

The Shi'ite Gamble: Rolling the Dice for Iraq's Future

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It is becoming clearer and clearer that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's offensive in Basra is more of a power struggle with Sadr than an effort to deal with security, "militias," and "criminals." What is far less clear is how this power struggle will play out, and what its implication will be for the US and Iraq as a whole.

There are three options and none of them have a predictable outcome: First, Maliki can win, defeat Sadr's militia—the Mahdi Army, or Jaish al Mahdi (JAM)—and marginalize the Sadr movement. Second, Maliki can provoke Sadr into open violence and a new form of insurgency. Or, both sides become locked in a lingering intra-Shi'ite power struggle that mixes violence with political power plays.

Maliki's Focus on Sadr

Maliki's effort to suppress the Sadr movement is clear. What is not clear is where Maliki is headed in terms of the overall structure of Shi'ite politics. One can pass over the irony that he obtained the Prime Minister's office largely because Sadr used the votes of his bloc to give him the position once it became clear that his predecessor Ibrahim al-Jaafari would have to leave office.

This, however, leaves many unanswered questions regarding how Maliki's break with Sadr have affected the relationships between Maliki, his relatively small Dawa Party, and main Shi'ite party in the country—the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC). There has been a near silence about how Maliki's faction is interacting with the SIIC faction, led by Abdul Aziz al-Hakim and his son. It is hard to believe that Maliki acted without some arrangement between Dawa and the SIIC, particularly with the prospects of local and provincial elections at the end of this year and national elections in 2009. But this is Iraq, and almost anything is possible.

So far, Maliki seems to have avoided any challenge to the SIIC and the Badr Organization—the supposedly "civil" branch of the SIIC that is its de facto militia. Maliki faces the problem that Dawa Party really does not have a meaningful militia of its own. The SIIC, however, not only still has a de facto militia but it controls some elements of the Iraqi Army and substantial elements of the police at the national and provincial levels.

Maliki seems to have been careful to avoid provoking the other Shi'ite parties in ways that might lead to a violent reaction. While he may talk about "militias" and "criminals" in a broad sense, almost all reporting to date indicates that he has focused almost exclusively on the Sadr militia and the Sadr faction. He has used largely political means to reign in the smaller Al-Fadhila Party, which split from Sadr and played an important role in controlling the government in Basra. Moreover, he seems to have paid at least some tribal leaders to give him local security forces, at least in the Basra area—using central government funds to create what could become elements of a local security force tied to his control.

The Uncertain Balance of Shi'ite Power

The fate and power structure of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the largest party or faction in the government and the Shi'ite Islamist coalition that dominates Iraqi politics, is now unclear. The UIA emerged out of the 2005 election with 4.1 million (48 percent) out of 8.5 million votes cast and with 140 seats in Iraq's 275-seat assembly. It then included the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, Islamic Dawa Party, Badr Organization, Sadrist Movement, Islamic Virtue Party, and Iraq Organization.

Since that time, the UIA has become increasingly divided, and the Shi'ite leadership has become more fractured. The SIIC's leader, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, is dying of lung cancer, and his son is an unproven leader. The more secular Iraqi National Congress, led by Ahmed Chalabi, is back in the game. Some members of the Sadr faction in the National Independent Cadres and Elites Party may now be aligned with Maliki. It is also worth noting that there are some Sunnis affiliated with the UIA, along with the Turcoman National Front.

The Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and the other senior Shi'ite clerics in the Marja(h), are another uncertain element in this power struggle. Sistani approved the UIA before the election, and his approval played an importance role in the result. His influence may since have declined as Iraq's political leaders have risen in status, but he and the senior clerics still retain great influence.

Sistani has so far seemed to back Maliki after the initial wave of fighting in Basra, Sadr City, and southern cities like Hillah, Kut, Karbala, Najaf, Diwaniyah, Nasiriyah, and Amarah. Sadr had previously said that his militia would disarm *if* Sistani and the other senior religious leaders said it should. On April 9, Jalal el Din al Saghier, a senior leader of Sadr's rival the SIIC, is reported to have said that Sistani had authorized him to say that Sistani did not sanction the Jaish al Mahdi and called for it to disarm.

