

Shia Militia Defiant Despite Climbdown

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Thousand-strong demo in Najaf is followed by Shia cleric's decision to pull his men out.

The pilgrims mustered by the roadside south of Najaf – just a few of the thousands of Iraqis who headed to the holy city, in response to the call made by Iraq's leading Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani.

The venerated cleric issued his appeal on August 25 to help end a three-week uprising by the Mahdi Army militia loyal to radical Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr.

Sistani urged both United States forces and the Mahdi Army to leave the city. The August 26 demonstration was intended as a peaceful show of public support for his call.

"We have responded to the call of His Eminence Sistani to achieve peace and security in Najaf," said Sheikh Mahmoud al-Bayati, a representative of the ayatollah. "It is a peaceful demonstration. We are not armed."

At 8 am, the convoy set off. All along the road south, there were cars, vans, trucks and minibuses on the move. Some carried green, black, white and red banners, others posters of Sistani.

At an intersection just north of Kufa, hundreds of vehicles queued to cross a security checkpoint manned by armed tribesmen.

"All Iraq is with you, revered Ali," sang one group of Sistani supporters travelling in a minibus.

In a truck, another group chanted, "We place al-Sadr in our hearts and Sistani before our eyes".

In an apparent bid by Sadrists to capitalise on the march, some held pictures of the young Muqtada al-Sadr and his father, Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, killed by Saddam Hussein's regime in 1999.

The motorcade crossed the river Euphrates and headed into the town of Kufa, only 10 kilometres from besieged Najaf, and now a support base for Sadr's forces.

Sadrist militiamen armed with machineguns, rocket launchers, and rifles spread out among the demonstrators, waving pictures of both Sadr and Sistani.

But near Kufa's main mosque, the march disintegrated into chaos as gunfire rang out and fighters ran from the head of the line carrying wounded men.

Demonstrators began to panic. Ambulances raced back and forth, with drivers yelling out to ask if there were any wounded in the crowds. Private cars – even a motorcycle – ferried the wounded towards Kufa's hospital.

At the front of the demonstration, marchers took cover behind street corners, cars, and trees as the gunfire increased.

Neither Mahdi Army militiamen nor Americans could be seen – only Iraqi police cars forming a checkpoint blocking the way to Najaf.

"Why are they firing at us?" asked a shocked demonstrator. "Look, Iraqis are firing at us – not the Americans."

Another replied, "It's your revered ayatollah who sold us out."

A Sadrist started shouting when he saw a TV cameraman filming marchers who held the Grand Ayatollah's picture. His friends restrained him.

"Where is Sistani?" said one member of the group. "Is he in Basra? He's sitting by the air conditioners, while we are getting killed here."

According to hospital officials at al-Furat al-Awsat hospital in Kufa, the number of dead reached ten, with 70 wounded. But doctors expected more casualties to come in.

Later that afternoon, Sistani's convoy arrived in Najaf and headed to a house belonging to one of his representatives.

Near the house, which was surrounded by policemen, Najaf police chief Ghalib al-Jazaeri confirmed that Sistani had now arrived.

"We declare a unilateral truce," said Jazaeri. "We hope they [Mahdi Army] respect it and apply it. We are controlling the city, we are near the shrine, and all the tribes and residents of Najaf are with us. If they [Sadrists] don't comply, we will be victorious."

Even as the police chief spoke, a group of demonstrators tried to get into the shrine a few hundred metres away, only to be stopped by police firing into the air.

"We will not leave Najaf! We will sleep here until they allow us to enter the shrine!" shouted one marcher who carried a picture of Sadr.

That evening, a Sistani spokesman announced that the Grand Ayatollah had met Sadr, and that the latter had agreed to vacate the shrine.

The spokesman said Sistani's office had asked the Iraqi authorities to allow all unarmed civilian demonstrators to enter the shrine in organised groups the following morning. As dawn broke, hundreds of people poured into the street, passing a roundabout where police had reportedly fired on marchers the day before.

The outskirts of the city were a scene of destruction. Bullet casings, broken glass, and unexploded mortar bombs were scattered on the street. Buildings were scarred with holes which looked like they had been made by artillery and heavy machine-gun rounds. In a few houses, ceilings had caved in – apparently from bombs.

The pilgrims passed into the old city surrounding the shrine, where each narrow alley was guarded by at least two Mahdi Army militiamen. Some welcomed the passing crowds, but others appeared tired and wary.

As the marchers reached the shrine complex itself, a volley of bullets and an explosion rang out, again creating panic among the marchers.

Two men went by pushing a cart carrying a wounded man.

"They don't want peace. There is no truce. You are fighting the Jews and the police. They are agents of Saddam," said one Mahdi Army fighter as he guarded a corner of the shrine.

"I don't think this truce will succeed," said Ali Aday, 26, a Mahdi Army fighter, who was bandaged on his arm and head. But he added, "If the revered Muqtada says, 'Drop your weapons and return to your jobs,' I will obey."

At 900 am, the shrine's loudspeakers broadcast what it said was a statement from Muqtada "to my brothers in the Mahdi Army".

"If peaceful crowds come, go out with them from Kufa and Najaf, without your weapons," the voice said.

"Do not disobey orders, or otherwise you will harm yourselves and harm me," it warned. "This is the order of the scholars and the religious seminary, therefore obey it."

The speaker then praised the fighters by saying, "You did not neglect your duty. You gave [the Imam Ali shrine] the best of defences."

After a few minutes of uncertainty, the militia men started to gather their weapons on pushcarts and running with them into what appeared to be an empty building near a narrow alleyway.

Many congratulated each other for surviving, while others simply began packing up their belongings in plastic bags in preparation for their return home.

Some fighters prepared to bury fallen comrades, wheeling a cart carrying four decayed bodies past the crowds and chanting, "God is the Greatest."

Not all were ready to give up the fight so easily.

"We will rest. We will stay at the outskirts of Najaf. We cannot trust the Americans and their agent, the government of Allawi," said one militiaman carrying a Kalashnikov rifle.

Ali Aday said that there would be further rounds of battle with the Americans to come, "We want them out of Najaf first, and then out of Iraq, God willing.

"It will be in steps. We are pushing them into the corners. We have obeyed the orders of our leader," he said.

"But I will never turn in my weapon," he vowed.

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