

Noteworthy Reporting

Maliki Turns Attention to Sadr City

Following widespread conflict between security forces and the Mahdi Army (Jaish al-Mahdi) during March 2008 in southern Iraq, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki signalled his intent to target the militia's strongholds in Baghdad districts in a statement issued on **04 April 2008**:

Basra was a prisoner. Now it's liberated and its people are in joy. I understand there are other cities that need similar operations. There are also some neighbourhoods in Baghdad where their people are still hostages in the hands of these criminals ruling them... We will not leave our people and families in Sadr City, Shula, Amiriya and other places.

Activity

Fighting commenced in Sadr City district on **06 April 2008** when intermittent fighting was reported between the Iraqi security forces and Mahdi Army militiamen over the course of the month. At least 20 people were killed and 55 others were injured in the opening skirmishes. While reporting was frequently vague, as in Basra last month, the irregular militias targeted the security forces as they entered the district with a combination of placed roadside IEDs alongside projected small arms and RPG fire.

One source reported at least 40 EFP IED related incidents occurred across Baghdad during the reporting period, the majority of which were deployed in Sadr City, with notable activity in other Shia districts of Khadamiyah and Bayaa.

HMS COMMENT: The deployment of roadside IEDs with EFP charges is a trademark of the Mahdi Army militia. This, alongside the distribution of the attacks, indicates that the militia was almost exclusively responsible for roadside IED incidents in the capital this month and represents a significant increase in localized IED threat levels. **COMMENT ENDS**

Another source reported that the Mahdi Army was using locally produced IED charges with plastic cylinder casings of various sizes. A 5kg and 15kg charge had been developed for small military vehicles, while larger 25kg and 50kg charges were available for targeting armoured vehicles.

HMS COMMENT: It is not clear if these charges were EFPs. For further information on Mahdi Army IEDs see the image of IED materials recovered from the group in Karbala under 'Counter Roadside IED Operations'. **COMMENT ENDS**

It was also specified that 'new' IEDs resembling curb paving blocks had been deployed and used in one particular attack on Palestine Street.

HMS COMMENT: Charges disguised as curb stones have been previously deployed by the Mahdi Army in Basra. Curb stones can easily be replaced by adapted artillery munition charges encased in suitably moulded concrete. **COMMENT ENDS**

Over the reporting period, militiamen continued to attack the International Zone compound and other security force targets with stand-off weaponry, firing a total of 712 missiles and mortar rounds. In reply, MNF-I intensified air-strikes within Sadr City attempting to interdict the rocket/

mortar teams. According to an Iraqi security force source, analysis of the fragments from munitions determined them to have been manufactured in Iran.

By **19 April 2008** Sadrist sources reported that approximately 400 people had been killed and more than 1,300 injured in Sadr City since late March 2008. Private property including 98 houses, markets and private cars, had allegedly been damaged. US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, also attributed the reported rise in MNF-I casualties to Mahdi Army activity in Baghdad.

HMS COMMENT: While official sources failed to provide any casualty and damage estimates to confirm or deny the report, collateral damage within Sadr City was inevitable given the intensity of the fighting and the weaponry deployed. There are likely to have been numerous civilian casualties which may have served to polarize local opinion against the security force operation, and draw previously moderate elements into the fighting. **COMMENT ENDS**



Suspected Mahdi Army fighters with recovered munitions from a raid in Kerbala on 08 April 2008

According to US sources Iranian-trained 'Special Groups' militants were fighting alongside regular Mahdi Army units in defence of the strongholds.

HMS COMMENT: Prior to the March 2008 security force operations directed against the Mahdi Army, the militia's strength was being eroded by Moqtada Sadr's self-imposed ceasefire. The move, which was unpopular amongst the militia's rank and file, saw hard-line elements, sponsored by Iranian elements, break-away from the mainstream organization and continue to operate in isolation of Sadr's command. Events over the last two months appear to be reuniting these previously disparate militant elements, thereby strengthening the organization. **COMMENT ENDS**

As in Basra, certain national security force units proved ineffective during the confrontations. On **20 April 2008** an MNF-I source reported that an Iraqi army unit tasked to Sadr City had left the area against orders. A Baghdad security spokesman Qassim al-Moussawi said only three soldiers had refused to fight.

HMS COMMENT: It is clear that certain elements of the national security forces continue to be infiltrated by, or partisan to, the Sadrists' cause. Following events in Basra during March 2008, approximately 1,300 Iraqi security force personnel were dismissed by the Iraqi government for desertion or declining to fight the Mahdi Army. These personnel were subsequently replaced by Badr Brigade militiamen – a hypocritical move by the government which served to further antagonize the Sadrists. **COMMENT ENDS**

“[I give a final warning to the Iraqi government] to take the path of peace and stop violence against its own people...If it does not stop the militias that have infiltrated the government, then we will declare a war until liberation”

Moqtada Sadr quoted on 20 April 2008 in a statement cited by news agencies

HMS Assessment

With the fight still raging in Sadr City at the end of the reporting period, it is difficult to assess the success of the operation. However, with Sadr rejecting the terms set by the Iraqi government for lifting operations against his Mahdi Army militia and threatening open war, a diplomatic resolution appears to be unlikely in the coming weeks.

While the operations may be destroying the Mahdi Army's capability to fight, the seemingly indiscriminate operations in Sadr City are likely to be serving to radicalize Sadrist sympathizers and local residents into joining the militia's ranks. Moreover, the fighting has drawn the previously isolated Special Groups back to fighting alongside the mainstream militia. Local militia units clearly retain a substantial capability to conduct effective combined arms and EFP roadside attacks, which pose a serious threat to security forces operating in the Shia areas of Baghdad.