

PolicyWatch 2712

Beware of Muqtada al-Sadr

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Whether the popular Shiite cleric's motivations are ideological or political, Washington should make sure that neither his loyal militias nor any rogue splinter groups are tempted into further acts of violence against American personnel and interests.

This September, a McClatchy article outlined the kidnapping of three American defense contractors in Iraq, noting how they were held for thirty-one days and tortured after being snatched in January. Yet they were not taken by the Islamic State, nor by Iranian-backed stalwarts such as Kataib Hezbollah or Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), as many analysts and columnists speculated at the time. The true culprits belonged to Saraya al-Salam (the Peace Companies, or SAS), a Shiite militia headed by influential Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. It is still unknown if this was a warning to the United States from Sadr himself, a rogue move by a splinter group, or a sign of a larger Sadrist effort against American forces in Iraq. Yet the news likely came as a surprise to many observers given Sadr's high-profile focus on nonviolent political action in recent months, not to mention Washington's repeated attempts to engage him. U.S. officials have been mum on the incident thus far -- whether or not they remain so, they should keep a close eye on Sadr's camp as the battle for Mosul and other important developments unfold.

ANTI-U.S. TRACK RECORD

Sadr has a strong ideological heritage of anti-Americanism. His late father, Ayatollah Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, was known for his fiery rhetoric against the United States. And after the younger Sadr declared the existence of Jaish al-Mahdi (the Mahdi Army, or JAM) following the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, the group was involved in numerous bloody clashes with coalition forces, as was its partial successor Liwa al-Youm al-Mawud (the Promised Day Brigades, or LYM).

Since 2014, Sadr has rebuffed numerous U.S. attempts to engage him, according to Iraq-based contacts from the State Department. He has also issued sporadic threats against U.S. forces. On July 21, Alaa About -- the spokesman for SAS, the latest successor to JAM -- stated there was no need for American participation in the battle for Mosul, and that Sadr's forces were "thirsty for American blood."

Despite such rhetoric, the decision to target Americans in January (and perhaps down the road) may have more to do with internal Iraqi politics than anti-Western ideology. Most notably, Sadr's hostile posture could be a means of gaining leverage in his complex and often tumultuous relationship with Iran.

SANDWICHED BETWEEN BAGHDAD AND TEHRAN

In the Iraqi political arena, Sadr has continually used forces under his control to demonstrate that he can project power anytime he likes. This includes the anticorruption protests he fomented earlier this year against Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government, during which his supporters took over Baghdad's Green Zone. Sadr has also criticized the government's cooperation with the United States.

Other protests this year have seen his supporters allegedly ripping down the banners of Iranian-backed Shiite militias, raiding their offices, and yelling anti-Iranian slogans. Further highlighting Sadr's rupture with Tehran and Baghdad, SAS has been acting independently of the government-recognized umbrella network for Shiite militias, al-Hashd al-Shabi (aka the Popular Mobilization Units, or PMUs). Sadr himself has called the dominant Iranian-backed elements in the PMUs "brazen militias."

To be sure, Sadr has publicly apologized for the anti-Iranian chants heard during this year's demonstrations, and Tehran continues to provide direct military support to his forces. Sadr even attended an October 18 reconciliation event with leading Iranian proxy commanders, including two who split from his camp: AAH chief Qais al-Khazali and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba leader Akram Kaabi. There, he expressed support for Iraqi operations in Mosul and rejected Turkey's involvement in the battle. Yet the divisions with Tehran are still deep, and more reports are emerging of assassination campaigns pitting Sadr loyalists against Iranian-controlled splinter groups, particularly AAH.

As Iran and Sadr compete to build loyalty within Iraq's Shiite community, taking a stronger line against the United States plays to the widespread anti-Americanism among the general population. Going up against the world's foremost military power could also help them demonstrate strength to domestic constituents and each other.

In the near term, if Sadr feels he is being pushed into a corner by Tehran or Baghdad, taking violent action against U.S. forces may give him an easy way to gain attention and bolster his claims that he is the only true Iraqi "nationalist" willing to oppose foreign "occupiers." Such attacks could also be used to demonstrate the impotence of the Abadi government and sow divisions between Baghdad and Washington.