Bill Roggio, writing in the *Long War Journal* states,¹

“Sistani has a clear opinion in this regard; the law is the only authority in the country,” Saghier told Voices of Iraq, indicating Sistani supports Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki and the government in the effort to sideline the Jaish al Mahdi. “Sistani asked the Jaish al Mahdi to give in weapons to the government.”

Sadr did not consult with Sistani on the issue of disbanding the Jaish al Mahdi, disputing a claim from Sadrist spokesmen who intimated Iraqi's top cleric told Sadr to maintain his militia. “The top Shiite cleric had not been consulted in establishing the Jaish al Mahdi, so [he] could not interfere in dissolving it,” Saghier said. “Whosoever established the al-Jaish al Mahdi has to dissolve it; Sayyed Muqtada al-Sadr established this army and it is only him who has to dissolve it.”

Even if Saghier is entirely accurate in speaking for Sistani, Sadr's appeal to Sistani to determine whether the Jaish al Mahdi or JAM should disarm does not seem to have produced a definitive response. At least at a distance, it seems like Sistani and the Marjah may still be waiting to see who, if anyone, wins.

¹ Bill Roggio, “Ayatollah Sistani on the Mahdi Army: “the law is the only authority in the country,”” April 9, 2008, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/04/ayatollah_sistani_on.php.

Support for Maliki from Sunni and Kurdish Leaders

At the same time, Maliki seems to have played his cards skillfully enough to get Sunni and Kurdish support precisely because he has carefully targeted Sadr and the Jaish al Mahdi—which Sunni Arabs and Kurds see as the major Shi'ite threat in terms of sectarian and ethnic violence and “cleansing.”

The Sunni and Kurdish leaders of the government have so far backed Maliki in his attacks on Sadr. On April 6, 2008, they supported him in a meeting of Iraq's Political Council for National Security that warned that Sadrists from could not run in the provincial elections in October if Sadr did not disband his militia.

Hassan al Rubaie, a Sadrist member of the assembly is said to have stated that, “We, the Sadrists, are in a predicament...Our political isolation was very clear and real during the meeting...Even the blocs that had in the past supported us are now against us and we cannot stop them from taking action against us in parliament.”²

The Uncertain Role of the Iraqi Army and Police

There are major uncertainties in the security dimension as well as in the political dimension. It is unclear how Maliki is dealing with the future of the Iraqi security forces, and exactly how US and British military support of Maliki interact with Shi'ite power plays versus the threat posed by the hardline extremists in the Sadr movement that have never honored the Sadr ceasefire, and have continued to attack US, British, and Iraqi government forces.

Some elements of the regular army have clear ties to the SIIC and Badr Organization, and all are dependent to some extent on Maliki's office for promotion, regular pay, arms and equipment transfers, manpower assignments, and money force services and facilities. MNF-I conspicuously avoids getting into these details for obvious reasons; any statements would be seen as a direct challenge to the Maliki government.

The role the Maliki government and SIIC play in the police is even more complex and uncertain. Senior police commanders have mixed loyalties but have shown a growing alignment with the SIIC governors in the south. Elements of the National Police, and many officers in the regular police, have ties to the SIIC. The level of police loyalty to Maliki is more uncertain, and again more influenced by his control over resources than anything else. There also are police units loyal to Sadr, and some have effectively mutinied since the Maliki campaign against Sadr began on March 25, 2008.

² Bill Roggio, “Ayatollah Sistani on the Mahdi Army: “the law is the only authority in the country,”” April 9, 2008, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/04/ayatollah_sistani_on.php.

The Uncertain Role of the US and Britain

Furthermore, the US and Britain have been caught up in the Maliki struggle. The US and British commands and country team had little warning of the Maliki offense and no control over its planning and initial execution—a demonstration of Iraqi sovereignty that all sides need to carefully consider in the future. Once it began, however, the US and Britain had little choice other than rescuing the Iraqi forces when they ran into trouble.

