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## Introduction

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RAND Arroyo Center was asked by the Department of the Army to analyze the 2008 Battle of Sadr City. The purpose was to provide a more complete description of the battle, to assess its outcome, and to derive lessons learned that can inform a broader understanding of urban operations. The ultimate purpose of the analysis is to help the U.S. Army understand what capabilities it may need in the future to contend with the challenges posed by combat in large cities.

On March 23, 2008, Moqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) militia precipitated what became known as the Battle of Sadr City with a barrage of rockets aimed at the Green Zone. That battle would cost JAM control of Sadr City, its main stronghold in Baghdad. It would also enable the government of Iraq to establish ascendancy in Baghdad and the Iraqi political landscape.

The battle itself unfolded the way doctrine says a battle should, which battles seldom do. Al-Sadr's JAM attacked on March 23, 2008, by launching a barrage of rockets at the Green Zone and assaulting Iraqi security forces positions throughout Baghdad. Coalition forces held their positions and confined the fiercest fighting to Sadr City in the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division's (3-4 BCT) area of operations. Coalition forces then counterattacked, built a barrier that isolated Sadr City (the Gold Wall) and apparently broke JAM's capacity for organized violence in the process. At this point, the victor is supposed to exploit his advantage and consolidate the victory. Coalition forces did just that, applying unrelenting pressure to Shia insurgent networks and eroding the Sadrist movement's popular support through a massive reconstruction program.

### Background to the Study

This monograph adds to a small but growing body of literature on the Battle of Sadr City. The action did attract some journalistic attention, mostly because of the extensive use of UASs (unmanned aerial systems) and other high-technology assets. Indeed,

the CBS News program *60 Minutes* aired a segment on the battle.<sup>1</sup> Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor describe the battle in some detail in their recent book, *The Endgame*. Gordon and Trainor focus principally on the interaction of battlefield events and the war's strategic course.<sup>2</sup> The Institute for the Study of War published an accurate descriptive summary of the battle in August 2008, based mostly on press reports.<sup>3</sup> Other sources mention it in passing, interpreting its significance but not providing much underlying detail about its conduct. Irish journalist Patrick Cockburn attributes the outcome to Moqtada al-Sadr's political calculations, while Adeed Dawisha credits Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's resolute behavior with fostering a nonsectarian political climate. Neither has much to say about how the battle's conduct helped produce the resulting outcome.<sup>4</sup> Within U.S. military circles, such debate as has occurred has centered on the relative value of lethal force and reconstruction in counterinsurgency.<sup>5</sup> In spite of the battle's importance, relatively little has been written about it, especially its implications for the conduct of future urban operations.

There is also little discussion of the battle from the Iraqi perspective; we will recap it here. Research of Arabic-language newspapers, blogs, and Internet forums did not turn up much about local Iraqis' or Shiite militias' attitudes about the Battle of Sadr City or the American forces' "Golden Wall." However, several online sources offered what may be useful context, at least for the conflict narrative. These sources tend to confirm the linkage of the Battle of Sadr City with the Maliki government's Basra operation and the importance of the wall isolating large portions of Sadr City as a provocation to militias affiliated with Jaish al Mahdi. Appendix A details the research team's analysis of contemporary Arabic-language sources.

At the beginning of this project our sponsors were particularly interested in how 3-4 BCT managed the high-technology resources allocated to it for the battle, which was the centerpiece of the *60 Minutes* story. As we began our research, however, it soon became apparent that there was much more to this battle than the employment of unmanned aerial systems (UASs) and high-technology sensors. Even the combat that took place from March through May 2008 is only part of the story. The critical setting of conditions for the battle had been ongoing since mid-2007, when the 1st Cavalry

<sup>1</sup> Lesley Stahl, "The Battle of Sadr City," *60 Minutes*, October 12, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Marisa Cochrane, *Special Groups Regenerate*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *Moqtada al-Sadr and the Battle for the Future of Iraq*, New York: Scribner, 2008, pp. 98–106; Adeed Dawisha, "Iraq: A Vote Against Sectarianism," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 21, No. 3, July 2010, pp. 26–40. In a May 2010 article, Geraint Hughes does not even mention the battle, even though he notes the simultaneous battle in Basra (see Geraint Hughes, "The Insurgencies in Iraq, 2003–2009: Origins, Developments and Prospects," *Defence Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, May 2010, pp. 152–176).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Craig Collier, "Two Cheers for Lethal Operations," *Armed Forces Journal International*, August 2010.

Division, acting as Multi-National Division–Baghdad (MND-B), had begun isolating the Sadr City district from the rest of the city and disrupting Sadrist networks with targeted raids against key individuals. When the 4th Infantry Division assumed responsibilities as MND-B, it continued this effort. The 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division (2-82 BCT) was the brigade within whose sector Sadr City fell.

Once battle was joined, high-technology weapons did play a critical role in neutralizing JAM's rocket-launching capability, but defeating the rocket launches also required traditional ground maneuver urban combat, because 3-4 BCT had to seize and control the launch sites south of Sadr City from which most of the rockets were fired. Ultimately, 3-4 BCT built a massive concrete wall (the Gold Wall) to deny enemy infiltration into the areas with the most potential rocket-launching sites within range of the Green Zone.

