Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr makes bid for greater role in US-occupied Iraq

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Last Friday Moqtada al-Sadr, the 33-year-old head of the Sadrist Shiite movement in Iraq, made his first public appearance since October, putting to rest US claims that he had fled the country for Iran. Sadr delivered a speech at a mosque in his home city of Kufa, near Najaf. In an indication of the political influence now wielded by the Sadrists, the event dominated the Iraqi media over the weekend.

Sadr's speech was in line with recent efforts to present his movement as an Iraqi nationalist tendency that can unify the people against the US occupation and the catastrophic conditions it has inflicted. On April 9, the Sadrists organised a demonstration of up to one million people in Najaf to demand a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops. A week later, six Sadrist ministers resigned from the cabinet of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in protest at his refusal to ask Washington for a date. They subsequently won majority support in the parliament for a resolution demanding a US withdrawal. This month, leading Sadrists have held talks with Sunni Arab tribal leaders from western Iraq with the aim of developing a non-sectarian anti-occupation alliance.

Draped in a white burial shroud to symbolise his willingness to face death, Sadr began Friday's speech with a chant: "No to the devil, no to America, no to the occupation, no to Israel". He repeated his movement's demand for a timetable for the withdrawal of US and other foreign forces. The Maliki government, he declared, "is not authorised to extend the mandate of the foreign forces in Iraq after a million people demonstrated to protest that presence and 144 [out of 275] lawmakers signed to demand the withdrawal of these forces".

The cleric condemned Maliki for making "endeavours to bring Baathists back into power", a reference to US demands that the Iraqi parliament repeal the "de-Baathification" laws that prevent senior members of Saddam Hussein's regime from holding positions in the government, public service or security forces. The Sadrist movement, like all Shiite fundamentalist tendencies in Iraq, was brutally repressed under Hussein's secular, but largely Sunni Arab-based Baathist regime. It is bitterly opposed to US efforts to allow former Baathists to re-enter the political process.

Sadr's speech, however, was also an appeal for unity between Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis. He blamed the occupation for the murderous civil war that is raging between rival Shiite and Sunni extremists. "The invader has separated us," he told his audience. Calling for an end to sectarian violence, he stated: "Unity is strength. Division is weakness."

Promising to defend all Iraqis regardless of their religious or ethnic background, Sadr called on his Mahdi Army militiamen not to attack Sunnis or minorities such as Christians: "I want to say now that the blood of Sunnis is forbidden to everyone. They are our brothers in religion and nationality. Let our Christian brothers know that Islam is a friend to minorities and to other faiths and seeks dialogue with them." Going further, he appealed to his supporters not to fight with their "brothers" in the Iraqi army and police as clashes were exploited as a "pretext for the occupiers' presence".

Despite the speech's anti-occupation tenor, Sadr was careful to call for political, not military, opposition. He did not issue any timetable of his own for the withdrawal of foreign troops. He also did not reverse his order earlier this year for the Mahdi Army to go to ground and offer no resistance to US military operations.

In fact, one aim of Sadr's decision to resurface after six months appears to be to head off the outbreak of full-scale fighting between his supporters and the occupation forces. The militia's non-resistance has permitted American or government forces to detain hundreds of its lower-level commanders and fighters. Sunni extremists have exploited the decreased militia security to carry out a series of massive car bombings in Shiite civilian areas.

The Shiite masses and the Mahdi Army are growing restless. Revenge killings of Sunnis by Shiite death squads are once again on the increase, with close to 30 bodies found every day in Baghdad alone. Shiite militiamen have fought occupation troops in the capital, Basra, Najaf, Diwaniyah, Nasiriyah and Kut.

A major US incursion into the Sadrist's Baghdad stronghold, the suburb of Sadr City, is expected over the next several weeks. By refusing to endorse militia activity in Sadr City or anywhere else, Sadr is seeking to both discourage resistance as well as distance himself and his organisation from any fighting.

Reports last week in the *Washington Post* and Associated Press indicated that Sadr's movement is basing its political

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calculation on the inability of the US military to sustain its current surge beyond the end of the year. The Sadrists' primary concern is not fighting the occupation, but increasing their political influence and that of layers of the Shiite elite. Inevitably, they believe, Washington will be forced to do a deal with the Iraqi faction which has the greatest ability to deliver political stability and security.

