

Iraq: In Al-Basrah Aftermath, Iran's And Al-Sadr's Gain Is Al-Maliki's Loss

By Sumedha Senanayake

The Iraqi government's operation in Al-Basrah was billed as a decisive battle to regain control of the southern city from what it called armed gangs and criminals. But the real focus of the operation seems to have been radical Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's militia, the Imam Al-Mahdi Army.

The intense response by al-Sadr's followers across southern Iraq and Baghdad seemed to catch the government off-guard. As the violence and instability spread, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government faced what appeared to be a widespread insurrection. At that point, a military option did not seem feasible.

On March 30, after nearly a week of fighting, al-Sadr issued a nine-point statement calling on his followers not to attack government forces. He urged the government to stop its random raids on Sadrists, called for an amnesty for fighters in the Al-Mahdi Army, and the release of all imprisoned members of the Sadrist movement who have not been convicted of any crimes.

Iran Plays Both Sides

Several days after al-Sadr's cease-fire call, it emerged that Iran helped broker the truce that ended the bloodshed that left nearly 500 dead and 900 wounded. In the aftermath of the Al-Basrah conflict, Iran clearly emerged as the big winner.

Several sources indicated as early as March 28 that a representative of al-Maliki's Al-Da'wah Party, Ali Adib, and Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Badr Organization, the military wing of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), traveled to the Iranian city of Qom to meet with Iranian officials.

According to McClatchy Newspapers, the aim of the trip was twofold: to press al-Sadr to restrain his militia and to call on Iran's Qods Force to stop supplying weapons to Shi'ite fighters in Iraq. It was also revealed that the two men went to Iran without consulting with the prime minister.

Haidar al-Abadi, a member of Al-Da'wah, said that the delegation was from the Shi'ite-led United Iraqi Alliance, which is dominated by Al-Da'wah and the ISCI, "and the prime minister was only informed. It was a political maneuver by us."

The role of Iran in brokering the truce clearly demonstrates the Islamic republic's influence in Iraq, particularly in the Shi'ite community. Based on what was discussed in Qom, Iran was playing both sides of the fence, as peace brokers and instigators of the violence.

Al-Sadr Remains Strong

While the military confrontation ended essentially in a stalemate, al-Sadr came away with a political victory. His militia remains intact and he has demonstrated that it can withstand a major assault by the Iraqi military.

The aftermath of the clashes also showed that al-Sadr still has control over his militia. There had been much speculation that al-Sadr had lost control of the Al-Mahdi Army and that some breakaway factions were not heeding his authority. The Al-Basrah clashes and subsequent cease-fire demonstrated that he was still in charge.

While his militia were clearly not a passive actor in the Al-Basrah violence, their armed struggle was framed in the context of self-defense. The Iraqi security forces were seen as the aggressors in launching the military campaign, which many Sadrists described as politically motivated.

As it became clear during the Al-Basrah operation that the Al-Mahdi Army was the main target, al-Sadr continued to adhere to the truce he declared for the militia. The truce was instituted in August 2007 after his forces clashed with police in the holy city of Al-Najaf. There were concerns recently that the increased pressure on the Al-Mahdi Army might push al-Sadr to end the truce.

Maintaining the truce gave the appearance that al-Sadr was willing to place Iraq's benefits above his own political ambitions, which he stressed in the nine-point statement that led to the current cease-fire. In it, he supported Iraq's unity by calling for an "end to armed appearances in Al-Basrah and all other provinces." Considering his bravado when his militia took on the U.S. military twice in 2004, al-Sadr's actions during the latest confrontation suggested his growing maturity as a political leader.

Huge Blow To Al-Maliki

For al-Maliki, the results of the "Battle for Al-Basrah" were certainly humiliating, given that he personally oversaw the military campaign. Al-Maliki hoped to erase the perception that he is a weak and ineffectual leader, particularly in dealing with al-Sadr and his militia. However, soon after the operation began, it was apparent that al-Maliki greatly overestimated the abilities of his forces and underestimated the tenacity of al-Sadr's militia.

Al-Maliki had vowed to crush the Shi'ite militias, armed gangs, and criminals that effectively controlled the city for three years. He initially gave all armed elements in Al-Basrah 72 hours to disarm, but after this was ignored, the deadline was extended to 10 days, coupled with an offer of cash in exchange for weapons.

In an operation that was planned to be completed quickly, Iraqi security forces were met with strong resistance from al-Sadr's militia, despite U.S. air support. Defense Minister Abd al-Qadir Jasim admitted on March 28 that the government had been "surprised" by the militia's resistance and the government's battle plan and tactics had to be altered.

More troubling for al-Maliki, "Al-Azzam" reported on March 31 that several thousand police officers had refused to fight the militia and two Iraqi Army regiments reportedly defected to the Sadrists. If numerous acts of insubordination and desertion indeed took place during the operation, this would indicate the low level of morale among the security forces.

In the end, al-Maliki declared the operation a "success." However, his words may ring hollow since he failed to disarm and crush al-Sadr's militia, and this may have weakened him politically in the eyes of his ruling Shi'ite alliance.

The revelation that members of his own Shi'ite alliance, including from his own Al-Da'wah Party, went to Iran against his wishes to broker a truce further undercuts his authority and ultimately his credibility.

Thorn In Washington's Side

U.S. support for the Al-Basrah operation has become considerably more muted since it was first launched. On March 30, CIA Director Michael Hayden told NBC News that he had no prior knowledge that the Iraqi government planned to launch such a campaign. In fact, he even indicated that U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker and U.S. commander in Iraq General David Petraeus were also left in the dark about the operation.

This could be a sign of tacit disapproval of al-Maliki's handling of the operation as well as the administration distancing itself from it in order to offset any potential embarrassment before Crocker and Petraeus testify before Congress next week.

The failure of the operation also makes clear that the Iraqi military is far from prepared to take over responsibility for security. This does not bode well for the United States, since it is an indication that troop reductions maybe further delayed.

Al-Sadr's performance again shows that the young cleric is a major political force in Iraq who cannot be ignored. Many saw the Al-Basrah campaign as a means of weakening al-Sadr before the provincial elections now set for the fall. Now it seems that he may be a long-term political player and the United States may have to work with him, whether it likes it or not.

Finally, in terms of Iran, the United States can't be too pleased that Tehran was where Iraqi Shi'ite leaders turned to in a crisis -- yet another stark indication of the growing Iranian influence in Iraq.