

Shiite cleric cancels Baghdad protest against U.S.

By Stephen Farrell
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BAGHDAD: Moktada al-Sadr, the Shiite cleric whose Mahdi army militia has been engaged in fierce clashes with Iraqi and American troops in Baghdad over the past week, on Tuesday called off a huge demonstration in the capital less than 24 hours before it was to take place.

The march was called for the fifth anniversary of American troops' capture of the capital, on April 9, 2003, to protest the continuing U.S. military presence. But Sadr's Baghdad strongholds have been encircled by Iraqi government and American troops since heavy fighting last month in Basra and clashes in Baghdad, and dozens of Iraqis have been killed in recent days.

Iraqi and American armed forces have been tightening a cordon around Sadr City, the vast Shiite district of Baghdad that is Sadr's base of support and that is named after the cleric's revered ancestors.

At a hastily convened news conference in Paradise Square, where the statue of Saddam Hussein was toppled in 2003, Salah al-Obaidi, a spokesman for Sadr, said the movement feared for the safety of its supporters if they confronted armed government forces.

Acting on the orders of Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, Iraqi security squads have been stopping young male Shiites from entering Baghdad at checkpoints around the city's perimeter, Iraqi witnesses said Tuesday. They said sentries had been singling out men 15 to 35 years old and sometimes detaining them.

Obaidi said his movement had to take account of "the size of the security deployment made by the government of Maliki."

"That is why I call on our beloved Iraqi people who wanted to demonstrate against the occupation to postpone it," he said, "because I fear for their lives and blood and because, by God, I fear for Iraqi hands being raised against you."

But he warned that Sadr could at any time terminate the cease-fire he declared in August, which has contributed to a decline in violence and casualties in Iraq.

"If we need to lift the freeze in order to carry out our goals, objectives, doctrines and religious principles and patriotism, we will do that later," he said.

At least three American soldiers were killed Monday in separate attacks in Baghdad, the U.S. military announced, without specifying where they had been killed or who might have been responsible. At least 10 American soldiers have been killed in Iraq since Sunday.

The tension between the Sadrists and government forces escalated in late March, when Maliki ordered the Iraqi military to occupy the southern port city of Basra, where Sadr's militia had taken control.

Maliki has warned Sadr's organization that it must disarm the Mahdi army militia, the largest Shiite militia in Iraq, or his representatives would not be allowed to participate in future elections. The ultimatum reflects the growing political tension between Maliki and Sadr, who represent rival political factions among Iraq's majority Shiites.

The crackdown on the Madhi army has created potentially destabilizing political and military tensions, pitting a stronger government alliance against the Sadr force that has won past showdowns.

Maliki's military operations against the Mahdi army have at least temporarily pacified Sunni political leaders who had long called on Maliki to fight Shiite forces with the same vigor that his forces use against Sunni insurgents. And both the Kurds and some of Maliki's Shiite political rivals, who also fear or resent Sadr's rising power, have been driven closer to the prime minister by his military action. This may give Maliki more traction to pass laws and broker deals.

But the badly coordinated push into Basra unleashed a new barrage of attacks on U.S. and Iraqi forces and led to open fighting between Shiite militias. New figures compiled by the U.S. military showed a sharp rise in attacks on civilians and military targets in March, reflecting numerous indications that violence across Iraq has begun to rise again after months of gains in the aftermath of a U.S. troop increase.

The statistics threaten to reignite public concern about the cost of the war, just as the highest-ranking U.S. military commander, General David Petraeus, and the senior U.S. diplomat in Iraq, Ambassador Ryan Crocker, were to testify before Congress on Tuesday.

The assault on the Mahdi army has also eroded Maliki's credibility with a large segment of the public that fears the militia that Sadr leads but also sees him as a legitimate champion of their interests. In Iraq, where perceived power is a key to real authority, the Mahdi army is seen to have stopped Maliki's Basra assault cold then melted away when Sadr ordered them to lay down their arms.

Against what seemed to be long odds as Maliki's assault in Basra foundered against Mahdi resistance and Baghdad's Green Zone was pounded with rockets fired from the Shiite stronghold of Sadr City, the prime minister has been freshly embraced by several Shiite, Kurdish and even Sunni blocs who at times mainly seemed to support him because there was no obvious alternative.

But while some senior Iraqi officials see those developments as a help in efforts to promote political reconciliation, many Iraqis take a less nuanced view. In those terms, in the past few weeks, Maliki has cemented his reputation among his enemies as a tool of the Americans.

And indeed the strong political support for Maliki follows extensive U.S. lobbying with Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish politicians. In fact, after Maliki became mired in Basra, Crocker said, he emerged from talks with Iraqi politicians with the sense that they had to back him "whatever they may have thought about the way the government got into this."

But some senior members of the Iraqi government see an extraordinary opportunity in the strengthened ties between Maliki and some of the ethnic, political and sectarian groups that have long viewed him with suspicion.

"My view is that what happened could well be a turning point in the political alignments of Iraq," said Barham Salih, Iraq's Kurdish deputy prime minister, speaking of Maliki's efforts to take on the Mahdi. "What he did in taking on his own constituents can give him the credentials to be a national leader rather than the leader of a Shia sect."

James Glanz contributed reporting.