In a clear presentation of the Sadrist's willingness to consider some form of new arrangement with the US occupation, Sadrist leader Salah al-Obaidi told the *Washington Post* last week: "We are not anti-American. We think the Americans have an important role in rebuilding Iraq, but through companies, not as an army. We can open a new channel with the Democrats and even some of the Republicans."

If it is desperate enough, a US administration might well turn to the Sadrist movement, particularly if it is heading an alliance with Sunni parties. The Sadrists are Arab nationalists and have fewer historic ties to Iran than other Shiite fundamentalist tendencies. At present, they enjoy widespread support and expect to make substantial gains in provincial elections due by the end of this year, including in Baghdad, Basra and other southern, predominantly Shiite provinces. Sadr's loyalists also have a strong presence inside the newly formed Iraqi security forces.

Any attempt to militarily destroy the Sadrists risks a major escalation of the Iraq war under conditions where antiwar opposition in the US is already overwhelming. A deal may be a better option. Hints have been given by US officials and military commanders that they are, at least, keeping open the possibility of working more closely with the Sadrists. National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe responded to Sadr's speech on Friday by expressing the hope that it indicated he wanted "to play a positive role inside Iraq". The cleric, Johndroe said, "has an opportunity to be a part of the political reconciliation process".

Iraqi politicians are also positioning themselves for a possible realignment. Miriam al-Rayyis, an advisor to Maliki and a member of his Shiite-based Da'wa Party, declared that "we wish all our political leaders would talk like this". Iyad al-Sammaraie, a member of a Sunni Islamic party in the parliament, hailed Sadr's "call for national reconciliation". Abbas al-Bayati, a leader of an ethnic Turkomen Shiite party, declared Sadr could "calm the political and security situation".

One price that Sadr would have to pay for a greater political role would be the elimination of more militant elements within his movement. In April 2004, thousands of Mahdi Army fighters took up arms against the occupation, forcing the US military to fight bloody battles to regain control of Karbala, Najaf and other southern Iraqi cities. While Sadr accepted a truce and called off the uprising, the US military remains deeply concerned over the existence of a substantial militia based on anti-occupation and Shiite fundamentalist rhetoric. Factions of the Mahdi Army are almost certainly carrying out guerilla operations against American and British troops. In the event of a US confrontation with the Shiite clerical regime in Iran, even more may take up arms.

According to Associated Press, the Sadrists are already carrying out a purge of militants, including by providing information to the US military on so-called "rogue" elements within the Mahdi Army. The newsagency reported: "Those willing to cooperate with the Americans are part of a larger group that calls itself the 'noble Mahdi Army' and accuses others in the Mahdi Army of going too far by killing innocent Sunni civilians and embezzling militia funds. The informants also target fighters they claim were trained and armed by Iranians but offer no further proof or details."

Sadr's speech was followed by high-profile killings and arrests of so-called "rogue" militiamen. On Friday, British and Iraqi government troops gunned down Abu Qadir, the Mahdi Army commander in Basra, who was accused of directing attacks on Shiite political opponents in the city. According to the Iraqi newspaper *al-Hayat*, Sadr had "lifted his protection" for the militia leader. Local fighters, however, retaliated by bombarding British positions for over three hours. Air strikes were called in and the situation remains tense.

On Saturday morning, US troops launched a successful raid deep inside Sadr City. Obviously acting on inside information, they detained a militia commander who was allegedly involved in smuggling explosives from Iran into Iraq. The raid produced outrage in Sadr City. The raiding party called in an air strike on a convoy of nine vehicles they claimed were blocking their exit and preparing an ambush. Locals reported that the cars were queuing for a gas station to open and that at least five innocent people were killed.

The ability of Sadr to openly collaborate with the White House and the US military is, however, limited by the social base on which his movement rests. His anti-occupation rhetoric last Friday is aimed at maintaining influence over the broad layers of Iraqi Shiites who are bitterly opposed to the US occupation and the social disaster that it had brought. If Sadrists leaders assume a more prominent role in supporting the continued US dominance over Iraq, the movement could rapidly lose support and its ability to contain popular resentment and hostility.

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