

# Shiite Cleric's Soldiers Battle Rivals in Najaf and Basra

New York Times, August 25, 2005

BAGHDAD, [Iraq](#), Thursday, Aug. 25 - Fighting erupted Wednesday between followers of the rebellious Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr and his opponents in the holy city of Najaf, killing at least four people and wounding at least 20, officials said.

The fighting spurred members of Mr. Sadr's militia, the Mahdi Army, to storm the Baghdad offices of a competing Shiite party led by Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, officials said.

Clashes also broke out in Basra in the south between Sadr fighters and militiamen supporting a third Shiite religious group, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

Mr. Sadr's militia has been engaged in an intense and sometimes violent rivalry with Mr. Jaafari's party, Dawa, and with the Supreme Council.

Seeking to quell the Shiite violence less than a day before legislators are scheduled to vote on a draft constitution, Mr. Jaafari appeared on state-run television at 12:15 a.m. Thursday to appeal for calm.

"Peace must reign," he said, heavy bags of fatigue under his eyes. "This language of violence cannot be permitted in the new Iraq." He added: "The gun and the language of the gun are finished."

The clashes prompted a call for National Assembly members loyal to Mr. Sadr to boycott their legislative duties - he enjoys the support of a large minority of Shiite legislators. If they honor the call as early as Thursday, it could interfere with final negotiations on the draft constitution, which is supposed to be completed by midnight Thursday.

He led two bloody uprisings against American military forces last year and was accused of murdering a rival Shiite cleric the year before. But though the Americans extinguished both uprisings and drove Mr. Sadr underground, he was never disarmed.

After quelling the second rebellion, last August, American and Iraqi authorities, with the cooperation of Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, pressed Mr. Sadr to join the political mainstream, dominated by Dawa and the

Supreme Council. In recent months Mr. Sadr, who draws much of his support from poor Shiites in Baghdad and southern Iraq, indicated that he planned to forgo violence and enter the political arena to help relieve sectarian tensions.

In an unrelated burst of violence in Baghdad, fierce gun battles erupted between about 40 insurgents and the police in the streets of two residential neighborhoods in western Baghdad on Wednesday, killing at least 13 people, most of them civilians, and wounding at least 57, an official at the Iraqi Interior Ministry said.

The firefights began about 3:30 p.m. when a suicide car bomber exploded next to the convoy of a police commander in Jamiya, killing two police officers and wounding two, the ministry official reported. The American military command in Baghdad said two other suicide car bombs exploded in the same area but provided no information on casualties.

Following the blasts, the insurgents, moving in civilian cars and on foot in what appeared to be a coordinated offensive, attacked police patrols with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades, according to the ministry official and a witness.

In nearby Ghazaliya, insurgents attacked the convoy of Iraq's deputy justice minister, killing four of his bodyguards and wounding five, officials said. Both are predominantly Sunni neighborhoods believed to be insurgent strongholds.

The Najaf clashes began when a crowd gathered to protest the reopening of Mr. Sadr's offices opposite the Imam Ali Shrine, the most sacred Shiite religious site in Iraq. Government authorities had closed the office last August after the American military decimated his militia during a siege of the shrine that left hundreds of Iraqis dead and much of the city's old district destroyed.

Mr. Sadr's spokesman in Najaf, Salah al-Obeidi, said Wednesday night that the protesters had provoked the fight by trying to enter Mr. Sadr's offices. He said they were repelled by Mahdi militiamen.

Mr. Sadr accused the police of abandoning the area when the riot began and demanded a government investigation into the clash, Mr. Obeidi said.

Within hours of the Najaf clash, Mahdi Army members invaded three Baghdad offices of Dawa, an Interior Ministry official said.

In Basra, Mahdi Army members clashed with fighters loyal to the Supreme Council. The police reported that Mahdi militiamen, firing mortars and assault rifles, attacked Supreme Council offices in at least four neighborhoods and a radio station belonging to the party.

Mr. Sadr, a cleric who is thought to be in his 30's, has vehemently opposed the American military in Iraq, and has used this stance to set himself apart from the

other parties. Late last month, Mr. Sadr's organization announced that it had collected one million Iraqi signatures during a three-week petition drive demanding that foreign troops leave the country.

Mr. Sadr has also been among the staunchest Shiite opponents of autonomy in the south and, according to Reuters, some of his supporters joined Sunni demonstrators in a march on Wednesday in support of "no" votes in a referendum on the new constitution.

In his televised address, Mr. Jaafari urged all Shiite groups to remember the repression they suffered under Saddam Hussein and promised to investigate the cause of the violence.

Fakher Haider contributed reporting from Basra for this article, and an Iraqi employee of The New York Times contributed from Najaf.