

Charismatic Preacher and a Crucial Battle of Wills

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The next few days will be crucial. Yesterday saw the first armed confrontations between coalition forces and the gunmen who support the young Shia Muslim firebrand, Moqtada al-Sadr. Today the Americans are hitting back with Apache helicopters.

The action is across the whole of the Shia south, the area that suffered most under Saddam. The immediate cause of tension is the impending handover of power to the Iraqi Governing Council in June. It will get worse before it gets better.

The pictures of fanatical Shias suggest the whole country is on fire.

This could be the result - but not yet. It seems the Americans have decided the time is right to take on al-Sadr. They are no doubt hoping that his support among the Shias, who make up two-thirds of Iraq's 25 million population, is not that great.

They might be right. Al-Sadr is considered both dangerous but politically naive. There is no way that other Shia leaders, some of whom control armed groups themselves, are going to allow al-Sadr to emerge as the voice of the Shias.

Iraq's Shia spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, is thought to regard him with complete disdain.

So who is al-Sadr? He is the 30-year-old son of a Shia ayatollah who was killed under Saddam. He has no particular religious qualifications but has charisma that gives him support in the Shia slums of Baghdad. These slums centre on a housing development formerly known as "Saddam City". When Saddam fell, it became "Sadr City". Perhaps a million people live there, 10,000 of whom are the young men of the "Mehdi army" militia which is now fighting the Americans.

US troops moved last week to confront al-Sadr, closing a newspaper that supports him. It also appears they arrested an associate of al-Sadr whom they suspect of murdering a moderate Shia leader in Najaf.

Another key issue is whether the American tactics against al-Sadr are more successful than the British operating in Basra.

The British have been far more laissez faire than the Americans and so the local Iraqi police are being left in control of the situation.

Some of them have now joined the demonstrators' sit-in at the governor's office.

The governor, Abdel-Latif Wael, reportedly fled the building. Wael is also a member of the Iraqi Governing Council. I met him in February when he introduced me to a group of local leaders. His political skills were respected. Whether he can outmanoeuvre al-Sadr's supporters without using force will be a great test.

One person in London certainly watching will be Tony Blair himself.

He has met Wael on each of his visits.

Wael proudly shows off a photograph of the two men standing together. The judge's survival is now crucial to British policy.

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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