled and that he

face Iraqi justice. These Shi'i leaders were primarily interested in limiting the fighting as it approached key holy sites in Karbala and Najaf and wreaked havoc on the economy of southern Iraq. Many probably also fear Sadr's growing personal popularity; according to certain polls, he is the second most popular man in Iraq after Grand Ayatollah Ali Husayn al-Sistani (the most senior Iraqi Shi'i cleric), making him a direct challenger to more senior Shi'i clerics. Accordingly, Sadr has reportedly used as many as eleven different conduits in his efforts to open political talks with the coalition and others. He has also employed a well-conceived and responsive "information operations" campaign to spread his message across the Shi'i community and the rest of Iraq. Moreover, the so-called "ceasefire" of May 27 was consistent with this tactical approach, as was his more recent "withdrawal" from the streets of Najaf and Kufa. From the beginning, Sadr has sought to avoid a decisive defeat by the coalition and to avoid firm agreements that would hold him accountable for what is done in his name. He has proposed or agreed to ceasefires and withdrawals only during moments of acute pressure from coalition forces or rising Shi'i concerns about the risks to holy sites in Najaf.

Second, Sadr has used threats and bluffs in an effort to appear more formidable than his actual capabilities indicate he is. For example, he has threatened to unleash suicide bombers and to ignite violent resistance if coalition forces approach holy sites. Dressing in the robes of martyrdom and using his Friday sermons to disseminate anticoalition vitriol, Sadr has engaged in a sort of "theater of resistance" in order to buttress his supporters and deter his enemies. His most serious threat was to mobilize the Shi'i community and Iraqis in general against the coalition. From the beginning of his revolt on April 4, he attempted to elicit active support from Iraqi Shi'is, but with only limited success. Sadr also appealed to the Iraqi Sunni community, again with limited success, and to Shi'i communities in Iran and Lebanon. His attempt to reenergize his revolt in mid-May with mini-uprisings in Baghdad, Nasiriyah, and Amarah failed to spread as well.

Irregular Warfare

Sadr has not limited his actions to the political realm. The Mahdi Army has proven willing to stand and fight coalition forces, even at the risk of appalling losses, and to take the initiative whenever circumstances offer some prospect for success. The militia's irregular warfare has displayed five broad characteristics:

- Use of opportunistic attacks on exposed coalition elements, including ambushes of convoys and patrols, improvised explosive devices, and harassing fire against coalition and Iraqi government facilities.
- A geographically widespread "rebellion," with Mahdi Army elements fighting in many locations in the south, including Najaf, Kufa, Karbala, Nasiriyah, Amarah, Kut, Basra, Samawah, and Diwaniyah.
- The launch of mini-uprisings in Baghdad's Sadr City and other locations in the south in response to increasing coalition military pressure.
- A willingness to exploit Shi'i shrines as cover from coalition attack.
- A tendency to disappear in the face of overwhelming coalition military pressure. Because of their willingness to stand and fight, Mahdi Army elements have earned the grudging respect of U.S. forces engaged against them. Given that the militia is less than a year old, this tenacity suggests some type of outside assistance, probably from former Ba'ath regime military personnel (including Sunnis, who reportedly have a considerable presence in the Mahdi Army).

Potential Outcomes of the Revolt

Neither the temporary, one-sided ceasefire of May 27 nor the Mahdi Army's withdrawal from the streets of Najaf and Kufa represent the end of his challenge to the coalition. In fact, Sadr surrendered little in exchange for a reduction of coalition military pressure against him. If fighting had continued at its previous level, his forces would have faced

piecemeal destruction. In the current context, it has yet to be demonstrated that mainstream Shi'i elements can bring him under control, much less hold him accountable for his criminal activity or dismantle his militia. The new Iraqi government's pledge that Sadr will be dealt with by the Iraqi justice system does not indicate that his movement will be dissolved anytime soon. Claims that his militia has been defeated across the south are also likely premature.

One potential outcome is that the coalition will eventually be able to contain Sadr without eliminating him as a serious political factor. For example, Sadr could reach a political arrangement whereby he simply takes his militia off the streets and curbs his rhetoric. Subsequently, he could remain politically active, with his organization largely intact and his militia awaiting orders to reemerge. This outcome seems quite likely under the current circumstances.

Another potential outcome is that Sadr will be enhanced as a political force, making him still more difficult to deal with in the future. According to one poll, nearly 68 percent of Iraqis supported him in May 2004, compared to only 1 percent in December 2003. Sadr may be able to exploit this popularity as the political process unfolds.

Unfortunately, one near-certain outcome will be some level of continuing violence in the south and in areas of Baghdad where Sadr has strong support. The coalition also faces the prospect of additional mini-uprisings, and a full-blown Shi'i revolt remains a possibility under certain circumstances.

There appear to be at least two positive outcomes from the latest phase of the revolt, however. First, the coalition may have found a path toward winning the cooperation of mainstream Shi'is instead of alienating them. Coalition military operations have benefited certain Shi'i political and religious elements and encouraged them to rein in Sadr, showing that Shi'is and the coalition can work together for mutual advantage. Second, the coalition appears to have learned a great deal about fighting in the complex religious and political environments of southern Iraq's urban areas -- a lesson that has come none too soon.

Jeffrey White, a retired U.S. government intelligence analyst specializing in military and security affairs, is an associate of The Washington Institute. Ryan Phillips is a research assistant at the Institute.

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