The US and Britain simply could not risk a Sadr victory and the loss of Basra or other cities in the south. They also faced the fact that extremist elements in the Jaish al Mahdi have systematically continued to attack and kill US and British forces in spite of the Sadr ceasefire. Moreover, although Iran has backed Maliki in the recent fighting, the extremist elements of the JAM have previously had ties to Iran and links to the Al Quds force in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. One can afford to be neutral against neutrals. It is not a wise policy in dealing with enemies.

The practical problem for US and British intervention, however, is that there has never been a clear dividing line between those elements of the JAM that support the ceasefire and the complex mix of extremist elements (sometimes called “special groups”) that have had Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah training and arms; have been a continuing threat to the government; and have used Iranian-supplied explosively formed projectiles (EFPs), mortars, and rockets against US and British forces.

Once the Maliki offensive took place, the US and Britain had to target both the hardline or rogue elements in the JAM and the mainstream elements that had supported the ceasefire. They seem to have done so as selectively as possible, but they inevitably incurred Sadr’s wrath in the process and are now seen as an overall enemy of the Sadr movement and all of the Jaish al Mahdi.

The Sadrist Threat(s)

Sadr initially reacted to the Maliki offensive by calling on all Iraqis to unite in driving out the foreign invaders but now has threatened the Iraqi government and senior clergy as well. On April 19, ABC News reports that he made the following statement,

- ? ...despite all the help we gave to the ungrateful Iraqi government, for this government targeted the Sadrists though they are their brothers
- ? ...have you forgotten our first uprising in Najaf and other governorates which was the reason behind forming an Iraqi government. Or have you forgotten the second uprising which was the reason behind the elections in Iraq... do you want a third uprising??!!”
- ? ...because I believe that no Iraqi should be killed whether he is a Muslim or non Muslim, a civilian or a military if it wasn't this then I knew how to handle you
- ? ...despite all the negotiations and what we did to keep the respect of the government...here you are doing what Saddam did like stopping Friday prayers, closing the religious offices, killing old and young men and assassination of our good people.

- ? We will announce a war till liberation if you don't stop.
- ? We didn't gain but the insult of our prophet and the Pope visits the biggest occupying country to Iraq forgetting what is happening to the Iraqis and how they are suffering.
- ? I send you, Iraqi government, the last warning to stop using violence against the Iraqi people or it will be like Saddam's...if they don't stop the militias in government we will announce an open war till liberation.
- ? I thank some of the marjias (Shiite clerics) which rejected the embargo on Sadr city and that the government should not target any political party for political reasons

Sadr is sometimes long on rhetoric and short on action. While he has talked about martyrdom, he has tended to lead from the rear. The fact remains, however, that if he ends the ceasefire and allows the JAM to attack, no one can be sure where it will end. He also has to calculate that he be able to get Iran to take his side, at least covertly and to a limited degree. Al Qaeda in Iraq may step up its activity, and a lingering fight could have an impact on the US election and help drive the US out of Iraq.

Scenario one: Maliki wins, defeats Sadr's militia, and marginalizes the Sadr movement.

One can question the impact of a Maliki victory from the perspective of democratic theory. Virtually all experts agree that the Sadrist movement probably has more mass support among Shi'ites than the combination of Dawa and SIIC. In some mix of local and provincial elections that was held on the basis of ideal democracy, Sadr would win significant strength in Baghdad and the south, and do so with as much legitimacy as any other populist demagogue.

More practically, it is hard to dismiss the possibility that the fighting that began on March 25 has been directed largely against Sadr precisely because he was becoming an increasingly better organized political force and more of a threat to Dawa and SIIC leaders who gained power more because they rode the US-led invasion into power than because of real popular support.

This, however, is not a perfect world, and it is even further from a perfect Iraq. If Maliki's offensive can shatter the Sadr militia and special groups, it is hard to believe that any October elections will not produce results that will serve the interests of all Iraqis—and Shi'ite Arab Iraqis—better than Sadrist-dominated victories in much of the south and Sadr City. It is difficult to believe that Sadr would ever be a friend of the US, that the Mahdi Army would quietly disappear on its own, or that the special groups would not keep killing, and that the JAM would not pose the threat of new intra-Shi'ite fighting. This has, after all, been the pattern since the JAM first became a serious threat in 2004.

