

Report

The Double Game: the Sadr strategy in Iraq



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The Sadrist movement is unique among the Shi'a groups in the current crisis in Iraq in that it is in a partnership with Nouri Al Maliki's government yet it engages in protests that oppose his policies. This position is part of a long-standing tradition that gives the movement a wide margin to manoeuvre and jump from the sidelines to the centre of the political process in a short space of time.

The precedent for this position was set by a series of overlapping factors. The Sadrist movement is the result of Arab Shi'ism that became independent of Iranian Shi'ism while maintaining a continued presence inside Iraq, opposing Shi'a groups that existed outside of Iraq which returned with the American occupation. These combined factors, among others, made it act in a unique way; participating in the political process while fighting Americans; seeking refuge in Iran while criticising its strategy in Iraq; putting one man in government and others in the opposition; and forming a part of the Shi'a 'house' while engaging in Sunni protests.

The Sadrists: A unique path

The overall impact of the sanctions imposed by the United Nations on Iraq after the occupation of Kuwait (Security Council Resolution 661, adopted 6 August 1990) led to the economic, social, and political restructuring of Iraqi society. The Sadrist movement was one of the products of the sanctions of the 1990s, enabling cleric Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr to benefit from a set of changes that emerged after the Second Gulf War, which highlighted the power in the Iraqi Shi'a landscape at the beginning of 1992.

Al-Sadr resurrected the conflict over Arab nationalism in the religious Hawza in Najaf. This conflict began at the beginning of the twentieth century, and was likely influenced by a nationalist ideology which dominated the region. This also revived the conflict between urban and rural populations based on class, social standing, and politics, which was related to Shi'a representation within the Shi'a establishment as a whole. He thereby broke the monopoly of the religious urban houses from the class of the clergy, particularly in Najaf, Karbala, and Baghdad, opening the field wide to allow for the sons of the southern provinces (Maysan, Nasiriyah, Basra, al Diwaniyah, Muthanna), both natives of these provinces and immigrants to the capital Baghdad in particular, to engage in the Hawza study which he had undertaken himself.

It is a conflict that reflects issues between the Hawza of Ma'dan¹ and the Hawza of Najaf, or between the representatives of the marginalised people with brown skin belonging to rural clans, some who recently became Shi'a (between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century), and the traditional representatives with fair skin of the urban Shi'a population in Najaf, Karbala, and Kazimiya.

Al-Sadr benefited from a climate that resulted in violent suppression of the rebellion that occurred in the central and southern provinces with the Shi'a majority in the wake of the Iraqi forces' withdrawal from Kuwait. He further benefited from the implicit criticism directed at the religious Hawza in Najaf, with specific reference to Abu Qasim Al Khoei (1899-1992), because of his stance in support of the rebellion and by him yielding to the duality of the language of the Hawza, whose silent tradition limits its role in the religious framework (called by some an 'authority of the field') as well as any practical religious institution directly associated with the society which he represented personally. Somewhat unexpectedly, the Sadrist movement was able to garner support among poorer social classes on the margins of the cities such as Al Sadr, Shula in Baghdad and Hayaniya in Basra, whose successive political systems had failed to incorporate them socially. Al Sadr or Sadr City was named thus in 2003, previously called the City of Revolution in the time of Abdul Karim Qadim, and Saddam City in the time of Saddam Hussein.

In 1998, Sayyid Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr, in a radical and unprecedented step in his quest to differentiate himself from traditionalists, revived the Friday prayers, which were considered an 'inactive religious duty' of the Shi'as, though some said they were forbidden and not obligatory as a religious duty in the era of absence².

This step represented a re-examination of his power and his influence among his followers and impersonators³. This move also served to review the rivalry between traditional consultants on the one hand, and, on the other hand, those who say the idea of the *wilayat al faqih* (the guardianship of the jurist) is being revived⁴, not only in Iraq, but also in Iran. The revival of the Friday prayer was a practical tool for Sadr to argue for the limited guardianship of the jurist, where he put three limitations on the general guardianship of the jurist, which are:

- The restriction in applying general legal provisions;
- The restriction to lower the degree of infallibility of the imams;
- The restriction on interest; as it does not make sense for the guardianship without its existence⁵;

Al-Sadr faced contention with regard to the details of guardianship and the 'absolute guardianship of the jurist', as Khomeini stated in 1988 that the position of 'the Supreme Leader' was the role of a leader of the Shi'as all over the whole world, because his part of the guardianship related to that of Allah, the prophet and the infallible imams.

