A volunteer from brigades loyal to radical Iraqi Shi'ite leader Muqtada al Sadr mans a machine gun in front of al Sadr's picture while keeping guard in Samarra on 13 July 2014. Photo by Thaier Al-Sudani/Reuters/Newscom.

In this monograph, Carole A. O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras provide a comprehensive assessment of Muqtada al Sadr, one of Iraq's most powerful and controversial political figures. The authors leverage their extensive network and experience (inside and outside of Iraq) to analyze how al Sadr overcame aggressive opponents to maintain his influence. A key feature of this study is its original research on topics of great importance to contemporary Iraq which are often underappreciated and understudied. The authors uniquely consider the influence of al Sadr's father (a widely revered pre-1999 Arab nationalist) in al Sadr's transformation from a figure of sectarian Shi'a to one of Iraqi nationalism.

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Muqtada al Sadr and Neo-Iraqi Nationalism

O'Leary/Heras

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Muqtada al Sadr and Neo-Iraqi Nationalism: Implications and Opportunities

Carole A. O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras

JSOU Report 21-6

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Sharpening the Edge of SOF's Advantage: The All-Domain SOF Leader-Professional

Muqtada al Sadr and Neo-Iraqi Nationalism: Implications and Opportunities

Carole A. O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras

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On the cover. On 27 November 2020 in Iraq, Baghdad, supporters of Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr hold photos of him and rally in his support at Tahrir Square. Al Sadr called the masses of the Sadrist Movement to achieve a large majority in the new Iraqi parliament to enable them to form the next government. Photo by Ameer Al Mohammedaw/dpa/picture-alliance/Newscom.

Back cover. A volunteer from brigades loyal to radical Iraqi Shi'ite leader Muqtada al Sadr mans a machine gun in front of Sadr's picture while keeping guard in Samarra on 13 July 2014. Al Sadr's followers, who fought U.S. troops under the banner of the Mehdi Army during the 2003-2011 occupation, have returned as al Sadr's new "Peace Brigades." Photo by Thaier Al-Sudani/Reuters/Newscom.

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Foreword

Since October 2019 a multi-sectarian, nationalist, youth-based, political reform movement has jolted the Iraqi political establishment leading ultimately to the resignation of the Iranian-supported Adel Abdul Mahdi and the installment of Mustafa al-Khadimi, who is more friendly to U.S. national interests. Influential in the dynamics leading to this transition is Muqtada al Sadr, one of Iraq's most powerful and controversial political figures. He is the leader of one of the most powerful political blocs in Iraqi politics, in addition to one of the best organized, armed, and most effective social movements. Al Sadr is positioned to be a powerbroker in Iraq for years to come, which will have great consequences for U.S. political and national security strategy toward regional counterterrorism and Strategic competition dynamics.

Al Sadr was first brought to the world's attention in 2003 when the then young and feisty cleric became the living, breathing symbol of resistance against the U.S.-led coalition. Since he first burst onto Iraq's social, political, and security scene, al Sadr has seen his influence wax and wane, but each time his domestic and foreign opponents attempted to remove him, only to have him gain more power. Al Sadr has leveraged his family's nationalist credentials for close to two decades in Iraqi politics and has demonstrated a seemingly unpredictable approach to sometimes working both for and against this nationalist movement. His unique position among Shi'a in Iraqi politics indicates the political reconciliation necessary for a sustainable counterterrorism effect will have him playing a key role. Moreover, as great power competitors court partners in the region, al Sadr could be pivotal on whether China gains a solid foothold in future Iraqi economics and politics.

Given its role in Iraq over the past 17 years, it is likely that Special Operations Forces (SOF) will continue to play an important part in the continuing U.S. Government (USG) relationship with the Iraqi state for the foreseeable future. Both counterterrorism and great power competition rely on political solutions to achieve strategic effects. As the Joint Concept for Human Aspects of Military Operations and the Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning conclude, deep appreciation of the socio-cultural and political dynamics are basic requirements to achieve strategic effect.

In this monograph, Carole A. O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras provide a comprehensive assessment of al Sadr's rise in Iraq's society and politics. The authors utilize their extensive experience and contacts, both inside and outside of Iraq, to analyze how al Sadr rose to prominence, maintained his position despite active and aggressive efforts by his opponents to defeat him, and forecast the extent to which his position as one of Iraq's most influential powerbrokers will be sustained and challenged in the future. A key feature of this study is original research on several topics that are of great importance to contemporary Iraq, but which are often underappreciated and not thoroughly analyzed. These topics include: the current structure and power dynamics within the armed organizations that al Sadr leads; the potential for continued or diminished violent extremism—both Sunni and Shi'a—because of the rise of al Sadr's multi-communal, multi-party, *al-Sairoon* political movement; the trajectory of Iranian influence in Iraq and the wider Middle East, especially the Levant; and the extent to which al Sadr is a check on Iran.

The authors take a unique approach to examining al Sadr's importance in contemporary Iraq, which is to examine whether and how al Sadr has re-embraced his widely revered father's pre-1999 Arab nationalist roots to move from a sectarian Shi'a figure to an Iraqi nationalist one. They also assess whether al Sadr is capable of rejecting future violence against the Iraqi state and Iraq's large number of different communal groups, particularly Sunnis. The authors conclude that although al Sadr is less of a nationalist and unifying figure than is popularly believed, he does demonstrate that he is willing, at times, to transcend sectarian and communal politics for the greater good of Iraq and the Iraqi people. However, al Sadr remains committed to opposing foreign occupation or undue influence over Iraq—whether American, Sunni Arab, or Iranian—and he remains an opponent of the U.S. military presence on Iraqi territory, which is a position that he has consistently held since 2003. The SOF integrated campaigning role for strategic effect will therefore need to increase support to human security-oriented USG activities to allow Iranian influence to appear as the near threat to al Sadr's interests.

David C. Ellis, PhD
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Carole A. O'Leary, PhD is an associate with BlueLaw International. She also co-directs the Middle East Religious Freedom Initiative and the MENA Region Cultural Mapping Project with Professor Robert Destro at Catholic University. In 2013–2014, she engaged with Nicholas Heras in a field-based research project for CENTCOM J5, focused on malign Iranian behavior. In this context, she served as a scholar-in-residence and adjunct professor at the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, in Washington, D.C. Her research and fieldwork focus on cross-border communal identity politics with a specific focus on ethnic, religious, and sectarian conflict, and the role of Arab tribalism in the central Middle East. From 1996–2011, she was an adjunct professor of Middle East Studies in the School of International Service at American University (AU) in Washington, D.C. As a scholar-in-residence at AU's Center for Global Peace (1996–2011), O'Leary directed the Center's Middle East initiatives, including the Iraq Federalism Working Group launched in 2002 and the Arab World Tribalism Working Group established in 2003.

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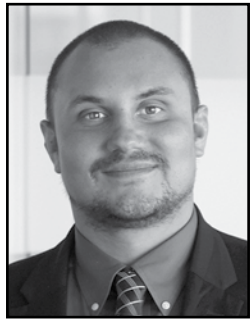

analysis on topics related to Iraq, ISIS, Syria, and Yemen and a senior analyst at the Jamestown Foundation where he provided analysis on security and geopolitical dynamics in Iraq, the Levant, Libya, the trans-Sahara/Sahel region, and Yemen. Heras served as a research associate at the National Defense University from 2013–2014, where he was responsible for managing field research and analysis for a project for the U.S. Central Command and U.S. Special Operations Command that focused on the transnational threats to the U.S. and its interests in the Middle East from Iran-backed organizations and Salafi-Jihadi organizations. He was a David L. Boren Fellow based in Beirut, Lebanon from 2010–2011, and previously worked as a research associate at the American University Center for Global Peace where he managed field research and analysis for several projects focused on Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Heras has extensive field research experience in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and other regions of the Middle East. He was the co-author of the 2019 Joint Special Operations University monograph, *Political Strategy in Unconventional Warfare: Opportunities Lost in Eastern Syria and Preparing for the Future*.

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The authors would like to thank their colleagues Richard Michael and Dr. Faiz Al-Alawy for their expert review and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this monograph. They would also like to thank their numerous Iraqi, Arab, American, and European colleagues who have engaged with them over the years on topics related to Muqtada al Sadr and his evolving impact on dynamics inside of Iraq. This intellectual engagement has helped to sharpen the authors' analytical argumentation on how to assess the impact of Muqtada al Sadr and his movement in Iraq and the geopolitical effects of the Sadrist movement in the Middle East. Last, but certainly not least, they would also like to thank Dr. David Ellis of the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) for the opportunity to conduct this study, and the JSOU Press team for ensuring that this monograph was published to such a high standard.

Introduction

By the middle of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein had become convinced the Shi'a community in Iraq could not be trusted to be loyal citizens.[1] The early years of the war saw life go on normally for most Iraqis who still had access to food, housing, financial savings, and, for many, the ability to travel outside the country for summer holidays. Muqtada al Sadr grew up in the heart of middle class Arab Baathism. He was in fact a "son of the Baath," as all Iraqi children were taught to be. This was the case until approximately two years prior to his father's assassination in 1999. In the last two years of his life, Mohammed Mohammed-Sadeq al Sadr turned on the Saddam Hussein Regime and its Baathist ideology, preaching a form of Shi'a based political ideology.[2]

This took place in the context of post-1991 Iraq, a bleak environment in which international sanctions devastated the economy.[3] People were often forced to sell their cars, furniture, clothing, etc., to be able to eat through a food ration card system tied to the United Nations Oil for Food Program that commenced in 1996. The violence of the 1991 uprising and its aftermath, particularly in the south of Iraq, created a climate of fear that persists in the hearts and minds of Iraqi Shi'a who lived through that period. John Kifner, of the *New York Times*, reported at the time that witnesses saw tanks painted with the slogan "No Shi'a after today," people were hung from electric poles, and tanks towed bodies in the streets.[4] Iraqi scholar Ranj Alaaldin states that "extreme poverty and repression followed the uprising."[5]

For most of this troubled decade of the 1990s, Muqtada al Sadr's father, the leader of the Sadrist Movement, neither attacked Baathist ideology nor the person of Saddam Hussein himself.[6] This is an important point—al Sadr was raised within the norms of Arab Baathist ideology. It was not until his father started preaching against the regime in 1997 that the elder al Sadr began to experience anti-regime, revolutionary ideology. Sadeq al Sadr provided the Shi'a underclass (rural and urban) with an outlet for its suffering under the Hussein regime. His organization provided the poor with counseling and services, and through this work he created a wide, but loose network of supporters in the process.[7] In fact, according to Alaaldin, many

of today's fighters who comprise the Shi'a militias inside Iraq, were young men during the 1990s.[8]

Sadeq al Sadr mobilized the Shi'a communities of Iraq on the basis of Shi'ism and anti-Western, Iraqi nationalism.[9] By the time of his assassination in 1999 at the hands of Hussein's regime, al Sadr had successfully established a powerful form of communalism, as part of a broad-based Shi'a mobilization effort that later, under his son Muqtada, merged religious fervor with a Shi'a variant of Iraqi nationalism.[10] When the U.S. invaded in 2003, it was Muqtada al Sadr and his followers who filled the political, policing, and social gaps after the collapse of the Iraqi state, establishing his *Jaish al-Mahdi* (the Mahdi Army or JAM). At the same time, he also set up services for the poor in Baghdad's Sadr City and across the south of Iraq.[11]

In 2003, American academic Juan Cole published an article on the rise of Shi'a religious factions in post-Hussein Iraq. He argued the Sadrist Movement stood out in this group as militant and cohesive, as well as sectarian and anti-American. According to Cole, Sadrists sought to impose a puritanical, Khomeinist vision on Iraq.[12] In the authors' view, this is simply not the case. Al Sadr was never a Khomeinist and never a believer in *veliyat i faqih* (rule by the supreme jurist). Rather, he was then and is now a strong supporter of Iraqi nationalism. As emphasized throughout this monograph, al Sadr grew up in the Iraqi form of Arab (Baathist) nationalism. None of the key religious leaders in his family supported *veliyat i faqih*, although his father-in-law, Baqir al Sadr, a founding member of the Dawa party, did come to support parts of this concept.[13]

Muqtada al Sadr in many ways encapsulates the complexity of modern Iraqi identity. He is an ethnic Arab and an Iraqi nationalist who was raised in the ideology of Arab nationalism. He is a Shi'a Muslim from a very prestigious clerical family whose roots are inside Iraq, not in Iran. At the same time, he has lived in Iran as a refugee from post-Hussein Iraqi politics and studied in Qom, the holy city that Iranians consider to be the equal of the world center of Shi'a learning: the Iraqi holy city of Najaf, the burial place of the Imam Ali in Iraq. As a politician and religious leader, al Sadr has supported both close engagement and cooperation with Iran, and championed Iraq's Arab identity and its ties to the broader family of Arab nations. Much analytical energy has been spent trying to assess whether al Sadr is an ally of Iran or an antagonist against its goals in Iraq. The reality is that al Sadr plays both roles in contemporary Iraq, which reflects the unique position that

Iraq holds in the modern Middle East—the pivotal state through which Iran can turn many of its regional activities, while also a potential barrier to the expansion of Iran's influence and control over regional affairs.

This analysis contends that while al Sadr is not, nor soon will be, an ally of the United States Government (USG), he is a pragmatic Iraqi nationalist leader whose internal political interests could in some areas align with U.S. national interests, including to prevent the return of violent extremism (e.g., Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [ISIS]). The viability of al Sadr's diverse political coalition rests on his ability to put technocrats in office, take on corruption at all levels, work to weaken the power of the most radical of the pro-Iranian militias, and provide Iraqis with the goods and services that former governments failed to deliver between 2010–2020. These goals cannot be achieved by the Sadrist Movement without international support that balances Iranian influence and interests. It is possible the U.S. could find in al Sadr's political coalition a partner to achieve common interests, though for different, "soft" reasons (e.g., in strengthening civil society). However, this partnership cannot express itself through direct USG to al Sadr interaction; rather it needs to evolve through USG (particularly U.S. military) support for American civilian activities (e.g., nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]) in Iraq.

Despite his potential to serve as a buffer against Iran's dominance of Iraq and mitigate the political value of violent extremists, this analysis also concludes that now is not the time for the USG to openly reach out to al Sadr and his Shi'a allies, due to more than a decade of distrust. Al Sadr and those within his political sphere can be approached effectively by elements of U.S. civil society, particularly NGOs and universities, to discover potential areas of cooperation, such as in technology exchange and human capital development. In the sense that al Sadr is a pragmatist, such relationships can be fruitfully established and amplified for effect in Iraq.

Further, and most importantly, the analysis assesses the representatives of the USG in Iraq should do their utmost to avoid overtly involving Iraq in its actions and rhetoric against Iran. Iraq will always have close cultural and religious ties to Iran and the USG needs to publicly make clear that not only does it understand this reality, but the United States will not work against it. In the pages that follow, this study provides the social and historical context for understanding the evolution of al Sadr's role in the post-Hussein

environment in Iraq, and how to possibly identify convergences between his Iraqi nationalist movement and U.S. national interests.

Political Competition among Shi'a Militias

On 22 September 1980, Saddam Hussein launched an invasion into Iran, barely a year and a half into the new Islamic government of Grand Ayatollah Khomeini. A radical Iraqi Shi'a movement, called the Badr Brigade, arose in this context. The Badr Brigade was the militia of the political movement called the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), founded by Iraqi Shi'a cleric Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim. The Badr Brigade was created by the Iranians to fight against Iraq in support of the young Islamic Republic of Iran and its Supreme Leader Khomeini. Hadi al-Ameri, the head of the Badr Brigade, now leads a powerful religious Shi'a political coalition in Iraq that came in second after the al Sadr bloc in the most recent national elections in May 2018. Alaaldin notes that as the militia of SCIRI—as well as a member of the U.S.-funded Iraqi Opposition group, the Iraqi National Congress—the Badr Brigade easily integrated into the post-Hussein political order. Due to its maturity and support from Iran, Badr demonstrated greater experience and discipline than al Sadr's Mahdi Army during this early phase of the post-Hussein period.[14]

In the view of many Iraq analysts—including Rory Stewart, Michael Flanagan, Nicholas Krohley and Alaadlin—when Iraqi Shi'a needed protection, services, and leadership, the Sadrist Movement was there for them. As Alaaldin notes, the organization established offices and local patrols, and provided social and religious services to its constituents in Baghdad, mainly in Sadr City. In contrast to the highly disciplined Badr Brigade, Alaaldin argues the Sadrist Movement and its Mahdi Army introduced ill-disciplined militia groups, with no accountability, into Iraqi society. Iraqi analysts, like those cited above, agree the social background of al Sadr's base was that of the undereducated, urban poor. According to Alaaldin, this indicated the organization's members were less inclined (or qualified) to engage in governance.[15]

These analysts also agree that although the Sadrist Movement was focused on al Sadr's leadership, it was nevertheless decentralized in the way it operated. According to Alaaldin, "it was a vast, grass-roots organization that, over the course of the U.S. occupation, became shaped by autonomous and

battle-hardened Shiite militia factions within the organization who became increasingly assertive and disloyal to the Sadrist leadership."[16] Further, these splinter factions found a willing patron in Iran, which ultimately enabled them to fully break from the Sadrist Movement. By 2007, various militia groups roamed Iraq, no longer answering to al Sadr.[17]

By 2007, various militia groups roamed Iraq, no longer answering to al Sadr.

Muqtada al Sadr's Strategic Dilemma

It is important, therefore, to understand al Sadr in the context of Iraq and the existential dilemma that the Iraqi political system now confronts in the face of a multisectarian, nationalist, youth-oriented political movement. Al Sadr is, by inclination, a classic Mesopotamian leader whose vision for Iraq and his society's stability is to balance both Iran and the Arab States for theological and geopolitical reasons, and to emphasize Iraq's uniqueness as the site where these two civilizations mingle freely. Although al Sadr and his supporters are comfortably positioned within Iraq's sectarian system as power brokers within the Shi'a community, he has shown a predilection for cross-sectarian, cross-communal, and cross-ideological engagement that could incubate an Iraqi nationalist movement to balance Iran's gravitational pull on Iraq's society, politics, and security structures. However, the question that lingers is does al Sadr has the temperament to confront Iran and reduce its influence within the Shi'a community despite the risks that come with it? Or will he accept Iran as the primary foreign actor in Iraq, but with the intention to constructively engage with other actors, especially the Arab States?

The key to understanding al Sadr's potential role in Iraq is to realize that despite his current stature, and the legend he has constructed, he has always been a bit of an uneasy heir to the political movement his father founded. When his father spoke of Shi'a sectarianism, it was to promote the empowerment of the dispossessed among the Shi'a faithful who steadily lost access to employment and resources under Hussein's rule. The al Sadr family has long been respected by both Arab Sunnis and Shi'a in Iraq, with some serving in government and others rising to prominence as Shi'a religious leaders.[18] Moreover, possibly no other Shi'a political movement has been as effective in engaging with Iraq's Arab tribes, especially in the South where the majority are Shi'a but with Sunni cousins.[19] Muqtada al Sadr inherited this identity

from his father, but he contends with a more complicated socio-political reality in an Iraq that has suffered through more than 17 years of civil war and sectarian strife, mass displacement, and the intensification of social and economic collapse across Iraq's communities.

