Over the Brink in Iraq:

Muqtada al-Sadr Confronts the Coalition

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Brief Analysis

Over the past week, Muqtada al-Sadr, a leading radical Shi'i cleric in Iraq, has begun to launch direct, violent challenges to the coalition's authority. After a relatively quiet period of organization and preparation, Sadr and his faction have emerged as an even more dangerous factor in an already unstable security situation. His latest actions come at a difficult moment, as the coalition attempts to deal with an increasingly obdurate Sunni insurgency, a political challenge from Grand Ayatollah Ali Husayn al-Sistani (the most senior Iraqi Shi'i cleric), and a general rise in political tensions before the approaching June 30 transfer of power. Coalition leaders may in fact have decided to provoke Sadr into an open challenge now rather than waiting for him to take action later. Yet, Sadr was ready, willing, and able to exploit this opportunity, inciting violent protests across much of southern Iraq and in his Baghdad stronghold.

Background

One of the great success stories in Iraq thus far has been the absence of any large-scale armed Shi'i challenge. This success seemed on the verge of evaporating in October 2003, as Sadr's supporters became involved in a number of violent incidents with coalition forces, including a deliberate ambush of a U.S. military police element (see **PolicyWatch no. 794 (templateC05.php?CID=1672)**). In fact, Sadr went to the brink of armed conflict with the coalition, risking the suppression of his faction. He chose to draw back, however, and the coalition chose not to push further. These decisions postponed what was perhaps the inevitable, and the events of the past week have finally carried Sadr over the brink.

Sadr used the period of quiet between October 2003 and the present to expand his capabilities. His Mahdi Army, which consists of some six to ten thousand militants, now seems better organized, better armed, and more capable. These improvements were highlighted on March 12 of this year, when Sadr's forces conducted a well-prepared and coordinated strike on the gypsy village of Qawliya, attacking it with mortars and infantry, occupying and razing it, and dispersing its population. Sadr also expanded the nonmilitant portions of his faction, establishing new offices, religious courts, and prisons in southern Iraq.

Unlike Iraqi Sunni resistance elements, Sadr operates within a political framework, displaying overt leadership, an

articulated organizational structure, and a unified militia force. He also has property, financial resources, and the name of his father (a prominent Shi'i cleric killed by the Saddam regime in 1999) at his disposal. All of these factors make him a complex challenge that the coalition cannot take lightly.

Over the past week, Sadr became openly confrontational. After the coalition shut down a Sadr-linked newspaper on March 28 (see below), thousands of Sadr supporters took to the streets in protest. In an April 2 sermon in Kufa, Sadr crossed a line that he had carefully treaded since October by instructing his followers to fight "the occupiers" and to "strike them where you meet them." On April 3, the Mahdi Army marched in Baghdad and, the next day, Sadr's supporters initiated coordinated attacks on Iraqi police stations in that city while staging violent demonstrations in Najaf, Kufa, Nasiriyah, Amarah, and Basra. In sum, the demonstrations resulted in nine coalition soldiers killed (eight American and one Salvadoran) and twelve wounded, as well as more than sixty-five Iraqis dead and 250 wounded.

Context

The cause of Sadr's latest challenge appears to be a combination of two recent coalition-initiated events: the March 28 closing of the radical newspaper al-Hawza and the April 3 arrest of Sadr's senior aide, Mustafa al-Yacoubi, for his suspected involvement in the murder of a rival Shi'i cleric in April 2003. Sadr's challenge is also emerging in the context of other significant political and security developments in southern Iraq, where coalition military capabilities are limited, relative to those deployed against the Sunni resistance in central Iraq. Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani is posing a political challenge to the coalition with regard to the Transitional Administrative Law, the interim constitution recently approved by the Iraqi Governing Council. His supporters have indicated that they will use mass demonstrations to help fulfill their goals. Moreover, in addition to Sadr's forces, other armed Shi'i factions and militias (e.g., forces associated with the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the Islamic Dawa Party) are currently active in the south, competing for influence and position. Popular demonstrations against the coalition have already taken place in Basra and Najaf, while militants have conducted several attacks on police forces in the south and used bombs against British forces in the Basra area.

What Is to Come?

Unless the coalition takes strong action now, Muqtada al-Sadr and his faction will only become more dangerous over time. Although any such action will carry substantial risk, now may be the best time to suppress Sadr, while a strong U.S. military presence is in the country and with several weeks remaining before June 30. The coalition has a number of options from which to choose in confronting Sadr:

• Act on the warrant issued months ago by an Iraqi judge to arrest him and a number of his lieutenants in the hope of decisively weakening his faction. This approach could perhaps be combined with suppression efforts against the Mahdi Army.

• Attempt to avoid an escalation of the current conflict by seeking a truce.

• Solicit the aid of other Shi'i elements in reducing the current hostilities and controlling Sadr's behavior.

All of these courses of action entail risk. Arresting Sadr or suppressing his militia would be seen as dramatic confirmation of his argument that the coalition is the enemy of Shi'is. Direct action of this sort would eliminate any incentive to reduce the level of confrontation and would probably lead to sustained hostilities, including massive, violent demonstrations and armed resistance. Moreover, if given an opportunity, Sadr and his associates would attempt to mobilize support among other Shi'i groups and leaders, Sadr's Sunni associates, and Iran. Specifically, they would attempt to portray a campaign against his faction as an attack on Islam and Shi'a, comparing it to Saddam Husayn's brutal actions (including the killing of Sadr's father). Such efforts would appeal to at least some in the Shi'i community. Sadr would seek to adopt a strategy of long-term clandestine resistance, effectively opening a

second armed front in Iraq.

If the coalition elects to avoid an escalating conflict at this time, Sadr and his faction would be emboldened to move even more aggressively to their political advantage. Increased defiance and risk-taking would likely emerge. Moreover, other, weaker Shi'i organizations would become more reluctant to oppose him, while Iraqi security forces would become more hesitant to challenge the Mahdi Army. In contrast, other powerful Shi'i political organizations could well decide to move against him if the coalition chooses not to do so. Finally, Sadr's perceived success in confronting the coalition would likely attract adherents to his faction and recruits for his militia.

If the coalition were able to employ the aid of other Shi'i political and religious elements in controlling Sadr, these elements would gain a distinct political advantage over other groups and would also likely feel that the coalition was in their debt. Armed action against Sadr by other Shi'is would generate additional violence in both the south and Baghdad. In any case, controlling Sadr would unlikely curtail his ambitions permanently. He would continue to work toward his goals, eventually emerging again as a problem. Hence, whatever stance the coalition adopts, it will have to manage difficult challenges and unexpected consequences.

Implications

Sadr's radicalism and willingness to violently oppose the coalition constitutes the first serious Shi'i security challenge to the coalition. If he and his supporters are not dealt with effectively, the coalition's nightmare scenario of widespread armed Shi'i resistance will become a reality. Such a development would stretch coalition military assets to the breaking point. Many of the coalition's multinational military contingents are neither prepared nor inclined to engage in the kinds of actions that U.S. forces conduct against the Sunni resistance, nor would their governments necessarily permit them to do so. Indeed, Sadr's response to coalition actions targeting his faction raises the specter of sustained hostilities between Shi'i militants and coalition troops, along with the potential mobilization of portions of the Shi'i population against the coalition. This dangerous mix of popular opposition and armed resistance has not yet been seen even in Sunni areas of Iraq.

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