This is what allowed al-Sadr the ability to play a role without an official title. Here we mean that the Iraqi state considered him a consultant, or a *faqih* (jurist) of Arab descent, facing the religious influence of the Hawza from inside the Shi'a institution itself and, at the same time, facing the Iranian official religious institution and considering it a counterpart, which may be more effective than direct confrontation with these institutions, especially in light of the sectarian climate that escalated after 1991. But the assassination of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr and his two sons in Najaf in February 1999 completely changed the existing balance of power. After clashes erupted between Sadrists and security forces in several areas, the Sadrists were no longer seen as a partner but as a source of danger.

The Search for political representation

The signs of resurrection of the Sadrist movement in April 2003 surprised many since the excessive hold of security seemed to stifle the movement completely. Additionally, there was a belief that the movement would not be viable after the death of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr. When Abdul Majid Al Khoei was killed on 10 April 2003, one day after the statue of Saddam Hussein fell in Firdos Square in central Baghdad, which some blamed on the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr, for the first time many Iraqis heard of this group and the presence of something called the 'Sadrist movement'⁶. By engaging in volunteer relief work, the name of the 'Sadrists' was clearly established in the following weeks and looked to fill the vacuum left by the fall of state institutions not only in Baghdad, but in all Iraqi provinces. The Sadrists had organised themselves quickly to maintain public order, and help the people in their areas of influence by providing public services through a network of turbaned young people emulating 'Sadr the Father', using Shi'a mosques and public buildings as their headquarters. But this social presence on the ground did not give the movement any political recognition. They, therefore, received no representation in the Governing Council, which was established as a temporary transitional administration by the Americans in Iraq on 13 July 2003.

It seemed clear that the Americans, perhaps influenced by Shi'a leaders who wanted to monopolise the Shi'a representation, did not objectively appreciate the power of Muqtada al-Sadr, or the extent of the masses behind the Sadrist movement and the extent of its strength. The denial of representation for Sadrists in the council⁷ led to their confrontation with the American forces, especially since some of the Shi'a representatives (there were a total of twenty-five members in the Governing Council: thirteen Shi'as, five Sunni and Kurds, and two representatives for the Turkmen and Christians) had no legitimacy except that which America appropriated for them. Ahmed Al Barrak, Abdul Karim Al Muhammadawi, Wael Abdul Latif, and Rajaa Al Khuzai, who were chosen to represent the Iraqi Shi'as in the Governing Council, did not have any political weight or political presence before 2003. And while al-Sadr always maintained his famous motto: 'No, no to America, no, no to Israel, no, they are both devils', there was no explicit opposition to the American occupation until the Sadrists' exclusion from

the Governing Council. Immediately after this, the Sadrists began talking about 'rejecting the occupation', leading subsequently to Muqtada al-Sadr's formation of the 'Mahdi Army'.

The relationship between the Sadrists and the Americans did not amount to an outright confrontation until April 2004, which peaked in the battle of Najaf in August 2004 and ended in an undeclared defeat, and a truce that was personally sponsored by the Shi'a cleric, 'Ali Al Sistani. But the most important presence of the Sadrist movement emerged through the role played by the Mahdi Army in sectarian 'purification operations' that followed the bombing of a Shi'a shrine in Samarra on 22 February 2006. The Mahdi Army carried out retaliatory acts, often described as sectarian and accused government security forces of being complicit. Boosted by Shi'a political will, the Mahdi Army undertook a war with the specific aim of establishing a balance of power between Sunnis and Shi'as, as well to counteract the al-Qaeda movement.