Muqtada al Sadr's father was locked in a delicate dance with the Hussein government and never professed to be part of Iran's "Islamic Resistance" movement in Iraq, even while competing against other movements for influence and power within the Iraqi Shi'a community. Muqtada al Sadr, on the other hand, has had to delicately dance with an Iranian-influenced Iraqi central government in Baghdad, Iran and its Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the United States, and the Arab States. His relationship with Iran has been fraught. At times, al Sadr needed Iran, and at times Iran needed him. However, al Sadr never really diverged from his Iraqi nationalist rhetoric, even when he deployed JAM against Americans and Iraqi Arab Sunni insurgents or when exiled to Iran from 2008–2011. In fact, al Sadr sent JAM elements to predominantly-Sunni Fallujah in early 2004 to support a nascent uprising.[20] He was also the first Iraqi Shi'a leader to express support and condolences for the al-Maliki administrations' mistreatment of Arab Sunnis from Anbar, Ninewah, and Salahaddin governorates after they rioted in protest against the Baghdad government. Unlike other Shi'a Iraqi leaders, al Sadr did not blame the riots on elements of al-Qaeda in Iraq or related groups.

This brief overview illustrates that al Sadr's contemporary rhetoric and political maneuvering have strong historical continuity going back decades to his father's movement. Al Sadr's strategic dilemma requires pragmatic flexibility in partnerships with groups more amenable to U.S. national interests due to the structure of intra-Shi'a politics. While the U.S. fought an al Sadr-backed JAM rooted firmly in Shi'a sectarian identity, al Sadr's more recent coalition—formed in advance of the May 2018 national elections in Iraq—included Communists, Arab Sunnis, and other minorities.[21] In other words, he rejected forming an alliance that included only Iranian-backed, conservative, religious Shi'a members. This is the most positive development for U.S. national interests since 2004 in respect to mitigating Iranian influence in the region and possibly preventing the return of violent extremism to Iraq. The remainder of this analysis describes why al Sadr chose this path and how the U.S. might support an Iraqi nationalist movement for a strategic counterterrorism effect.

Methodology

This study uses a mixed research method that is informed by interviews conducted by the authors and through analysis of secondary sources in English and Arabic. The interviews in this monograph result from the authors' more than 15-years-worth of engagement with high-level and well-connected Iraqi interviewees, both inside and outside of Iraq. These interviews were semi-structured and included 12 Iraqi experts with knowledge of the dynamics of Shi'a politics in Iraq, Shi'a-Sunni socio-political dynamics, the Sadrist Movement's role within Iraqi politics, and the future trajectory of the Sadrist Movement and its associated militant groups. As these interviews frequently concerned sensitive matters, and the interviewees frequently travel to and from Iraq, the authors generally agreed not to use the names, and in most circumstances, the positions of interviewees. Where possible, the analysis and conclusions derived from the interviews are supported with independent research and reporting available in English for readers to independently validate. Readers will note the historical continuity of the analysis, even when it defies U.S. conventional wisdom regarding al Sadr as a political actor.

Chapter Overview

To fully appreciate the historical continuity of the Sadrist trend and al Sadr's current approach to Iraqi politics, this monograph unfolds mainly in chronological order. Chapter 1 provides a history of Iraqi nationalism and how it impacted the creation of the state's structure. It then demonstrates how ideology and competition over control of the state planted the seeds of violent extremism along ethno-sectarian lines. This chapter is essential for appreciating al Sadr's nationalist rhetoric, the authentic allure it has to many Iraqis, and the political alliances that have resulted from his family's legacy.

Chapter 2 explains in more detail how and why al Sadr's family rose to prominence in Iraqi politics and its relationship to Iran because of Shi'a politics. It provides the basis for his family's role in mid-to-late twentieth century Shi'a religious and political thought, and highlights the different approaches between the Najaf, Iraq, and Qum, Iran, religious rivalry regarding the role of the Shi'a clerical establishment in politics.

Chapter 3 explores Shi'a religious politics in Iraq after 2003. It demonstrates how the different Shi'a political parties and militias jockeyed for power and influence during the U.S. occupation. It also illustrates how

external sources of influence and resources shaped the political system after the fall of Hussein. In so doing, it explains how al Sadr came into conflict with the revered Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and later reconciled with him.

Chapter 4 describes why al Sadr fought the U.S. and the nascent Iraqi government from 2004–2009. It dives into the ideological and structural factors impacting al Sadr's decision to create the Mahdi Army, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* (JAM), and then ultimately to transform his movement into the current *Sairoon* bloc. This chapter should be read as contemporaneous with chapter 3, and their connections will become clear once the intra-Shi'a competition is made evident.

Chapter 5 explains the role Shi'a militias played against ISIS and the impact they had on Iraqi politics. In particular, the chapter reviews how Iran was able to coopt many of the indigenous militias previously associated with al Sadr's JAM for its own purposes. The conclusion of this chapter explains why al Sadr formed a new militia, *Saraya al-Salam* (Peace Companies), in the face of ISIS and growing Iranian militia influence. This chapter also demonstrates how al Sadr was able to use a political crisis to reestablish his political movement anew.

Chapter 6 traces al Sadr's transformation from the Shi'a sectarian firebrand to his current Iraqi nationalist form. The chapter demonstrates the continuity of his ideology despite his prior sectarian base, and it assesses the implications for his political ascension in Iraqi politics.

Chapter 1. Iraqi Nationalism, the State, and the Seeds of Extremism

Iraq came into being in the early twentieth century due to the efforts of political elites in Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra, who brought together an amalgam of different regions, ethnicities, religions, and sects into an actual state, with a strong, centralizing government supported by oil. Despite problems in the Kurdish north, an Iraqi identity—a form of Iraqiness—did develop during the mid-twentieth century.[22] It was not until after Saddam Hussein invaded Iran that sect became fully politicized. Prior to the Iran-Iraq war, only individual Iraqis who joined political movements other than Baath Party, including ideologically religious ones of any religion or sect, were in danger of being monitored or worse.

In contrast to what most Americans interpret as "ancient hatreds," ethno-sectarian conflict only became a significant factor in Iraq during the last 15 years of the twentieth century, but it was institutionalized by the new government structure created after the Saddam Hussein regime was toppled in 2003.[23] While the sectarian-based violent extremism characteristic of the current system has organic roots, it was not and is not a necessary feature of Iraqi identity or politics. Rather, the cycle of identity conflict contributing to what appears to be a never-ending U.S. counterterrorism mission is a symptom of malign actors gaining control over the institutions of state security after 2003, often with unwitting U.S. assistance.

However, in the view of the authors, Iraqi national identity is resilient; the May 2018 election and ongoing nationalist protests show that many Iraqis are exasperated with not only corruption and incompetent governance, but also with sectarianism.[24] The contention here is that Iraqis want to move away from sectarian governance, but with the powerful, now institutionalized, sectarian parties running the country, this kind of positive change will take decades. Al Sadr's move away from sectarianism to a mixed political coalition is a very hopeful sign. Appreciating the underlying nationalist resilience in Iraqi society and politics, expressed in part by the al Sadr coalition, is necessary for achieving a strategic

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stabilization effect in Iraq because it could diminish the relevance of violent extremist organizations to their current ethnic or sectarian constituencies.

The Hazards of Creating the "Nation"

Benedict Anderson's seminal 1983 book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, provides an excellent framework for understanding how communal (group) identity politics, cultural pluralism, and (in)stability intersected in post-Hussein Iraq. In particular, his discussion about the rise of "official nationalisms" in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century bears on the Iraqi experience.[25] Official nationalism, he asserts, imagines or "constructs" a single national identity without diversity (one people, one language).

Often violently imposed by state elites, official nationalisms "developed after and in reaction to the popular national movements proliferating in Europe since the 1820s."[26] In turn, official nationalism became the model adopted one century later by some of the new states in the Middle East as they formed in the aftermath of World War I (WWI).[27] It is important to recall that many world leaders believed the key to international peace following the "War to End All Wars" was the territorial integrity of nation-states. A state without a clear nation would thus be in a precarious political situation with respect to future conflict.

Martha and Richard Cottam define a nation-state as "a state in which the citizens of a country identify with the territorial unit as a political unit more strongly than any other politically relevant identity group."[28] In their definition, "the nation is given primary loyalty" and "all other identities and their demands drop to the side when nationalism becomes salient."[29] Under the Cottams' criteria, Iraq is classified with the core community non-nation states, or "states with one identity group that sees itself as constituting the community upon which a nation should be based."[30] Due to historical patterns, Sunni Arabs comprised the majority of Iraq's elite up to and through its early independence, which infused an Arabist orientation into the construction of national identity.[31]

Adoption of the ideology of official nationalism by the governing elites in some post-Ottoman Middle Eastern states—including Iraq, Syria, and Turkey—served to exacerbate tensions amongst various ethnic, religious, and sectarian communities, as well as between those communities and the new

states. By conflating nationalism with a single ethnolinguistic (or religious or sectarian) identity, the post-Ottoman governments of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey failed to provide an inclusive model of nationalism for their culturally pluralistic societies.[32]

In Iraq, for example, by the mid-1960s, ethnic Kurds, Turkomans, and Assyrians could not relate to the Baathist government because it only recognized Arab ethnic identity and language as legitimate foundations for Iraqi nationalism. The government specifically denied the cultural validity of significant portions of its culturally plural population. Because of Baathist nationalist ideology, the Iraqi government forcefully pursued a policy of Arabization of the non-Arab ethnic groups, focused most notably on its Kurdish population, the second largest ethnic community in Iraq after Arabs. Although a thorough analysis of the debate about the nature of the Iraqi state is beyond the scope of this chapter, the Cottams' discussion of the behavior of non-nation states is suggestive regarding the Kurdish case in Iraq:

> The identity and comparison patterns in non-nation states produce patterns of political conflict different from those found in nation-states. For example, although scapegoats are selected from groups in nation-states, as well as non-nation states, the level of violence directed at the scapegoat may be greater in the non-nation state because of the intensity of group identity and the lack of a common identity.[33]

A preponderance of evidence collected inside Iraq since 1991 indicates that Iraqi Kurds and, to a lesser extent, other non-Arab communities, faced mass slaughter and not simply discrimination during the Baath period (1967–2003).

In an analysis of nationalist identity production by state elites, Arjun Appadurai suggests "the central problem of today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization."[34] He is referring to a struggle between state elites who want to create cultural uniformity and the efforts of subnational communities to gain cultural rights and even autonomy or independence. Appadurai argues that for many people around the world, the fear is not "Americanization," but something much closer to home. He gives the example of the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey whom he suggests fear Turkification and Arabization more that Americanization.[35] In the authors' view, it is plausible that a more elastic understanding of

national identity, of "nation-ness" as Anderson terms it, would have limited or perhaps even prevented the occurrence of ethnic and religious tensions in the multicultural states of the Middle East. Arguably, federalism could have provided a better model for accommodating cultural diversity for the new Middle East states than existing models, in which "constructed" national identity is only understood in terms of one language and one people.

In complementary analyses of the politics of identity in Iraq, Adeed Dawisha and Shafeeq Ghabra summarize how national identity has been imagined and reimagined since the creation of the Iraqi state.[36] Both highlight that the failure to construct an Iraqi national identity that includes all Iraqis is a key factor in understanding Iraq's institutionalized culture of violence, its inability to initiate political reform, and its aggressiveness towards its neighbors. A more comprehensive treatment of the same topic can be found in Kanan Makiya's analysis of the politics of identity in modern Iraq.[37] According to Makiya, Arab Sunni identity was imposed upon a new national state in which Shi'a outnumbered Sunnis, religiously, and Kurds and other ethnic groups existed alongside an Arab majority.

Arabism and Iraqi Nationalism

For most of its time as part of the Ottoman Empire, the territory that would become Iraq was loosely governed by the central government and even then influence was felt mainly along the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys.[38] The desert areas across Syria and Iraq were left largely to the Bedouin tribes who were not generally integrated into the broader socio-economic system until the turn of the twentieth century. The rise of Turkish official nationalism in the late Ottoman period resulted in a corresponding rise of Arabism in response. Contrary to Ottoman tradition, Turkish nationalists began to conflate Ottoman culture with Turkish culture and engaged in a campaign to "Turk-ify" the Ottoman system. The internal tension between Turkish nationalism and Arabism ultimately created the Arab nationalist foundation upon which T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) was famously able to mobilize the Arab tribes during WWI against the Ottoman Empire.[39]

Perhaps the single best study of the creation of the modern state of Iraq out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire is David Fromkin's *A Peace to End All Peace*. According to Fromkin, what the British found in what was to become Iraq was: "incoherence, communal strife, and habitual disorder—rather

than organized nationalism." Fromkin goes on to point out that "the talk of national self-government came mostly (according to the local British authorities) from ambitious intriguers of shady character."[40]

The Iraqi state was created by the British out of the three Ottoman *wilayets* (large regions), named after their capital cities of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul. The combined area contained a diverse mix of ethnic, religious, sectarian, and tribal groups. It was constructed by the colonial power [Britain] in terms of its system of government; legal structures; definition of national sovereignty in legal and territorial terms; creation of a central economic system; standardization of the educational system; and through the acceptance of the new state into the international system through the League of Nations.[41]

The British installed Faisal bin Hussein as King of Iraq to lead the Iraqi government. An outsider from Arabia, King Faisal I was supported by Iraq's predominantly Sunni governing class, which included both urban Arabs and Kurds. Despite his roots in the Arab nationalism movement, he did understand that Iraqi nationalism had to be built on something other than just Arabism due to the multiethnic population of Iraq.[42] According to Faisal I:

> Iraq is among the countries which lack the most vital element of social life: cultural, nationalist and religious unity. It is so segmented and divided that her politicians should exhibit a great deal of wisdom and discretion and at the same time they should be powerful in substance and essence.[43]

He went on to state:

> In Iraq, and I say this with a heart torn by agony, there is yet no Iraqi people, but unimaginable human masses devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued with religious traditions and superstitions, connected to no unifying tie, prone to mischief, bent on anarchy, always ready to rise against any government whatever. Of these masses we want, in this respect, to create a people whom we would refine, train and educate.[44]

Unfortunately for the future of Iraq, Faisal I allowed himself to be guided by advisors who overwhelmingly put Arab nationalism above Iraqi nationalism. This was, in the authors' view, his greatest flaw as a monarch. At this time, in general, Sunni identity (Arab and Kurd) was identified on the status

in society, rather than sectarian ideology. There was a Sunni-Shi'a divide in Iraq in this period, but it was imagined in terms of class and did not generate sectarian tension.[45] The majority of Shi'a in the south at this time were illiterate and/or under-educated and inwardly focused on their own community. The Shi'a masses in the south (both urban and especially rural) engaged in local folk magic traditions rather than orthodox Shi'a Islam.

The tension between Arab nationalism and Iraqi nationalism began with the foundation of the state in 1931. There was a tendency in the Ministry of Education to propagate Arab nationalism above Iraqi nationalism, in effect minimizing the sociocultural role of non-Sunni Arabs in the Kingdom.[46] Palestinian historian Nur-eldeen Masalha states that this effort, which included the use of dismissive remarks about Imam Ali in the curricula, gave great offense to the Shi'a community in Iraq, leading Faisal I to withdraw offending textbooks in 1927 and again in 1933 when they were reissued.[47]

The tension between Arab nationalism and Iraqi nationalism began with the foundation of the state in 1931.

Whether Faisal I truly grasped the importance of embracing the cultural diversity of Iraq is doubtful, however, David Fromkin argues that he did at least recognize the pluralistic nature of Iraq. Regardless, according to Masalha, his policy of promoting pan-Arab nationalism above Iraqi nationalism proved to be a disruptive force in Iraq, as it drew a wedge between the Arab and non-Arab communities.[48] Masalha asserts that Faisal I's policy of equating *wataniyya* ("patriotism") with Arabism marginalized non-Arabs (Kurds, Turkomans, Assyro-Chaldean Christians) who feared that they had no place in a state that equated being Arab with being Iraqi.[49]

The Baath: Secular Arab Nationalism's Impact on Ethnic Relations

An interesting feature of early modern Iraqi history is the degree to which it provided the political space for civil-secular political groups to form among the elite, including socialists, communists, and Arab nationalists. Indeed, progressive education policies under the monarchy enabled many Shi'a to enter the system for the first time, which allowed them to become involved in the political system, especially with the pan ethno-sectarian Communist party and Arab nationalist parties.[50]

Makiya asserts that as early as the British mandate period, some Sunni Arab nationalists in Iraq considered the efforts of the Kurds, Shi'a, and other non-Arab communities to assert themselves culturally and politically as treasonous and attributed their efforts to Western imperialist interference. He describes this phenomenon well:

> The Assyrian pogrom of 1933 was a harbinger of things to come with the slaughter of Iraqi Jews in 1969, and the continuous assaults on Kurds and Shi'a, culminating in subsequent decades in the use of chemical (and possibly biological) weapons against both communities.[51]

Various Iraqi regimes justified such crimes against the non-Sunni Arab communities by tying these communities' efforts to achieve political and cultural rights to imperialism or Zionism.[52]

During the period after the 1958 military overthrow of the monarchy, a modernizing government bureaucracy provided an environment in which both Sunni and Shi'a communities could steadily advance socially due to the government's oil wealth.[53] Rapid urbanization accelerated in the 1950s and 1960s, leading to new, often communally homogenous neighborhoods in many cities, such as Baghdad's overwhelmingly Shi'a neighborhood of Thawra, which later became known as Sadr City (after the U.S. invasion).[54] During this period, a small number of Baath party ideologues coalesced within the military on the platform of secular Arab nationalism and by 1967 were able to successfully take over the government in yet another military-backed *coup d'etat*. This coup established permanent rule of the Baath party that lasted until the U.S. invasion of 2003. According to Hanna Batatu, the 1958 revolution turned the system upside down and a series of middle class, military dominated, populist, and authoritarian regimes took power.[55]

The rise of secular Arab nationalism by mid-century also created a reaction from some Sunni and Shi'a religious activists. Just as ethnic diversity came under stress, religious parties were seen by the secular parties as backward and threatening to the development of a modern nation. Islamist parties, such as the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood and Shi'a al-Dawa Party, became active, though marginal, players in response to secular Arab nationalism. Unsurprisingly, they were repressed by the state security services, but represented important constituencies inside Iraq that only grew over time.[56]

Makiya argues that the concept of *shu'ubiyya* was a key organizing feature of Arab nationalist ideology in Iraq (from the Arabic *sha'b/sh'ub* or "people"). He states that the *shu'ubiyya* movement was created in the Abbasid period (750–1258 AD), in the context of the expansion of Islam into non-Arab regions. According to Makiya, the original movement included non-Arab Muslim converts, and it arose in response to the issue of cultural diversity that confronted the early Arab Muslims as they moved out of the Arabian Peninsula. He asserts that the term *shu'ubiyya* took on a new meaning in modern Iraq tied to Arab nationalist ideology, becoming the organizing framework of an ideology rooted in an "us vs. them" mentality. The term *shu'ubiyya* was at various times, applied by Baath Party officials to Communists and non-Arab ethnic communities, as well as Shi'a religious communities.[57] Nevertheless, urban Kurds, Arab Sunnis, and Shi'a found the political space to integrate under a Baath party nationalist identity due to the countervailing positive and unifying ideology of Iraqi nationalism.[58] Rural Kurds, however, considered it vitally important to preserve Kurdish heritage and at times employed violence against the Iraqi government that sought to impose Arabization policies designed to eradicate much of Kurdish culture and society.

