The Revolt of Muqtada al-Sadr:

Characteristics and Implications

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Brief Analysis

The challenge posed by Muqtada al-Sadr in the past several weeks remains unresolved, and its consequences are likely to be felt for some time to come. Al-Sadr's actions since March 28 present a complex challenge, one with both military and political implications. Eliminating al-Sadr and his organization as a political and military factor entails risk; but, if handled properly, the risks are worth taking.

Context

The clash with al-Sadr was long in development (see PolicyWatch no. 853 **(templateC05.php?CID=1731)**). The coalition's decision to close one of al-Sadr's newspapers on March 28 precipitated a broad revolt by his followers in Baghdad and in the south. The scope of this rebellion surprised the coalition, leaving its forces and bases vulnerable to attack and isolated, thereby allowing al-Sadr to seize the military and political initiative across much of southern Iraq.

The near simultaneous outbreak of rebellion on April 4 at numerous locations in Baghdad and in the south indicates advance preparation. A combination of Mahdi Army assaults -- including attacks on coalition posts and Iraqi government offices and police stations, violent demonstrations, and attacks on lines of communication -- placed the coalition's southern position at risk. It also quickly became evident that a substantial portion of Iraqi security forces in the south were either actively or passively supporting al-Sadr.

Al-Sadr's supporters rapidly seized control of Kufa, Kut, Najaf, and portions of Karbala, and contested control of Nasariyah, Hillah, al-Amarah, Diwaniyah, Basra, and other locations. The Mahdi Army displayed a willingness to directly engage coalition forces, despite the risk of casualties. The "high water mark" of the rebellion occurred on April 7 when Kut fell to Mahdi Army elements after the humiliating withdrawal of the Ukrainian contingent. In addition to attacking coalition footholds in urban areas, al-Sadr's supporters also began to seize foreign hostages and interdict the long coalition supply line from Kuwait to Baghdad.

Military Challenge

The actions by the Mahdi Army and other armed supporters of al-Sadr represented a broad and decentralized threat

to the coalition; indeed, the numerous attacks across a wide area served to confuse and dislocate any concerted coalition response. Coalition forces were put on the defensive in many locations, having to concentrate on holding their positions rather than regaining the initiative.

Still, despite substantial early successes, not everything went al-Sadr's way. Although some Shi'i rallied to his cause, the majority did not. In part, this was due to al-Sadr's unpopularity in many areas and to the fact that no senior Shi'i leadership figure overtly supported the revolt. Tribal leaders in the south urged calm and exercised a restraining hand, limiting the scope of the rebellion. Al-Sadr's forces also proved unwilling or unable to stand against determined and aggressive coalition military action. Where coalition forces stood and fought, they held. Where they acted aggressively, as the Italians did in Nasariyah, al-Sadr lost, and lost heavily.

Coalition Response

From April 4 to April 7, al-Sadr held the initiative. In response, the coalition retook Iraqi police and government facilities in Baghdad, deployed U.S. combat elements from elsewhere into Iraq, reoccupied Kut (on April 9) against light resistance, and held on elsewhere. By April 9, U.S. forces had begun to concentrate on the outskirts of Najaf, awaiting a decision to clear the city of al-Sadr elements. By April 14, al-Sadr was speaking of a negotiated settlement, rather than repeating his previous declaration to fight to the death.

Other Shi'i Actors

In addition to al-Sadr's supporters, other Shi'i elements played, or could have played, a role in the course of the insurrection. Grand Ayatollah Ali Husayn al-Sistani played a cautious but essentially quieting part, attempting to calm the situation without openly supporting either the coalition or al-Sadr. This basically worked to the coalition's advantage by discouraging mass mobilization of the Shi'i to al-Sadr's cause. The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the Dawa Party both played a limited role in discussions aimed at ending the U.S. standoff with al-Sadr. Overtly, the Iranians sent an envoy to Najaf in an attempt to diffuse the crisis, although their covert involvement remains unclear. All of these groups reacted cautiously to the situation, wanting neither to oppose al-Sadr directly, nor to express overt opposition to the coalition; they could afford to see how the situation developed before taking action.

Implications

The revolt of Muqtada al-Sadr will be a watershed event in the postwar history of Iraq. For the first time, the coalition faced organized and armed opposition from the Shi'i. Even if al-Sadr's forces are brought under control, there are significant military implications:

The limited, but not insignificant, ability of al-Sadr's militia to stand and fight against aggressive coalition forces, and their capability to inflict losses and damage on those forces.

The ability of the militia to spontaneously draw strength in numbers from local Shi'i populations. For example, some Shi'i in Baghdad not normally supportive of al-Sadr proclaimed, "We are all Mahdi Army."

The militia's ability to attack in many places simultaneously while combining different kinds of actions: indirect fire, assault, ambushes, and violent demonstrations.

The exposure of coalition vulnerabilities, including uneven performances by some coalition military elements, long and vulnerable lines of communication from Kuwait to Baghdad, and the isolation of some coalition administrative and military elements.

The unwarranted reliance on the new Iraqi Police Services (IPS), even for intelligence. IPS units appear to have either stood aside or joined al-Sadr's supporters.

But the revolt is as much political as it is military:

Al-Sadr's political organization is central to his strength and remains particularly active in Baghdad and the south. It operates comfortably on the violent edge of politics -- murdering, intimidating, and suborning to achieve its objectives. Even in the unlikely event that al-Sadr actually disbands the militia, his political organization will remain intact.

If al-Sistani and other clerics prove successful in resolving the crisis with al-Sadr, the coalition will pay a price. The power and prestige of these clerics will be enhanced relative to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), and al-Sistani's role as the arbiter of Shi'i politics will be confirmed. He is likely to feel that his influence has been enhanced by this role and will become even more difficult for the coalition to deal with.

The revolt has demonstrated to the Shi'i, and to the CPA, that force is an option if negotiations do not meet Shi'i political objectives. Many Shi'i -- both organizations and individuals -- stood on the sidelines in this crisis, but they could hardly fail to notice the difficulty the coalition had in meeting al-Sadr's challenge.

Prospects

Al-Sadr's revolt may well be settled "peacefully," through the intervention of al-Sistani and others. Such a scenario would represent a defeat for the coalition. Success for the coalition will only come, even if over time, through al-Sadr's elimination as a political and military factor in the Iraqi equation. There are various ways this could be accomplished, beyond the outright physical destruction of his faction, but political compromises and half-measures will simply allow him to regroup and fight again another day.

Even if the coalition eliminates the al-Sadr factor, residual insecurity is likely to plague areas in the south. Remnants of al-Sadr's militia and organization would probably go underground and transition to armed resistance, targeting both coalition elements and Iraqis working with the coalition. Restoring the situation to its pre-March 28 state -- or anything similar to it -- will require a long-term effort.

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