This war culminated in the battle of Karbala in August 2007, which ended in a declaration by Muqtada al-Sadr on 29 August to cease the activities of the Mahdi Army, including attacks on occupation forces, for a period of six months. It was extended by another six months on February 2008. Despite this declaration, the Sadrists faced a threat to its broad reach in the southern provinces, particularly in Basra, from the Iraqi government during a period that was called the 'Charge of Knights' on 25 March 2008, which ended in the Sadrist movement significantly losing its influence. This confrontation was extended to include Sadrist strongholds in its core political base, Sadr City, a confrontation that represents the internal Sunni-Shi'a struggle for influence rather than a conflict between the state and militants acting outside of the law, though the state itself was a key player in initially granting the Sadrists this influence. Al-Sadr ended the matter with the indefinite freezing of the Mahdi Army's activity on 28 August 2008, adding in a statement issued by his office that he 'does not consider himself as belonging to this title ideologically'.⁸

The Sadrist movement made significant economic gains during this period of internal conflict, and used its economic strength to assert its influence. Its military arm, the Mahdi Army, with its violent activities (kidnapping, seizing private property, imposing royalties, smuggling) on the one hand, and the political influence in state institutions on the other, gave the movement important economic resources that helped consolidate its political and economic interests at the same time.

A distinction must be made between the Sadrists, or the Sadrist movement, and the Mahdi Army. The former refers to the political wing of the movement which is comprised of:

- The Office of the Martyr al-Sadr, headed by Karrar Al Khafahi and two deputies, Sheikh Walid Al Kraimawi and Sheikh 'Ali Al-Mutairi.
- The liberal bloc, a name that was used at the beginning of 2009 ahead of the elections for the provincial councils, headed by Dr. Diaa Al Asadi. The political body of the liberal bloc had 106 members, and it was an organisation directly linked to the Office of the Martyr al-Sadr, headed by the leader, Muqtada al-Sadr. It organises periodic elections to choose a secretary general, with Dr. Diaa Al Asadi winning the position of the Secretariat in the second round of elections, which took place on 29 October 2011 after the failure of the competitors in the first round to get more than the 50 per cent needed to win. The liberal parliamentary bloc which is headed by the MP Bahaa Al 'Araji, is considered part of this formation.

There are other prominent names in this dual organisation, including Sheikh Salah Al 'Abidi, the official spokesman for Muqtada al-Sadr, Sheikh Mustafa Al Yacoubi, Sheikh 'Aoun Al Al Nabi, and Sheikh Mahmoud Al Jayashi, the director of the private office of Muqtada al-Sadr.

Conversely, the Mahdi Army is not a cohesive organisation with clear hierarchy and decision-making mechanisms. It is difficult to describe its nature and it often seems closer to the model of al-Qaeda, with numerous organisations in different regions

affiliated to it in name, but working individually and carrying out its operations independent from the original organisation, presumably without any mutual coordination. It is an extremely flexible organisation, which is what drove Muqtada al-Sadr to try to control it by freezing its activities in August 2007 and then announcing in one of the Friday sermons in Kufa in November 2008 the formation of armed battalions called the 'Promised Day Brigade' (which is different from the name of the Mahdi Army, whose name is derived from the fourth part of Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr father's book called 'The Encyclopedia of the Imam Mahdi'). But he did not mention any acts of violence undertaken by the aforementioned brigade, and the matter remained within the limits of power that the Sadrist undertook from time to time. It also remained in the framework of the public threats to fight the Americans if they stayed in Iraq, or in the event of them not committing to withdraw, or if they returned to Iraq.

The relationship with Iran: Strategy and tactics

The Sadrist movement remained a local organisation and because of the circumstances of its creation and the nature of its rhetoric, it was not able to build external relationships except within a limited scope after the occupation. Its relations with Iran, and by extension with Hizbullah, were practically its only external relations.

The Iranian strategy in Iraq worked to create a strong and unified Shi'a block that could capture power and administer the country with a special relationship with Iran. Parallel to this strategy, there was an Iranian tactic dependent upon the support of armed militias able to sustain a war of attrition with the occupation forces, and the American forces in particular, to prevent them from thinking about a military move against Iran. The relationship with the Sadrist movement in general, and the armed wings (represented officially in the Mahdi Army, or a splinter of it like the League of the Righteous, as well as many other small militias organically linked to Iran) in particular, was a part of this tactic. Hence, the convergence of interests between Iran and the Sadrists was more than just on an ideological basis.