The Iran-Iraq War and Sectarian Stress Fractures

Different from more homogeneous Arab states, like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Iraqis of different ethnic (Arab, Kurd), sectarian (Sunni, Shi'a) and religious (Muslim, Christian) background did intermarry, especially in urban areas.[59] Within the Arab tribes, an important cultural rule was to never marry one's daughter to someone without Arab tribal identity of equal or higher rank. In this regard, marrying her to an Arab tribesman (particularly from the same tribe and of the same or higher rank) of the other sect was perfectly acceptable. The importance of this complex communal identity structure is represented in the following example: a Shi'a Iraqi graduate student of the primary author of this text (from Kut) was able to visit Tikrit, the Sunni home region of Saddam Hussein, in 2006 after the rise of severe sectarian conflict in post-Hussein Iraq. His freedom of movement as a Shi'a operating in the heart of Sunni Saddamist territory was due to his membership in the much-respected Shammar tribe of Iraq, a mixed sect tribe with two branches, Sunni in the north and Shi'a in the south.

Importantly, Iraqi nationalism over the course of the twentieth century contributed to a socially intermixed population that made hard and fast distinctions based on sectarian affiliation or ethnic identity problematic. Certainly, homogenous communities persisted at the family and clan levels. But it became harder by the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, to find Arab tribes without Sunni-Shi'a marriages and offspring, or Kurdish communities without Arab, Assyro-Chaldean Christian, or Turkoman members. What bound them together was the sense of Iraqi-ness and progress that the modernist government bureaucracy seemed to promote, even during periods of political turmoil. Though contested and varied, Iraqi identity and nationalism existed and contributed to a broad socio-cultural ethic of indifference to ethno-sectarian identity, not just tolerance.[60]

"Unity, Arabism, Socialism" was the motto of the Baath Party that students recited in elementary school.[61] There is no doubt that Iraq's underlying focus on Arabism served to weaken Iraqi nationalism among non-Arab Iraqis. The focus on Arabism under the Baath Party led many non-Arabs (Kurds, Turkomans, and Assyro-Chaldean Christians), especially in the large cities like Mosul and Baghdad, to Arabize their names and hide their ethnic identities, taking on an Arabic identity to "get along." In the view of the authors, this was to change dramatically, starting no later than the middle of the Iran-Iraq War.

Almost as soon as Saddam Hussein publicly seized the reins of power as President of Iraq in 1979, he attacked Iran and the eight-year war began. This war greatly challenged the social fabric of Iraqi nationalism. However, Iraqi Arab and Iranian Persian ethnic differences initially did, at the outset, strengthen Iraq's national identity, neutralizing Iran's appeal to its Shi'a population. Additionally, the religious split between Iran's radical Islamist Shi'a Qom faction, of which Ayatollah Khomeini was a main figure, and Iraq's Quietist Shi'a Najaf faction also helped maintain the nationalist orientation of Iraqi Shi'a towards Iraq. According to Patrick Cockburn, author of the study *al-Sadr*, many Iraqis did have divided loyalties. A former Iraqi soldier told Cockburn that, "anybody who failed to fight during a battle was executed instantly [and] his coffin was marked with the word *traitor* and his family was charged the price of the bullets used to execute him."[62] At the same time, disenfranchised elements of the Kurdish and Shi'a Arab populations, namely the Kurdish Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Shi'a al-Dawa Party, sided with Iran.

In response to the Kurdish and Shi'a defections, Hussein accelerated the consolidation of the Iraqi state security apparatus around his Arab Sunni clan and tribe, thereby creating a system of separate influence favoring the Sunni Arabs. The resulting security crackdowns and human rights violations by Hussein's government solidified opposition against the Baath regime, but now with overtly ethnic and sectarian dimensions. After the Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988, ethno-sectarian tensions became apparent in Iraqi society, but the technocracy and basic opportunity structure for Shi'a in the Iraqi system persisted. Some elements of the system, such as the medical and education sectors, were even considered among the best in the Arab world, and much of Iraq's population still remembers when this made Iraq a decent place to live.[63]

Gulf War I and the Consolidation of Ethno-Sectarian Politics in Iraq

The defeat of Hussein's military during Gulf War I (1990–1991) created the space for the Kurds and Shi'a populations to rise up against the regime, but the revolution was mercilessly crushed at the cost of many thousands of Shi'a and Kurdish lives.[64] The end of the military campaign of Gulf War I led to United Nations (UN) backed sanctions established to force the regime to surrender its weapons of mass destruction stockpiles and end such programs. Due to the regime's public unwillingness to surrender its stockpiles, the UN imposed sanctions on Iraq that, over the course of 12 years, devastated the economy and destroyed the middle class.[65] During this period, Hussein further consolidated his security apparatus around his own Sunni Arab Tikriti tribe, however Shi'a could find work in other government sectors.[66]

From 1991–2003, the sanctions contributed to extraordinary suffering and a lack of opportunity. UN-backed no-fly zones established to protect the Kurds in the north and the Shi'a in the south effectively divided Iraq's governance into three regions; the Kurdish controlled north, the regime-controlled Sunni center, and the predominantly Shi'a south. Regime-controlled urban areas were often intermixed in sectarian terms. Ethnic and sectarian groups, like Mohammed Mohammed-Sadeq al Sadr's Shi'a movement, provided care for citizens in their identity group, particularly in cases where the government could not or would not offer services.[67] By the mid-1990s, Iraq's society was split along ethnic and sectarian lines in terms of politics, but socially most Iraqis were still united in ways that could not be equated with ethnicity or sect alone.[68]

It is into this context that the USG entered Iraq in 2003. The U.S. experience with the two no-fly zones and operations with the Kurds highlighted the political ethnic and sectarian divide but missed the social basis of the nationalism and mixed family linkages, particularly in Iraq's large urban areas. Unfortunately, in so doing, the U.S. backed political parties favored by Iran, especially the Shi'a al-Dawa Party and SCIRI, by giving them control over the security services, which contributed directly to the cycle of ethnic and sectarian violence that seems insurmountable today.[69] As will be made clear in subsequent chapters, al-Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS, and Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) are all symptoms, not causes, of cross-ethnic and cross-sectarian societal fear in Iraq. How specific communities react depends on the perception of imminent conflict by these communities.[70] Control over the state security apparatus is the goal (held by the Shi'a for now). In this regard, the authors contend that a robust and diverse Iraqi nationalist movement could neutralize the messages of actors like ISIS and the pro-Iran PMUs.

According to Dina Al Shiheeb of *Al Arabiya* newspaper, the trend of communities feeling marginalized in Iraq continues in the post-Hussein era, this time with Iraq's Sunni Arabs feeling most at risk in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion and the government established under American supervision.[71] The Sunni Arabs of post-Hussein Iraq believe that they are living in a Shi'a state controlled by Iran. They also believe that, as a community, they have been unfairly branded as supporters first of al-Qaeda in Iraq and later ISIS. Arab Sunnis are divided on how to confront the new Shi'a controlled post-Saddam state. Some want a federal region like the Kurds have, while others want the Americans to curb Iran's power in Iraq (governing through the Iran-backed Iraqi Shi'a religious parties), so that Iraq can pursue an independent future with equal rights for all its communities.[72]

Today, the Sadrist Movement represents an opportunity to break the reality of Arab Sunni marginalization, but it cannot do it without external support. The challenges are: (a) to work to establish a vibrant civil society, and (b) to create a strategy for marginalizing extremist organizations—Sunni or Shi'a—by meeting the population's political, social, and economic needs. This is not to say that the Iraqi government should be displaced; rather, it recognizes that the Iraqi government cannot transform fast enough to marginalize extremists without external assistance in providing essential services, including sufficient electricity to deal with the incredible heat that lasts from May until October, causing riots throughout the south of Iraq.

Al Sadr and Neo-Iraqi Nationalism

The first country al Sadr visited after the U.S. invasion of Iraq was not Iran; it was Saudi Arabia.[73] Raised as a member of the Baath party and nursed on Arab nationalism, it makes sense to the authors that al Sadr would want to visit the heart of the Arab world and birthplace of the Prophet Mohammed when finally able to travel outside Iraq. Unfortunately, al Sadr was not received by King Fahd and left the country feeling insulted by the Saudi royal family. In the view of the authors, this drove him towards Iran and the creation of JAM. However, even during the height of the activities of JAM against members of the Arab Sunni community in Iraq, al Sadr continued to employ unifying, non-sectarian rhetoric, and in 2004 offered militia support to the uprising in Fallujah.[74]

Clearly, al Sadr has enjoyed great influence conferred on him by his father and uncle, and by his followers in Iraq.[75] He has moved from a Shi'a cleric hiding in Iran to an Iraqi leader openly leading a large, populist movement. To this end and in advance of the May 2018 elections in Iraq, al Sadr formed a new alliance with Communists and secularists. As interviewed by National Public Radio (NPR) journalist Jane Arraf, one of al Sadr's political lieutenants, Dhia al-Asadi, head of the Ahrar bloc, the Sadrist Movement's political wing, said: "We have to face it. What destroyed our country ... is groups or parties allied along sectarian or ethnic lines."[76] Similarly, Michael Flanagan assessed in 2018 that, "His goal now is to be a Muslim leader in Iraq -for Sunnis and Shi'ite alike. He emphasizes his Arab roots over religious, sectarian differences. He is looking to possess a broad appeal in Iraqi affairs based on a populist pan-Arab platform of Iraqi nationalism, anti-corruption and regional engagement."[77]

Since 2011, al Sadr has reached out to Saudi Arabia to build bridges between Iraq and the Arab Gulf countries. Middle East analysts Milo Comerford and Daniel Sleat, stated that, according to political ally Dhiaa al-Asadi, al Sadr visited Saudi Arabia in 2017, "to tell them that the Shiite of Iraq are not going to be an extension of the Iranian revolution – his visit was to ask them to be more present in Iraq."[78] According to Comerford and Sleat, al Sadr's 2017 meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was part of a movement across the Middle East region, away from sectarianism and extremist violence, and towards support for modernizers and secular reformists.[79]

Al-Asadi also told NPR's Arraf that al Sadr's role in opposing U.S. intervention in the region prevents Tehran from opposing him outright.[80] According to Arraf, al-Asadi argues al Sadr has taken the same stance against Iran, Turkey, and Russia, warning them not to intervene in Iraq. In fact, al-Asadi asserts that al Sadr has demanded \all foreign forces leave Iraq, including Iranian fighters.[81] Comerford and Sleat argue that while al Sadr has been viewed as anti-West, the reality is more complex. They assert al Sadr favors U.S. troops remaining in Iraq, to continue stabilizing it. They also believe he is open to building links to the West. According to these two analysts, al Sadr has also condemned the internationalization of Shi'a militancy, stating in a recent interview that the U.S. was correct in labeling Iranian-backed Iraqi militias fighting in Syria as terrorists.[82]

In theory, it would seem a popular "Iraq first" nationalist like al Sadr would be exactly the kind of leader the U.S. would want for Iraq. However, distrust of al Sadr goes back to the earliest period of the U.S. occupation of Iraq under J. Paul Bremer, who first closed al Sadr's newspaper and then went to war with him. For deeply ingrained identity reasons, due in no small part to his being brought up under Arab nationalist and Baathist ideology,[83] al Sadr remains unwilling to meet with any Americans, including civilians. It is the belief of the authors of this study that al Sadr will soon allow some of his key advisors to meet with American civilians, particularly educators and technology experts. This could lead to cooperative ventures in many sectors at the civilian-to-civilian level.

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Summary

After the U.S. invasion in 2003, Iraqi nationalism, already weakened at the hands of the Baath party's pan-Arab agenda, proved highly susceptible to sectarian and ethnic strife. The Kurds have stayed inside Iraq because neither neighboring states, nor the U.S. or European states, will support their secession from Iraq. However, the Kurdish leaders in Erbil continue to believe that Iraqi Kurdistan should become an independent state. It should be noted that the new post-Hussein Shi'a narrative that distances the Shi'a from the Baath party is patently false. There were more than one million Shi'a members of the Baath party, including some very high-ranking officials.

According to Makiya, while Iraq's ruling elite did at times emphasize Iraqi, Mesopotamian, Islamic, or tribal identity (in addition to Arab ethnic identity), it is clear that "the state had always sought to maintain the status quo of Arab Sunni hegemony."[84] Covertly or overtly, Arab Sunni identity was always the key concept around which Iraq's regimes created the ideology of nationalism in Iraq.[85] According to Makiya, "much of the violence in modern Iraqi politics is attributable to the structural incompatibility between political goals and the confessional distribution of Iraqi society."[86] In this regard, Makiya points out that "as early as 1932, only a fifth of the Iraqi population at most could be identified as part of a social base for pan-Arabism."[87] Thus, from the period of the creation of the modern state of Iraq, Arab nationalism was viewed by non-Sunni Arabs as a form of ethnic and sectarian hegemony.[88]

The challenge facing Iraq today is cobbling together a national identity based on cultural and historical factors, rather than Sunni Arabism. For example, a new model of national identity could stress Iraq's roots as the cradle of civilization under the Sumerians, and its history of excellence in science, math, and engineering. Al Sadr's nationalist tendencies represent the most viable current attempt at reviving the Iraqi nationalist spirit within the Shi'a community, but requires international support that appreciates the complex internal social and political dynamics at work.

As recently as 2010, Iraqis demonstrated hope for Iraqi nationalism when a narrow plurality of voters cast ballots for the secular bloc, Iraqiya List (Ayad Alawi's list).[89] However, this bloc did not have the backing of Washington or Tehran. Both non-Iraqi powers thought in sectarian terms. According to former-Iraqi Foreign Minister Adnan al-Pachachi, Washington did not want to anger the Shi'a majority and ended up supporting Maliki for a second term.[90] This does not belie the fact that there is still a real sense of Iraqi nationalism.[91] But this nationalism needs to be nurtured by a government that reduces sectarian differences. Iraqi secular-nationalists recognize the responsibility to further expand their influence, or else Iraq will become a loose, unmanageable state like Lebanon. The remaining chapters describe al Sadr's development into the Iraqi nationalist leader of today, as well as the establishment of his militia, JAM.

Chapter 2. Becoming al Sadr

> There was one point they kept on repeating, as if it mattered a lot to them. 'It is wrong' they asserted, 'for people to call us a militia: we are an army.' The distinction in their eyes was that they were not just a Shi'a defense force but a real army in the service of Islam and the most revered leader of the faithful on earth, al-Sadr (as recalled by journalist Patrick Cockburn, April 19, 2004, near Kufa).[92]

Patrick Cockburn writes that in April 2003, "U.S. troops that had just captured Baghdad saw something they did not understand: throughout central and southern Iraq, more than a million Iraqis had taken to the road and started walking to the holy city of Kerbala."[93] According to Cockburn, the U.S. troops thought they were celebrating the fall of the Saddam regime. However, as Cockburn recounts, this pilgrimage was an early demonstration of the ability of al Sadr to mobilize masses of religious Shi'a. On 11 April 2003, during his first Friday sermon in his father's mosque in Kufa, al Sadr called for people to walk on foot to Karbala as a sign of their faith. Cockburn notes that the American troops who drove past the walkers "would have been surprised to learn that the people were commemorating a battle that happened fourteen hundred years ago at Karbala—not the one that had just been fought as the American army advanced north."[94] It was near Karbala that the Imam Hussein and his half-brother Imam Abbas, were killed in 680 AD. The grandson of the prophet Mohammed and the son of Imam Ali, assassinated in Kufa 19 years earlier, Hussein and his small caravan of soldiers and family members were overwhelmed by the greatly superior forces sent against them by their archenemy Yazid, Hussein's rival and leader of the Sunnis, based at Damascus. The story of the death of Hussein and Abbas is one of courage, martyrdom, and redemption through sacrifice on the one side; and betrayal, cruelty, and violence on the other. It is also the story of a righteous minority against an evil and powerful government authority.

To understand the role of al Sadr in Iraq and the region, it is first necessary to understand Iraqi Shi'ism, which is multifaceted and complex.[95] Iraqi Shi'ism is not a single, uniform communal identity. It is not socially homogeneous. It includes tribal peasants and their sheikhs, urban bourgeoisie,

modern intellectuals, and the clerical classes of the holy cities. It consists of many combinations of interest, ideology, and movement that often transcend communal boundaries.[96] Shi'a intellectuals and activists have been prominent in most of Iraq's modern political movements and cultural currents, including Baathism and communism.[97] What has come to be called the *Ashura* complex plays a central role in Iraqi Shi'a culture and structures many of its motifs. The *Ashura* complex refers to the pain and suffering of current and past followers of Imam Ali and his son Hussein (i.e., the Shi'a) over their deaths at the hands of their adversaries.

There is also an intimate connection between Iranian religious institutions and those of Shi'a Iraq. Many Iranian clerics have taken residence in the shrine cities of Iraq, including Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, and many of the clerical families of Iraq have their origins in Iran. The religious schools of the holy cities are cosmopolitan and have students and teachers from many countries, but mostly Iran. However, Iraqi Shi'ism is distinct from its Iranian neighbor in the pattern of the relation of institutions to the different sectors of the community; the "Bedouinization" of some of its motifs and rituals in relation to its tribal component, and the Arab culture and identity of its adherents. Iraqi Shi'ism was further shaped into its current form by the emerging Iraqi identity and public culture over the course of the twentieth century.[98]

Intra-Shi'a Theological and Political Competition in the Iraqi Context

Due to conversion to Shi'ism on the part of Sunni tribesmen in south-central Iraq—beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth—for the first time, most Iraqis belonged to the Shi'a faith. Iraq became a country with a Shi'a majority ruled by the Sunnis. The British census of 1919 showed that the Shi'a were 53 percent of the population, and a more complete census in 1947 showed that Shi'a Arabs alone comprised 51.4 percent of Iraqis, Sunni Arabs 19.7 percent, and Sunni Kurds 18 percent.[99]

Iraq was, and is, a frontier zone squeezed between civilizations centered on the Iranian plateau: Turkey (or Anatolia), Arabia, and the Eastern Mediterranean. From the time of the Mongolian destruction of Baghdad in 1258 until the establishment of the modern state of Iraq, central government control was always limited and often non-existent. This may help to explain

the enduring strength of non-state actors, such as religion, sect, tribe, clan, and extended family in Iraq.