The practical problem is that it is much easier to provoke an ideological and political movement with even the most successful tactical attacks than it is to defeat it as a religious and political force. Iraq's poorer and more religious Shi'ites will not disappear no matter how good the military gains are against the JAM. They will be a major political force in any future elections regardless of whether Sadr survives, Sadrists are allowed to run, or the elections are fair or partly rigged. No one in Iraq goes quietly into that great night.

It is equally important to note that even if the JAM is defeated by May, there will still only be a maximum of five months to hold local and provincial elections. At this point, no real parties exist at the local level, it is not clear how candidates will be selected, it is not clear how they will campaign, and the real world role of the United Nations and Iraqi Electoral Commission in running the elections is uncertain.

It also is uncertain what role Dawa and the SIIC will play in shaping Iraq's future if they can defeat Sadr and any meaningful challenge from today's Shi'ite leaders. Even a successful mix of local and provincial elections in the Shi'ite areas in 2008 would leave a host of other questions unanswered: what will the impact be on national elections in 2009; can local and provincial elections be successful in Sunni and mixed areas; how will this affect any voting on "federation;" and how will the new balance of local, provincial, and central government power reshape Iraq?

Other questions arise as to how Dawa and the SIIC will deal with the US once the elections are held and Britain is effectively gone from the south. It seems likely that they will continue ties to the US and keep their distance from Iran, but it will be much easier for them to play the US off against Iran if Sadr is gone. **There also are serious questions about just how much distance the SIIC will keep from Iran – given its long standing ties to that country and need for outside support – and whether empowering an Al Dawa and SIIC leadership would lead to a strong push for a Shi'ite federal area in the south and new pressures to divide up part of the country. Weakening the SIIC's main rival in Iraq could present serious problems as well as benefits.**

If this "best case" scenario occurs, it would almost certainly increase the prospects of the US staying in Iraq and have some impact on the November elections in the US. It would, however, be as much the "fog ahead" as the "way ahead."

Scenario two: Maliki provokes Sadr into open violence and a new form of insurgency.

It seems likely that the fighting and power struggle between Maliki and Sadr will continue through May at a minimum, and it is at least as likely to get worse as better. This will not matter if the Maliki government wins in time to hold local and provincial elections in 2008, and for a victory to influence the congressional vote on the FY2009 supplemental that is necessary to fund the war and the debate over the 2008 US election.

The outcome will be very different if the result is a major new insurgency in the south and Sadr City, if the Sadr ceasefire ends without the defeat of the JAM, and if the US and Iraqi forces are dragged into more serious fighting against both the Sadrist and Al Qaeda in Iraq. This fighting could block the 2008 elections in Iraq or deprive them of any legitimacy, push the Sadrists into open or covert dependence on Iran, and would have a major impact on the US elections.

Again, there is a heavy layer of fog over the outcome. It is important to note, however, that the Sadrists did not win any previous clashes with MNF-I, have not won significant clashes in this round of fighting, seem to have lost in Basra, and have not had any overt Iranian encouragement and support. Iraqi forces—for all their very real and all too obvious weaknesses—are now much stronger and are slowly becoming more effective.

Moreover, intra-Shi'ite power struggles seem to be driving the Shi'ite bloc in the central government toward political accommodation with Sunni and Kurd and increased reliance on the US at the expense of Iran. Iran has also carefully distanced itself from Sadr and backed the Maliki offensive in Basra. The players are uncertain and the game can shift in a heartbeat, but this "worst case" scenario seems less likely than the "best case."

Scenario three: both sides become locked into a lingering intra-Shi'ite power struggle that mixes violence with political power plays.

Both of the previous scenarios do, however, raise the prospect of an uncertain and unstable outcome or a continuing confused mess. The Sadr movement has already survived being half-defeated on three previous occasions. The special groups can become far more terrorist and general in their targeting. Iran may be able to exploit Shi'ite divisions on a sustained basis, and al Qaeda in Iraq may be able to exploit the government's need to deal with two fronts.

The prospect of a lingering fog of uncertainty is just as real as the fog of victory or defeat.