The Sadrist movement was in dire need of Iranian support, especially with regard to armament, as well as the need for a 'backyard', primarily for training and providing a safe haven when necessary. Iran, throughout this relationship, has been able to put pressure on Muqtada al-Sadr, who evaded arrest in Iraq by residing in Iran, to accept the nomination of Nouri Al Maliki as prime minister for a second term even though he strongly rejected this nomination for months (the Federal Supreme Court ratified the final results of the elections on 1 June 2010, and the Sadrists did not accept the nomination of Maliki as prime minister until 1 October 2010). But the political practices of Muqtada al-Sadr revealed an almost complete breakdown in the relationship between the Iranians and the Sadrist movement, particularly after Muqtada al-Sadr's decision to visit Erbil and participate in a campaign with the Kurdistan Alliance and the Iraqi List to withdraw their confidence on 29 April 2012⁹, a situation that was confirmed in a meeting in Najaf on 19 May 2012. This drove Muqtada al-Sadr to leave Iran and take up residence in Lebanon.

Initially, when discussing Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, we pointed to the issue of his rejecting the theory of the absolute guardianship of the jurist that Khomeini spoke of, and how he entered into the conflict with the traditionalist Hawza in Najaf by reigniting the controversy about Arab nationalism of the Hawza, specifically in relation to the Supreme Leader. These two positions went directly against the desired Iranian model and embodied his marketing of Shi'ism, dogmatically and ideologically, in Iraq. Therefore, the subsequent dissolving of the relationship between the Sadrists and Iran was not that strange.

The Double game and changing alliances

In addition to their conflict with the traditionalist religious Hawza in Iraq, after April 2003, the Sadrists faced a direct challenge from the different forces coming from exile, specifically from the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution, and the Dawa Party with its two parts (the general headquarters and the organisation of Iraq), as well as

from Shi'a religious and political personalities that gained influence immediately after the occupation. Perhaps the effect of the Americans ignoring the movement, and its lack of representation politically in the Governing Council, had a direct impact on these two parties to a certain extent. It was therefore not just a violent conflict waged by the Sadrists for the sake of political representation directed against the Americans; rather the movement also pitted internal factors against each other in order to prove its influence and gain political recognition. The movement had chosen what is called a 'double game', in its management of the conflict, changing its alliances and its strategy to strengthen its political position. Thus the Mahdi Army was involved in the management of the conflict on the ground with the occupation forces and other Shi'a forces, while the Sadrist movement was strongly and effectively involved in the political process that the occupation created and managed and the Shi'a forces participated in establishing. To highlight the incongruities at play, the Sadrists were present in enforcing the Green Zone while the Mahdi Army was constantly shelling the Green Zone.

The Sadrists succeeded spectacularly in managing their political battles and in demonstrating flexibility in forming their alliances at the beginning of 2005, which enabled them to progress slowly but surely to strengthen their position on the Iraqi political map in general, and the Shi'a map in particular. The Sadrists obtained twenty-three of the total 275 seats in the National Assembly elections of January 2005, and then obtained thirty seats of the total 275 in the House of Representatives elections in December of the same year (within the closed list of the United Iraqi Alliance, which included Shi'a political forces that, in total, won 130 seats that were distributed as follows: thirty for the Supreme Council, thirty for the Dawa Party with its two parts the general headquarters and the organisation of Iraq, fifteen for the Islamic Virtue Party, fifteen for the independents, ten miscellaneous (Turkmen and Kurd), as well as two additional seats from the list individually. They had a major role in naming a candidate for the Supreme Council as prime minister and they chose Ibrahim Al Jaafari from the Dawa Party, but they failed in the end to appoint him as prime minister because of the American-Kurdish-Sunni objection, and supported choosing Maliki as a compromise candidate after a delay that lasted months.

