

Sadr's War



Supporters of the anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr rally in Baghdad's Shiite enclave of Sadr City, Iraq. (AP/Karim Kadim)

There were few losers in Muqtada al-Sadr's decision to [extend the cease-fire \(NYT\)](#) of his Mahdi Army on February 22. The anti-American cleric and his large Shiite militia have emerged as a powerful force in the evolving Iraqi power structure. The vow to keep guns holstered for another six months is cause for celebration in U.S. quarters. "This extension ...is an important commitment that can broadly contribute to [further improvements in security](#) for all Iraqi citizens," the U.S. military said in a statement.

And yet the biggest winner may be Sadr himself. The *Washington Post* reports the cleric's decision marks "another step in his transformation from guerrilla chieftain to political leader." Others saw the move as part of Sadr's long-term strategy to beef up political and military credentials while biding time for a possible troop withdrawal during the next U.S. presidential administration. "[The game in Iraq is not over](#)," CFR's Vali R. Nasr told *TIME*.

A lack of political progress, including the recent Iraqi government rejection of a parliamentary measure setting up provincial elections, has been viewed as a setback for U.S.-backed national reconciliation efforts. But signs on the security front are [more encouraging](#). Civilian violence—which increased slightly in February 2008 for the first time in months, according to the website [Iraqbodycount.org](#) and several [Iraqi ministries \(BBC\)](#)—is significantly down from 2006 levels. U.S. military officials say they will recommend a [pause in troop withdrawals \(Reuters\)](#) to help consolidate the gains. Sadr's ceasefire is also expected to [contribute to the calm \(IRIN\)](#), though much of the progress had shown up in statistical studies well before the cleric's February 22 truce extension.

Over the last six months, Sadr has [strengthened his political base \(AFP\)](#) in parliament and purged rogue elements from his militia, sometimes with [deadly conviction \(WashPost\)](#). The cleric also spent time in Najaf studying to [become an ayatollah \(al-Arabiya\)](#)—an endeavor Babak Rahimi of the Jamestown Foundation says could enhance [Sadr's political and religious authority](#) (giving him the ability to issue a fatwa, for instance), not to mention open access to religious funding sources. CFR's Mohamad Bazzi says such positioning could give Sadr a leg up in his drive for regional dominance. The cleric is locked in an inter-sectarian power struggle with rival Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, whose Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council—the largest

Shiite party in parliament—is backed by the United States and Iran. [“Sadr is taking a long view,”](#) Bazzi argues in the *Nation*, “showing greater political skill than the United States and his Iraqi rivals usually give him credit for.” The accolades, however, may not reflect a deliberate plan. Patrick Cockburn, the veteran Iraq correspondent of the *Independent* newspaper, says the Mahdi Army’s truce decision was born reluctantly out of a [need to repair its reputation \(NPR\)](#) as “an enormous death squad.” That image—blackened during the group’s violent purge of Sunnis from Baghdad in 2006 and clashes with Hakim’s Badr Brigade—prompted Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to encourage a cease-fire as early as January 2007. The *Economist* writes that Sadr’s decision to heed the request was likely made easier by urgings from [supporters in Shiite-dominated Iran](#).

What Sadr plans to do with round-two of his ceasefire is not entirely clear. As the *Economist* notes in the article above, “people still know more of what the Sadrists are against—Baathists, federalism, a continued American presence in Iraq, for example—than what they are for.” Some of the Mahdi Army’s sixty-thousand fighters, including those who believe opponents used the ceasefires [to target them \(LAT\)](#), are equally pessimistic. “Now, after this statement, [we can’t defend ourselves,](#)” one fighter told the *Daily Star* of Lebanon. U.S. officials, too, suggest Sadr’s political [influence is waning \(TIME\)](#). In the end, though, the only real option for Sadr’s opponents may be to come to terms with his rising political star. The International Crisis Group concludes that the U.S. response to Madhi Army violence, including the arrest of Sadrists, arming a tribal counterforce, and backing of his rival, is [“understandable but shortsighted” \(PDF\)](#). The report concludes: “It is fanciful to expect the Mahdi Army’s defeat.”