

To the Brink:

Muqtada al-Sadr Challenges the United States

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Brief Analysis

Shi'i leader Muqtada al-Sadr, one of the most dangerous men in Iraq, has moved to the brink of a direct and violent confrontation with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and U.S. forces. This is neither an accident nor a surprise. He has prepared for this eventuality almost from the beginning of the occupation and is now on the verge of posing what could be one of the most serious challenges to the coalition. Specifically, Sadr may force the coalition to choose between enforcing its will on part of the Iraqi Shi'i community (with the attendant risks of serious conflict) or acquiescing to the rise of a Shi'i faction that is beyond its control and opposed to its aims.

Recent Developments

Last week, Sadr and his well-organized faction again challenged the coalition in the streets of Baghdad, and this week he began mounting an indirect challenge in Karbala. Tensions have been growing between Sadr supporters and U.S. troops since early October, with clashes, demonstrations, and the attempted arrest of the cleric Salah al-Obeidi in Baghdad's Sadr City, an area named after Muqtada's late father.

On October 6, Sadr associate Moayad Kazrajy was arrested, sparking a series of events whose consequences are still being played out. He was reportedly arrested for criminal and anti-coalition activities, which apparently included hiding weapons in a mosque. Soon after the arrest, Sadr once again demonstrated that he could exploit an opportunity presented by the coalition. His supporters quickly took to the streets in a well-established pattern: making demands on the coalition, declaring their intention to resist coalition actions within their areas, and issuing dire threats. Unlike in previous confrontations, however, Sadr's supporters deliberately employed armed violence against U.S. troops in an act of calculated resistance. (Past armed clashes between Sadr loyalists and coalition forces had been spontaneous in nature and relatively minor in terms of casualties.) On the night of October 9, an element of the First Armored Division conducting a routine patrol in Sadr City was lured into an ambush, reportedly by Sadr supporters. In the ensuing firefight, two U.S. soldiers were killed and four wounded; two Iraqi militants were killed as well. The fighting lasted for over an hour, with the Iraqis using rocket-propelled grenades, explosives, and automatic weapons.

The deaths of the two militants provided an opportunity for further demonstrations and challenges. On October 10,

approximately 10,000 Shi'is marched in the funerals for the two men. Prominent in the crowd were members of Sadr's militia, the Jaysh al-Mahdi, who marched in formation, armed and openly wearing insignia. That same day, during his Friday sermon, Sadr announced the formation of an Iraqi government, including a cabinet, in defiance of the existing Iraqi Governing Council. One of Sadr's key followers in Baghdad, Abdel Hadi Daraji, described this new government: The imam's army [Jaysh al-Mahdi] is the military side, and the cabinet is the political side. On October 1314, Sadr loyalists, including Jaysh al-Mahdi personnel, clashed with Iraqi police and supporters of Grand Ayatollah Ali Husayn al-Sistani (the most senior Iraqi Shi'i cleric, who is tolerant of the occupation) in an attempt to assert control in Karbala. On October 1617, Karbala was the site of serious clashes between coalition forces (U.S. and Polish troops, along with Iraqi police) and Shi'i militiamen. Three U.S. soldiers and two Iraqi policemen were killed, along with a number of militiamen. Although Sadr's role, if any, in the latter incident is unclear, his actions in Karbala have been destabilizing. Moreover, around this same time U.S. troops had to move into Sadr City in order to force Sadr's men out of a government building they had seized.

Context

Sadr's recent actions are part of a pattern of escalating opposition to the coalition. From the outset of the occupation, Sadr adopted a stance against the coalition and, after it was formed, the Governing Council. He moved rapidly into Sadr City, organizing his supporters there in the early weeks of occupation a move that is now paying off in terms of influence and visibility. His creation of the Jaysh al-Mahdi in August provided him with an overt military card, and it would be surprising if he did not command covert military forces as well (e.g., the suicide bombing of an Iraqi police station in Sadr City on October 8 cannot be positively laid at Sadr's feet, but his involvement is suspected). Sadr also exploited the August incident in which a U.S. helicopter blew down Islamic flags on a mosque in Sadr City, using it to further establish his position in opposition to the CPA and the United States.

Until now, coalition officials have tended to downplay Sadr's significance, arguing that he represents only a fraction of Iraqi Shi'is and that, according to polling data, the majority of Shi'is are more or less satisfied with the coalition so far. Although both of these arguments are probably true, they miss the point: even with a limited following, Sadr poses serious problems. His supporters are disciplined, organized, energetic, and armed.

Indeed, Muqtada al-Sadr is a real presence in Iraq, in the spiritual, social, political, military, and physical sense. Spiritually, he wears his father's mantle, compensating to some extent for his own relatively minor religious stature. He uses his regular Friday sermons as a bully pulpit to inspire his followers and attack his enemies, and his clerical status ensures him a measure of protection from retaliation. Socially, his organization has provided needed services to Iraqis from the outset of the occupation. His political presence is evident both in terms of his well-organized cadres and his ability to rapidly muster supporters for demonstrations. His military presence is represented by the Jaysh al-Mahdi and further suggested by the reports of arms stored in mosques. Finally, his physical presence is ensured by the visibility of his organization (both offices and individual supporters), the open activity of Jaysh al-Mahdi, and Sadr's own public presence. While he is certainly not the most revered Iraqi Shi'i cleric, nor the one with the largest following, he cannot be wished away.

Moreover, although Sadr does initiate some confrontational incidents, the coalition also provides him with numerous opportunities to exploit. The August flag incident is perhaps the best example of this, but U.S. patrols in Shi'i areas of Baghdad and Karbala provide plenty of opportunity for other incidents, both spontaneous and planned. U.S. and local accounts of what happens in such incidents are usually quite different, disagreeing on both causes and results, with Iraqis tending to exaggerate events and believe the worst. As Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, the commander of the First Armored Division, has indicated, one of the problems for U.S. forces is an insufficient understanding of the political and social micro-climates in which they are operating. This relative ignorance contributes to mistakes in dealing with the locals. Similarly, Sadr's selection of Karbala as the area in which to affirm his authority was likely

intended to exploit, and test, the non-U.S. forces assigned to the area.

Implications

Muqtada al-Sadr seems bent on challenging the coalition. It is not clear how far he intends to take this challenge, but his provocations appear to be escalating, with several particularly dangerous moves going unpunished. Among the most troublesome developments are the assertiveness of his supporters, his creation of a militia, the October 9 ambush of the U.S. patrol, and his declaration of a new Iraqi government.

Already facing a significant persisting challenge from disaffected Sunnis, the coalition would hardly welcome the prospect of an emerging Shi'i challenge, even if only from one segment of the Shi'i community. As Lieutenant General Sanchez stated on October 14, the coalition cannot allow any opposing political-military power in Iraq. If the coalition wants to enforce its writ, it will have to check Sadr's power. Sadr's previous challenges have not been dealt with firmly, in part because the incidents in question have been complex and ambiguous, and also because Sadr has always drawn back from a full confrontation. Now, however, he seems to be edging closer to such a confrontation. Sadr is capable of producing a crisis between the CPA and the Shi'i community; in the event of a large-scale confrontation between Sadr and the coalition, Shi'is would be forced to react, and some would probably opt to support him. The most immediate risk is a violent clash with a significant portion of the Shi'i population. What is ultimately at stake is the coalition's ability to control the Shi'i community at acceptable cost.

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