They seemed more professional in their management of the elections for the House of Representatives in 2010, where they were able to win thirty-nine seats of the total 325, and twenty-one for the Supreme Council and Badr, although their votes were less than the others within the Unified National Coalition, this time they also had the crucial role in nominating Maliki as prime minister due to Iranian pressure, this after refusing for months. As a result of that pressure, the Sadrists weakened their share of the ministries (the Sadrists obtained eight ministries out of a total their thirty-nine seats, in exchange for five ministries for the Kurdistan Alliance out of a total of their forty-three seats, as well as the release of thousands of members of the Mahdi Army).

The Sadrists continued their double game. At a time when they formed the decisive factor in Maliki winning a second term and supported his government, they were his harshest opponents in the House of Representatives, preventing Maliki from taking advantage of the support of his presumed political bloc (the National Alliance) inside the House of Representatives. Over the past two years, the Sadrists have been lining up along the Iraqi List and the Kurdistan Alliance to pass laws that do not satisfy Maliki and state legislation, such as a law on the Supreme Judicial Council, two laws on the Integrity Commission and the Office of Financial Supervision before the Federal Court repealed them, a law amending the law of provincial elections, and finally, a law setting the term limits of the prime minister, or in rejecting bills that the government and Maliki wanted, such as an infrastructure law, a law of parties, a law on cybercrime, and a law on freedom of expression. The Sadrists also voted against the dismissal of the Chairman of the Independent Electoral Commission and the dismissal of the mayor of the capital city, despite the fact that the prime minister's bloc had based the call for this dismissal on interrogation.

The matter did not stop at the borders of the House of Representatives. Muqtada al-Sadr accused Prime Minister Maliki of exclusivity and dictatorship, adding that he did not implement the Erbil agreement that brought him to office, and that he adopted a policy

of systematic exclusion of his partners and opponents alike, charges that were echoed by Maliki's opponents. The most important plan in this regard is the Sadrists choosing to stand alongside the Iraqiya and the Kurdistan Coalition in a vote of no confidence against Maliki, after which Muqtada al-Sadr undertook that his deputies would vote for them if they could get 120 votes in favour of withdrawing confidence.

In other words, these positions are not just arbitrary tactics, but a strategy which the Sadrist movement was firmly committed to. This alliance to redraw the Iraqi political map towards a bloc that cuts through sectarianism politically, ethnically, and religiously, ruled Iraq after April 2003. It was credited to Muqtada al-Sadr personally, that he made this move despite knowing the possibility that Maliki could use al-Sadr's allegiances to weaken his popular support base by suggesting that al-Sadr's move goes against Shi'a doctrine. The final position of Muqtada al-Sadr confirmed that the movement of the popular protests in the Sunni sector reinforces his commitment to this strategy, especially as he was confident that he would continue to be influential in the Shi'a political map.

In summary, the Sadrist movement's chances to increase its power in the future depend on two factors:

- Marginalised social forces will increase their numbers because of the economic model followed in Iraq.
- An ideology that derives its perceptions from creating a Shi'a authority that is Iraqi and Arab and runs counter to the authority of Khomeini. This force may give the Sadrist movement a central role in the future because the strategy includes the potential to form bridges that transcend sectarian conflicts and link the components of Iraq to an Arab national framework.

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Endnotes

¹ Ma'dan is a term given to residents of the province of Maysan's marshes in particular, but was generalised to characterise the newcomers from the southern provinces. It is a discriminatory term that reflects the nature of the abuse in these cities with the displaced, which partly explains the symbolic and material violence perpetrated by these people towards the cities that host them.

² 'The Shiites had performed the Friday prayers until the mid-fifth century Hejira, especially in the Buratha mosque in Baghdad, but extremism is considering the theory of piety (*taqiyya*) and waiting, and the requirement of the presence of the just imam or his permission, and an interpretation of the just imam as the infallible absent imam (the awaited Mahdi) led the Shiites to freeze Friday prayers in the fifth and sixth century, and the birth of fatwas that prohibit undertaking them (in the era of the absence). Ibn Idris Al Hili was one of the most negative scholars in that he gave a fatwa forbidding them and claimed consensus of the Shia imamate on it.' (Ahmed Al Katib, *The Development of Shiite Political Thought*).

