

# In Iraq, U.S. walks tightrope with Sadr



Ahman Al-Rubaye AFP/Getty Images

**Muqtada Sadr's visage looms from posters in Sadr City in Baghdad. U.S. relations with Sadr improved slightly last year but have deteriorated since his fighters took up arms against an Iraqi security offensive against Shiite militias.**

**The military is battling militiamen loyal to the cleric, but takes pains to not blame his Mahdi Army, whose political and social services role make it immensely popular.**

By Tina Susman, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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BAGHDAD -- The U.S. military has tied itself into a verbal knot as it tries to avoid further inflaming tensions with Shiite cleric Muqtada Sadr while confronting members of his Mahdi Army militia.

U.S. forces battle almost daily with Shiite militiamen in Sadr City, including Sadr loyalists, but commanders are careful to avoid blaming the Mahdi Army for the violence. This is focused on the criminal groups," the chief U.S. military spokesman, Maj. Gen. Kevin Bergner, said at his most recent news briefing on April 30. When U.S. commander Gen. David H. Petraeus alluded to violence in Sadr City during a visit to London on Thursday, he did so without naming any group, only referring to "the militia in and around Sadr City."

The evolution in words used, or not used, by military officials when discussing Sadr and his fighters reflects the United States' turbulent relationship with the Shiite cleric and his own reinvention of himself as a political player. The United States, which in 2004 considered arresting Sadr in connection with the killing of a rival Shiite leader, began softening its tone early last year after Sadr agreed to not confront extra U.S. troops deployed by President Bush to Baghdad to quell violence.

The U.S. rhetoric took an ingratiating turn shortly after Sadr issued a formal cease-fire Aug. 29 that contributed to a sharp drop in the number of U.S. troop deaths.

In a statement released Oct. 1, Petraeus and U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker referred to Sadr on first reference as "sayyid," an Arabic honorific usually reserved for male descendants of the prophet Muhammad.

Thereafter, the honorific was used routinely in public statements by U.S. military officials here. A U.S. military official in Baghdad said it was in recognition of the role the United States thought Sadr was playing at the time to encourage "peaceful, non-criminal activity."

"It was an important way to recognize his position and his authority," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was discussing politics.

Last month, "sayyid" dropped from the public lexicon of the U.S. military here, a sign of what officials consider Sadr's crossing of the line from budding peacemaker to potential troublemaker after he threatened "open war" against U.S. forces.

"We began seeing him looking much more divisive again," the official said.

During an unannounced visit to Baghdad last month, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice spoke scornfully of Sadr, commenting that he remained safe in Iran while his followers were fighting and dying in Iraq.

But even if U.S. rhetoric seems to be shifting, the military still insists that Sadr's Mahdi Army is not its main problem, saying it is "special groups" that have broken away from Sadr's control. Those groups are trained and armed by Iran and not bound by Sadr's directives.

However, military officials acknowledge that mainstream Mahdi Army elements took part in the initial fighting that erupted March 25 against an offensive launched by U.S.-backed Iraqi security forces.

When Sadr called a halt to fighting March 31, his most loyal followers responded, officials say. Since then, they say, Sadr's mixed messages have been interpreted by some militiamen as a signal that it's OK to take up arms again. They cite Sadr's statement last month that his threat of "open war" applied only to American troops.

"Sure enough, we were in a firefight within a couple of hours" of that statement being issued, said Sgt. Erik Olson, an Army reservist in Sadr City.

The military says politics has nothing to do with its shift away from publicly blaming the Mahdi Army. It denies that it is a political maneuver aimed at trying to sway Sadr to maintain his truce, frayed though it may be.

At a recent news briefing, Maj. Gen. Jeffery Hammond, whose area of operation includes Baghdad, said calling the "lawless criminals who chose to start shooting rockets and mortars" anything else, such as Mahdi Army militiamen, would be to give them unwarranted respect.

"They're thugs," he said, when asked who was involved in the violence. "They don't deserve to be identified as anything other than that."

Other military officials see the political and social role of Sadr's group as a reason to avoid pointing a finger at him.

The Mahdi Army has roots in Baghdad and serves as a local social service organization. Sadr loyalists hold 30 seats in the national parliament, and the Mahdi Army is part of the political movement known as the Sadr Trend.

"The Mahdi militia is a political organization," said Army Capt. Alan Boyes, whose base is a former butcher's shop in Sadr City's Jamila neighborhood. "Now, do I believe political groups should have militias? No, but that's the way things are in Iraq."

Whatever their commanders call Sadr supporters, U.S. troops on the battle-worn streets of Sadr City are not as inclined to steer clear of blaming the violence on Sadr and the Mahdi Army, commonly referred to by its Arabic-based acronym, JAM.

They say the political roots cited by military officials as a positive element of JAM are what make the group dangerous.

"They're in the government. They're amongst the people you work with every day," said Army 1st Lt. Matt Vigeant, who considers the Mahdi Army a far greater challenge to U.S. forces than the Sunni insurgent group Al Qaeda in Iraq. "JAM has that popular base that AQI does not."

Cracking that, soldiers say, is virtually impossible as long as Sadr is able to sustain support either through coercion or through genuine public admiration for his policies.