

U.S. Should Choose Time, Place to Confront Radical Cleric

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Since the beginning of Muqtada al-Sadr's uprising this month, the U.S. military has been uncompromising in its determination to bring the Iraqi Shiite cleric to justice. Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, deputy head of U.S. military operations in Iraq, is on record as threatening, "We will hunt him down and destroy him."

More than two years into the global war on terror, "kill or capture" rolls fairly easily off the tongues of U.S. military commanders, who have used the phrase regularly with reference to Mr. al-Sadr since the uprising began. What General Kimmitt and other Coalition Provisional Authority figures might have added, however, is that Mr. al-Sadr should be dealt with - to borrow another well-worn military phrase - "at a time and place of our choosing."

If one lesson stands out from the recent flare-up of violence in the Sunni triangle and the Shiite south, it is that military force needs to be carefully calibrated and sparingly used in transitional Iraq.

It's heard often that Iraqis respected the strength of the Baathist regime, that the coalition needs to demonstrate similar resolve. But Saddam Hussein's routine use of violence against his internal opponents typically was patiently planned and precisely applied. The coalition can take this lesson from the former regime without having to adopt Baathist brutality.

Mr. al-Sadr was a security threat to the coalition before the Baathist defense of Baghdad had collapsed. His militia, the Mahdi Army, was strongly implicated in the April 10, 2003, killing of a senior Shiite cleric, prompting the coalition to issue an arrest warrant against him on charges of conspiracy to murder. Since October, when Mahdi militiamen killed two U.S. soldiers, the coalition and Mr. al-Sadr have been on a collision course.

Denied a position on the Iraq Governing Council, the cleric sought to control and tax a number of Shiite shrines and incited violence against coalition forces. After the coalition closed his newspaper, Al-Hawza, on March 28, Mr. al-Sadr instructed his militia to seize key areas in several southern cities, prompting the reinforcement of coalition forces in these previously quiet Shiite areas.

Faced by U.S. military mobilization, Mr. al-Sadr appears to have stepped back from the brink. In a situation reminiscent of the "cheat and retreat" tactics used by Mr. Hussein against the United States throughout the 1990s, Washington is caught in a dilemma: Should it pre-empt a demonstrated threat or hold fire until the threat has re-

emerged?

Moving against Mr. al-Sadr could reignite the fighting and perhaps broaden it if the Americans are forced to enter the Shiite holy sites at Najaf to remove him. Capturing or killing Mr. al-Sadr would invite inevitable comparisons between the coalition and the Baathist regime, which imprisoned hundreds of Shiite clerics and killed Mr. al-Sadr's father in 1999.

But letting Mr. al-Sadr go free could strengthen him and bolster the confidence of other potential challengers. The pertinent question must now be: Does Mr. al-Sadr present such a clear and present danger that the United States is forced to move against him at a time and place of his choosing rather than that of the United States?

On all levels, the answer is no.

Mr. al-Sadr commands broad political sympathy but little actual support in Iraq's Shiite community, reducing the likelihood that he could instigate a national uprising. He is an upstart, threatening the tax revenues and challenging the status of other Shiite militias and clerics, and he has little support from other Shiite groups. His militia is neither tightly controlled nor well-trained.

Though it talked a good fight when faced by Iraqi police and coalition troops hampered by highly restrictive rules of engagement, the militia folded wherever it came into contact with determined security forces.

The coalition is now closely following its movements, limiting the potential for surprises. Mr. al-Sadr, as a coalition official told me, is a "spent force," and only the coalition can make him into a threat again, which it would do by seeking to kill or capture him at this sensitive time.

The lesson of Sunni Fallujah and the Shiite uprisings is that certain types of military operations - those that are protracted or subject to uncontrolled escalation - are highly counterproductive in Iraq, risking emblematic confrontations that can take on mythical status for Iraqi resisters. An incursion into Najaf to seize Mr. al-Sadr quickly would become just such a scenario.

Other types of military action - discrete, covert and brief - can be highly effective, and this is the type of action that the United States should reserve for Mr. al-Sadr and others like him. The young Shiite militia leader has pronounced his willingness "to sacrifice for the sake of the Iraqi people," and so he should, but only by disappearing from Iraq's political scene at a time and place of the United States' choosing.

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