It is in this context that Muqtada al Sadr's father-in-law, Baqir al Sadr, knew and worked with Ruhollah Khomeini during the latter's long exile in Najaf between 1964 and 1978.[100] While there are differing accounts as to the degree of their intimacy, we know that Baqir al Sadr encouraged his students to attend Khomeini's seminars on genealogy and other subjects. Baqir and Khomeini both supported political activism by the Shi'a clergy. They both opposed the tradition of what is known as quietism, as represented by Grand Ayatollah al Kho'i, and now by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Supporters of quietism believed that direct political involvement by the clergy was corrupting. For Khomeini and others of the activist tradition, Islam is, and always has been, political.[101]

During lectures given in Najaf that Baqir al Sadr's students attended, Khomeini promoted his theory of *veliyat i faqih*. Baqir al Sadr agreed with the idea of an active political role for *mujtahids* (Shi'a clerics who can issue religious rulings), but he promoted this idea in the context of democracy. Baqir al Sadr established a model that divided power between the citizens and the clerical class. In his model, executive and legislative powers remained out of clerical control, while the *mujtahids* were given control over the judiciary. Baqir al Sadr, unlike Khomeini, considered the traditional clerical leadership to be fallible.[102]

Baqir al Sadr established a model that divided power between the citizens and the clerical class.

Baqir al Sadr and the Formation of the Dawa Party

A key, unanticipated result of the creation of the Iraqi state under King Faisal I was the rise of secular Arab nationalism as a broad social movement in the country. To generate an Iraqi identity from the disparate geographic, tribal, ethnic, and religious groups, King Faisal brought with him many Arab nationalist activists who formed both the intellectual and administrative core of the new Iraqi state.[103] Over three decades their influence increased through the propagation of public schools and other government service programs, with the effect of diminishing the utility and prestige of religiously based education, such as the revered clerical schools in Najaf, where the Shi'a clerical elite resided.[104] Leftist socialist and communist doctrine formed the

basis of most Arab nationalist policy preferences,[105] which meant there was a decidedly secular character to the administration of the state despite King Faisal having the legitimizing religious claim of descent from the Prophet Muhammed. Whereas the Sunni Ottoman-era political structures effectively marginalized Shi'a political participation based on religious grounds,[106] the new Iraqi administrative state created many opportunities for socio-political advancement through the ideology of secular Arab nationalism.[107]

With the overthrow of the monarchy in July 1958 in a bloody coup by General Abdel Karim Qassim, Iraq entered an unstable period that has lasted more than 50 years and that shows little sign of stabilizing to this day.[108] The fall of the monarchy opened the door to secular politics.[109] In 1959, the number of people taking part in the pilgrimages to Najaf and Karbala fell to an all-time low. The Communists and the nationalists were powerful in government and on the streets, and the 1958 revolution opened doors for the Shi'a.[110] The leaders of the powerful Communist party in Iraq were Shi'a and they were able to attract the urban and rural poor. President Qassim himself was partly Shi'a and he initiated building projects for basic housing for the impoverished Shi'a immigrants from the countryside. Fifty years later, this same area became a political and military bastion of al Sadr, having gone through three name changes from *al-Thawra* (the Revolution) under Qassim, to Saddam City under Saddam Hussein, to Sadr City after 2003.[111] Containing one-third of the capital's population, it was a densely populated twin city to the east of Baghdad. The military coup of 1963, in which the Baath party took a leading role, was seen as anti-Shi'a and the sectarian balance began shifting decidedly against them. Shi'a members of the Baath party found that they were treated far more brutally by the security apparatus than Arab Sunni members.[112]

In the face of these developments, Baqir al Sadr and some of the younger clergy established a political party called *al-Dawa* (the call), the first meeting of which took place in Najaf in 1957.[113] The aim of *al-Dawa* was to defend Shi'a Islam and its institutions.[114] Given the hostile environment created by the security services, even the traditionalists among the clergy could see the need to emulate the structure of the communist party with its cells, discipline, and a chain of command.[115] Alarmed by the growth of communism among the Shi'a masses, traditionalist Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim assented to the creation of *al-Dawa*.[116] The founding members of *al-Dawa* were from most of the noble clerical families, including al Sadr. Many of the leaders

were tortured and executed, but the post-Saddam Hussein government was led by many of the relatives and descendants of the clerics who established *al-Dawa*.[117]

The extent to which Iraq had always been divided between Shi'a and Sunni became a matter of furious debate in the years after the U.S. invasion of 2003. If it could be shown that Iraq was always a mosaic of competing communities that hated one another, then the U.S. and its allies could not be blamed for provoking a sectarian and ethnic civil war. The Sunni were reluctant to admit that, as a minority, they had wielded power over a Shi'a majority. It is true that there was no segregation between Sunni and Shi'a—they intermarried and some Shi'a rose high in the Baath party and the government.[118] Further, religion was not the only way that Iraqis, including Shi'a, established their identity. However, in the exercise of power, Iraq was a Sunni-dominated state that became more so during Hussein's rule.[119]

Baathist Repression against Shi'a Political Identity

The ideology of Arab Nationalism could disguise sectarianism in a way not immediately obvious to non-Iraqis. For example, Patrick Cockburn describes how in 1964, the Baath Party nationalized Iraqi banks and commercial and industrial companies. The public reason for this given by leaders of the Baath party was to bring the Iraqi economy into compliance with Egypt, led by Gamal Abdul Nasser at the time, under the goal of Arab unity. The reality, however, was that most Iraqi businessmen were Shi'a and the government officials who took over the companies were mostly Arab Sunnis.[120] Sectarian divisions between Arab Sunnis and Shi'a in Iraq in the 1960s were not as deep as those dividing Arab and Kurd, but if they were not always dominant, they were also never absent.

The divisions only got worse when the Baath returned to power in 1968.[121] Hussein wielded power at this time primarily through the different agencies of the security police and the intelligence services. The most important posts went to his half-brothers and cousins, members of the Bejat clan of the Albu Nasir tribe from Tikrit. "If you want to know how we rule Iraq," reflected one of Saddam's relatives, "we do it just the same way we used to run Tikrit."[122] Through tribalism, the military and the police were combined to make the regime impervious to overthrow. Also, the increase in oil prices after 1973

provided the Baathists with vast sums of money, enough to raise the living standards of nearly all Iraqis and to quiet popular discontent.[123]

In 1969, only one year after the Baath seized permanent power, the government ordered all Iranian nationals to be deported. The regime claimed that they numbered half a million, although this was an exaggeration. Entire groups, such as the Faili Kurds (Shi'a Kurds originally from Luristan, east of Baghdad, across the border in Iran), were targeted in the coming years. Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Kho'i, who became the leading Marja in June 1970, took a more apolitical line than his predecessors toward the regime, which caused much of the Shi'a laity to turn to Baqir al Sadr. Importantly, Baqir al Sadr's family was identifiably Arab whereas al-Kho'i had been born in Iran. As repression against the Shi'a increased, Baqir al Sadr distanced himself publicly from the *al-Dawa* Party, although he maintained covert links.[124]

The critical moment in the twentieth century for the Iraqi Shi'a was the Iranian revolution of 1978–79. Baqir al Sadr became an open supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini.[125] However, Shi'ism in Iraq and Iran have quite different histories. In Iran, some 90 percent of the population is Shi'a, and Shi'ism became the official religion there in 1501 AD. In Iraq, it is the religion of a majority who were without political power until the U.S. invasion of 2003. It is unknown if the revolution would have spread to Iraq, but Hussein took no chances. In 1979, he seized absolute power, massively repressed the *al-Dawa* Party, and in 1980 launched a military attack on Iran.[126] He thought he would win a quick and easy war, but in fact he ultimately destroyed not only Baath party rule, but also hundreds of years of Arab Sunni predominance in Iraq.

The Hussein Era and the Hardening of Ethno-Sectarian Identity

On 12 June 1979, more than 200 security forces arrested Baqir al Sadr and took him to the General Security Directorate in Baghdad. Demonstrations against his arrest took place on an unprecedented scale in the Shi'a neighborhoods of Baghdad and in Shi'a cities and towns across Iraq, as well as in Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Britain, and France. The regime reversed itself and Baqir was released from prison due to differences in the leadership of the Baath over the degree of violence to be used in combating political Shi'ism.

Hussein used this time to settle scores within his family and to sideline the faction that had supported Baqir al Sadr. This was the start of Hussein's personalization of both the Baath regime and the structures of power in Iraq as a whole. Baqir al Sadr was put under house arrest and members of the *al-Dawa* Party were targeted,[127] with 4,000–5,000 arrested and more than 200 executed. Iraqi security made Baqir al Sadr's life and that of his family miserable, cutting off electricity, water, and the telephone line. This went on for months.[128] Finally, a presidential envoy came to Baqir al Sadr's home to ask him to publicly criticize the Islamic revolution in Iran and show support for the government in Baghdad. Baqir al Sadr rejected the offer. In March 1980, the regime issued a decree that made membership in the *al-Dawa* party punishable by death. At this point, Baqir al Sadr changed tactics and began to work to recruit anti-Baathist soldiers. According to a former high-ranking official in the post-Hussein period, "Baqir worked on contacting critically placed officers in the armed forces. He understood the critical role that the Iranian armed forces had played in the victory of the Iranian Islamic Revolution."[129] It was in this context that he started building military cells whose goal was the assassination of Hussein.[130]

On 1 April 1980 one of these fighters threw a grenade at the Iraqi Foreign Minister, Tariq Aziz, when he was visiting Mustansariya, the oldest university in Iraq, located in Baghdad.[131] The bomber was killed along with some university students and Hussein declared that their deaths would not go unavenged. A few days later, another bomb was thrown at the funeral of the students. The response of the Iraqi regime was immediate. Baqir al Sadr and his sister, Bint al Huda, were executed on 8 April 1980.[132] Demonstrations in Shi'a areas were violently repressed. In executing Baqir al Sadr and destroying his movement, Hussein seemed to have won a total victory over activist political Shi'ism in Iraq. However, this was at the price of turning much of the Shi'a community against him.

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As early as October 1980, during the Iran-Iraq war, it became clear to most Iraqis that Hussein had made a disastrous mistake in invading Iran. The key reason why Iraqi Shi'a soldiers did not desert was that it was suicide to do so. Hussein's security forces were everywhere, and when they captured a deserter, they cut off his nose and ears and carved a special mark into his

forehead so he would be recognized as a traitor. In addition, a deserter was not allowed to return to his job and his citizenship was revoked.[133]

Another reason why Iraqi Shi'a soldiers fought against the Iranian Shi'a was that the Iraqi Shi'a were nationalistic. Unlike the Kurds, the Shi'a had never demanded the dismantling of the Iraqi state. Instead, they wanted a share of power commensurate to their majority status and an end to discrimination against them.[134] It is clear Hussein crushed meaningful Shi'a political opposition by the summer of 1980. A cease-fire to the Iran-Iraq War was declared on 8 August 1988, and when Saddam invaded Kuwait in August 1990, he found that Iraqis had reached their limit and did not want to fight another war with a neighbor.

After the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, locals gathered at city centers in the center-south of Iraq and seized the symbols of power, including the Baath party headquarters and the *muhabarat* (secret police). Baath party and high-ranking government officials were killed. In the north, Iraqi army units surrendered to the Kurds and soldiers deserted. Kurds and the parties of what was then called the Kurdistan Front took to the streets in Iraqi Kurdistan. All the while, Baghdad stayed calm. In summary, the military partly collapsed, facing three different scenarios: rebellion in the south, abandonment of the Kurdish north, and holding together in the center. The uprising lacked cohesive leadership and was successful for only two weeks. The loyal units of the Baath party successfully carried out their mission to crush the uprisings.[135]

The Sanctions Period and the Foundation of the Sadrist Movement

The country that emerged from the 1991 Gulf War did not resemble the one that had entered it. A new era of sanctions began, lasting for over 12 years, weakening the state, destroying the economy, creating hyperinflation, and reducing the middle classes to poverty. More than 60 percent of the population fell below the poverty line. The systematic destruction of civil society and vital civil forces created a gap that was filled by the spontaneous—or government manufactured—system of tribal networks. The ruling elites shifted from secular party politics to clan/family politics.[136]

During the Iran-Iraq War, the once secular Baath party began to use Islamic religious symbols to combat Khomeini's Shi'a fundamentalism. Hussein created a new family tree, linking himself to the Prophet Mohammed

to match Khomeini's supposed noble descent. The lineage of the Prophet Mohammed became politicized. On the eve of the 1991 War, "Allahu Akbar" (God is great) was inscribed on the Iraqi flag, and the motto "the Believer strides forward" replaced the old slogan of "The Baath strides forward." This increase in religiosity reached a peak in the wake of the 1991 defeat of Iraq and the failure of the subsequent uprisings. A rise in personal piety and religious symbolism spread nationwide. Hussein's government built more than 100 new mosques during this period of UN-enforced sanctions. Women were both encouraged and pressured to wear *hijab* (modest Islamic dress). As unemployment grew, Hussein personally advised Iraqis to keep their women at home, increasing male chauvinism among the unemployed.[137] Due to an increase in violent crime and sociocultural dislocation, religious institutions began to provide food, medical care, stability, and comfort in a world seemingly gone mad.[138]

Sadeq al Sadr had begun his religious activity in a gradual manner, focusing on recruitment, charities, and sermons. For most of the 1990s, he appeared to be apolitical and in line with the government's pious activity. Rising in prominence after the death of Grand Ayatollah al-Kho'i, he established an apparatus of novices and seminarians to fill in the gap left by the destruction of Baqir al Sadr's network of followers. This core extended its influence through networks of *khums* (Shi'a religious tax) collectors.[139]

Sadeq al Sadr succeeded in building large networks of followers in Baghdad and Nasiriya and creating alliances with influential segments of the urban middle classes. Large constituencies emerged in Najaf, Baghdad, Nasiriya, Basra, and other cities.[140] He was able to gather hundreds of thousands of Shi'a for his sermons, which grew more critical of the regime. The center of Shi'ism worldwide, Najaf, became a center of dual Shi'a leadership, loyalty to the quietist Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani on the one hand and to the activist Sadeq al Sadr on the other. Sadeq al Sadr succeeded in establishing a politicized Shi'a identity that would play an important, radical role in the future. He institutionalized Shi'a identity during the sanctions period, yet he never established a fully doctrinal ideological system, unlike the *al-Dawa* Party and SCIRI, both of which followed Khomeini's ideology. In the end, the Hussein regime could not tolerate this development and assassinated Sadeq al Sadr in February 1999, as well as two of his sons.[141]

The Emergence of Muqtada al Sadr

With a large following in Najaf, Nasiriya, and Sadr City (previously Saddam City), Muqtada al Sadr emerged as a surprise to both the Americans and senior Shi'a clerical leadership. After the assassination of his father and brothers, Al Sadr was placed under house arrest. His father's followers covertly recognized him as the "heir." Sadeq al Sadr's network of young sheikhs (i.e., religious clerics who were not *sayyids* or descendants of the Prophet) and communities of followers (for whom he had provided much-needed social services during the sanctions period) now rallied to Muqtada al Sadr's call. Sadeq al Sadr was a strong supporter of Iraqi Arab clerical leadership, whereas Iraq's preeminent Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani was a quietist cleric born in Iran.[142]

Unlike the revolutionaries who overthrew the Shah in 1979, Muqtada al Sadr was not ideological. He had no clear idea of an Islamic State, rather his father had preached for Shi'a Islamic cultural revolution that would lead to a more just political system.[143] Further, the ideological legacy of the al Sadr family advocated a vision that was opposed to that of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini's belief in *veliyat i faqih*. Al Sadr's uncle, and also father-in-law, Baqir al Sadr is known among the Shi'a of Iraq as the First Martyr, or Sadr I, and advocated an advisory role rather than a leading political role for the *'ulama* (the clergy).[144] Muqtada al Sadr went on to marry Baqir al Sadr's daughter in 1994. His father, Sadeq al Sadr, built up the Sadrist Movement during the 1990s, and after his assassination, came to be known as the Second Martyr, or Sadr II. These almost mystical attributes of his father-in-law and father were critical to the rise of Muqtada al Sadr and the respect in which he was held by his followers.[145]

Al Sadr came to embody the symbolism of martyrdom from his father and uncle. His tool was managing street politics, and the authors believe this was his strongest attribute as a leader. Al Sadr created a new division in post-Hussein Iraq: anti-government-domestic versus pro-government foreign-exile Shi'a leadership. The Sadrist Movement was born in a time of a significant rise in popular religiosity, and in the earliest phase (2003–2004) it had three components: a religious core formed mostly of young clerics and novices who were loyal to his father, the charities his father created to provide services to the urban poor, and loyal armed mobs that arose after the fall of the Baath. Shi'a religious leaders in Iraq were highly conscious of parallels

between what happened to Hussein and his family and what was happening in Iraq after the U.S. invasion in 2003 and 2004. Al Sadr and his followers saw themselves in the tradition of martyrdom vs. tyranny, established when Imam Hussein and his brother Abbas were killed by the Sunni Umayyads near Karbala, some 1,400 years ago.[146]

The killing of prominent Shi'a cleric Majid al-Khoei in Najaf, one month after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, appeared to U.S. observers as a purely criminal act. The murder was, in fact, the perpetuation of a decades-long intra-Shi'a clerical battle in Najaf over the soul and future of Iraqi Shi'ism. Al-Khoei's death marked a new, zero-sum round in the schism over how the Iraqi clerical class should advocate on behalf of the country's Shi'a. Al-Khoei had moved to Najaf from Britain as soon as it was cleared of the Iraqi military by the U.S. military.[147] Angry mobs linked to al Sadr were focused on exacting revenge on those whom they considered to be pro-Baathist government senior level clerics. Al Sadr's mob attacked the office of the Custodian of the Shrine of Imam Ali where al-Khoei was in discussions with the custodian. Al-Khoei and others were dragged to al Sadr's house and stabbed to death. The bodies were mutilated and dragged into the streets.[148] This incident became a symbol of a new division in the Shi'a clerical leadership and, ultimately, in the Shi'a community of Iraq—between the more radical activists, like al Sadr, and the quietists who surrounded Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani.

According to Matthew Goodwin, the Sadrist Movement, compared to the other Iraqi Shi'a parties, was unique in being both anti-U.S. and ambivalent, if not hostile, about Iran.[149] Al Sadr established the Mahdi Army in this context, which launched an insurrection against the U.S. occupation in 2004.[150] Al Sadr then reversed course and reestablished a role for himself and his movement in the Iraqi political process. The Sadrist Movement became a key partner in the main Shi'a political coalition—the United Iraqi Alliance UIA)—that ran in the 2005 general election. The UIA was victorious, and the Sadrists gained more than 10 percent of seats in the parliament and control over the transportation and health ministries.[151] However, as sectarian violence increased in 2006, al Sadr reactivated his Mahdi Army. A short time later, al Sadr fled to Iran, in Goodwin's view, in response to the U.S. surge in troops in 2007, and ostensibly to further his religious education. Goodwin states that in 2010, al Sadr called on his followers to vote in the general election and support candidates who called for a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops. In 2011, al Sadr returned to Najaf but then declared he was removing

himself from politics in 2014.[152] Also in 2014, he reconstituted the Mahdi Army under the name the Peace Companies to fight against ISIS. In 2016, he led large protests against the government of Haider al-Abadi, prime minister since 2014, accusing the government of corruption and failing to carry out critical reforms.[153]

Summary

Chapters 1 and 2 described the history of Iraqi nationalism and how the Shi'a community, especially its clerics, experienced the evolution of secular Arab nationalism. Chapters 3 and 4, in turn, recount the political dynamics that buffeted al Sadr as he assumed leadership over the Iraqi nationalist, but Shi'a centric, social movement created by his father. What will become apparent is al Sadr's continuity of orientation even though he changes tactics over time. This continuity aligns with a number of U.S. interests in Iraq, even though the U.S. is not considered an ally by the Sadrist Movement. Appreciating more deeply how al Sadr experienced Iraqi Shi'a politics from the 2003–2014 will help explain why he formed his 2018 political coalition and what it means for any future U.S. engagement with al Sadr and his movement.

