

Account of Broad Shiite Revolt Contradicts White House Stand

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United States forces are confronting a broad-based Shiite uprising that goes well beyond supporters of one militant Islamic cleric who has been the focus of American counterinsurgency efforts, United States intelligence officials said Wednesday.

That assertion contradicts repeated statements by the Bush administration and American officials in Iraq. On Wednesday, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that they did not believe the United States was facing a broad-based Shiite insurgency. Administration officials have portrayed Moktada al-Sadr, a rebel Shiite cleric who is wanted by American forces, as the catalyst of the rising violence within the Shiite community of Iraq.

But intelligence officials now say that there is evidence that the insurgency goes beyond Mr. Sadr and his militia, and that a much larger number of Shiites have turned against the American-led occupation of Iraq, even if they are not all actively aiding the uprising. A year ago, many Shiites rejoiced at the American invasion and the toppling of Saddam Hussein, a Sunni who had brutally repressed the Shiites for decades. But American intelligence officials now believe that hatred of the American occupation has spread rapidly among Shiites, and is now so large that Mr. Sadr and his forces represent just one element..

Meanwhile, American intelligence has not yet detected signs of coordination between the Sunni rebellion in Iraq's heartland and the Shiite insurgency. But United States intelligence says that the Sunni rebellion also goes far beyond former Baathist government members. Sunni tribal leaders, particularly in Al Anbar Province, home to Ramadi, the provincial capital, and Falluja, have turned against the United States and are helping to lead the Sunni rebellion, intelligence officials say.

The result is that the United States is facing two broad-based insurgencies that are now on parallel tracks. The Bush administration has sought to portray the opposition much more narrowly. In the Sunni insurgency, the White House and the Pentagon have focused on the role of the former leaders of the Baath Party and Saddam Hussein's government, while in the Shiite rebellion they have focused almost exclusively on the role of Mr. Sadr. Mr. Rumsfeld told reporters at the Pentagon that the fighting in Iraq was just the work of "thugs, gangs and terrorists,"

and not a popular uprising. General Myers added that "it's not a Shiite uprising. Sadr has a very small following."

According to some experts on Iraq's Shiites, the uprising has spread to many Shiites who are not followers of Mr. Sadr. "There is a general mood of anti-Americanism among the people in the streets," said Ghassan R. al-Attiyah, executive director of the Iraq Foundation for Development and Democracy in Baghdad. "They identify with Sadr not because they believe in him but because they have their own grievances." While they share the broader anger in Iraq over the lack of jobs and security, many Shiites suspect that the handover of sovereignty to Iraqi politicians from the American occupying powers on June 30 will bypass their interests, Mr. Attiyah said.

With his offensive, Mr. Sadr has "hijacked the political process," he said. As a result, more moderate Shiite clerics and politicians risk going against public opinion if they come out too strongly against the rebellious young cleric, he said. Also hard to gauge is the relationship between Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Mr. Sadr. Ayatollah Sistani is an aging cleric venerated for his teachings, while Mr. Sadr is a youthful rabble-rouser, with little clerical standing. This week, Ayatollah Sistani issued a statement supporting Mr. Sadr's decision to act against the Americans, but emphasizing the need for a peaceful solution. In this, the older man seemed to be marking out a position that allowed him to associate with the tide of Shiite popular feelings, while allowing Mr. Sadr, for whom he is said to harbor a personal contempt, to risk his militia

in a showdown with the Americans. While Mr. Sadr's militiamen prepared for battle, all was quiet at the Kufa headquarters of a rival militia that has helped sustain Mr. Sadr's political influence

the Badr Brigade. Nominally controlled by another Shiite political organization, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Badr Brigade has generally been seen as underpinning Ayatollah Sistani's authority. Although anti-Americanism is hardly universal among Shiites, an anti-American mood has been building for months. At the Grand Mosque in Kufa, where Mr. Sadr took refuge as his militiamen were seizing control of the city on Sunday, this deep vein of anti-Americanism feeds off every rumor. At night, as they torch gasoline-soaked tires to light checkpoints guarding the approaches to the mosque, the militiamen speak of America's planning to uproot Islam in Iraq, to steal its oil, to deny Shiites a voice in the country's future governance, even to bring back Saddam Hussein. In the Shiite-dominated areas of Iraq, some Pentagon officials and other government officials believe that Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Shiite extremist group, is now playing a key role in the Shiite

insurgency. The Islamic Jihad Organization, a terrorist group closely affiliated with Hezbollah, is also said by some officials to have established offices in Iraq, and that Iran is behind much of the violence.

C.I.A. officials disagree, however, and say they have not yet seen evidence that Hezbollah has joined forces with Iraqi Shiites. Some intelligence officials believe that the Pentagon has been eager to link Hezbollah to the violence in Iraq to link the Iranian regime more closely to anti-American terrorism.

But C.I.A. officials agree that Hezbollah has established a significant presence in postwar Iraq. The Lebanese-based organization sent in teams after the war, American intelligence officials believe. Hezbollah's presence inside Iraq is a source of concern since it is widely recognized by counterterrorist experts to have some of the most effective and dangerous terrorist operatives in the world. The United States has issued a \$25 million reward for the capture of Imad Mugniyah, the longtime chief of foreign terrorist operations who is believed to have been behind a series of terrorist attacks against Americans in the 1980's, including the hostage-taking operations in Lebanon. More recently, Hezbollah has focused its terrorist activities on Israel, and, before the war in Iraq, is not believed to have launched a major terrorist attack against American interests since the bombing of the Khobar Towers barracks in Saudi Arabia in 1996 killed 19 American military personnel.

There were some clues to an Iranian presence in Kufa this week. Even as militiamen ferried food and medical supplies into the mosque this week in preparation for a siege, among the pilgrims to the sanctuary were Iranian men. Militiamen at the mosque said that at least some of the funds needed for extensive reconstruction work currently under way inside the sanctuary have come from Iran. There are close ties between the Shiite clerical establishments in the two countries. But whether the Iranian role extends beyond finance is hard to know. Some foreign Islamic fighters have been playing a role in Iraq, particularly in the Sunni rebellion, intelligence officials say. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian affiliated with the Ansar al-Islam terrorist group, is conducting terrorist operations in conjunction with the Sunni rebellion, intelligence officials believe. Mr. Zarqawi may have been behind some recent car bombings in Iraq, although American intelligence officials do not believe he is commanding any of the Sunni militia forces facing the United States military.

The Sunni forces appear instead to be led by former Iraqi government members and local tribal leaders in Falluja and other cities in the Sunni heartland, intelligence officials said.

Robert Baer, a former C.I.A. official who worked covertly in Iraq in the mid-1990's, said that some of those Sunni tribal leaders were once opposed to Saddam Hussein, and years ago approached the C.I.A. about working with it against Hussein. But now, many of those same tribal leaders have turned against the occupation, current and former intelligence officials say.