SPLINTER CELLS

For over a decade, splinter groups and individual defectors have continually plagued Sadr's ranks. Indeed, the potential for more such splinters to form -- including some that claim to carry Sadr's banner -- makes it uniquely difficult to assess threats arising from the cleric's camp.

While autonomous cells within SAS and LYM could cause their own problems, groups sponsored by Tehran seem to pose the greatest challenge. As tensions rise, such groups could take action against American forces and then blame the attacks on Sadr. In that scenario, he might have to face the repercussions of the attacks, which could in turn spur him to adopt an even more hostile position toward the United States.

Following Sadr's restructuring of JAM in 2008 and the creation of LYM, he often (correctly) asserted that splinter groups, not his own fighters, were the ones targeting U.S. forces. Some of these groups were disparate cells linked to the then-developing Iranian proxy AAH, while others were localized JAM factions that disagreed with halting their armed activities.

When SAS was announced in mid-2014, Sadr stated that it would be the only militia to represent his name and cause. Yet LYM was allowed to continue, showing that Sadr still had to deal with powerful and at times autonomous elements within his militia apparatuses. Accordingly, the cleric has often used a tactic he honed during JAM's heyday: freezing his militias and monitoring which factions adhere to his orders. In February-March 2015, for example, he froze both SAS and LYM, claiming it was a gesture to encourage political interactions rather than violence between different Iraqi parties. In November 2015, he ordered a freeze on SAS elements in Diyala, claiming they were engaged in criminal activities. And this May, he called for his cadres to withdraw their armed presence from sections of Baghdad hit by Islamic State bombings. While this was likely meant to show the government that it needed him and demonstrate its impotence in protecting the capital, particularly those neighborhoods guarded by Iranian-backed forces, it may also have been another loyalty test for Sadr's forces.

Whatever the case, more splinters emerged following the Islamic State's 2014 advance in Iraq, this time with multiple new formalized groups declaring their presence. When the Iranian proxy Kataib al-Imam Ali (the Imam Ali Battalions, or KIA) [was announced in late June of that year](#), former JAM commander Shebl al-Zaidi recorded video of himself and his fighters holding the severed heads of what they claimed were their Islamic State enemies. He then stated that KIA was aligned with SAS and was an integral element of JAM. Three months later, Sadr countered these claims and the attempted smearing of his campaign in a public address, declaring that his militias had a more cleaned-up reputation. Yet as of late 2015, some KIA-linked elements were still putting up martyrdom posters for fallen commanders that featured photos of Sadr.

Other splinter groups fighting in Syria have similarly claimed loyalty to Sadr even though he publicly opposed any armed Shiite intervention next door. On closer inspection, it is clear that these groups are no longer loyal to him -- for many of them, Syria still serves as a good tool for recruiting fighters and further weakening his control.

Another major Sadrist splinter commander, Ahmed Hajji al-Saadi, announced on social media in 2014 that he was operating with SAS in Iraq -- a curious assertion given his close relations with numerous Iranian-backed Shiite jihadist organizations and his claim to fame as cofounder of Syria's first major transnational Shiite jihadist group, Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA). The LAFA offshoot Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein has also claimed to be Sadrist despite its open loyalties to Bashar al-Assad and Tehran. Other Iran-backed groups fighting in Iraq and Syria, such as Qaeda Quwat Abu Fadl al-Abbas and the newer Jaish al-Muwamalat (Army of the Hopeful), have banked on their respective JAM and SAS legacies to recruit and craft militant networks.

KEEPING A CLOSE EYE ON SADR

To help prevent or prepare for potential troubles with Sadr and his splinters, U.S. policymakers should consider renewing their focus on the shifting moves made within his often opaque camp. This includes assessing which figures and networks Iran is using to foster more splinter groups. In the event American personnel are attacked again, such information could be beneficial in planning an appropriate, targeted response.

While Washington has remained publicly silent about Saraya al-Salam's kidnapping of American contractors in January, seemingly preferring to work behind the scenes, it may not have the luxury of doing so in the future. If Sadr is truly embarking on a path of further conflict, U.S. forces will need to respond in a measured way -- not only to discourage escalation, but also to send a strong signal of American power and resolve.

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