Chapter 3. The al Sadr and Sistani Symbiosis, 2003–2007

This chapter examines the change in the relationship between al Sadr and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani starting after 27 August 2004.[154] The first change is that al Sadr moved from the role of antagonist to that of a respectful younger cleric. Second, al Sadr began to reassert his original Iraqi nationalist ideology. In the authors' view, the key factor dictating the change is that al Sadr realized he could not compete with al-Sistani on any basis, including rank, status, age, and allegiance of the Shi'a community. It is widely held by Iraq experts that al Sadr, in 2003 and 2004, took a highly antagonistic position against Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and the *Hawza*. The dynamic between al Sadr and al-Sistani has always been difficult and complicated by the differing worldviews of the two men and their inclinations when it comes to the politics that mobilize Iraq's Shi'a community.

Despite al Sadr's command of a large section of the "Shi'a Street" in Iraq, and his strong connections with the youth and disenfranchised, al-Sistani is by far the more influential actor in commanding the respect of the widest possible segment of Iraq's Shi'a community, as well as Shi'a outside of Iraq. Al Sadr may be powerful inside Iraq, but al-Sistani is more influential, is more revered, and has a greater international network of support. While rivals, the two men have also managed to create a *modus vivendi* (agreement) between them that has benefited both, and more generally, Iraq's Shi'a community, which is susceptible to divisions over politics and religious doctrine. Ultimately, al-Sistani was able to assert his authority over al Sadr, not by mobilizing the loudest street following, but through traditional means that emphasized al-Sistani's role as one of the most prominent Shi'a thought leaders.

Al Sadr may be powerful inside Iraq, but al-Sistani is more influential, is more revered, and has a greater international network of support.

Regardless of al Sadr's clear charisma and ability to appeal to a mass audience, al-Sistani was able to establish his authority because Arab culture (and Shi'ism as a religious doctrine itself) demanded that al Sadr recognize the authority of the more senior and acclaimed religious thinker and leader. Once the pecking order was arranged, the two found they have a lot

more in common politically than would have seemed possible in 2003 and 2004. Al-Sistani saw al Sadr as a person who also shared in the Shi'a struggle inside of Iraq, and as someone who could be more independent from Iran and the imposition of *wilayat i-faqih* (rule by the supreme jurist). Ultimately, al-Sistani had more patience for al Sadr's outbursts and challenges because al Sadr was not like SCIRI or the Da'wa movement, which had risen to power because of time in exile. This was especially the case during the sanctions period when Shi'a religious notables and political figures inside of Iraq fought to survive against Hussein's predations.[155]

While there are many analyses of al-Sistani by Western, Iranian, and Iraqi scholars, Babek Rahimi is the author of an excellent study that examines the specific relationship between al Sadr and al-Sistani.[156] Rahimi demonstrates how the elder, quietist al-Sistani managed to bring the activist al Sadr back into the Shi'a clerical fold through persuasion, not violence. From 2003–2004 al Sadr assumed that his family's religious credentials gave him prominence and political authority beyond his age and religious education. And for a short period, it did seem that his influence eclipsed that of al-Sistani, at least among the urban poor. However, al-Sistani's recognized authority over the Shi'a community worldwide eventually enabled him to assert his authority over al Sadr, and even to mentor him in some respects. According to Rahimi, "the relationship between the two clerics has been one of asymmetrical partnership, in which al-Sistani plays the superior partner, guiding the younger and less experienced al Sadr in his quest for becoming a legitimate leader of the Iraqi Shiite community."[157] The importance of this relationship is not to be underestimated. Despite all of Iran's political, social, and military intervention in Iraq, al-Sistani remains the most respected and highest-ranking Shi'a cleric, not only in Iraq, but throughout the world, far more so than Iran's Supreme Leader.

At first glance, al Sadr and al-Sistani have nothing in common, except the fact the neither lived outside the country during the Hussein era. Al Sadr is a young activist without the proper religious credentials who created a religious militia, which engaged in sectarian violence against the Arab Sunni community in Iraq. The much older al-Sistani, while supporting the rights of the Shi'a community in Iraq to function as the majority, nevertheless believes in the full political enfranchisement of all Iraqis, regardless of ethnicity, religion, tribe, or sect. Al Sadr is an activist cleric who espouses Iraqi-Arab

nationalism, whereas Sistani follows the quietist school of Shi'ism, which calls for a separation between religious activities and politics.[158]

Against the Najaf *Hawza*: 2003–2004

Most Iraq experts date the beginning of the change in the relationship between al Sadr and al-Sistani to 27 August 2004, when al-Sistani negotiated an end to the three-week stand-off between al Sadr's Mahdi Army and U.S. forces in Najaf, one of Shi'ite Islam's holiest sites. The intervention by al-Sistani stopped the violence that neither then-Prime Minister Ayad Allawi nor his Iraqi Interim Government was able to.[159] According to Kenneth Katzman, the senior Middle East analyst for the Congressional Research Service, "without Sistani, they would not have had a solution to the Najaf crisis. The IIG [Iraqi Interim Government] is almost completely beholden to Sistani to keep Sadr in check."[160]

According the Babtab Persian News Service, after three weeks of intense fighting, al-Sistani was able to broker a cease-fire deal with al Sadr.[161] And while Sistani's goal was partly aimed at ending the destruction of the shrine complex and protecting Najaf's inhabitants, he also saw the Mahdi Army as a major asset in dealing with violent extremist, anti-Shi'a Sunni groups, as well as U.S. forces in Iraq. Rahimi suggests that with support from Tehran, the cease-fire also provided an opportunity to bring al Sadr's militia closer to the Shi'a establishment in Najaf (the *Hawza*).[162]

Post-2005 Elections and the Iran Factor

While al-Sistani gained considerable influence over al Sadr at this point, the Mahdi Army also began to break up into more radical sub-groups that were loyal to Iran first. Some of these offshoot militias stated al Sadr was too compromising toward the Sunnis.[163] In the authors' view, one of the most relevant points Rahimi makes in his study is the importance of the role of Iran in the making of their alliance. In this regard, he argues that although al Sadr and al-Sistani did not want Iranian influence in Iraq, they realized that Tehran could not be ignored either. The authors agree with him that the two clerics understood that Shi'a empowerment in Iraq could only be ensured by Iranian support, and challenging Tehran would only lead to the reemergence of Arab Sunni power in Iraq. In summary, al Sadr and al-Sistani both considered the support of Iran as necessary in a period of

increasing hostility to Shi'ism in the Sunni world. Tehran also understood that both men could play a major role in advancing Iran's interests in Iraq and the larger region.[164]

Summary

The authors assess that al Sadr has steadily evidenced an ideological consistency as an Iraqi nationalist, even at the height of the sectarian violence in Iraq, which is something he had in common with al-Sistani. Second, both al Sadr and al-Sistani lived inside Iraq during the 1990s period of international sanctions. This is not true of the leadership of Iraqi Shi'a parties, like al-Dawa and SCIRI, who lived abroad during this time, in places like London and the U.S. Thus, the authors conclude that al Sadr and al-Sistani had more in common than not. Al Sadr ultimately understood that his "Sadr" family charisma, while critical to his rise as a Shi'a leader in post-Hussein Iraq, could not undermine the status of al-Sistani as the senior most grand ayatollah of the Shi'a worldwide. He eventually realized how important al-Sistani could be to his own evolving leadership role, not only among the Shi'a but among all Iraqis.

Chapter 4. Lessons of Jaysh al-Mahdi

Al Sadr became a household name in Iraq, and internationally well known, due to the mobilization of JAM, or Mahdi Army. Contrary to its moniker, the organization was never a coherent military force under a centralized command-and-control structure, and instead was more like an umbrella organization of locally mobilized armed groups that claimed loyalty to al Sadr and the movement his father created.[165] After the defeat and dismantlement of the Hussein government in April 2003, what became known as the JAM began to slowly emerge as the Sadrist Movement organized local militias. This included areas in the suburbs of Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, Karbala, Samarra, Nasiriya, Kut, and throughout the Shi'a-majority areas of southern Iraq. Sadrist militias began also to appear in Kirkuk and disputed areas of Diyala, demonstrating the geographic reach of the Sadrist Movement.

At its height in 2007, the JAM had an estimated 120,000 fighters, spread throughout Shi'a-majority areas of Iraq.[166] However, it is believed most of these fighters were gunmen affiliated with local armed groups, including a significant number who were, for all intents and purposes, involved in what could be considered criminal gangs. The affiliated groups underneath the JAM umbrella—especially in and around Baghdad and other places like Basra, Maysan, and Dhi Qar—were credibly linked to sectarian and ethnic cleansing and violence, looting and illegal appropriation of property, robberies, extortion of local businesses (even in Shi'a-majority areas), carjacking, and other forms of criminality. This gave JAM, as a whole organization, a sinister reputation.[167] JAM affiliates, especially in more socially conservative Shi'a-majority areas, maintained religious police modeled after those in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and these police could also be a source of human rights violations against local residents.[168]

Besides a reputation for sinister, and depending on the locale, religiously intolerant behavior, the JAM was noted for a few different characteristics that distinguished it from its rival organizations within the Iraqi Shi'a community. First, the JAM was considered the most consistent opponent against the U.S.-led coalition. It was willing to stand and fight against the U.S.-led coalition, and lose, but also survive due to the popularity of the Sadrist

Movement—a political reality that none of its opponents within the Shi'a community could ignore.[169] Al Sadr saw his legend as an indispensable "resistance" leader grow in 2004. It was during this year he oversaw JAM's two campaigns against the coalition, and they were timed for maximum political effect within Iraq because they were Shi'a-led operations that relieved pressure from Sunni areas under siege from coalition forces, especially in Fallujah. Al Sadr smartly realized that by supporting the predominantly Sunni armed opposition based in western Iraq, he could make a pan-sectarian appeal for resistance against the coalition that would increase his power and authority inside Iraq.[170] Although JAM forces lost both campaigns, and al Sadr himself was nearly captured by the coalition in Najaf in August 2004, the Mahdi Army and the Sadrist Movement survived the battles against the coalition. Both would reemerge with steady success as the preeminent Shi'a militia networks in Iraq. The JAM achieved this status despite the opposition that it consistently faced from other Shi'a organizations in Iraq, whether linked to Iran or not.

Al Sadr saw his legend as an indispensable "resistance" leader grow in 2004.

The second characteristic of the JAM was the antagonistic role that it took upon itself within the Shi'a community in Iraq. Al Sadr, following in his father's footsteps, consistently positioned himself as a populist who railed against a system of patronage that the U.S.-led coalition endowed upon the "Shi'a establishment" in Iraq.[171] Iraqi Shi'a political movements, including some linked intimately with Iran, such as the Supreme Islamic Committee of Iraq (ISCI, formerly SCIRI) and the *al-Dawa* party, had been working with the United States and its coalition allies to prepare for the campaign against Hussein. ISCI was led by the prominent Shi'a clerical al-Hakim family, which was a main opponent of al-Sistani and al Sadr. These parties were among the big victors as the coalition created a new governing authority and developed a new constitution for post-Hussein Iraq. Other derivative groups, such as the IRGC-backed Badr organization, focused on infiltrating the newly formed Iraqi Security Forces and became opponents of the Sadrist Movement as well.

Third, the Sadrist Movement was never eliminated from the political life of post-Hussein Iraq. Al Sadr brought the movement, as part of the UIA Shi'a-majority political bloc, into the Iraqi parliament in 2005. Yet, neither al Sadr, nor the socio-political organization that he inherited from his father, was afforded complete legitimacy despite its participation in the

2005 elections. The Shi'a establishment was loathed to give the Sadrists a political boost beyond what they had won in the ballot booth. That meant the JAM, which was viewed with antipathy by the Shi'a establishment, was by and large kept out of the upper echelons of the leadership within the Iraqi Security Forces in both the ministries of Defense and Interior.[172] Primarily situated outside of the Iraqi government and official security forces, the JAM was able to grow and become a "street force" of Shi'a gunmen who not only nominally followed the orders of al Sadr, but also their own command structure. For JAM, al Sadr was like a distant CEO whose picture was hung up at every franchise, but whose corporate policy was unevenly applied in each location.

This third characteristic of JAM was a boon for al Sadr's opponents within Iraq's Shi'a community because the discordant command structure within JAM had its utility in times of communal conflict. This could then be used as a justification to target and dismantle the Sadrist Movement militias after the communal wars were over. The Shi'a establishment frequently ignored the JAM's aggressive campaign against Sunni Iraqi communities, especially in and around Baghdad, during the 2005–2007 period when the mainly Sunni vs. Shi'a sectarian war was being fought. In fact, the JAM's war of attrition, and often successful war of conquest against the Iraqi Sunnis in mixed communities in and around Baghdad, complemented the activities of other Shi'a groups against Sunni Iraqis. An example is the Badr organization, which used its position of great influence within the security forces of Iraq's Interior Ministry to similarly target, persecute, and frequently carry out extrajudicial killings of Iraqi Sunnis, civilians, and militia gunmen alike.[173]

The difference between JAM and the state-sponsored Iraqi Shi'a militias was that, by and large, the JAM was a non-state actor that carried out its campaign against Sunni Iraqis. This meant that the JAM in many areas—especially in mixed cities such as Baghdad and Samarra, and to a lesser extent, in Basra—took on the persona of being a shield for Iraq's Shi'a community against particularly lethal and effective Sunni armed opposition groups, such as al-Qaeda in Iraq. Local Shi'a armed groups in these mixed cities were not always or easily able to access Iraqi state support for their mobilization training, armament, and pay. Consequently, many such Iraqi Shi'a groups joined the JAM umbrella because the Sadrist Movement could provide support to these local affiliates quicker than the Iraqi state could, if they were willing to.[174]

A feature of the JAM umbrella was the reality that it had a mass base of support throughout the Shi'a areas of Iraq, both rural and urban, and among socio-cultural groups such as Iraqi Shi'a tribes, as well as across socio-economic groups. However, the popular perception of the organization was that it especially welcomed the underclass of Iraq's Shi'a communities. JAM was a big umbrella, and over time the ability to project power in certain key cities in Iraq for the Shi'a community (Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, Karbala) made it untenable as an organization that could stay for long without being addressed by the Iraqi government, especially the Shi'a power brokers.[175] However, Iraq's vicious sectarian war marked the watershed for the JAM, and it was during this period that al Sadr's armed organization became known for its brutal, but generally effective defense of Shi'a communities from Sunni armed groups, especially al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Being a non-state actor, even when tacitly backed by the Iraqi state, the JAM became a convenient scapegoat for Iraq's Shi'a establishment. This was apparent in 2007 and 2008, around the time of the coalition's surge in Baghdad, when the political (and most important, military) winds were blowing hard against non-state, sectarian militias, whether Sunni or Shi'a. During that period, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a powerful figure in the Iran-backed al-Dawa party, was consolidating his authority and expanding his influence over the official security branches of the Iraqi state. He was also establishing a monopoly of violence over the more powerful Shi'a armed groups that were not directly bought off by the state.[176] The JAM was a primary target of al-Maliki's efforts, although it was coalition forces that were the primary antagonists against the organization. The coalition campaign was the cause of the JAM's constituent groups that were generally subdued by, "reconciled" with, or dismantled by the Iraqi state.

Overall, it can be stated that the JAM evolved during several different phases of its brand, yet the key feature of this organization was that it was being used by al Sadr, and his close lieutenants, as a means to an end: to make al Sadr a political figure of great power. This is the key dynamic as it relates to al Sadr and the JAM that is often overlooked. The JAM was periodically "rebranded" by al Sadr during different points of its existence.

During 2003–2004, the JAM was, for all intents and purposes, a brand that Iraqi Shi'a could turn to if they were seeking an organization that was willing to respond aggressively against the U.S.-led coalition and the nascent Iraqi Security Forces. This phase of JAM's brand effectively ended when al

Sadr left Najaf under the deal brokered by al-Sistani. Following that deal, al Sadr turned his organization's focus on building up the wide base of support that it had among Iraqi Shi'a, especially in Baghdad's suburbs (Sadr City), in Basra, and throughout the Shi'a-majority areas of southern Iraq.

The JAM became a key feature of the broader Sadrist Movement, which, in a manner like Lebanese Hezbollah, sought to create a seamless connection between the social services and the political power that the movement could provide its constituents. This political front needed to be reinforced by an armed wing that could refer to itself as being part of a "resistance society," both against the U.S.-led coalition and eventually against Sunni Iraqi enemies.[177] During this phase of the brand, from 2005–2007, the JAM became the iron gauntlet under the velvet glove of al Sadr's forays into Iraqi electoral politics, as a part of the UIA ruling coalition. The JAM also was key to al Sadr's ability to generate muscle behind him as he supported al-Maliki as Iraq's prime minister, a decision that would ultimately cost al Sadr dearly.

It was during this phase that the JAM built significant political power within the Shi'a-majority areas of Iraq, while growing as a military force as a result of the sectarian war that Iraq was experiencing.[178] JAM affiliates assumed de facto control over large areas of Baghdad and its suburbs, became the strongest force in Basra (although without a monopoly on violence there), subordinated most of the Shi'a community of Samarra, and held significant power on the streets of Iraq's two major Shi'a shrine cities, Najaf and Karbala.[179] The organization also had exceptional power throughout rural, southern Iraq, with a particular focus on Maysan and Dhi Qar provinces.[180] The accumulation of power by the JAM did not go unnoticed by al Sadr's Shi'a rivals, and al-Maliki in particular fell out with al Sadr.

The Sadrist response was to defy the Iraqi state, which was largely dominated by the Shi'a religious bloc (UIA), with the support of the coalition. The result of this rivalry was that the Iraqi Security Forces and coalition forces in 2007–2008 led a general campaign against the JAM, resulting in significant losses everywhere JAM held power. During this period, the image of JAM suffered a further blow within the wider Shi'a community due to its clashes with Iraqi Security Forces linked to the Badr organization in Karbala in August 2007. This conflict led to the deaths of Shi'a pilgrims and gave al-Maliki and partners carte blanche to conduct military campaigns against JAM affiliates throughout Iraq.