³ This explains the proposal of Muhammad Baqir Al Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Council, that the Hawza in Najaf perform the Friday prayer in June 2003 in the shrine of Imam 'Ali Bin Abi Talib, and the Hawza approved it, especially after 'Ali Khamenei took away the authority of the Council and gave it to 'Ali Al Sistani.

⁴ It is well known that in regards to the concept of the 'guardianship of the jurist', any 'public prosecutor' for the jurist, combined with the conditions of the era of the absence, returns in history to Mhaqqiq 'Ali Al Karaki' in the tenth century of the Hejra, sharing rule with Safavid Shah under the description of 'deputy of the Imam Mahdi: the just jurist'. But assuming that the theory did not start until Ahmed Bin Al Mawla Al Naraqi in the beginning of the nineteenth century, who tried in his book, *Awaid Al Ayyam*, to ask if 'the guardianship of the jurist who are the rulers in the time of the absence and the representatives for the imams, did their general guardianship include the guardianship that was originally fixed for the imam or not?' and it concluded that 'everything that was for the prophet and the imam...and the imamate was for them, so the jurist also has that', and they have the 'general guardianship'. However, in Ayatollah Khomeini's book *Islamic Government*, we come to a theory of rule based on this principle in the chapter entitled, 'The System of Islamic Rule', in which he talks about the two conditions for the ruler: knowledge of Islamic law and justice, and ends with 'if the matter of forming a government arose the jurist is knowledgeable and just, and it includes the matters of the society that the prophet, peace be upon him, followed, and the people shall hear and obey' (p. 49). He adds that 'all who fail to obey, God will take them and make a calculation based on that' (p. 80). Obedience here is absolute and the one who is bound to obey does not have the right to object or disobey, as Ayatollah Muhammad Hadi Ma'rfa describes, 'because the obedience that is imposed on the people towards the orders of the prophet and the legitimate guardians is absolute obedience, whether a mob of the people desire them and

their general members or not, meaning that the guardian recognizes the issue of public interest themselves, and guardian has the right to act without restriction in public affairs administratively and politically, and their action is absolute, and the people do not have the right to object' (dimensions and boundaries of the guardianship of the jurist). The Iranian constitution stipulates that the guide or leader is the highest authority in Iran and he has political and religious sovereignty. Article 5 states that 'in the time of the absence of the Imam Mahdi – God most high hastens his return - the guardianship of the matter, and the imamate of the ummah, in the Islamic Republic of Iran is in the hand of the just jurist, the pious, possessing knowledge of the issues of the age, and brave and able to administer and manage.'

⁵ See his book, *What is Behind the Jurist*, part 4, p. 65.

⁶ Quoted by the BBC from one of the traveling reporters on 10 April/Nisan 2003, saying that Al Khoei was killed by the 'followers of Muqtada Al Sadr, son of the late imam Muhammad Sadeq Al Sadr'. See the link: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/arabic/middle_east_news/newsid_2936000/2936775.stm

⁷ The reference is Paul Bremer's memoirs entitled *My Year in Iraq*, which clearly discloses the size of the failure to estimate the strength of the Sadrist movement. In his memoirs, Bremer says that he relied on the reports of one of his aids that described Muqtada Al Sadr as an 'Islamic Bolshevik who understands only one thing, brute force', that he 'currently lacks broad public support' that he 'depends on a group who are fanatically loyal to him, and that his armed followers does not exceed more than 200 people!' Paul Bremer, *My Year in Iraq* (New York, 2006), p. 129.

⁸ Arabic net 28 August/Ab 2008.

⁹ In a publication that he called 'The Noble Goal of the Erbil Visit', Muqtada Al Sadr says that Al Maliki and Qasim Suleimani, commander of the Al Quds forces at that time, asked him when he met them in Tehran not to go to Erbil, and he accused them of 'playing the chord of sectarianism'; thus meetings like this 'provoked and roused him' (published on p. 4).