

# Dispute Over Iraqi Cleric, Said to Have Gone to Iran



Max Becherer/Polaris, for The New York Times

An American soldier rested on a tricycle on Thursday during a lull in searches of a Baghdad neighborhood. The soldiers were looking for weapons.



- SIGN IN TO E-MAIL OR SAVE THIS
- PRINT
- REPRINTS
- SHARE

ARTICLE TOOLS  
SPONSORED BY

CHRIS ROCK

By DAMIEN CAVE

Published: February 16, 2007

BAGHDAD, Feb. 15 — Questions and accusations continued to swirl about the whereabouts of the militant Shiite cleric [Muktada al-Sadr](#) on Thursday, and American and Iraqi forces deepened their security push in Baghdad.

An Interior Ministry official said that the Iraqi police had wounded Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the leader of the terrorist group [Al Qaeda](#) in Mesopotamia, and killed his top aide in a gun battle near Balad, in Diyala Province. But there were no further details, including whether Mr. Masri had been captured or how it was known he had been wounded, and

the United States military declined to comment on the report.

Two Shiite leaders stepped forward on Thursday to confirm American reports this week that Mr. Sadr had gone to [Iran](#).

But the two, a senior official in Mr. Sadr's organization who spoke on condition of anonymity, and Sami al-Askari, a Parliament member from a different Shiite party, took exception with suggestions that he had fled because of a crackdown on militias and had permanently moved to Iran. They said that the cleric often visited the country and that it was unclear why he had left or when he would come back; the Sadr official said he could return to [Iraq](#) on Friday.

In a sign of how volatile the topic has become, several of the cleric's aides continued their vehement denials that he had left at all, and accused the Americans of a propaganda campaign to paint him as a coward. "This is an American lie that aims to get information about the whereabouts of Sadr in any way possible," said Abdul Razzaq al-Nadawi, a top Sadr aide, in an interview on Al Arabiya. "Through this they can accomplish two things: the first is that either Sadr shows up on TV and announces that he is here, and in this case they can make sure that he is in Najaf, Iraq. If he doesn't show up they will also have achieved something, by depicting Sadr as a coward who fled to Iran fearing for his life."

For his part, Mr. Askari said he did not understand why either the Americans or Mr. Sadr's group were making such a fuss. The cleric has frequently traveled to Iran, he said, and rarely appears in public even when he is in Iraq. "I don't know why the Sadrist are denying that Moktada al-Sadr has left," he said. "Maybe because of the provocative statements by the Americans."

The American military has not divulged its motivation for highlighting Mr. Sadr's purported absence. Senior White House officials said that they believed that Mr. Sadr left several weeks ago and that it was unclear what led him to go. If he actually did leave, it is now unclear whether he could come back: the Iraqi government said Thursday that it had closed its borders with Syria and Iran as part of the new security plan.

Prime Minister [Nuri Kamal al-Maliki](#), a Shiite who owes much of his political rise to early support from Mr. Sadr, has struggled under recent pressure to show progress in reining in the militias. United States officials insist that the Mahdi Army and other Shiite militias have been taking a bigger role in attacking American troops, sometimes with help from Iranian materials and expertise. Meanwhile, Sadr loyalists portray themselves as nationalists, legitimate partners of the Shiite-led government, and the only capable defenders of Shiite families from attack by Sunni Arab groups.

The report on Thursday about the wounding of the Qaeda leader in Iraq came after the official, Maj. Gen. Hussein Ali Kamal, the deputy interior minister, had canceled a scheduled news conference. In making the announcement, General Kamal said he had no further information.

Mr. Masri was identified as the new leader of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia last summer, after the terrorist leader [Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#) was killed in June. Mr. Masri, an Egyptian who said he was a founding member of the group, has been the subject of speculation before. On Oct. 5, news reports suggested that he had been killed. A month later, an audio recording surfaced with a voice attributed to Mr. Masri taunting President Bush.

In Baghdad, the top Iraqi and American commanders for the city — Lt. Gen. Abud Qanbar and Maj. Gen. Joseph F. Fil

Jr. — visited a market area in eastern Baghdad recently hit by several car bombs.

In the southern Sunni area of Dora, gunshots and mortar fire rang out all morning as American troops set up tanks on corners and surrounded parts of the neighborhood, residents said. In the northeastern Shiite districts of Shaab, Ur and Bayda, American troops with Iraqi policemen continued to search homes for weapons. About 300 Iraqi security forces worked in the area with 2,500 American troops, said Col. Steve Townsend, the commander of the Third Stryker Brigade Combat Team.

For the second day of their sweep, American troops found almost no resistance, instead mostly encountering compliant residents and children begging for attention. In the afternoon, some troops decided to cruise through nearby Sadr City. From the hatch of a 19-ton Stryker armored vehicle, the district appeared far less friendly than the three nearby neighborhoods had. There were lots of antagonistic hand gestures, hard stares and grimaces from young men.

About an hour later, near a restaurant in Sadr City, six people were killed when a minibus exploded outside a popular restaurant. With American troops on the neighborhood's edges and Iraqi forces inside, witnesses said that the heightened security presence helped evacuate bombing victims more quickly.

Salaam Sabri, 35, a microbus driver who ran to the scene after hearing the explosion, said that police cars and army vehicles were hauling bodies to the hospital while policemen and soldiers searched cars and pedestrians for signs of who might be responsible for the attack.

"It wasn't like before," he said. "They surrounded the area and they checked all the cars and all the people walking by."

Two car bombs exploded in Dora just after 1 p.m., killing four Iraqi civilians not far from where American tanks gathered on corners. Twenty bodies were found in Baghdad on Thursday, an Interior Ministry official said. At least one was headless, according to a hospital official.

A sniper killed an Iraqi Army soldier in the Sunni area of Adhamiya, an Interior Ministry official said. An Iraqi police commando was also killed by gunfire in the Amil neighborhood, another Sunni area.

In another Sunni district, the Jamaa neighborhood of western Baghdad, a car packed with explosives blew up near an Iraqi patrol, wounding two soldiers. The United States military said in a statement that a marine was killed Wednesday during combat in Anbar Province.

A missile or mortar round hit a building just across the Tigris River from the Green Zone, wounding two people, including an American Embassy contractor, said Louis J. Finton, an embassy spokesman.