

Iraq: Moral Authority Is Greater Than Military Might

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach and Hussein Askary

Catastrophe loomed over Iraq, as U.S. and allied Iraqi forces moved toward a final showdown against the forces of radical Shi'ite militia leader Moqtadar al-Sadr in the holy city of Najaf. On Aug. 25, when the puppet interim government of Iyad Allawi issued its umpteenth ultimatum for al-Sadr to surrender, or be killed in a storming of the holy Imam Ali shrine, it was thought that only a miracle could avert the impending doom. The "miracle" occurred, in the form of an announcement that Grand Ayatollah Ali Hussein al-Sistani, the highest Shi'ite authority worldwide, was returning to his native Najaf, from London, where he had undergone surgery for a heart problem. The miracle worked.

His London-based aide Hamid al-Khafaf announced that al-Sistani would enter Iraq through Basra, and would continue to Najaf. "Najaf is burning," he said. He called on all Iraqis "to be ready . . . to march on the city of Najaf under the leadership of al-Sistani to save the city." Once he arrived in Basra, where he was greeted by thousands of well-wishers, waving Iraqi flags, the Grand Ayatollah had a statement read out, in which he declared: "We ask all believers to volunteer to go with us to Najaf. I have come for the sake of Najaf and I will stay in Najaf until the crisis ends."

This call was immediately followed by the mobilization of thousands of Iraqis throughout the land, who organized convoys to travel to the holy city. Al-Sistani specified that followers should wait outside the city gates for him to arrive, to lead the march to the shrine.

Al-Sadr's spokesmen endorsed the march, and welcomed al-Sistani's return, saying that the al-Sadr forces were ready to implement all orders from the *Marja* (the spiritual authority). They announced the suspension of military activities in all the areas in southern Iraq which lie along the auto route al-Sistani would take to go from Basra to Najaf.

The Allawi government's response was a token 24-hour cease-fire, during which talks should take place. The U.S. official response was that it would "abide by" the interim government's decisions; but, in reality, U.S. forces and those of the Allawi government were involved in vicious attacks on marchers heading for Najaf. Numerous marchers were shot, and hundreds reportedly died.

Despite these bloody provocations, talks commenced. In discussions with government representatives in Basra, and with al-Sadr in Najaf, al-Sistani spelled out the terms of a

peace proposal aimed at terminating the hostilities, and preventing the outbreak of religious war, were the holy shrine to be stormed. The conditions laid down by al-Sistani were: that both Najaf and the nearby city of Kufa be declared weapons-free zones, and all armed forces—whether U.S. troops, Iraqi security forces, or al-Sadr's Mahdi Army—be removed. Security in the cities should be the responsibility solely of the Iraqi police. And, the government should arrange for compensation for those many who had suffered as a result of the intense fighting over the previous days and weeks. Furthermore, preparations for elections, scheduled for January 2005 at the latest, should begin in earnest.

It was merely a matter of hours, before al-Sistani's spokesman announced that al-Sadr had accepted all the conditions presented. In addition, al-Sistani had arranged for the Iraqis who had marched to the city's gates, to be able to enter the shrine, and, by early the next morning, leave. In this way, the al-Sadr militiamen inside the shrine could mingle with the others and, leaving their weapons behind, exit the mosque.

The Iraqi interim government and the U.S. military had no choice but to accept the miracle. The Allawi government announced that it would grant al-Sadr's forces an amnesty, and also pay compensation for loss of life and property during the recent fighting. Al-Sadr issued a call to his militia to lay down their arms. "To all my brothers in the Mahdi Army," he said, "You should leave Kufa and Najaf without your weapons, along with the peaceful masses."

Who Is Ayatollah al-Sistani?

How could a 73-year-old man with no political mandate, and suffering from a heart ailment, succeed in suspending hostilities which were about to spark all-out religious warfare, not only in Iraq, but, potentially, worldwide? Although press reports continue to speak of the Ayatollah as "the highest Shi'ite cleric in Iraq," the fact is, he is the supreme religious authority for all Shi'ites throughout the world. He is revered as well by Sunni Muslims, and has the respect of all Iraqis. Contrary to press spin, which has portrayed his return to Iraq as a move to regain political leadership which the young al-Sadr had allegedly robbed him of, al-Sistani is not a political figure. Nor has his authority ever been threatened by al-Sadr's radical militia.

