

Did Sistani collude with US assault on Najaf?

By Milan Rai
August 30, 2004

There are at least three possible accounts of the origins of the recent Najaf conflict. Uncovering the truth requires a close scrutiny of the behaviour of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, now feted as the peace-bringer of Najaf. The standard Western media rendering is that (for some unknown reason) militant Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr decided to launch an uprising against the US occupation on 5 August

This flies in the face of the fact that, as the Financial Times reported, it was US forces that 'went on the offensive' against al-Sadr's group, 'breaking a two-month ceasefire with followers of Shia radical Moqtada al-Sadr' by surrounding al-Sadr's home in Kufa, next to Najaf, sparking an exchange fire with members of al-Sadr's militia.' (FT, 3 August, p. 9)

And this took place on 2 August, three days before the Mehdi Army assault on Najaf police station which is usually reported as the beginning of hostilities.

US officials claimed that the 2 August incident in Kufa was not a raid on al-Sadr's house: 'Until we learn the side streets, we won't know where Sadr lives. And until we do, we'll run into things,' said Lt. Mike Wyrsh of the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit, which had taken 'command' of the area only two days before the incident.

On the other hand, according to Ahmed Sheybani, al-Sadr's spokesman in Najaf, 'They passed the barriers, surrounded the house and tried to enter.' (Knight Ridder, 3 August, <<http://tinyurl.com/4g98v>>)

The 'blunder' explanation does not explain why, on the same day as the Marines 'ran into' al-Sadr's house, US forces also 'went on the offensive' against a Sunni Islamist political group, 'arresting an influential Sunni cleric in Baghdad'. (FT, 3 August, p. 9)

It also does not explain why a few days earlier, US forces (with some token Iraqi security forces, raided the home of al-Sadr's representative in the holy city of Karbala, arresting both Sheikh Mithal al-Hasnawi and his brother. (The Australian, 31 July, <<http://tinyurl.com/4mlto>>)

Following 2 August, there were 'days of mounting tension' as 'several of the cleric's senior

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aides' in the Najaf area were arrested, and the Mehdi Army in Najaf 'seized 18 Iraqi police officers in response'. (Guardian, 6 August, p. 2)

Before and after 2 August, there was a pattern of harassment against al-Sadr (and at least one other Islamist opposition group). The 2 August incident in Kufa was almost certainly a deliberate attempt to seize al-Sadr.

Where was the decision taken to escalate the violence in Najaf? Let us turn to the second major turning point in the conflict, the decision on 5 August to send US forces into areas of Najaf they were excluded from under the terms of the June ceasefire.

An account in the New York Times has it that Marine officers in Najaf 'said they turned a firefight with al-Sadr's forces on August 5 into a eight-day pitched battle - without the approval of the Pentagon or senior Iraqi officials.'

Because of Mahdi Army resistance slowing them down in Najaf's cemetery, 'the politics of war' eventually took over 'and the U.S. force had lost the opportunity to storm al-Sadr's troops around the mosque.' What the Marines had hoped would be 'a quick, decisive action' 'bogged down into a stalemate'.

A sequence of events that is 'strikingly reminiscent of the battle of Fallujah in April': 'In both cases, newly arrived Marine units immediately confronted guerrillas in firefights that quickly escalated. And in both cases, the U.S. military failed to achieve its strategic goals, pulling back after the political costs of the confrontation rose.'

The Marines told the New York Times 'that they engaged al-Sadr's forces at the request of the local Iraqi police': 'They did not seek approval from more senior military commanders or from Iraqi political leaders, with the exception of the governor of Najaf.' (18 Aug, reprinted in the Indianapolis Star <<http://tinyurl.com/4hsul>>)

One of the difficulties for this account is the apparent complicity of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who left at this crucial juncture for medical treatment for his heart in London.

'US tanks and armour, led for the first time by Iraqi security forces, rolled into Najaf [on 5 August], hours after Ayatollah Sistani left the city... By the time Ayatollah Sistani had reached Heathrow, having changed planes in Beirut, a full-scale battle that raged for seven days and seven nights was unstopably under way.' [Sunday Telegraph, 15 August, p. 18]

Professor Juan Cole, one of the most perceptive commentators on Iraq, suggested on 7 August that US forces had 'spirited' al-Sistani out of Najaf to pave the way for an assault on al-Sadr. Cole notes that 'Al-Hayat reports that Sistani's reason for leaving at this juncture was to remove himself from the scene of the fighting and to lift the mantle of his authority from the Sadrist movement', permitting the assault. <<http://tinyurl.com/5wolz>>

The FT noted there had been 'a whispering campaign among the Sadrists that he colluded in a plan to finish off Mr Sadr.' (28/29 August, p. 10)

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'One US commander, Major David Holahan [executive officer, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines Regiment], said of al-Sistani's departure: "A lot of people think it is the green light for us to do what we have to do."' (Sunday Times, 15 August, p. 19.)

