

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

The U.S. Military Response

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Jun 7, 2004

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Brief Analysis

Muqtada al-Sadr represents a serious long-term political and military challenge to the coalition and the new Iraqi government. Open warfare between Sadr and the coalition first emerged on April 4, 2004, with "uprisings" by his militia, the so-called Mahdi Army, in Baghdad and across southern Iraq. Although Sadr has not achieved his objective of a broad-based Shi'i rebellion, coalition forces have not been able to bring him to justice or dissolve his militia. Both sides are now playing a high-stakes game. The coalition is betting that it can eliminate or reduce Sadr as a political force without causing a serious breach with the larger Shi'i community. Sadr is gambling that he can persist, even prosper, in the face of the coalition. Indeed, he has long-term political goals and is positioning himself for the upcoming elections. The prospects that the coalition can bring him under control at acceptable cost and risk remain uncertain.

The Initial Revolt

Sadr's April 4 uprising consisted of simultaneous small revolts in Baghdad and across southern Iraq. The seriousness of these actions varied from place to place, and coalition forces largely contained the revolt by mid-April. Nevertheless, the Mahdi Army remained entrenched in a number of critical areas, including Najaf, Kufa, Karbala, and Baghdad's Sadr City. Sadr's cadres also remained active, if not in control, in other locations throughout southern Iraq.

When the rebellion broke out, the coalition moved almost immediately to improve its military posture in the south, deploying major combat elements from the experienced 1st Armored Division and 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment. These forces gave the coalition an offensive capability that it had heretofore lacked in southern Iraq.

Politically, both sides sought an advantage in the confrontation by appealing to other Iraqi elements. The coalition looked to mainstream Shi'i politicians, clerics, and tribal leaders to help bring Sadr and his militia under control. Sadr directed his appeals to the broader Iraqi population (including Sunnis) and to Shi'is in other countries. In any case, no Shi'i political or militia element seemed willing to confront Sadr directly.

The Coalition's Response

During the first two weeks following the containment of Sadr's initial revolt in mid-April, the coalition appeared to have developed a relatively effective but cautious approach to dealing with Sadr, at least from a military perspective. Recovering from the surprise and early setbacks of the initial phase of the revolt, the coalition initiated a campaign to isolate Sadr politically and neutralize his military power. Accordingly, U.S. forces launched offensive operations on April 26 intended to suppress and destroy his militia and remove its leadership, allowing the mainstream Shi'i community to rein him in with a political solution. Maj. Gen. Martin Dempsey, commander of the 1st Armored Division, characterized the military component of this approach in a May 11 interview: "Essentially we want to eliminate Muqtada Sadr's ability to intimidate."

The coalition's military and political operations against Sadr have been mutually supporting. Reductions in his military capability have made him less of a threat to other Shi'i political and religious elements. At the same time, these elements have exhibited increased opposition to Sadr, reducing his ability to mobilize support (especially armed support) among the broader Shi'i and Iraqi communities. In general, the coalition's political efforts have consisted of two major elements:

- Winning over Shi'i elements that have a stake in bringing order and security to southern Iraq. Efforts along this line appear to have spurred increased cooperation with tribal leaders.
- Encouraging moderate Shi'i religious and political figures to limit Sadr's influence and press him to comply with coalition demands. At the same time, the coalition has avoided direct negotiations with Sadr himself.

The coalition has applied inducements along with military pressure in order to encourage religious and tribal support. Although the overt backing of mainstream Shi'i leaders was not deemed absolutely necessary, mainstream Shi'i clerics have reportedly been supportive of military action as long as the coalition does not attack shrines. This support has given U.S. forces significant freedom of action in the south that could not have been anticipated when the revolt first began in early April (e.g., to conduct operations even up to the very walls of shrines).

Military Measures

The U.S. military campaign against Sadr has thus far been waged with clear objectives, with forces that are highly experienced in the Iraqi insurgency milieu, and with a mixture of appropriate tactics. The objectives of this military action are to reduce or destroy militia elements and to dissolve Sadr's organization by demolishing its offices and removing its leaders. The coalition has also attempted to reinsert Iraqi security services into areas freed from Sadr's control. Key to the success of U.S. operations has been the deployment of appropriate personnel -- namely, elements of the 1st Armored Division. This unit -- which had already acquired a year's experience in the difficult urban security environment of Baghdad, including numerous brushes with Sadr militants in Sadr City -- has been able to take the offensive in southern Iraq without inflicting large numbers of civilian casualties or putting key religious sites at unnecessary risk. The tactics employed by this division are varied and appropriate to its objectives. They include the following:

- A "war of posts" featuring the seizure of key positions in and around cities or areas held by the Mahdi Army, as well as the destruction of offices manned by Sadr's cadres. Actions of this sort have served to isolate Mahdi militia elements, reduce their hold on symbolically important facilities (e.g., government offices, police stations), and impede their freedom of action and movement.
- Precise small-unit actions based on specific intelligence and employing precision weapons, including airborne systems in close proximity to sensitive sites. Actions of this sort have been used to destroy militia elements, seize key terrain, and arrest leaders. They often involve devastating, though accurate, firepower at the point of attack, resulting in severe casualties for Sadr's forces.

- Mini "thunder runs" with heavy combat vehicles, intended to overawe the resistance and the population while drawing out militia forces in order to engage them.

- Aggressive patrolling intended to highlight the coalition's presence and draw out militia forces.

According to a senior source in Iraq, these relatively cautious tactics have upset senior Shi'i clerics who were looking for the coalition to act more aggressively against Sadr's forces. Although coalition forces have killed many of Sadr's fighters (reportedly as many as 1,500 since the beginning of the revolt) and caused a great deal of localized destruction, military action has been employed in a precise, carefully orchestrated, even cautious way. This approach has helped the coalition avoid some potentially disastrous missteps (although the potential for such missteps will persist whenever military operations are underway).

Sadr's Response

The campaign against Sadr has yet to run its course, and claims that his militia has been defeated are probably premature. Muqtada al-Sadr is not just a passive recipient of coalition blows. He is an adaptive opponent who is actively seeking to avoid complete military defeat while enhancing his political position.

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