The power of al-Sistani lies in his position as a supreme religious leader, whose authority is moral, not military or political. At the same time, were he to issue a *fatwa*, or religious edict, for example, calling on all to engage in military resistance against the occupation and its puppets, there is no question but that it would be implemented. The fact that masses of Iraqis took to the streets, to make their way to Najaf, on his bidding, demonstrates the nature and dimensions of his authority.

This power has been displayed several times, since the war and invasion of Iraq. Most significant was the mass mobilization he called, when it became clear that the U.S. occupying powers under Paul Bremer, had no intentions of organizing elections. Al-Sistani mobilized a mass demonstration, which forced Bremer et al. to set a date for elections. And, it was al-Sistani who succeeded in engaging the United Nations in the process which should lead to elections. It was he who intervened in late May, to put an end to the conflict between the al-Sadr forces and the occupation.

The Grand Ayatollah's position since the invasion has been principled and unwavering: While rejecting both the occupation and the puppet Iraqi Governing Council, and its successor, the interim government, as illegitimate entities (because they were set up under the illegal occupation), he has refrained from launching armed resistance, in the interests of the population. His rejection of al-Sadr's militia has been explicit, as has his denunciation of the radical cleric's occupation of the Imam Ali shrine, over which al-Sadr has no religious authority. Al-Sistani has tolerated the various quisling entities set up by the United States, but not recognized them, taking the longer view that, when elections are held, then a legitimate government can be established, which will end the occupation and receive his blessing.

What Could Have Happened

Al-Sistani was flown to London in early August, as the current escalation of the conflict broke out. U.S. troops backed Iraqi police forces, who approached the residence of al-Sadr. This move was seen by the latter's militia as the prelude to a violent thrust to storm the residence, seize al-Sadr, and arrest or kill him. Official U.S. and Iraqi interim government policy had been, in fact, to eliminate al-Sadr.

As the city came under siege, al-Sadr and his forces took refuge inside the Imam Ali shrine, assuming that the United States would not storm the mosque. However, as the days went by, U.S. tanks and troops edged closer to the shrine, and the interim government made known that it would decide whether or not to storm it. U.S. military spokesmen offered assurance that only Iraqi security forces would go inside the mosque, so as not to "enflame Shi'ite passions."

By Aug. 25, preparations for a final assault had been completed. U.S. planes had succeeded, in days of constant aerial bombardments, in destroying buildings all around the shrine, allowing the deployment of snipers to positions there, so as



Ayatollah al-Sistani pulled off a "miracle," ending the siege of the Imam Ali shrine in Najaf, by U.S. and Iraqi government forces, against the Mahdi Army of Moqtadar al-Sadr.

to be able to shoot anyone entering or leaving. Conditions inside the mosque were disastrous, as the dozens of wounded could not be adequately treated.

Simultaneously, fierce combat broke out in a number of predominantly Shi'ite cities al-Amarah, Nasiriyeh, and Basra, as well as in the al-Sadr stronghold of Sadr City in Baghdad, which was under heavy U.S. bombardment.

It was at this eleventh hour, that the announcement was made of al-Sistani's imminent return. The mere news of his intended arrival immediately redefined the situation, introducing an element of optimism, and hope for a peaceful solution.

Had the religious leader not taken this decision, fraught with risks for his health and security, the worst could have occurred: The Imam Ali shrine could have been stormed by Iraqi troops, backed up by U.S. Marines and air power. A bloodbath would have been the immediate result.

This desecration of one of the holiest Shi'ite sites, would have sparked a military response elsewhere. Neighboring Iran's population is 95% Shi'ite, and there are large Shi'ite communities in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrein, where they constitute a majority, in opposition to the government. Shi'ites exist also in the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Central Asia.

