

Najaf: Truce or trap?

By Milan Rai
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The Najaf ceasefire did not resolve the conflict in Najaf. Before the ink was even dry on the agreement signed by militant Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and the supreme Shia religious leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the United States and its client forces were breaking the terms of the truce.

In particular, US Marines refused to withdraw from Najaf, as required by the Sistani peace deal. Muqtada al-Sadr may wish to move the conflict over the occupation to the political sphere, but the US and the Allawi do not.

Ayatollah al-Sistani's return to Najaf after a strange absence (see previous posting, *The Sistani Puzzle*) was followed by a 24-hour ceasefire and the signing of a peace deal that allowed al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia an 'honourable' (and safe) withdrawal from the holy Imam Ali shrine, without the use of force.

'The governor of Najaf, Adnan al-Zurufi, said the Ayatollah's four-part formula provided for Najaf and Kufa to be free of all "weapons and militia", for "foreign forces" to leave both cities, for Iraqi civilians to be compensated for their losses during the fighting and for voter records to be compiled for the general election in January.' (Independent, 27 August 2004, p. 3)

Note this interesting last point, a shared Shia concern.

'A disenchanted government minister said: "Our past mistakes have turned Mr Sadr into a player. He still has his army, but he is now a political problem and not just a military one. And he won't be going away soon. With every crisis he emerges on top and stronger than before." ' (Guardian, 28 Aug., p. 17)

'Mr Sadr is fortunate in his enemies,' noted the FT. (FT, 28 Aug., p. 10)

'US commanders on the ground expressed frustration yesterday that they had been "close to being in a position to finish this." (FT, 28 Aug., p. 10) The real threat to US-Shia relations now is not the militancy of the al-Sadr movement (al-Sadr is turning to politics), but the determination of the US and the Allawi government to reverse their defeat.

THE PEACE DEAL - US WITHDRAWAL?

The Washington Post reported that when the Mahdi Army withdrew, 'Four battalions of Iraqi security forces received tea and water from residents as they arrived in the city center with the handful of American advisers who had trained them. "People received us clapping,

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and by the will of God we will replace the U.S. Army,” said Sgt. Sabah Muhsin Sarhan of the 2nd Battalion of the Iraqi Intervention Force, the name for the anti-insurgency force in the new army. “Our job is to protect our country, and we don’t want the foreigners. We don’t want the Jews to control us.” ‘ (28 Aug., p. A01)

This is one of Washington’s ‘allies’ in Iraq.

Sgt. Sarhan did not get his wish. The Post reported, ‘The particulars of the Najaf deal are especially troubling to U.S. military strategists. It calls for the U.S. military and anti-U.S. militias to stay out of the city. The provision will have a disproportionate impact on U.S. forces, which tend to move in large, visible units whereas militiamen can simply take a minibus in and out of the city.’ (Washington Post, 28 Aug., p. A01)

Solution? Break the terms of the truce. ‘The senior [Iraqi] government official said a date has not been set for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Najaf. “It is contingent upon Najaf becoming a safe place, free of militants,” the official said. “If the standoff is resolved and the militants leave Najaf, then the presence of foreign forces in Najaf will not be necessary.” ‘ The militants then left. ‘U.S. commanders in the city said Thursday night that they had not received orders to withdraw.’ (Post, 27 Aug., p. A01)

‘The U.S. military, which ceased offensive operations on Thursday because of the peace talks, did not withdraw from positions inside Najaf after the deal was announced. [Iraqi minister Qasim] Dawood said U.S. forces would be instructed to “draw back” by the interim prime minister, Ayad Allawi, once Sadr’s militia departs.’ (Washington Post, 27 Aug., p. A01)

Some chance. Allawi is not in charge. The BBC reported on 28 Aug., ‘American troops are adopting a lower profile, but are still patrolling some areas’ of Najaf – supposedly ‘at the request of the Iraqi interim government.’ (28 Aug.)

As the Telegraph noted, it ‘was doubtful that American commanders would give up hard-fought ground without dramatic and concrete concessions from the 30-year-old cleric.’ (Telegraph, 27 Aug., p. 1)

‘United States forces will remain in Najaf until the interim Iraqi Prime Minister, Iyad Allawi, judges that control of the city can safely be handed over in its entirety to the country’s own police and security forces, senior American officials said yesterday. While the formula promoted by the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani for ending three bloody weeks of fighting in Najaf provides for the withdrawal of foreign forces, US Marines and cavalry will keep their tanks, armoured vehicles and troops in defensive positions until Iraqi security forces are fully ready to take over.’ (Independent on Sunday, 29 Aug., p. 18) When Hell freezes over.