Al Sadr's last major attempt to preserve JAM was in June 2008, when he announced its dissolution and formed a new organization, *al-Mumahidun* ("those who pave a path"). The new group, at least in how it was discussed publicly, de-emphasized the military nature of JAM, and instead focused on it as a vehicle to provide social and cultural services to the Sadrist Movement's constituents.[181] According to interviewees, *al-Mumahidun*—although not remembered as clearly as JAM—was in some regards more important for the overall survival of the militant wing of the Sadrist Movement. It was through al-Mumahidun that al Sadr, long a friend of Lebanese Hezbollah's Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, would take his Lebanese friend's advice and try to restructure the JAM core into a group that served the political wing of the Sadrist Movement rather than as an umbrella of similarly branded militias that undermined the social and political mission of the movement.[182] In this way, Nasrallah, and Lebanese Hezbollah, served as a useful model for al Sadr that he would apply for future purposes.[183]

Summary

Al Sadr's power during the 2003–2009 period was not simply due to his ability to mobilize the so-called "Shi'a Street" for political rallies and mass civil disobedience against the U.S.-led coalition and the Iraqi state, it was because he could inspire a large militia movement into armed action. The JAM was al Sadr's ticket to influence and power, but it was also a challenge to him because the organization's activities were frequently out of line with the image that al Sadr eventually sought to cultivate, which was to be a leader for all Iraqis, not just the Sadrists. Al Sadr also failed to establish a clear and well-maintained line of command and control within the JAM organization, and the syndicate-style structure of JAM allowed Iran's Quds Force ample opportunity to infiltrate and use it for Iranian purposes, whether to target and weaken Iraq's Sunni armed opposition or to plan and conduct attacks against coalition forces in Iraq. The Frankenstein monster that JAM became was a real threat to al Sadr because it provided the Iraqi state (and the U.S.-led coalition) with a ready-made justification to target and act aggressively against the Sadrist Movement. Al Sadr's political career and his ambitions to have greater power over Iraq's Shi'a community, and therefore the Iraqi state, especially in the 2007–2009 timeframe, nearly was destroyed by JAM's growing role as the IRGC's preferred proxy force in Iraq.

Chapter 5. ISIS, Saraya al-Salam, and the New al Sadr

Al Sadr's decision to disband JAM in June 2008, a decision made while reportedly seeking to advance his religious education while resident in Iran, was a significant moment in the history of the Sadrist Movement. By the time of his decision to disband JAM, al Sadr had for all intents and purposes lost the ability to control and direct the bulk of the sub-groups within the JAM umbrella. In the years between 2008 and 2014, JAM ceased to exist as an organization and instead existed as a loose network of armed groups that remained tied to the Sadrist Movement but could not be ordered into action (or inaction) by it.[184]

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During this period, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) was particularly interested in subordinating former JAM sub-groups under its command. Many of the groups within the modern PMUs structure started as JAM affiliates that were enticed away from al Sadr by the IRGC-QF. These groups include *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, *Kata'ib Hezbollah*, and *Liwa al-Yawm al-Maw'ud*. It is important to understand that the current *Hashd Shaabi* (PMUs) structure was built from a foundation of former JAM sub-groups, and some were particularly active "special groups" that the IRGC-QF used to target the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq. One of the special groups, *Liwa al-Yawm al-Maw'ud* (Promised Day Brigade), in fact remained loyal to al Sadr throughout the 2008–2014 period, and it was perhaps the most effective regarding its lethality and effectiveness in operations against the U.S.-led coalition.[185]

Importantly, *Liwa al-Yawm al-Maw'ud* would become the foundation of *Saraya al-Salam*'s (Peace Companies) *idaara*—the official administration or system of *Saraya al-Salam*—but with the connotation that it was directly linked to the command of al Sadr through a distinct chain-of-command. *Liwa al-Yawm al-Maw'ud* is the *Saraya al-Salam* component that is officially registered with the Iraqi government within the PMU structure.[186] *Liwa al-Yawm al-Maw'ud* is important not only because it was the descendant

of JAM that maintained the tightest loyalty to al Sadr, even when he had formally disbanded JAM. In a sense, it also countermanded his order to stand down JAM operations against the U.S. coalition. The group continued operations against the coalition in coordination with the IRGC-QF, and its leader, Kazim al-Issawi, one of al Sadr's closest deputies who is also the most important military commander of *Saraya al-Salam*. Al-Issawi's job during the 2008–2014 period was to serve as the primary interlocutor for the remnants of the *idaara* JAM organization with the IRGC-QF, and at a minimum to deconflict *Liwa al-Yawm al-Maw'ud*'s operations against the coalition.[187]

It is, therefore, important to understand that the delineation between al Sadr's *Saraya al-Salam* and the IRGC-QF is not always a straight-forward or clear division, although interviewees do assert that Saraya al-Salam retains independence in action that is not characteristic of the Iranian-influenced or controlled PMU groups.[188] The interviewees assert that this is true of the *idaara* component of *Saraya al-Salam*, which participated in actual combat operations against ISIS and received support from the PMU committee that is nominally subordinate to Iraq's Prime Minister. In contrast, there is a larger, non-professional component of *Saraya al-Salam*, the *ansaar* (supporters), which follows al Sadr as their commander in socio-politics and believe in his populist message but are not subordinate to the PMU committee.

The *idaara* component of *Saraya al-Salam* is sometimes also referred to as the "professional" component of the organization because it is this branch that acts as a coherent military force with a structured chain of command. It is estimated that the professional component has a force that numbers no more than 6,000 fighters, the majority of whom are natives of Baghdad, Kufa, Najaf, and a small cohort of Basra natives.[189] As part of the PMU committee, the idaara received supply; logistical; medevac; and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support from the government. Although the component was technically subordinate to the PMU committee and Iraq's prime minister under Iraqi law, in practice, al Sadr still maintained significant influence over the decision-making of the *idaara*. This could place him at odds with the PMU committee's leadership, and in an extreme situation, with the Prime Minister of Iraq.[190]

The *ansaar* component of *Saraya al-Salam* accounts for the bulk of the gunmen that the organization could potentially call upon during a period of crisis. The number of *ansaar* who are aligned with the organization is estimated to range between 15,000 to 40,000 gunmen, with the estimate being

so wide due to the fact the *ansaar* are spread over several areas in Iraq.[191] This component of *Saraya al-Salam* is not fully mobilized, having been formally demobilized by al Sadr in July 2018. However, it represents, according to interviewees, the "fighting street" that protects the Sadrist Movement at times of protests, such as in 2017, 2018, and 2019 against the Iraqi government, and during other periods of intense political activity conducted by al Sadr's movement upon his orders.[192]

These two components of the *Saraya al-Salam* organization are mutually reinforcing, and in the current context in Iraq, represent al Sadr's most effective tools to become a player in the game of divvying up the positions in the Iraqi government's ministerial and security branches.[193] To date, al Sadr's opponents from within the Iraqi Shi'a community, especially the Badr organization and *al-Dawa*, and increasingly from *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, have tried to keep Sadrist loyalists from staffing key positions in the Ministries of Defense and Interior. Although it is believed that al Sadr has significant support within the lower ranks of the Iraqi military, although not as much in the Ministry of Interior's armed forces, the role of *Saraya al-Salam*'s *idaara* component as part of the PMU structure gives al Sadr a legitimate presence in the security branches of the Iraqi state that he has generally not enjoyed since 2003.

How the IRGC-QF Built the *Hashd Shaabi* on a *Jaysh al-Mahdi* Foundation

The discussion concerning al Sadr's role in Iraq is intertwined with a larger discussion on the extent to which the IRGC-QF has established a permanent system of control over key levers of the Iraqi state and the socio-politics of Iraq's Shi'a communities. It is widely known that the IRGC-QF has used the counter-ISIS campaign in Iraq to expand the network of groups that are influenced by or subordinate to it. *Saraya al-Salam*, and more broadly the Sadrist Movement as a whole, is not immune to the influence of the IRGC-QF. However, al Sadr's PMU organization is commonly believed to be an independent actor that is not beholden to Iran for its directives.

Iraq's PMU organization grew rapidly since its establishment in the summer of 2014, with almost 70 subordinate groups officially falling under the PMU, administered by the authority of the office of the Iraqi Prime Minister. It is believed most of the groups within the PMU organization,

approximately 40, were beholden to Iran's Quds Force, and most were composed of Shi'a fighters—mostly Arab, but also ethnic Kurds and Turkmen.[194] One of the most important and interesting dynamics related to the PMU organization is that, although the majority of the fighters that have been mobilized are ethnic Arab and sectarian Shi'a, there are a number of groups raised from Iraq's minority communities. This includes the Iraqi Arab Sunni community and also smaller minority groups, such as from Christian communities (e.g., *Kata'ib Babiliyun*), Yazidi communities (e.g., *Liwa Ezidkhan* and the YPS), Turkmen communities (e.g., *Liwa al-Turkmen* and *Fawj Amerli*), and the Shabak communities (e.g., *Liwa al-Shabak*).[195]

According to estimates done by the government of Iraq, there may be as many as 122,000 fighters who were mobilized into the PMUs. There are skeptics that believe a significant part of that number were nonexistent "ghost" fighters who were listed so prominent PMU leaders (and Iraqi politicians with ties to the PMU) could collect more money.[196] It is reported that no more than 90,000 (and likely closer to 70,000) PMU fighters were actually deployed, and the majority of that deployment was for support activities, such as manning checkpoints. The PMU groups close to Iran's Quds Force were reportedly more frequently deployed in direct combat, whether in Iraq or Syria.[197] Altogether, it is believed that perhaps upwards of 50,000 or more fighters within the larger PMU organization are still part of groups that are directed by or under the influence of the IRGC-QF. The three largest groups believed to be heavily influenced, in rank order of the degree of control that the IRGC-QF has over them, are Kata'ib Hezbollah, *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, and the Badr Brigades.[198]

Although the role of the PMU structure is now formalized within Iraq's national security architecture, the long-term impact of the PMU groups on the mass politics of Iraq, particularly the Shi'a communities, is unclear.[199] Formally, the law that made the PMU an official Iraqi government organization states the PMU is to be apolitical, non-sectarian, and separate from non-governmental militia forces.[200] However, the most powerful PMU organizations continue to be linked to armed movements that support a powerful Iraqi political actor, such as *Saraya al-Salam* under al Sadr, or his rival Ammar al-Hakim, or even the IRGC-QF.[201] The PMU mobilization has been a vehicle for mass politics, particularly within the Shi'a communities, as occurred in Iraq's provincial elections in September 2017 and parliamentary election in April 2018.

As the conflict against ISIS shifted into the stabilization phase in Iraq, the PMU structure transitioned in 2016 from independent militias to formal security forces supported by the Iraqi state through the office of the Prime Minister.[202] Al Sadr, *Saraya al-Salam*, and the broader Sadrist Movement consequently competes against IRGC-QF influenced groups from within the PMU structure. Each will aggressively continue to position itself as a powerbroker within Iraq's Shi'a community. A dynamic of note is that the IRGC-QF has learned from the Sadrist Movement that militant groups are only as powerful as the mass movement, the "politics of the street," that support them. Previous IRGC-QF efforts in Iraq have attempted to lead mass movements through a vanguard that supports the implementation of the *wilayat i-faqih*, and then expand into a socio-political movement from that foci through sustained financial and military support.

It is important to recognize the motivation behind Iran's deep involvement in Iraq, which fundamentally is focused on protecting Iran's territorial integrity, supporting the Quds Force's mission of spreading the Islamic Revolution, and making Iran the leading nation within the global Islamic community. Since 1979, Iraq has been one of the key sites for the IRGC-QF to attempt to build an Arab base of support for the Iranian-led Islamic Revolution.[203] The importance of the PMUs to the Quds Force is the groups provide Iran another line of influence inside of Iraq, and most importantly, an opportunity for the IRGC-QF to shape Iraq's fraught and heavily contested intra-Shi'a political infighting.[204] Although a nation of many different communal identity groups, the powerbrokers in Iraq are currently ethnic Arab and sectarian Shi'a, and the PMU organization is the emerging security apparatus of choice for Iraqi Arab Shi'a. By seeking to control the PMU organization, the Quds Force is making a strong play to control Iraq's Shi'a community, and by extension, dominate Iraq indefinitely. Iran, long ostracized by the Arab world on ethnic grounds (and viewed as an aggressive, regionally imperialist power), seeks out Arab nations that will be friendly and provide a vehicle to become "normalized" within the Arab world. Iraq, in theory, is perfectly positioned for achieving this objective.

The IRGC-QF's Islamic Resistance project in Iraq now appears to have planted the seeds of support for the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iraq in line with the vision of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.[205] Recall that al Sadr's father, Grand Ayatollah Sadeq al Sadr, stood against these efforts in the 1980s and 1990s by building up his network of dispossessed

Shi'a Iraqis that supported Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War. In fact, many of his followers were conscripts in the Iraqi military during that conflict. The assassination of Sadeq al Sadr and two of his sons, and the subsequent rise and eventual deterioration of the JAM under Muqtada al Sadr, provided a new opportunity for the IRGC-QF to recruit from a generation of young Shi'a Iraqis who did not know the Iran-Iraq War. That generation came of age during a period of U.S.-led coalition occupation of Iraq. JAM, if not al Sadr himself, was therefore a catalyst that helped propel the IRGC-QF's activities among the Shi'a communities in Iraq.

Al Sadr, although not an adversary for Iran, is not a great facilitator of its goals in Iraq either. Although it is true that the IRGC-QF has taken advantage of the disorganization of JAM in the past to augment the Hezbollah network, the Sadrist Movement also challenges the status quo of the Iraqi state, which is a potential vulnerability for Iran in Iraq.[206] The Hezbollah network of IRGC-QF backed PMU groups is important to Iran, as it represents a *basij* (Iranian internal security) type of security organization that can be used, even if selectively, as a weapon against opponents inside Iraq. Yet, even more important than the PMU structure to Iran is maintaining control over ministries, such as Defense and Interior, where still larger budgets, more formalized channels of patronage, and generally better military hardware are available to IRGC-QF influenced leaders and their followers.[207] These ministries constitute the most significant levers of influence over Iraq's security state that Iran currently possesses, and the Badr organization, *al-Dawa*, and *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* have spent most of their energy in building influence in them.[208]

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The challenge that al Sadr represents to the IRGC-QF is that; the Sadrist Movement can mobilize on the street, the *idaara* component of *Saraya al-Salam* remains one of the most significant PMU groups, and al Sadr's *Sairoon* Bloc continues to push for al Sadr approved leadership in the Defense and Interior ministries. Defining what it means to be an "Iraqi nationalist" is also a difference—if not an outright conflict yet—between the Sadrist Movement and the IRGC-QF backed groups in Iraq.[209]

For the time being, supporting Khomeini-style *wilayat i-faqih* implementation in Iraq is not considered Iraqi or nationalist, and is therefore one striking difference between the majority of the IRGC-QF backed groups and the

Sadrist Movement, including *Saraya al-Salam*. This dynamic demonstrates the complexity of the socio-politics of identity within the Iraqi Shi'a communities, and within the PMU structure. This could, when combined with other factors such as the continuing deterioration of living conditions throughout the Shi'a "heartland" in Iraq, lead to a violent competition between the groups within the PMU structure. Iraqi groups that are loyal to the Quds Force generally support implementing Iran's *wilayat i-faqih* system inside of Iraq, whereas other groups, such as al Sadr's *Saraya al-Salam*, oppose it in Iraq.[210] The outcome of this intra-Shi'a conflict is likely to have a decisive effect on the socio-politics of the Iraqi Shi'a communities and strongly affect the future of Iraqi national politics, particularly ethno-sectarian harmony, and the country's territorial integrity.

In contrast to the IRGC-QF's typical approach in Iraq, the Sadrist Movement, especially in the 2003–2008 period, took the opposite by promoting a brand of Iraqi Shi'a nationalist populism that enticed an ever-growing number of local "franchises" to come under the Sadrist umbrella, which became JAM. There was no particular vision to the JAM movement, although there are assertions that certain branches—the "Golden Brigades," or for the purposes of this study the *idaara* branches that would later develop in the Baghdad area into *Liwa al-Yawm al-Maw'ud*—sought to enforce discipline upon the troublesome constituent groups within JAM.[211] In this respect, the IRGC-QF has been more successful than al Sadr or his lieutenants in maintaining the discipline of the groups that have fallen under its influence, although even for the IRGC-QF, there are still only degrees of influence that it can claim over the direct decision-making of its favored Iraqi militant groups.[212]

Al Sadr represents a unique challenge to Iran in Iraq, not necessarily because he is always an antagonist actor toward Iran (he is not, and most of his grievances seem to be directed toward the IRGC-QF backed groups that are in power in the Iraqi state), but because he is more effective than the IRGC-QF backed groups at mobilizing the "Shi'a street." *Saraya al-Salam*'s *ansaar* component, which is the largest component of the organization, is for the most part composed of highly localized groups, often-times no larger than a group of local youth from a city district or an outlying village, that gets paid to monitor checkpoints into and out of their home areas, and more importantly, to provide security for demonstrators when they protest the Iraqi state.[213] Al Sadr uses *Saraya al-Salam*'s *ansaar* component to fulfill his

objectives in raw street politics, whereas the IRGC-QF is utilizing the PMU groups that it supports as incubators to identify operatives for a transnational, Shi'a "Hezbollah Network."

IRGC-QF activities in Iraq have been ongoing since the early 1980s, as a product of the newly born Islamic Republic's desire to create an "Islamic Resistance" movement that could spread the Islamic Revolution and *wilayat i-faqih*.[214] The Sadrist Movement, first under the leadership of Sadeq al Sadr, and then his son, has had an ambivalent relationship to the IRGC-QF. Grand Ayatollah al Sadr was not a supporter of the *wilayat i-faqih*, a sentiment that his son shares, and the elder al Sadr's connection to the Hussein government was also a factor that played against IRGC-QF efforts to recruit him into its orbit. Sadeq al Sadr was a vocal opponent of his Shi'a clerical rivals, such as the al-Hakim family, that sought refuge in Iran, and he was believed to have an almost ethnic Arab animosity toward the ethnic-Iranian Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

From 2007–2010, during the height of "special group" attacks on the coalition, former JAM elements, and the surviving *idaara* component of JAM, *Liwa al-Yawm al-Maw'ud*, were at the forefront of this effort to hasten the departure of U.S. and coalition forces from Iraq. The participation of *Liwa al-Yawm al-Maw'ud* in this effort, in coordination with the IRGC-QF, reflects the reality that at that point in time, the IRGC-QF was still building up a dependable network of predominately Shi'a militias in Iraq. What the IRGC-QF sought to accomplish between 2007 and 2010, and what it has sought to accomplish from 2014 to the present, has been to shape the ideological development of the "special groups," maintain influence over them, and have them be recognized as official components of Iraqi state-sponsored security structures.