The most explosive situation is in Iran. Although al-Sadr has received no backing from the political establishment there, all Iranian forces are committed to defending the inviolability of the Imam Ali shrine. Iranian sources have reported that there have been tremendous pressures brought to bear on the government, by arch-conservatives, urging Tehran to lend support. Although this has not been in the form of official statements by prominent political figures, the message has been transmitted that "the people" want to rush to the aid of al-

Sadr. Were this to occur—were individual Iranian elements to cross the border into Iraq in order to join the al-Sadr militia—this would provide the pretext which Washington’s neo-conservatives, such as Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, have been awaiting, in order to “prove” Iranian “interference” in the internal affairs of Iraq.

Iran would then become a legitimate target in the eyes of Washington, and could be set up for a strike, even a nuclear strike, either by the United States directly, or by the Israelis. A months-long drumbeat for a pre-emptive attack against Iran, has been building up to this juncture.

Were Iran to be hit, at the same time that the Najaf shrine were besieged, all hell would break loose. Several commentaries appearing in the Arab Gulf press recently, have speculated on what might ensue. Kuwaiti author Dr. Muhammad al-Rumayhi wrote a piece in *Al Bayan*, on Aug. 24, entitled, “An Atomic Bomb Over the Gulf.” He warned that an attack on Iran by the United States or Israel, could lead to a situation in which “our cities turned into Nagasakis and Hiroshimas, a nuclear holocaust, or, in the best case, we could witness low intensity warfare across the Gulf, in the form of internal (domestic) disturbances.” The latter refers implicitly to the possibility that the Shi’ite communities in the Arab Gulf states could respond with asymmetric warfare, destabilizing especially those governments—Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, for example—which are seen as U.S. allies.

Iranian government officials are fully aware of the deadly consequences of such a scenario. For this reason, Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi called for an emergency meeting of the countries neighboring Iraq, specifically to address the Najaf crisis, but it was rejected by the Allawi government.

The Political Fallout

Al-Sistani’s spokesman, in announcing the breakthrough, said that not all issues had been finally settled, but that “three-quarters” had been achieved. Whatever the further developments in completing the peace mission launched by al-Sistani, the true contours of the political map of Iraq have been brought into focus. The real power in the country is Ayatollah al-Sistani, period. If it was his absence, due to a health emergency, which allowed the United States to gamble on a final solution to al-Sadr, it was the religious leader’s mere announcement of his intended return, which forced a pause.

The significance of his march on Najaf cannot be overlooked. Here, it was not a call to Shi’ites, but to *all Iraqis*, which counts. One of his aides specified that Iraqis should join from Kirkuk (in the Kurdish north), from Mosul (in the Sunni region), and so forth. Thus, it was a call to assert national unity, in a peaceful, non-violent, mass demonstration. And it was specifically organized to defend the Imam Ali shrine, which is sacred to all Muslims. The call was heeded, immediately, demonstrating the overwhelming support that

al-Sistani enjoys. It demonstrated that the population is unified in its resistance against the occupation.

Although Iraqi interim government spokesmen were bragging that the Mahdi Army was “finished,” as their assault was to start, in effect, it is the Allawi government which is discredited. By serving as the foot soldiers of the U.S. occupying force, in a planned siege against the holy shrine, and against Iraqi citizens, it hammered one more nail into its own coffin. No matter what U.S. military and political backing it will continue to enjoy, it is as viable as a dead fish. And, the entire edifice of U.S. policy on Iraq, built on a foundation of lies, has come tumbling down.

There is no way that Iraq can be stabilized, unless it has the perspective to become truly sovereign again. This means, as laid out by Lyndon LaRouche, in the LaRouche Doctrine, that the occupation must end, sovereign Iraqi military forces must be reconstituted, and a UN-guided process toward genuine elections must be implemented. Most importantly, the leading nations of Southwest Asia must be brought into agreement regarding regional security. The fact that the Iranians have called for an emergency meeting of Iraq’s neighbors, is just one indication of the readiness of regional powers to adopt an approach like that of the LaRouche Doctrine. For this to become reality, a radical change in U.S. foreign policy toward the region must occur, a change which LaRouche is committed to bring about.

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