

## Backgrounder #29

### Fact Sheet on Iraqi Security Force Operations 2008: Sadr City

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#### Operations Overview

In conjunction with Operation Charge of Knights, carried out in late March 2008 against Shiite militias in Basra, coalition forces increased their presence in Sadr City. On March 26, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and elements from the U.S. 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> Stryker Cavalry Regiment, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade Combat Team, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division began clearing the Baghdad district despite heavy enemy resistance.<sup>1</sup> From rooftop positions, Shiite militias used sniper fire, improvised explosive devices, and rocket-propelled grenades to attack the 42<sup>nd</sup> brigade, 11<sup>th</sup> Iraqi Army Division and its U.S. counterparts.<sup>2</sup> In response to these barrages, Iraqi and American soldiers counterattacked with small arms fire and missiles deployed from unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).<sup>3</sup> After pushing into Sadr City via the district's main thoroughfare, U.S. and Iraqi forces "split the area into at least two sections," installed concrete barriers, and set up fighting positions.<sup>4</sup> Iraqi and U.S. units also deployed their own snipers to patrol the rooftops overlooking their sectors.<sup>5</sup>

In effort to place Iraqi forces in the lead and increase ISF credibility in the eyes of Iraqi citizens, U.S. soldiers placed Iraqi formations "hundreds of yards ahead of the farthest American position and in the thick of the fight."<sup>6</sup> Although U.S. forces hoped this approach would build the Iraqi military's fighting capacity, some ISF have been hesitant to engage the Shiite militias that attack from alley strongholds.<sup>7</sup> This leaves the enemy free to target Iraqi positions with mortars, RPGs, and small arms fire.<sup>8</sup> Although many Iraqi units have defended their sectors "through several long firefights," others succumbed to militia intimidation and attacks by deserting their posts.<sup>9</sup> Iraqi fire discipline has also been a problem. The Iraqi soldiers that have remained in place continue to endanger themselves and American forces by firing wildly in response to militia gunfire.<sup>10</sup>

## **Issues**

- While the operation in Sadr City began as a combined U.S.-Iraqi effort, U.S. forces quickly transitioned to over watch. American units led the fight into Sadr City, but then they established “security stations to be manned by Iraqis.”<sup>11</sup> After they placed the Iraqis in the lead, U.S. forces sought to provide “peace of mind with a constant presence and supplies.”<sup>12</sup> This initiative has not been as successful as the Americans planned, perhaps because of the distance between Iraqi and U.S. fighting positions and the shortage of Iraqi junior officers and noncommissioned officers.<sup>13</sup>
- Some Iraqi forces operating in Sadr City, such as units in the 11<sup>th</sup> Iraqi Army Division, formed recently and lack experience.<sup>14</sup> Although most of the 11<sup>th</sup> IAD’s brigades formed through the unit set fielding process<sup>15</sup>—a force generation and training method intended to build cohesion—some formations within its ranks still lack the confidence to lead the fight against Shiite militias.<sup>16</sup> This lack of experience and confidence, combined with the Iraqi units’ limited leadership, is the most likely reason that Iraqi troops have displayed undisciplined and dangerous firing habits.<sup>17</sup>
- There has been a perceived inability to communicate between Iraqi and U.S. Army leaders. U.S. Army Second Lieutenant Adam Bowen claimed, “There is no good liaison right now between the I.A. and the coalition forces.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, Iraqi Major Sattar claimed that he could not communicate with his American partners in B Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the two units agreed to pass information through runners, but the presence of snipers made this an undesirable option.<sup>20</sup> Major Sattar also cited a lack of armored vehicles and poor equipment.<sup>21</sup> Although some of these equipment shortages may be due to poor preventative maintenance procedures and wasted ammunition, the Iraqi Army remains generally unable to re-supply its units in the field without significant coalition assistance.<sup>22</sup>
- There are too few U.S. and Iraqi troops deployed to Sadr City.<sup>23</sup> They are, thus, unable to clear insurgents from the district. They remain, therefore, in defensive positions subjected to repeated attacks. The Shiite militias have also been able to severely intimidate Iraqi soldiers. Some IA received calls on their personal cell phones, a fact that may indicate a high level of militia infiltration within IA units and/or an increased ability to hold the Iraqi soldiers’ families at risk.<sup>24</sup>

## **Positive Signs**

- Some Iraqi units have held their ground and accepted U.S. guidance in order to “protect their patrol bases, conserve ammunition, and evacuate their wounded.”<sup>25</sup>
- U.S. enablers such as attack helicopters, armored vehicles, UAVs, and route clearance vehicles have been able to contribute to the fight and support U.S. and Iraqi positions.<sup>26</sup>

- U.S. and Iraqi forces managed to force Shiite militias off the main thoroughfares.<sup>27</sup> While this does mean that Shiite militias are now fighting from the alleyways, an area that is difficult to penetrate, it also means that militiamen no longer control all primary routes into and out of Sadr City.

### **Overall Assessment**

Based on the historical presence of militias in Sadr City, the lack of successful major clearing operations there, and the district's difficult urban terrain, there are too few Iraqi and U.S. forces operating in the neighborhood at this time.<sup>28</sup> Considering the logistical limitations, lack of leadership, and lack of experience faced by some Iraqi units in Sadr City, they are not prepared to face the Shiite militia and should not be in the lead yet. U.S. and Iraqi forces may produce better results by combining their security stations and slowly transitioning to an Iraqi led effort as Sadr City is cleared of militia and as Iraqi units become more confident and experienced.