The IRGC-QF's hopes to continually develop networks of influence to identify, recruit, and mobilize future fighters for a type of "Hezbollah network," while making it difficult to root out the Islamic Resistance from the security structures of the Iraqi state.[215] An important leader within the PMU, the organization's Deputy Commissioner, is one of the Quds Force's most important Iraqi operatives because he determines the day-to-day operations of the PMU organization, utilizing the position inside the office of Iraq's Prime Minister to the advantage of Iran. As a result of this influence, Prime Ministers Adel Abdul Mahdi and Mustafa al-Khadimi have agreed to bring

the al-Sistani backed PMUs under the control of the armed forces, thereby weakening the PMU, but also concentrating Iran's influence over it.[216]

Al Sadr's power within Iraq's Shi'a community represents a threat to the Quds Force and complicates its ability to use its operatives to cement Iranian power inside Iraq's national security structures. The Quds Force is trying to create a durable network of contemporary Iraqi Shi'a leaders that were all part of IRGC-QF's "Islamic Resistance" movement in the 1980s and 1990s as a tool to weaken, threaten, and potentially overthrow Hussein and his government. Iraq's PMU organization is heavily seeded with groups that are led by these Islamic Resistance veterans, which is in contrast to the Sadrist Movement that was not part of the Quds Force's lines of effort in Iraq in the 1980s and 1990s.[217] Al Sadr is a threat to this project because of the relative independence of *Saraya al-Salam* from the IRGC-QF, and because he is trying to use the *Sairoon* Bloc to agitate for "non-partisan" leadership over Iraqi security organizations, including as high as the level of the Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior.[218] Al Sadr, the leadership of *Saraya al-Salam*, and the *Sairoon* Bloc, are following this course of action for a particular reason that is influenced by how the IRGC-QF approached the development of the PMU structure after ISIS captured Mosul in June 2014.[219]

Following ISIS' capture of Mosul, and under the supervision of the late-IRGC-QF commander Qassim Suleimani, IRGC-QF operatives and experienced Iraqi senior Hezbollah network operatives from the Badr organization, *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, *Kata'ib Hezbollah*, and JAM, trained and coordinated the efforts of the constituent militias in the nascent PMU organization.[220] Even the PMU groups that were not part of the Hezbollah network, including *Saraya al-Salam*, and the PMU groups organized in the shrine city of Karbala, such as *Liwa Ali al-Akbar* (Ali al-Akbar Brigade, organized by the Imam Husayn Mosque) and *Firqa al-Abbas al-Qataliyya* (al-Abbas Fighting Division, organized by the Al-Abbas Mosque), were subordinated to the IRGC-QF and Hezbollah networks operatives during several military campaigns against ISIS.[221] This process was a continuation of the Hezbollah network's strategy to infiltrate Iraq's internal security forces, including its SWAT forces, in order to solidify IRGC-QF influence in Iraq as Baghdad grappled with the immense challenge presented by ISIS.[222] At present, al Sadr and the forces that are loyal to him are seeking to prevent this situation from occurring again by contesting the IRGC-QF's total control over the security branches of the Iraqi state. Key elements of *Saraya*

al-Salam and units affiliated with Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani announced their willingness to comply with the order, while many pro-Iranian ones have balked, including *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*.[223]

The *Saraya al-Salam* Constituency

Al Sadr's decision to form *Saraya al-Salam* in June 2014 was his first foray back into being the commander of gunmen since his decision to dissolve JAM in June 2008. The general mobilization of predominately Shi'a armed groups that followed al-Sistani's *fatwa* in June 2014 in response to the threat from ISIS was the catalyst for al Sadr's order to form *Saraya al-Salam*. There remains some doubt over the extent to which al Sadr was already planning to reform a militant organization even prior to the *fatwa* from al-Sistani. This would not be surprising considering that some of the most important IRGC-linked Shi'a armed groups had been mobilizing against the Sunni opposition in northern and western Iraq before the *fatwa* was.[224] In announcing his decision to form *Saraya al-Salam*, al Sadr was also making a public statement to his opponents within Iraq's intra-Shi'a politics that he would not be left on the sidelines during the time period where there was a mad dash to militarize the broader Shi'a community in response to ISIS.[225]

An important factor to reiterate regarding *Saraya al-Salam* is there is a tension within the organization between its idaara components, which represent the part of *Saraya al-Salam* registered with and technically subordinate to the PMU committee, and the larger *ansaar* components of *Saraya al-Salam*, which is inspired by al Sadr and which has been technically demobilized since July 2018. Although the *idaara* component is still inspired by al Sadr, and would not likely move against him if ordered to do so by the PMU committee or Iraq's Prime Minister, the component depends on funding and support provided by the Iraqi government, which gives the government some leverage over it.[226] By contrast, the *ansaar* component is larger than the *idaara* is only informally organized since al Sadr's demobilization order, and functions less as a standing security force and more as a coalition of local, street-level fighting groups which follow the orders of al Sadr with the Iraqi government possessing less leverage over it.[227]

Saraya al-Salam's *ansaar* component is not as potent a military force as the organization's *idaara* component, however it is a more powerful political force that provides al Sadr with the ability to pressure the Iraqi government,

and in some regards Iran, by mobilizing large protests and by maintaining influence in the intra-Shi'a contest for power that is ongoing in Iraq.[228] The *ansaar* component represents the raw, street-level power that al Sadr can wield, as was demonstrated through the protests in Baghdad, Basra, and in other areas of Iraq's southern provinces in 2017 and 2018 and during the nationalist, reform-oriented protests from October 2019 to the present. This component of *Saraya al-Salam* also presents challenges for al Sadr that, if not carefully managed, could undermine his ability to continue building up his stature as a powerbroker and potential kingmaker in Iraq's contentious politics.[229]

First, the *ansaar* component of *Saraya al-Salam* is not organized under a central chain of command, instead it is inspired by al Sadr and following the authority of local leadership, and is therefore more of a "mob" than a military force.[230] Al Sadr can mobilize or demobilize the *ansaar* through the issuance of edicts and by making public statements calling for his supporters to go into action, or to refrain from acting, but this is not the same thing as having direct, chain of command authority over it. Second, although the component is a manifestation of al Sadr's charisma and the legacy of his father's network, it is also a burden on him because there is much overlap between the *ansaar* and the members of the larger Sadrist Movement that depend on him for social services.[231] This has had the effect of making him responsible for providing for the existential needs of people who also happen to be willing to potentially die under his authority. All this responsibility is being placed on al Sadr at a time of low oil prices, therefore, less cash is in the coffers of the Iraqi state to gain access to and redistribute amongst the members of the Sadrist Movement.

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Further, according to interviewees, the followers who heeded al Sadr's call to mobilize into *Saraya al-Salam*, rather than join the Iraqi military, Ministry of Interior armed forces, or even other PMU groups, did so because they were dissatisfied with what they viewed as the ineffective rule of former-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. They blamed him for allowing ISIS to emerge and for failing to provide services that were and still are desperately needed in southern Iraq.[232] Al Sadr's constituency also blamed the Iraqi Security Forces, still

largely controlled by the Badr organization, for failing against ISIS. While it might be understandable that the "official" institutions of the Iraqi state were met with suspicion by al Sadr's supporters, the apparent popularity of *Saraya al-Salam* vis-a-vis the shrine-mobilized PMU groups and the IRGC-backed *Hashd Shaabi*, reportedly has a more complicated explanation. According to interviewees, the appeal of *Saraya al-Salam* versus each of these categories of PMU groups is tightly connected to the socio-political niche that al Sadr and the Sadrist Movement fills within the intra-Shi'a political dynamics in Iraq.[233]

In comparison to the shrine-backed, al-Sistani-affiliated PMU groups, *Saraya al-Salam* is more closely associated with the connection to a "resistance society," which blends well with al Sadr's populist message to his supporters and the Sadrist Movement's general antagonism toward the Iraqi government.[234] Supporters of *Saraya al-Salam* believe in al Sadr's political populism and are, therefore, willing to overlook the fact that within Shi'a jurisprudence he is still only a middle-ranking cleric with the title of *Hujjatislam*.[235] They believe that his authority comes from the power of his political message, which shapes their existential reality. He is consequently worth fighting for and can coexist with the religious authority of other Shi'a *marja'* (most senior Shi'a religious leaders), except for those that support the *wilayat i-faqih* that is promoted by Iran's Islamic Republic.[236] Thus, related to this point, in comparison to the IRGC-backed groups within the PMU structure, *Saraya al-Salam* is not promoting *wilayat i-faqih*. It has the appearance of being "Iraqi" (in the nationalist sense) and therefore has the very important compatibility with majority of Iraqi Shi'a *marja'* who are not proponents of *wilayat i-faqih*.[237] By the time *Saraya al-Salam* was mobilized in June 2014, the IRGC-QF had already recruited the sub-groups of JAM that were amenable to working in relative subordination to the IRGC-QF, as distinct groups independent of a larger umbrella organization such as JAM, or willing to be blended into new, IRGC-QF backed umbrella organizations such as *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* or *Kata'ib Hezbollah*.[238]

A third key aspect that *Saraya al-Salam* inherits from JAM is that it is an organization that, following al Sadr, is as interested in gaining victories in the intra-Shi'a contest for power in Iraq as it is in defeating threats to Iraq from threats, such as ISIS. JAM ultimately was defeated by its Iraqi Shi'a rivals, and how these rivals defeated the organization was by using the official security institutions of the Iraqi state to wage war against it. JAM, although a powerful force on the "Shi'a street" in Iraq, was outmaneuvered and overwhelmed

by state-directed force (which included allying with the U.S. coalition) by its powerful Shi'a, Iraqi government institutionalized rivals, especially the Badr organization and *al-Dawa*.[239] It was also in some places picked apart by the IRGC-QF, which could offer better financial inducements and steadier material support than al Sadr and the Sadrist Movement.[240]

In comparison, *Saraya al-Salam* was from the beginning integrated into the PMU structure as a constituent member with standing equal to all the others.[241] This meant that when the PMU structure was made an official security branch of the Iraqi state in December 2016, *Saraya al-Salam* was also sanctioned by Iraqi state institutions, which provided al Sadr's organization with a "political shield" from the Iraqi government that it did not possess. This official state recognition of *Saraya al-Salam*, and therefore by extension the Sadrist Movement, was a key development for al Sadr and an advancement in the status of his organization within Iraq's official state security institutions that he is incentivized to protect.[242] Al Sadr's political rivals within the Shi'a community generally sought to prevent the Sadrist Movement from gaining significant influence and power within the Iraqi Security Forces, and instead tried to marginalize the movement to the status of violent street gangs that could be targeted at will by the Iraqi state.

However, al Sadr's Shi'a rivals have not been able to diminish his sociopolitical power within Iraq's Shi'a communities, even during the period when he was resident in Iran, which is why *Saraya al-Salam* emerged as one of the more significant PMU groups after al-Sistani's *fatwa* was issued.[243] Moving forward, al Sadr is likely to continue to leverage his political influence to accrue more of a personal role in the security institutions of the Iraqi state, whether to directly determine who leads these institutions within the Iraqi Security Forces, or more likely, to have a veto over who is placed in charge. It is in this competition over the leadership of the Iraqi Security Forces that al Sadr and the IRGC and their allied or subordinate Iraqi politicians and security officials are locked in a delicate dance.[244]

Saraya Al Salam is al Sadr's Leverage in Iraq's Intra-Shi'a Battles

For all the benefit *Saraya al-Salam* provides al Sadr in intra-Shi'a politics, it is crucial to remember the organization is neither an "Iraqi nationalist" movement, nor is it a tool for expanding Iranian influence over Iraq. Iran's gravitational pull on Iraq in general, and the Shi'a communities of Iraq in

particular, is strong enough that neither the Iraqi government and the institutions it oversees nor the Shi'a socio-political movements at the leadership and street level are immune from Iranian influence.[245] Given his family history, what can be said is that al Sadr seeks to balance the influence of Iran with appeals to the ethnic Arab component of Iraqi identity, which does have a qualitative effect on the *Saraya al-Salam* organization as a whole.[246] According to interviewees, *Saraya al-Salam* was mobilized from members of the Iraqi Shi'a community who view al Sadr as an appealing politician, with a populist message that rails against the ineffectiveness of the Iraqi state in general, rather than an almost messianic figure such as was the perception of him during the peak years of JAM from 2004–2008.[247]

Although *Saraya al-Salam* shares many of the features of JAM, a key difference between the two organizations is that the former is likely to maintain a force, whereas the latter was for all intents and purposes dissolved in 2008. In addition, what remained of JAM was picked over by the IRGC-QF throughout the 2009–2010 period. Al Sadr's political power, and his potential role as a member of a future Iraqi government with a ministerial portfolio, will also be a significant factor impacting the future of *Saraya al-Salam*.[248] The current *Saraya al-Salam* force, which is sizable but not the largest PMU group, can be used by al Sadr as leverage to gain more concessions from his political rivals. Therefore, al Sadr's long-standing socio-political power, and newly redeveloped military power, will continue to be actively negotiated vis-a-vis the Iraqi state. The growth of, and influence of *Saraya al-Salam*, will be a major piece for al Sadr to wield in that negotiation.

Summary

The war against ISIS provided al Sadr with a clear pathway to generate enduring influence over Iraq's security structures through *Saraya al-Salam*, which ironically is a result of Iran's desire to have a permanent, parallel, and well-funded organization mostly under the IRGC's influence at the core of Iraq's security regime. *Saraya al-Salam* is a contrast to JAM because the PMU organization has a better-defined command control structure. It has a larger corps of professional and semi-professional fighters, and the funding streams are paid for by the Iraqi state, under the authority of the Prime Minister's office because of an amendment to the Iraqi constitution. Unlike during the height of the power and influence of JAM, *Saraya al-Salam* enjoys

recognition as an official element of the Iraqi security apparatus. It therefore gives al Sadr a legitimate tool recognized by the Iraqi state which he can wield to increase his social, political, and security influence within Iraq.

Chapter 6. Al Sadr, the Independent Nationalist

Muqtada al Sadr's importance in the politics and society of the post-2003 Iraq has waxed and waned at times, but fundamentally, he has consistently been one of the most compelling leaders within both Iraq's Shi'a community and in the country's broader socio-politics. The 2018 parliamentary election was a watershed moment for him and the Sadrist Movement, with the result of the election being that al Sadr became one of the most important and best positioned powerbrokers in Iraqi society and politics. In both the run-up to the election and in its aftermath, al Sadr undertook a shift in perception—especially among commentators who are based in the West—from "firebrand" or "radical," to the more restrained descriptor of "populist;" that is, a legitimate politician responding to the demands of millions of Iraqis suffering from lack of opportunity and basic services.[249] Much of the commentary following the 2018 election seemed to discover al Sadr as a populist, when in reality he had been a populist figure in Iraq since the post-Hussein period began in 2003.[250]

Since the 2018 election, al Sadr went from being viewed as a committed opponent of the West (at best), and an outright agent of Iranian domination in Iraq (at worst), to someone who is the last best hope for Iraq's Shi'a community to push back against Iranian control.[251] Al Sadr's populism in the context of the current commentary about him is intriguing because the signs have always been there, since 2003, to indicate he has been a populist who views his movement's struggle beyond the strict concerns of Iraq's Shi'a community. In particular, he benefitted from image rehabilitation in the West, and to a lesser extent, among the Sunni Arab-dominated states of the wider Middle East, as the Nouri al-Maliki government became more overtly Shi'a sectarian and insular in the years immediately preceding ISIS's rise to power around June 2014.[252]

Al Sadr as a populist figure is one of the most compelling portraits of the man that has emerged in the post-2003 period. Due to the endemic structural challenges that Iraq faces, challenges that are tied most closely to the actions of Iraqis themselves, this is a dynamic that deserves close attention. The protests in Basra, Baghdad, and throughout Iraq, but particularly in the

southern provinces, demonstrate that the Shi'a population, particularly the disempowered underclass, has not lost its ability to mass mobilize. The debate that will drive al Sadr's further rise to power is one over service provision and the accountability of the Iraqi state to Iraq's people. Al Sadr successfully remade himself as a non-sectarian Iraqi nationalist whose goal was to install a new government of technocrats to take on the rampant corruption in the government. In fact, one of the Sadrist Movement's popular slogans became: "Corruption Is Terrorism."[253] Further, it is believed that al Sadr is genuinely committed to following through with governmental reforms under the new government, and al Sadr ordered 34 of his legislators not to seek reelection due to the fact they had been accused of graft.[254]

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Although al Sadr's populist streak has remained relatively consistent since 2003, there have been distinct phases since the fall of the Hussein government that have marked the ebbs and flows of both al Sadr and the broader Sadrist Movement. The authors take the position that al Sadr's populism should be understood in the context of the socio-political movement that his uncle and father created. This movement can be classified as Arab Iraqi nationalist in its outlook but drawing heavily from the narrative of resistance to oppression and lifting the downtrodden that is featured so heavily in Shi'a Islamist discourse and social movements. From the authors' perspective, al Sadr's movement has consistently shown, throughout all the phases of its existence since 2003, it can incorporate non-Shi'a Islamist organizations and individuals into its political agenda for Iraq, and it is in tension with the domination of Iraq by Iran and the limits Iran imposes on Iraq's national sovereignty. The broader question is whether al Sadr's inclinations can be operationalized against Iran? The answer is complicated because al Sadr is not Iran's adversary per se. Instead, it is better to say that since 2003 he has shown a propensity for contesting Iran's dominance over Iraqi leadership decision-making (especially Shi'a), and he has inherited from his father a deep association with Iraq's national "Arab" identity.

While al Sadr can be best characterized as a populist, this adjective should come with the caveat that his populism in the Iraqi context should not be confused with populism as it is routinely described in the Western media

regarding developments in Europe and the United States. Comparing al Sadr to populist leaders in the West, such as Italy's Berlusconi or even President Donald J. Trump, is not the appropriate comparison.[255] The Sadrist Movement always blended Iraqi nationalism and its strong Arab overtones with both the Shi'a sense of redemption from oppression and disempowerment, and elements of the Baathist sense of Arab revival. Sadrists were always uneasy with Iran because of the tensions between Iraq's Arab identity and Iran's Persian identity along with its activist wilayat i-faqih variant of Shi'a Islam. Al Sadr inherited this movement from his father, and the tension between a predominately Iraqi Arab nationalist movement, which utilized Shi'ism as a focus for mobilization, and the Shi'a sectarian parties that had been nurtured on the milk of the Iranian Revolution and the IRGC's "Islamic Resistance" campaign, were clear from the early days after the fall of the Hussein government.