Combat also gave participating Iraqi security forces a critical shaking out. The Iraqi Army entered this battle a “checkpoint Army,” infiltrated and cowed by JAM. During the battle, Iraqi soldiers advanced into contested territory and held their positions in the face of incessant enemy attacks. At the battle's end, the Iraqi Army had established an effective monopoly of violence throughout Sadr City. To those familiar with the situation in Iraq and the uneven progress attained by Iraqi security forces, that assessment might seem overly optimistic. In the months following the battle, however, Iraqi forces in Sadr City suffered few attacks and captured several key enemy leaders and weapons caches. Chapter Six provides more detailed support for this assertion. Had the Iraqi Army not attained this level of competence, the battle would have achieved very little. Control would have reverted to JAM when January 2009's provincial elections marked the end of U.S. forces' remit in Baghdad.

Having largely neutralized JAM's ability to control Sadr City, MND-B launched an intense reconstruction effort. The Army Reserve's 926th Engineer Brigade worked through local Iraqis to improve infrastructure and provide essential services. By focusing on building local capacity, the 926th also created a constituency for a new social and political order not dominated by JAM and al-Sadr's political movement. This reconstruction effort also created conditions for the government of Iraq to provide services to the district and extend its authority over Sadr City for the first time.

It is difficult to assess the relative importance of these different aspects to the battle's final outcome. Building the massive wall along Al-Quds Street, or Route Gold as it appeared on U.S. maps, was probably the single most important element of the battle, however. Faced with the prospect of being trapped in Sadr City, then picked off one by one, JAM's mid-level leaders committed their raw forces to a decisive battle on unequal terms against heavily armed and armored U.S. forces. They lost. On May 12, 2008, Moqtada al-Sadr offered a cease-fire to the Iraqi government. To be sure, al-Sadr's reasoning remains opaque to outsiders, but it seems likely that JAM had little remaining military capability with which to resist further. Building a wall had forced JAM to fight itself out.

When the actual Battle of Sadr City began in March 2008, it followed an already intensive year-long shaping effort by 2-82 BCT, which was operating under the control of the 1st Cavalry Division. 3-4 BCT's main heavy combat phase of the battle lasted two months, with an intensive reconstruction and information operations effort overlapping both the shaping and combat phases, and which intensified until U.S. forces withdrew from Baghdad proper. Thus, the reader should not place undue emphasis on any particular aspect of the battle. Each played a critical role in the final outcome of the battle and the post-battle operations. Major General Jeffery Hammond, MND-B's commander, pushed each of his subordinate elements to their absolute limit. Maneuver elements routinely patrolled for 16 of 24 hours daily. Information operations went on nonstop, at a rate that simply overwhelmed JAM's organization. Several hardened officers, with repeated deployment experiences, told us that they had never worked harder. Some of these efforts may have had greater impact than others, and the sheer volume of activity often overwhelmed attempts to synchronize different lines of operation. In short, MND-B relentlessly applied every tool at its disposal. In many respects, MND-B overwhelmed the enemy with a multidimensional onslaught, carried out on every available logical and geographical line of operation.

## Methodology

The Arroyo team used after-action reports, briefings, and other primary sources and secondary sources to research this report. Our most valuable sources, however, were interviews conducted between August 2009 and April 2011 with a broad range of participants from the units involved in the following phases: the pre-battle surge in the vicinity of Sadr City; the Battle of Sadr City; and the post-battle stabilization and reconstruction efforts. These participants ranged from lieutenants to the commanding general of the 4th Infantry Division. Our interviews were mostly with U.S. Army officers but also included a U.S. Air Force officer, a former Iraqi intelligence official, and U.S. government officials. These interviews provided critical information about not only what happened but *why* it happened.

Our understanding of the Sadrist militia comes from contemporary analyses by the International Crisis Group and other, similar organizations; from journalistic accounts; and from U.S. Army assessments. That said, this report largely reflects U.S. combatant perspectives about the battle.

Additionally, we consciously decided, in conjunction with our sponsor, to write this report at an unclassified level to enable its broad distribution. Unless otherwise noted, the information contained herein is derived from our interviews; in general,

interviewees are not identified by name. Finally, note that some portions of this monograph draw heavily on an earlier paper on the topic published by the authors in 2011.<sup>6</sup>

## Monograph Organization

Chapter Two documents the operations that began with the surge, which set the conditions for the Battle of Sadr City. Chapter Three describes the conditions in Baghdad just prior to the battle. Chapter Four examines the initial operations that occurred in March 2008 in response to the launching of rocket and mortar attacks on the International (“Green”) Zone from Sadr City. Chapter Five focuses on the second phase of the operation that sought to stop enemy infiltration from Sadr City into market areas important to the insurgents. Chapter Six examines efforts by coalition forces to exploit the changed conditions in Sadr City after the battle. In Chapter Seven we present our analysis of the factors that decided this particular battle, at this particular place and time. Finally, Chapter Eight assesses the implications of the Battle of Sadr City for future urban operations.

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<sup>6</sup> That work is David E. Johnson, M. Wade Markel, and Brian Shannon, *The 2008 Battle of Sadr City*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, OP-335-A, 2011.

