

The Meaning of Sadr's Return

Anthony H. Cordesman

Moqtada Sadr's return to Iraq is yet another warning that while the US debates a Bush strategy ("Plan A"), versus some form of US withdrawal strategy ("Plan B"), it is Iraqis that will probably shape events in Iraq ("Plan I"). The US still has influence, but it scarcely has control.

The motives behind Sadr's return are still unclear, and they may be partly driven by his fear that he is losing control of parts of his militia and movement, and was being seen as marginalized by his self-imposed exile in Iran. There is, however, another explanation.

Every Iraqi now has to plan for US departure as a serious contingency. Sadr may well feel that he is far safer in being the Shi'ite voice calling for early departure and riding a rising tide while Maliki and others are more responsible and see the need for a longer US presence.

Sadr can also publicly play the "nationalist," and seek Sunni support as well as broader Shi'ite support. In doing so, he can ride a wave of public opinion that sees the US as having failed, Coalition forces as a "threat," and is deeply frustrated with a weak Maliki government. Sadr can stand aside from the ruling Shi'ite coalition even if his representatives still play a role in it. It is not just US politicians that can run against the government they are a part of.

Certainly, Maliki is caught in something of a vise. The US is demanding progress in benchmarks that a weak and divided Iraqi political structure probably cannot deliver. These US pressures are almost certainly necessary, but they make it even more difficult for Maliki to negotiate by publicly setting goals he cannot meet and making them seem to be "imposed" by the US "occupier."

Maliki cannot provide Iraqis with security, economic progress, basic services, governance, or an elementary rule of law in most of the country. Iraqi public opinion polls show most Iraqis see the national government as weak and ineffective. He also is seeing Dawa steadily weaken as a political faction and Dawa has no real militias beyond a limited bodyguard force. Sadr can capitalize on this without necessarily openly splitting with Maliki, or can split with him at any time.

Unlike other members of the government, Sadr can keep his distance from the Kurds, and play the Arab card as well as the nationalist one, without ever explicitly splitting with the Kurds over autonomy. It is not yet clear what he will do, but this puts him in a better position to game any crisis with the Kurds over Kirkuk and oil than other factions, and exploit any debate over the oil law, federalism, or re-Ba'athification. Unlike Maliki and Hakim, he can oppose conciliation and support it at the same time.

Coming back to Iraq also put Sadr in a better position relative to Iran. He can both use Iran and claim to be independent.

It is less clear that Sadr is “winning” relative to SCIRI, but if reports that Hakim is truly ill with lung cancer are true, this could seriously shift the balance of power. SCIRI does seem to be losing political influence and strength in the oil-rich southeast, while Sadr's Mahdi Army remains a major force. Coming back allows him to reassert control and game US-led security operations.

He can accept the defeat of the worst elements in his militia, which had strong rogue and anti-Sadr members, and still complain about every anti-Mahdi action by the US and ISF - no matter how justified. It is easy for him to spin almost any such action into claims civilians were hurt, “mosques” were damaged, etc.

If this is his strategy - and again it must be stressed the evidence is still very uncertain - he also is coming back at a time that he can ride out the US surge simply by standing down while the US fights the Sunni-led insurgency, and defeats the problem children in the Mahdi Army. While the US continues to build up the Iraqi Army and police forces, Sadr will almost certainly attempt to fragment them if the US leaves and Maliki and other more national leaders are further weakened.

The Sadrist have also shown that they can cooperate just enough with the US and ISF to take the credit for improvements for local security in the areas where the Sadr militia already plays the role, and get away with claiming the credit for any successes in aid while still blaming the US and government for the overall lack of progress.

At a different level, Sadr may also feel Sistani and the traditional clergy are losing influence and relevance as Iraq's sectarian violence rises and “Quietism” has failed to change Iraq. It is important here to remember that Sadr does not need the support of the Shi'ites who do not act, only those who will be politically active and use violence. These are younger, more urban, and far less tied to tradition.

Sadr can also benefit from the inchoate nature of Sunni politics. There still is no meaningful national or broad Sunni political party that has strong popular Sunni Arab support. The elected Sunni politicians are weak and have small bases of support. They also have shown little bargaining skill and power in the conciliation debates, often delaying without winning. As a result, Sadr can play the Shi'ite card with Shi'ites, and to some extent play the nationalist card with fragmented Sunni elements like those in Anbar.

All of these options may give Sadr too much credit in terms of strategy, political skill, and personal restraint. He is, however, anything but dense and he has had four years of the most brutal schooling any radical can get. As a result, the

possibility that he is playing at this level of sophistication cannot be ignored. There is at least some chance that the future of Iraq will not be determined by "Plan A," "Plan B," or "Plan I." We need to be very cautious about the chance that it could be shaped by "Plan S."