A US officer, perhaps Major Holahan again, said as Sistani returned to Najaf three weeks later to end the fighting, 'There was a lot of thought that he had left the country originally to give us a chance to take control of the situation. Now he is coming back to help us find a solution, possibly a peaceful result. But the end result is, he wants us to help disband the Mahdi Army.' (D. Filkins, 'Week in Review', NYT, 29 August <<http://tinyurl.com/6354z>>)

On 12 August, Juan Cole noted, 'Al-Sharq al-Awsat says today that Sistani will not need a heart operation, and that his clogged arteries will be treated by coronary angioplasty (inflating a balloon in them).' The Times of London remarked on the strange decision 'to go to London for minor surgery that could have been performed in Baghdad.' (27 August, p. 27)

Residents of the Amir neighbourhood of Najaf had already condemned the ayatollah: Shakir Qassim, 25, said, 'Sistani escaped from Najaf. There are more hospitals in Baghdad to treat the same disease but he escaped to save himself.' Safa Abdel Zahra, 20, agreed: 'Sistani escaped from Iraq because he was afraid. There are hospitals [in Iraq] that can treat him. At the end he is a coward.'

The Financial Times noted that, 'Popular anger has been deepened by the fact that Mr Sistani went to London rather than Iran, where he was born, or Lebanon, home to one of the Arab world's largest Shia minorities.' (26 August, p. 9)

'He has shown an uncanny sense of timing. In the days leading up to [the peace deal], some Iraqis were tearing up photos of al-Sistani in the streets of Najaf, out of anger that he hadn't saved the city. But on the day that al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia left the shrine, [some] Iraqis called al-Sistani's timing perfect, saying he had intervened while al-Sadr was surrounded by U.S. and Iraqi forces and would have to respond to his peace plan...' (Knight Ridder, 27 August <<http://tinyurl.com/56laq>>)

'He picked his moment carefully, waiting until the Americans had tightened the tourniquet to the point where the militias were effectively outflanked and cornered. His silence in the three weeks since the fighting began [and his absence in London] had begun to strain the loyalty of his aides. It was deliberate - Ayatollah al-Sistani wants Hojatoleslam al-Sadr down as well as out: out of Najaf, in conditions that diminish him. That means wresting back control of the shrine by the Marjaiyah - the traditional combined leadership of Iraq's four ayatollahs - while being seen also to have distanced US forces from the city and brought an end to the fighting.' (Times, 27 August, p. 27)

Sistani was out of the way. Where were the other three ayatollahs during the fighting?

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'A German diplomat probed his British counterpart on the significance of the absence of all four grand ayatollahs from Najaf at the same time. There was no senior religious figure who could stop the conflict with a single call to negotiate. "It's entirely a coincidence," said one Western envoy.' (Sunday Telegraph, 15 August, p. 18)

Some coincidence. 'In all likelihood, the American operation to expel the Mahdi Army from the shrine could never have gone forward without the sanction of some very powerful Iraqi leaders - including Ayatollah Sistani himself.' When he did return, offering a truce, the Ayatollah apparently agreed that force could be used in the shrine itself against al-Sadr's militia: 'If Mr. Sadr did not back down, American officials said, Ayatollah Sistani assured them that he would support a storming of the shrine by Iraqi troops.' (D. Filkins, 'Week in Review', NYT, 29 August <<http://tinyurl.com/6354z>>)

The Sistani peace deal for Najaf is generally regarded as increasing the ayatollah's influence while diminishing that of interim prime minister Iyad Allawi. True, but not quite so simple.

'The reassertion of Mr Sistani's authority over Najaf is crucial for the Allawi government and for the US. With much of the Sunni heartland out of American or Iraqi government control, the Bush administration has relied on the ageing cleric - and changed its plans for political transition in accordance with his wishes - to keep Iraq's Shias from rising up against the occupation.' (FT, 26 August, p. 9)

The US assault on Najaf seems to have been a gamble decided on in Washington, perhaps coordinated with the Allawi government, certainly agreed with Iraq's four ayatollahs. Not a 'blunder', but a colossal miscalculation, by everyone, including the Grand Ayatollah, who wants an end to both the occupation and the al-Sadr phenomenon.