However, the authors acknowledge that an alternative explanation for al Sadr's populism is that he is inherently an "Islamist populist," and at his core he is also a politician who saw an opportunity to contest the unpopular leadership of Iraqi Shi'a leaders who happened to be very close to Iran.[256] This interpretation of al Sadr's politics means that, despite his nationalist rhetoric and willingness to work with political movements and individuals who are not Islamist, he is inherently a Shi'a Islamist leader who will seek a more conservative, Shi'a iconoclastic version of Iraq.[257] Despite his ability to appeal across Iraq's communities, and to non-Islamist political movements, he is inherently a cynical politician who understands that neither Iran nor its competitors are popular in Iraq, and the mood of the Iraqi public since the Nouri al-Maliki government and the ISIS war has been to return back to an Iraq for all Iraqis.[258]

As it was reported to the authors by former General Raad al-Hamdani in Amman, Jordan, in late 2012, and described by the Iraqi analysts Eli Sugarman and Omar al-Nidawi, Anbar and Ninewah governorates experienced violent protests directed against the sectarian Maliki government in December 2012. Al Sadr immediately took the side of the Sunni protestors, supporting most of their demands. He then went on to pray in public with Sunni clerics at one of Baghdad's oldest Sunni mosques.[259] Sugarman and al-Nidawi also state that al Sadr began to issue written statements condemning sectarianism in Iraq: "You cannot fight sectarianism with more sectarianism," he wrote to the Sunnis of Anbar and Mosul in December 2012, a quote

also mentioned to the authors by General Hamdani.[260] In summary, this perspective holds that al Sadr's statements supporting the political and cultural enfranchisement of all sects and religions in Iraq are done for political expediency, not out of a genuine motivation to be an Iraqi nationalist who seeks pan-communal engagement and harmony as a strategic objective in and of itself.[261]

Further, a more extreme version of this analysis of al Sadr as an Islamist populist is that he and his movement are wolves in sheep's clothing, and the hyper-sectarianism of the 2005–2010 period has not left the Sadrist Movement. As reported to one of the authors by a high-ranking Sunni Iraqi leader in August 2019, one interpretation of al Sadr's recent political moves since the 2018 elections is that he is trying to cover a Shi'a sectarian agenda with a cloak of pan-communal harmony. This Iraqi leader stated that, "the heart and soul of Sadr is with Iran."[262] Some Western analysts agree wholeheartedly with this politician, and they go as far as to argue that in the end, although al Sadr may be a bit of a rebel in his opposition to Iran completely imposing its will on Iraq, he is ultimately a sectarian leader who has a history of allowing his followers to wage brutal, sectarian-motivated attacks on fellow Iraqis, often for the benefit of Iran.[263]

While the authors acknowledge al Sadr is a complicated figure who has not entirely broken with Iran and believe he never will completely, the hostile breakup of JAM into direct Iranian proxies (e.g., *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*) between 2008 and 2010 had a major impact on al Sadr's reembracing of the non-sectarian, Iraqi nationalism he had espoused in 2003. Al Sadr's inclination has always been to be an Iraqi nationalist, rather than a Shi'a sectarian warrior. However, it is important to recognize that scholars who have assessed al Sadr's transition back from his Shi'a sectarianism of 2005–2009, which was never a completely accurate description of the role he played, miss that al Sadr did not make this decision for political expediency. Rather than simply a matter of gaining political purchase from defining himself in contrast to the hyper-Shi'a sectarianism of Nouri al-Maliki and his allies, al Sadr adopted his nationalist narrative from a natural place, which was his long exposure to Iraqi Arab (Baathist) nationalism during the Hussein era.

With these alternate analyses of al Sadr's populism in mind, the authors believe the rise of ISIS in 2014 unleashed unanticipated political crises that would ultimately force al-Maliki from office and discredit the Iranian-backed parties in the eyes of their essential Shi'a constituencies. As discussed in

Chapter 5, it was during the 2014–2018 period that *Saraya al-Salam* restored al Sadr's political clout in the intra-Shi'a competition, but his political strategy formulated in 2012 of reaching out to Kurdish and Sunni communities did not fundamentally change. As a result, al Sadr, the independent Iraqi nationalist, achieved new and unanticipated political influence by 2018. While his Iraqi nationalist image might appear incongruent with the U.S. experience with him from 2003–2008, his transition does have historical continuity with his family's legacy and even some of his initiatives in the early years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Ultimately, the authors assess al Sadr had been raised in an environment that promoted Iraqi nationalism, and he was never completely removed from that legacy, either in his actions or his political statements in public. Also, his Iraqi nationalism expressed itself prior to 2012—from the time of the U.S. invasion and even during the worst of the sectarian violence. Nouri al-Maliki had positioned himself as an antagonist against al Sadr on his path to power, from 2007–2009, and as al-Maliki became increasingly tied to IRGC-backed, Iraqi Shi'a groups, al Sadr's natural Iraqi nationalist, pan-sectarian leanings became a clearer contrast to the status quo in Baghdad. While the authors believe it is correct to point out key moments during the al-Maliki administration that al Sadr used to burnish his Iraqi nationalist credentials, focusing on these moments overemphasizes the concept of al Sadr as a cynical politician. These moments also under-represent the reality of al Sadr being an antagonist against al-Maliki and other similarly hyper-sectarian Iraqi politicians. This means, as a reality on the ground, that al Sadr would naturally draw himself into opposition against figures, like al-Maliki, who were tied closely to the IRGC.

Al Sadr Reinvents Himself Post-ISIS

The period spanning the administration of al-Maliki, the rise of ISIS, and the aftermath of the ISIS war, has been a tumultuous one for the Shi'a sectarian parties. Since the ISIS war there has been an increasing appetite among the Iraqi body politic for non-sectarian themes in public life. Muhammad Bazzi, a New York-based Iraqi academic who is a close observer of Iraqi socio-politics and who frequently travels to Iraq, captures the post-ISIS war, post-2018 election magnetism of Muqtada al Sadr best when he stated: "Sadr transformed himself from a sectarian militia leader who oversaw the killings

of thousands of Iraqis to a populist, nationalist, anti-corruption crusader."[264] The authors believe that although al Sadr has been a populist for most of the time since 2003, what changed since the start of the ISIS war and the growing discontent within Iraq, is that al Sadr is much better at retail politics beyond his Shi'a community. What is clear is that the 2018 election cycle vindicated the Sadrist Movement as the new torchbearer of this "Iraq First" approach to mass politics not tied to sectarian mobilization, although al Sadr has long been associated with this political approach. *Saraya al-Salam*'s general restraint helped to burnish this image.[265]

Al Sadr has been pushing his political movement toward this type of Iraqi First platform since at least 2011 to better serve the needs of his constituents, and to expand his influence beyond the Shi'a community.[266] It was during the 2011–2012 period that al Sadr began to be described by Western mass media as not only a "populist cleric" with a mass audience, but also as a "kingmaker" and as a man who could "break the deadlock" in Iraqi politics.[267] The idea of al Sadr as a man who could move beyond the business of cynical, corrupt, and money-grubbing sectarian "warlordism" in Iraq's politics was well-established before the 2018 parliamentary elections. However, the same Western mass media that described al Sadr as a populist in the 2011–2012 period still referred to his activities in the buildup to the 2018 parliamentary elections as "startling reinvention into a populist."[268] Clearly, al Sadr has been a difficult politician to get the read of for many commentators in the West, although some analysts have captured the spirit of al Sadr and his political dynamism quite well. Perhaps the best description of the promise, and potential peril, of both Iraqi and foreign actors investing too much hope in al Sadr as the white knight who can deliver Iraq from its troubles was provided by Thanassis Cambanis, a correspondent and analyst who spent several years living in post-Hussein Iraq:

> In the fifteen years since the American invasion toppled Saddam Hussein from power, Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr has distinguished himself from other emerging Iraqi leaders with his endurance, iconoclasm, and unpredictability. He has cut a bedeviling and at times magnetic figure in his country, and he is one of the few sectarian leaders whose popularity has crossed sectarian lines.[269]

Ultimately, the authors argue the 2018 election shows that certain bread and butter issues, especially corruption and poor social services provision

in an oil-rich country, are more important than sectarianism. Indeed, the *Sairoon* bloc itself was reportedly born from the social networking and coordination between the Sadrist Movement and more secularist and leftist political groups, like the Communist Party, during the 2016 mass protests in Baghdad's Green Zone over poor social services and public access to utilities.[270] Al Sadr emerged from the 2018 election cycle as the preeminent Iraqi populist leader, and because of Iraq's endemic and challenging issues, al Sadr as a populist is a brand that is plausible—though problematic—across Iraq's political spectrum and among its diverse identity communities. Fundamentally, al Sadr tapped into the roots of his father's movement, but instead of just focusing on a Shi'a base of mobilization, he sought out alliances across Iraq. For Iran, this is a development that is likely to be most unwelcome, especially because the Iranians, and the money the IRGC throws around Iraq's political, security, and cultural sectors, gets lumped in with the general corruption in Iraqi politics. Al Sadr has a large constituency for his movement, which is likely to grow in the foreseeable future and in opposition to Iran's main agents in Iraq.

Al Sadr has a large constituency for his movement, which is likely to grow in the foreseeable future and in opposition to Iran's main agents in Iraq.

Summary

For personal and political reasons, al Sadr is naturally an Iraqi nationalist, although his level of sectarian fervor ebbs and flows depending on the context and the situation that is developing for his community inside of Iraq. His Iraqi nationalist orientation, even if it is at times tinged with Shi'a chauvinism, is the result of his long-term exposure to his father's movement. During the initial phase of the insurgency against U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq, from 2003 to 2005, al Sadr was keen to demonstrate that his social and political movement was not simply a Shi'a sectarian organization, and it could appeal to a broader constituency of Iraqis, especially Sunni, who also opposed the coalition occupation. It was not until the violent attacks against the Shi'a communities in Baghdad, Diyala, and in the Shi'a-majority southern governorates by Sunni extremist organizations that JAM began to escalate into sectarian violence against the Sunni Arab community of Iraq. Al Sadr's inability to control JAM once the sectarian conflict kicked in during the early apart of 2006 had more to do with his failure, or his inability,

to impose command and control on what was essentially a coalition of militias that saw him as the avatar of their rage. Throughout the worst period of sectarian violence, from 2006 to 2008, al Sadr still used nationalist, non-sectarian rhetoric frequently, and by the time the sectarian violence had been controlled and JAM all but disassembled, al Sadr returned to public rhetoric that emphasized an Iraqi nationalist agenda, without significant sectarian ideology as a part of it. Al Sadr's current political position is consistent with a longer family history of Arab and Iraqi nationalism, though oriented for religious reasons on serving the Shi'a population. His political position has long sought to diminish the role of Shi'a groups who seek to impose Iranian wilayat i-faqih clerical dominance over the Iraqi government. For this reason alone, al Sadr is compelled to seek broader ethnic and sectarian support in Iraqi politics. As a result, the U.S. and al Sadr have common strategic political interests, despite having a history of conflict.

Conclusion

Since the mid-1990s, U.S. policymakers and the military have viewed Iraq through the prism of ethno-sectarian politics, and the government established in 2005 reinforced this view in practice. As a result, the U.S. supported successive Shi'a-majority governments run by the very parties most clearly backed by Iran because they appeared on the surface to be effective counterinsurgency and counterterrorism partners. Despite the strategic mistake of institutionalizing sectarianism in the Iraqi electoral process, the Iraqi nationalism cultivated throughout the twentieth century remained a viable identity construct that continued to struggle for representation. Indeed, political blocs representing it won pluralities in two of the last four Iraqi elections despite having little to no external backing. The surprising victory of al Sadr and *Sairoon* in May 2018 represented a rare moment of opportunity for the U.S. to reconsider its counterterrorism strategy and possibly support a neo-Iraqi nationalist movement that marginalizes the utility of sectarian extremists and terrorists to their Iraqi constituencies in the first place.

To be fair, interpreting the political agenda of al Sadr and his brand of neo-Iraqi nationalism is subject for debate, even among Iraqis. According to a former high-ranking member of Iraq's Atomic Energy Council and former dean at Baghdad's Technology University, al Sadr is determined in his calls for ending the U.S. military presence in Iraq.[271] This interviewee argues that the difference between al Sadr and the other Iranian backed groups in Iraq is the nature of the relations and the type of the given role. In his view, the political game inside Iran is based on two players: the so-called hardliners and reformers. The goal of the ultimate authority in Iran, the Supreme Leader (and those closest to him) is to support the same objective. According to the interviewee, the objective of the Iranian leadership in Tehran is essentially to confuse the West by keeping Western states focused on the "fake, beautiful" face of the reformers. Further, he argues that Iran is playing the same game in Iraq by creating the two same groups: hardliners (Hadi al-Ameri, the Badr Corps, *Asaib Ahl al-Haq* and others) and reformers (al Sadr's group and others).

This former high-ranking scientist suggests that since the creation of ISIS, Iran has been successful in destroying any possible meaningful Sunni

role in the Iraqi government and, at the same time, using Hadi al-Ameri to contain all the corrupt Sunni leaders by bringing them to work with his coalition, under his leadership (e.g., Khamis al-Khangar and most key Sunni politicians became part of Hadi al-Ameri's *al-Bina'a* group). According to this interviewee, the assigned role for al Sadr is to act as what he terms the "beautiful" face of the reformers to contain the Sunni public and confuse Iraq's Arab neighbors and the West.

The assessment of the interviewee is this: Iraq is passing through a dangerous transitional stage to create a new governing system which is something more dangerous even than Hezbollah in Lebanon, in the manner of the Iranian Islamic Revolution Guards style. The current weak and corrupt Sunni politicians are not able to stop the Iranian backed Shi'a plans. Iraq is on its way to becoming totally inside Iran's pocket and all that exists to delay this plan is some Sunni and Shi'a public opposition (which is targeted by the daily selective assassinations, as with Iraqi novelist Ala'a Al Mashdhoub), in addition to a weak Kurdish opposition. The game played by the leadership in Iran is now working in Iraq. In summary, for this interviewee, there is no difference between al Sadr and *Sairoon*, the *Badr* Corps, *Asa'ib Ahl al Haq* or any other Iranian backed militia. Al Sadr is fully backed by the Iranians, but with a different role than groups like those led by Hadi al-Ameri and Qais al-Khazali.

However, there is another potential explanation for the future of al Sadr in Iraq that should be considered. This explanation is provided by a former Iraqi minister whose spouse is a high-ranking member of the Iraqi Foreign Service and whose family comes from one of the most powerful Shi'a tribes in Iraq.[272] According to this explanation, al Sadr, while not necessarily seeking to antagonize Iran, is enough of a "wild card," with his own political brand to cultivate, that he is a challenge for the Iranians to control. From this perspective, al Sadr is best understood not as a tool for Iran, or a sword to be used against the Iranians in Iraq, but as an authentic, pragmatic Iraqi politician who is seeking to have significant (some would say powerbroker-like) influence over the political future of Iraq.

Taking these perspectives into consideration, al Sadr's independence from Iran should be judged along a spectrum. In this view, the Sadrist Movement in general is more independent from Iran than most other Iraqi Shi'a political movements. However, as with all the sectarian, ethnic, and political groups in Iraq, there is no escaping the gravitational pull of Iran, and al

Sadr cannot avoid engaging pragmatically with Iran to advance his (and his movement's) political interests. Further, it would be fantasy to suggest that al Sadr would have an epiphany and decide to support an American-led effort to combat Iran in Iraq, not only because that would be a huge political risk for him personally, but also because he is not a natural ally of the United States. Al Sadr's entire persona has in one way or the other been shaped by his opposition to the U.S.-led coalition's occupation of Iraq from 2003–2011, and since the conclusion of the counter-ISIS campaign in Iraq, to hastening the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq.

However, al Sadr's political coalition, which has included a significant Sunni Arab component and secular nationalists, requires U.S. involvement to counterbalance Iran's influence in Iraqi politics through its patronage of political parties and PMUs. However, from an American perspective, al Sadr's populist, nationalist rhetoric, and political platform presents a dilemma not just for Iran, but also his opponents within the Shi'a establishment. That same Shi'a establishment has facilitated Iran's ability to expand its influence inside of Iraq, and Iran's close association with it also makes Iran a convenient scapegoat for the populist anger that is bubbling out from the Shi'a street in Iraq. These political tensions and al Sadr's and al-Sistani's long-term battle for the soul of Iraqi Shi'ism against Iran present the best-case scenario for mitigating the influence of both Iran and violent extremists in Iraq.

U.S. planners should be wary not to assume that al Sadr could be anything more than a transactional partner for the United States in Iraq, and not because of Iran's influence, but because of the way his constituency expects him to stand in resistance to the United States. The Sadrist Movement is not pro-American, it is not pro-Iranian, and neither the United States nor Iran is an easy partner for al Sadr to support. Fundamentally, the Sadrist Movement is a populist political current within Iraq that stands in opposition to the elite of the Iraqi state, and the current hardships that many members of the Shi'a communities in Iraq are facing. It should also be noted that, if forced to choose, al Sadr would go with Iran, because Iran is Iraq's neighbor and he has a personal history of taking refuge in Iran and being mentored by Iranian clerical elite, even if he remains an opponent of imposing *wilayat i-faqih* inside of Iraq.

When viewed from an integrated campaigning lens, though, the al Sadr-U.S. tension is surmountable. Operationally, the trick is to identify

the desired effect on the ground and then determine which partner nation, intergovernmental or multination entity, or private or non-profit actor meets with *Sairoon*'s approval. The best the United States can hope for from the Sadrist Movement is that in its battle with the pro-Iran Shi'a establishment inside the Iraqi government, al Sadr and the *Sairoon* bloc weaken the relative power of IRGC-QF allies such as the Badr organization and *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*. The goal in this way would be to reinforce the neo-Iraqi nationalist trend and thereby break the institutionalized fear that contributes to a never-ending cycle of ethnic and sectarian extremism in Iraq. Lest this happens, the U.S. can expect to keep returning to the area, with SOF most likely to bear much of the burden.

Acronyms

IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
JAM	Jaysh al-Mahdi
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NPR	National Public Radio
OSINT	open-source intelligence organization
PMU	Popular Mobilization Unit
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SCIRI	Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq
ISCI	Supreme Islamic Committee of Iraq
UIA	United Iraqi Alliance
UN	United Nations
USG	U.S. Government
WWI	World War I

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130. Patrick Cockburn interview with Sayyed Mohammed al Musawi, Najaf, 1 June 2007.
131. Mallat, "Religious Militancy in Contemporary Iraq," 728.
132. Bayless, "Who is Muqtada al-Sadr?," 140; Aziz, "The Role of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr," 208.
133. Transcript of videotaped meeting shown on WGBH, *Frontline*, 26 June 1991.
134. Dawisha, "National Identity and Sub-State Sectarian Loyalities in Iraq," 245.
135. Nussaibah, "Set Up to Fail," 3; Dawisha, "National Identity and Sub-State Sectarian Loyalities in Iraq," 252.
136. Bunton, "From Developmental Nationalism," 643–644; Nussaibah, "Set Up to Fail," 3–4.

137. See Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, and Tripp, *A History of Iraq*.
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140. Cole, "The United States and Shi'ite Religious Factions," 545–547.
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148. Cole, "The United States and Shi'ite Religious Factions," 556.
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154. Rizvi, "Political Mobilization and the Shi'i Religious Establishment," 1299–1313.
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165. Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army*, 14–16; Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr*; Rory Stewart, *Prince of the Marshes: And Other Occupational Hazards of a Year in Iraq* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006).
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169. Stewart, *Prince of the Marshes*.
170. Flanagan, "Al-Sadr and Me."
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172. Interviews with Iraqi analysts from Baghdad and Maysan; see also Bayless, "Who is Muqtada al-Sadr?," 145–147.
173. Interviews with Iraqi analysts from Baghdad and Maysan; see also Bayless, "Who is Muqtada al-Sadr?," 147–148.
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175. Interviews with Iraqi analysts from Baghdad and Maysan; see also Schmidhauser, "A Balancing act: The Sadrist Movement," 113–118.

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271. This person is someone author Carole O'Leary has known since 2006 and is not named here to protect his identity and security in Iraq and the environs.

272. This former minister also cannot be named here to protect his identity and security in Iraq, as well as that of his wife.