Most early reports of the peace deal only mentioned requiring a US withdrawal from

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Najaf. The Independent (27 Aug., p. 3) and later reports in the FT (28 Aug., p. 5; 30 Aug., p. 7) and the Guardian (28 Aug., p. 2) were firm that the US withdrawal applied to both Najaf and the nearby city of Kufa (where al-Sadr has his home). There have been no reports from Kufa, but it is likely the US broke the terms of the truce there also.

After Iraqi forces took over Najaf, 'Both al-Sistani and al-Sadr supporters said they were angry at Iraqi police for arresting Mahdi Army members even though the fighters got tacit amnesty under the peace plan. (Knight Ridder, 27 Aug.)

The same day, 'While being interviewed by The Observer, a Mahdi fighter spotted a group of officers from the new Iraqi police force approaching in contravention of the peace deal. Muttering "traitors", he slid his bolt on his weapon while his friend clipped a belt into a heavier automatic. Within moments, a full-scale firefight broke out. Four more men, including three civilians, were being carried away, leaving trails of fresh blood in Najaf's streets'. (Observer, 29 Aug., p. 20)

Such events tailed off, due either to police restraint or (more probably) restraint on the part of the Mahdi Army.

THE PEACE DEAL – DISARMAMENT?

'Fighters loyal to Mr Sadr would leave the shrine by 10.00am today and receive an amnesty if they laid down arms', it was said. (FT, 27 Aug., p. 1)

Then Sayyed Immad Mohamed Kalantal, mutual relation of al-Sistani and al-Sadr and an intermediary in their peace negotiations, revealed that the Mahdi Army militia were allowed to retain their weapons under a secret provision of the truce, 'including AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenade launchers'. 'Kalantal said the clause had been agreed by Iyad Allawi, the Iraqi prime minister.' (Sunday Times, 29 Aug., p. 23)

Regardless of the provisions of the Najaf deal, more conflict is on the way, especially over the Mahdi Army's rocket-propelled grenades and mortar launchers. Disarmament of militias was identified as a key issue in Regime Unchanged.

THE PEACE DEAL – IMMUNITY FOR AL-SADR?

Several newspapers reported that, 'Kasim Daoud, minister of state, said Mr Sadr would not face arrest.' (FT, 27 Aug., p. 1) Actually, Daoud said, 'He is as free as any Iraqi citizen to do whatever he would like in Iraq.' (Washington Post, 27 Aug., p. A01) Daoud did not say whether al-Sadr might be arrested later for the death of a rival Shia cleric.

Apparently, 'Mr Allawi, the prime minister, has assured Mr Sadr that his arrest will not be expedited', but 'there are no guarantees beyond the life of the interim government, which will cease to exist after the first round of national elections' due in January. (Guardian, 28 Aug., p. 17) The 'guarantee' has a shorter lifespan than this.

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‘U.S. officials have long argued that the solution to the Sadr problem has to originate with Iraqis. Their calculation is that the U.S. position in Iraq would not be helped by having U.S. troops kill the rebel cleric. “At some point the Iraqis themselves will take Sadr out – like the Colombians taking out drug lords with U.S. in the background,” said a Pentagon official.’ (Washington Post, 28 Aug., p. A01)

Asked if al-Sadr would be allowed to enter the Imam Ali shrine again, Daoud replied ambiguously: ‘Muqtada al-Sadr is like any other Iraqi citizen. He has duties and he has rights.’ (Knight Ridder, 28 Aug.)

THE TRUCE TRAP

The US started the latest round of violence in Najaf by breaking the terms of the 4 June truce, by entering an area they had promised to stay out of, and attempting to raid al-Sadr’s house in Kufa. The US has ended the latest round of violence by immediately violating the truce they had just agreed to, by entering and remaining in areas of Najaf and Kufa they had promised to withdraw from. They didn’t wait eight weeks to break the truce this time.

If al-Sadr militants respond to these US truce violations with force, we may expect official and media condemnation of the ‘lawless and violent terrorists’ who just will not live up to their end of any bargain.

Al-Sadr’s actual response to the US provocations? A national ceasefire. ‘Due to the situation in Najaf and the provinces... we call on all members of the Mahdi army to cease fire unless in self-defence, and to be patient until the political programme which Sar’s followers are planning is revealed,’ said a senior al-Sadr aide, Sheikh Ali Smeissim. (Telegraph, 31 Aug., p. 12)

And the US-Shia conflict moved on to Sadr City in Baghdad.

Milan Rai is the author of Regime Unchanged: Why The War On Iraq Changed Nothing (Pluto, 2003)