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<sup>1</sup>Sergeant First Class Christina Bhatti, "Soldiers Weed Out Sadr City Terrorists," 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Public Affairs, Multinational Forces Iraq, 12 April 2008, available from [http://www.mnf-iraq.com/index2.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=18413&Itemid=128](http://www.mnf-iraq.com/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=18413&Itemid=128).

<sup>2</sup>3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade Combat Team, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Public Affairs Office, "Coalition Forces Return Fire After Complex Attack in Sadr City (Baghdad)," Multinational Corps-Iraq Public Affairs Office, Camp Victory, Release No. 20080412-02, 12 April 2008.

<sup>3</sup>3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade Combat Team, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Public Affairs Office, "Coalition Forces Return Fire After Complex Attack in Sadr City (Baghdad)."

<sup>4</sup>Michael R. Gordon, "Fight for Sadr City a Proving Ground for Iraqi Military," *New York Times*, 11 April 2008, available from [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/11/world/middleeast/11sadr.html?\\_r=1&th=&oref=sadr](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/11/world/middleeast/11sadr.html?_r=1&th=&oref=sadr), and Sholnn Freeman, "Iraqis, U.S. Intensify Actions in Sadr City," *Washington Post*, 13 April 2008, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup>Sholnn Freeman, "Iraqis, U.S. Intensify Actions in Sadr City."

<sup>6</sup>Michael R. Gordon, "Fight for Sadr City a Proving Ground for Iraqi Military."

<sup>7</sup>Michael R. Gordon, "Fight for Sadr City a Proving Ground for Iraqi Military."

<sup>8</sup> Sergeant First Class Christina Bhatti, "Soldiers Weed Out Sadr City Terrorists," and Michael R. Gordon, "Fight for Sadr City a Proving Ground for Iraqi Military."

<sup>9</sup>Michael R. Gordon, "Iraqi Unit Flees Post, Despite American's Plea," *New York Times*, 16 April 2008, p. 1, and Michael R. Gordon, "Fight for Sadr City a Proving Ground for Iraqi Military."

<sup>10</sup>Michael R. Gordon, "Iraqi Unit Flees Post, Despite American's Plea."

<sup>11</sup> Sholnn Freeman, "Iraqis, U.S. Intensify Actions in Sadr City."

<sup>12</sup>Sergeant First Class Christina Bhatti, "Soldiers Weed Out Sadr City Terrorists."

<sup>13</sup>Department of Defense, *Measuring Security and Stability in Iraq*, Report to Congress in Accordance With

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the Department of Defense Appropriations Act 2008, Section 9010, Public Law 109-289, March 2008, p. 50.

<sup>14</sup>Multinational Security Transition Command-Iraq (MNSTC-I), “The Iraqi Armed Forces: Army, Navy and Air Force Organization Chart,” 1 January 2008, power point presentation, slide 14.

<sup>15</sup>Unit Set Fielding is a force generation and training process that MNSTC-I implemented. When a new brigade forms, Iraqi soldiers go through basic combat training (BCT) and then combine with their brigade’s officers and noncommissioned officers to conduct additional training as an entire unit. Once they are finished training, the entire unit deploys to a specific location in Iraq, usually an area that needs reinforcement. Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Swanson, Deputy Director for Future Plans and Force Generation, Coalition Assistance Army Training Team, MNSTC-I, Teleconference from Iraq moderated by Jack Holt, Chief New Media Operations, Department of Defense Bloggers’ Roundtable, transcript, 3 April 2008, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup>Michael R. Gordon, “Iraqi Unit Flees Post, Despite American’s Plea.”

<sup>17</sup>Michael R. Gordon, “Iraqi Unit Flees Post, Despite American’s Plea,” and Michael R. Gordon, “Fight for Sadr City a Proving Ground for Iraqi Military.”

<sup>18</sup>Michael R. Gordon, “Fight for Sadr City a Proving Ground for Iraqi Military.”

<sup>19</sup>Michael R. Gordon, “Iraqi Unit Flees Post, Despite American’s Plea.”

<sup>20</sup>Michael R. Gordon, “Iraqi Unit Flees Post, Despite American’s Plea.”

<sup>21</sup>Michael R. Gordon, “Iraqi Unit Flees Post, Despite American’s Plea.”

<sup>22</sup>Department of Defense, *Measuring Security and Stability in Iraq*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>23</sup>Michael R. Gordon, “Fight for Sadr City a Proving Ground for Iraqi Military.”

<sup>24</sup>Michael R. Gordon, “Fight for Sadr City a Proving Ground for Iraqi Military.”

<sup>25</sup>Michael R. Gordon, “Iraqi Unit Flees Post, Despite American’s Plea.”

<sup>26</sup>Michael R. Gordon, “Fight for Sadr City a Proving Ground for Iraqi Military.”

<sup>27</sup>Michael R. Gordon, “Fight for Sadr City a Proving Ground for Iraqi Military.”

<sup>28</sup>Sergeant First Class Christina Bhatti, “Soldiers Weed Out Sadr City Terrorists;” Michael Gordon, “As Militias Roam Alleys, Iraqi Army Takes Brunt,” *New York Times*, 11 April 2008.