

Sadr combines political guile with armed might

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BAGHDAD: Moqtada al-Sadr, whose Mehdi Army fighters are locked in a widening showdown with US and Iraqi forces, is a formidable Shia cleric of political guile and militia muscle. He has been described as a populist, a nationalist and an Islamic radical rolled into one.

Known for the black turban of a "sayyid," or descendant of Prophet Muhammad, and a black beard to match, the young cleric was identified by the Pentagon in 2006 as the greatest threat to stability in Iraq. But last August he ordered a "freeze" of the activities of his estimated 60,000-strong militia, and in February renewed the order for another six months.

However, the firebrand cleric yesterday rejected a call from Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to lay down arms. "Sadr has told us not to surrender our arms except to a state that can throw out the occupation," said a top aide. Sadr has gone head-to-head with Maliki since the premier ordered the militiamen to surrender. Escalating violence across Shia areas of Iraq since Tuesday has claimed almost 230 lives in clashes between fighters and troops.

Sadr told Maliki to get out of Basra where the prime minister was personally overseeing an operation against rival Shia militia fighters battling for control of the southern port city and oil hub. US and Iraqi troops are also targeting fighters in the Mehdi Army stronghold of Sadr City, an impoverished slum area in eastern Baghdad, and the conflict has spread to other Shia areas of Iraq. Despite making only rare appearances in public, the cleric is idolised by millions of Shias, especially in the shrine city of Najaf in central Iraq where he has his headquarters and in Sadr City. Initially underestimated by US authorities and Iraqi officials, the son of revered Grand Ayatollah Mohamed Sadiq al-Sadr has shown that he can pull political strings even from his undisclosed hiding place.

After throwing his weight behind Maliki in 2006, ensuring he became prime minister, Sadr ordered his followers to pull out of the Shia premier's cabinet last April. It took Maliki six weeks to find replacements and since then his coalition has withered even further to the point where he is now left with only 23 ministers in his 40-member cabinet.

The walkout by Sadr's six ministers was in protest at the government's refusal to set a timetable for the withdrawal of US troops. Maliki suffered a second setback last September when Sadr's parliamentary bloc pulled out of the Shia alliance which leads the national unity government in Baghdad. Sadrists accuse the government of favouring their Shia rivals at the expense of Sadr's followers, who are mostly drawn from the poorer sectors of Iraqi society.

Analysts believe the historical rivalry between Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Hakim and Sadr lies at the heart of the present turmoil in Shia areas, with Basra emerging as the battleground for the intra-Shia rivalry. "(Sadr) has become the authentic spokesman for a significant portion of traditionally disenfranchised Iraqis who... remained marginalised from the emerging political order," the International Crisis Group said. A US army lieutenant who deals with Sadr's fighters has said the militia operates "like the mob, they keep people safe."

The young cleric, in his 30s, organised his Mehdi Army shortly after the US-led invasion in 2003. The militia rapidly became the most active and feared armed Shia group, blamed by Washington for killing thousands of Sunnis. But then Sadr reined in his fighters last August after allegations they were involved in bloody clashes in the shrine city of Karbala, near Najaf.

He ordered them to halt their activities, including attacks on the US and Iraqi security forces, for six months. Iran has denied widespread reports that Sadr has since taken refuge in the Islamic Republic as he works to brush up on his religious credentials. Sadr kept Iraqis guessing until the last minute over whether he would renew the ceasefire, finally announcing its extension. Senior members of his movement said in August that the aim of the truce was to rein in wayward factions. In 2004, Sadr twice challenged US forces with armed rebellions in his Najaf stronghold.

Though his fighters took a beating, the nationalist cleric has gained an aura that is the envy of Iraqi political leaders who established close ties with Washington. Sadr's ceasefire renewal won praise from the US military.

“Those who continue to honour al-Seyyed Moqtada al-Sadr’s pledge will be treated with respect and restraint,” said the US command in Baghdad, using Sadr’s honorific title as a descendant of the prophet. –