Security and Politics

by Patrick Clawson **(/experts/patrick-clawson)**

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Articles & Testimony

The current fighting in Iraq was almost inevitable. The new political process we are putting in place is based on elections, and those who know that they are going to lose them have every reason to disrupt that process. The Sunni radicals and the Shiite rebel leader Moqtada al-Sadr realize that their only hope of achieving power is by resorting to force. It is hardly surprising that they are cooperating with each other, since a combined effort gives them their best shot at prevailing in a test of arms.

The more troubling confrontation is with al-Sadr, the 30-year-old son of the late, respected Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr. His followers are fanatical but few in number. Stymied politically, al-Sadr has built up his militia, the Jaysh al-Mahdi, or the Mahdi army. They are little more than thugs. In March, the Mahdi army drove out all the residents of Qawliya - a village rumored to be a red-light district - and used a bulldozer to knock down their homes. Another tactic of theirs is to throw acid in the faces of scarf-less women and to threaten those who open women's centers.

Sadr's group is hardly the only militia in Iraq. Many of the tribal leaders, religious figures, and local politicians maneuvering for power in the new civil structures have also been actively recruiting armed groups of supporters. Believing that force equals power and order, too many otherwise democratically minded Iraqis are tempted by totalitarianism. The problem we face was captured well in a recent Oxford Research International poll: Asked what Iraq needs at this time, 86 percent said "an Iraqi democracy," but 81 percent said "a single strong Iraqi leader."

Faced with the militia issue, the Governing Council inserted into the March interim constitution the provision, "Armed forces and militias not under the command structure of the Iraqi Transitional Government are prohibited except as provided by federal law." That did not go far enough for some. The Washington Post editors complained, "No plan has been announced . . . to disarm and dismantle" the militias. It thundered, "Only the United States has the means to force this vital step, and its time is running out."

So, it should have been obvious that in order to "disarm and dismantle" the Mahdi army, we would necessarily have to confront al-Sadr, as there was no way his forces could be co-opted into the new security services.

After threatening al-Sadr for weeks, the United States picked a fight with him. On March 28, in what al-Sadr's followers took as a provocation, we closed his newspaper. Then, when he reacted at Friday prayers the usual way -

with incendiary rhetoric and some peaceful protests - we arrested his deputy, Mustafa al-Yaqubi. Not surprisingly, al-Sadr assumed this was the start of the confrontation we had long threatened, and so he reacted by pulling out all the stops. That is when the rebellion started.

One can make many arguments about whether it was a good idea to pick this fight now with al-Sadr. Maybe it would have been better to tolerate the Mahdi army so long as they confined itself to social issues. On the other hand, if a fight was inevitable, this is not a bad time to have it. Now, unlike after June 30, when Washington is scheduled to transfer power over to the Iraqis, we can at least control the process, and moreover, U.S. forces are at a peak.

But what is alarming is that it appears we were not ready for a clash: U.S. forces were not positioned to protect government installations; they showed little strength in the cities where al-Sadr has influence; and Iraqi security services were ill prepared to deal with the fighting.

We evidently assumed al-Sadr would simply fold when faced with our actions. U.S. Iraq policy has been characterized by extraordinary self-confidence, which served us well during the major combat operations but has been more of a problem since. In particular, we have not always paid as much attention as we should to what others may do to frustrate our plans. Before we take a hard line against a radical like al-Sadr, we should weigh carefully what he can do to us. For all the problems he has caused, we should try to find ways to draw him and his followers back into the political process.

We also need to bear in mind that the institutions of the new Iraq are weak and fragile. Yes, it is disappointing that the Iraqi security services have contributed little to the coalition effort, but on the whole, it would be inappropriate to ask them to do so. The largest components of those services are policemen and facilities guards, who are neither trained nor equipped to deal with combat.

We should not ask the new Iraqi security services to perform politically risky tasks, because they are of little use to us unless they enjoy public support. So far, the news on this front is good. The Oxford Research International poll showed 68 percent of people expressing confidence in the new police. In a similar vein, in the aftermath of a February attack on a police station in Fallujah, clerics representing more than 500 mosques in Anbar province - the heart of the Sunni rebellion, including Fallujah and Ramadi - signed a fatwa that may have been pointedly silent about attacks on Americans, but which stated firmly, "We condemn any act of violence against Iraqi state government workers, police, and soldiers, because it is aggression under Islamic law."

The strength of public support for the new Iraqi institutions is only part of the good news emerging from Iraq. Perhaps the most convincing evidence is that in the last year, more than a million refugees have returned to Iraq, despite being told not to by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. And despite the constant complaining - a characteristic feature of Iraqi life - 57 percent of Iraqis told Oxford Research International that their life is better now than before the war, compared with 19 percent who say it is worse and 23 percent who say it is about the same.

Still, all this progress will melt away if the security situation continues to deteriorate. The key to restoring security is to get the politics right. The Marines like to say, "You have no worse enemy and no better friend than a Marine." Today's task, when confronted with militiamen fighting us in Iraq, is to be that worst enemy, but we must be ready in the near future to make the transition to becoming the best friend of those who lay down their arms, no matter how much they criticize us.

Mr. Clawson is deputy director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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