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~~SECRET~~ (SPECAT EXCLUSIVE)

PROG: 18 JANUARY 2004

AUTHORIZED: (b)(3), (b)(6)

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File

FROM: HEADQUARTERS COALITION PROVISIONAL AUTHORITY  
TO: SECDEF WASHDC  
SECSTATE WASHDC  
NSC WASHDC

~~NODIS/SPECAT~~

~~SECRET~~ HQ CPA 489

E.O. 12958: 01/19/13  
TAGS: PREL, PGOV, IZ  
SUBJECT: CPA 489 THE LAST STRAW: MUQTADA SADR'S SUPPORTERS  
MAKE A GRAB FOR HOLIEST SHIA SHRINE

CLASSIFIED BY CPA EXECUTIVE SECRETARY (b)(3), (b)(6) FOR  
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

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SUMMARY  
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1. (~~S/NODIS~~) Supporters of Muqtada Sadr have made two turf  
grabs for the Shrine of Ali in Najaf in as many days. On  
January 18, 30 Sadr supporters seized the office of the  
Guardian of the Shrine for the ostensible purpose of  
setting up a Sharia Court. After several hours, the group  
left following intervention by the Shrine Police, and  
possibly in response to mediation by political parties. On  
January 19, Sadr supporters returned to the Shrine of Ali  
to "set up an office." The Najaf Governor mobilized local  
police and called for support from Spanish Brigade  
Coalition forces. The incidents followed months of Sadr  
testing the tolerance of the Iraqi Government and Coalition  
toward his illegal activities. He must now be held  
accountable. Taking appropriate action against him would  
likely have a salutary impact on politics in southern Iraq.  
End Summary.

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SETTING UP COURT, OR IS IT AN OFFICE?  
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2. (C) Thirty Supporters of Muqtada Sadr surreptitiously entered the Shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf on January 18, and seized the office of the Killidar, the traditional guardian of Shia Islam's holiest mosque. Armed Sadrites surrounded the Shrine, outside its imposing walls. Once in control of the "Killidaria", the group put up a sign announcing the establishment of a "Sharia Court" in the guardian's office. (NOTE: The previous Killidar was killed on April 9, 2003, along with Majid Al-Khoei; Sadr is widely considered responsible for the murder. Twelve of his associates have reportedly been detained for their roles in this crime.)
  3. (C) Governorate Coordinator (b)(6) urged Najaf Governor Haydar Muhdi al-Mayali to resolve the problem using Iraqi assets. (Use of Coalition forces would have been viewed as a violation of the Shrine.) After some initial hesitation, the Governor turned to the Shrine Police, who entered the Killidaria and convinced the "judge" heading the "court" that his continued presence would lead to violence. The "judge" agreed and departed with the other Sadrites. Shrine Police removed the sign and closed the Killidaria.
  4. (S/NODIS) Late in the day on January 19, Sadr supporters returned to the Shrine, claiming that they no longer sought to set up a court, but just wanted to establish "an office." The Governor mobilized Iraqi Police and Shrine Police, and requested a Coalition force presence on the road that circles the old city of Najaf. (NOTE: Not at the Shrine itself.) The Spanish Brigade responded immediately, along with Salvadoran troops who deployed to monitor the situation. Meanwhile, Iraqi police who had surrounded the Shrine reported a stand-off between a combined number of several hundred Sadr and Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) supporters, with some "fighting" between the factions but no shooting. (Comment: One possible outcome of these incidents is a strengthened position for SCIRI in Najaf. The longer Iraqis perceive the Coalition and Iraqi Government as unwilling or unable to stand up to Sadr, the more they will perceive SCIRI as the only party on the ground prepared to stand up to Muqtada and his thugs. End Comment.)
  5. (SBU) At one point during the January 19 incident, CPA Najaf heard reports of buses preparing to depart from the Kufa mosque with Sadr reinforcements, but the vehicles



never materialized. We understand that negotiations mediated by the Iraqi Police and the Governor's contacts with certain "religious figures" may have helped diffuse the situation. The evening drop in temperature also may have encouraged the crowd at the Shrine to return home for the night.

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WHAT NEXT?  
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6. ~~(SBU)~~ As of 1700 hours local time January 20, the situation in Najaf appeared calmer, with direct confrontation between Sadr and SCIRI supporters averted for the time being.

7. ~~(S/NODIS)~~ Beyond the Shrine incursions, Sadr's supporters continue to threaten local law enforcement authorities. The deputy police chief in Kufa, who was previously detained by the Sadrites, moved from his home to the police station after receiving a January 19 letter threatening him with "rearrest." The Sadrites also reportedly continue to hold an Iraqi police sergeant in the "Sharia prison."

8. ~~(S/NODIS)~~ The Najaf Governor told Governorate Coordinator (b)(6) that he had received a message from Sadr on January 19 expressing surprise that his actions had upset the Coalition. In conveying the message, the Governor urged CPA not to trust Sadr.

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COMMENT  
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9. ~~(S/NODIS)~~ On January 18, the Governor found a peaceful, Iraqi solution to the immediate problem of removing armed intruders from the Killidaria. An equally likely scenario could have been a violent confrontation at the Shrine between Sadr's Jaysh-al-Mahdi and rival Shia groups, potentially requiring armed Coalition intervention to resolve. This would be disastrous to the image of the Coalition both locally and among Shia worldwide.

10. ~~(S/NODIS)~~ Whether intracommunal tensions in Najaf will escalate in the coming days remains to be seen. However, what is clear is that these most recent incidents are but

the latest in a series of aggressive moves by Sadr including previous direct confrontations between his supporters and Shrine Police and his establishment of an illegal system of Sharia Courts. We should view the January 18 and 19 events at the Shrine as the last straw. After his long history of criminal behavior, which may include extortion, kidnapping as well as the murder of Majid al-Khoei and the former Killidar, now is the time to take action in conjunction with Iraqi authorities to hold Sadr accountable. We have the means to do so in the sealed warrants issued against him, as well as his senior aide (b)(6) and eleven others, in connection with the al-Khoei/Killidar murders.

11. ~~(S/NODIS)~~ Firm, just action would support our efforts to establish rule-of-law throughout Iraq. Although Sadr's arrest may provoke clashes with his supporters in the short run, we believe it will have an almost immediate, salutary impact on politics in southern Iraq. It would remove a destabilizing influence who has sought to gain power through intimidation and fear, thereby driving many, including possibly Grand Ayatollah Sistani, toward SCIRI for protection. End Comment.

(b)(6)

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