

IRAQ IN TRANSITION: COMPETING ACTORS AND COMPLICATED POLITICS

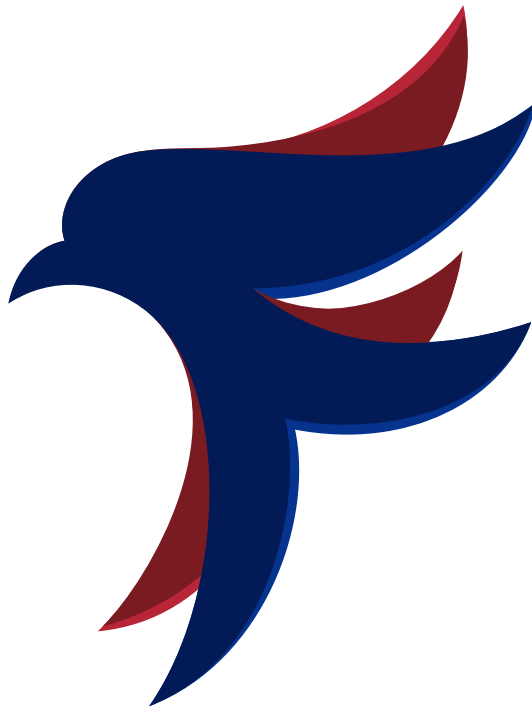
MAKING SENSE OF THE SADRISTS: FRAGMENTATION AND UNSTABLE POLITICS

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FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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ABSTRACT

Iraq's Sadrist movement, led by populist Shi'i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, has been at the heart of Iraqi politics since 2003. The movement's political strategies have shifted dramatically during this time, encompassing militant insurgency, sectarian violence, electoral politics, and reform-oriented street protests. Consequently, despite their prominence, the Sadrists' shifting positions mean they remain one of the most complex and frequently misunderstood movements in Iraq. This is further compounded by the near total absence of engagement between the Sadrists and Western, particularly American, governments. As Sadr has changed his movement's politics again, this time toward a counter-protest stance, U.S. policymakers are once more grappling with the dilemmas posed by a movement that is both powerful and obscure.

EXPLAINING INSTABILITY ON SADRIST POLITICS

Iraq's Sadrist movement, led by populist Shi'i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, has been at the heart of Iraqi politics since 2003. Its political strategies have shifted dramatically during this time, encompassing militant insurgency, sectarian violence, electoral politics, and reform-oriented street protests. Consequently, despite its prominence, the Sadrists' shifting positions mean it remains one of most complex and frequently misunderstood movements in Iraq. This is further compounded by the near total absence of engagement between the Sadrists and Western, particularly American, governments. As Sadr has shifted his movement's politics once more, this time toward a counter-protest stance, U.S. policymakers are once more grappling with the dilemmas posed by a movement that is both powerful and obscure.

Iraqi politics have been destabilized by the U.S. drone strike that killed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani and de facto leader of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, al-Hashd al-Sha'bi) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. The strike also created a leadership vacuum for the country's Iranian-aligned Shi'i paramilitaries. Stepping into this space, Sadr is trying exploit the new situation to reclaim a powerful political role in Iraq. His strategy is to smother and extinguish Iraq's anti-establishment protests (which have been marked

by anti-Iranian and anti-PMF sentiments) and to pressure former paramilitary rivals to coalesce around his Sadrist movement as the new central pillar of Iran's IRGC network in Iraq.

This strategy appears to contradict earlier stances taken by Sadr from 2015, which saw his movement cooperating with demonstrators and with secularist parties in a major protest movement.¹ These protests challenged Iraq's political elites, the PMF, and Iran's role in sustaining their grip on power. Even in the early phases of the October 2019 Revolution, Sadrists were active in the demonstrations, and Sadrist paramilitaries defended other protesters from the violence of state and Iranian-aligned parastatal forces. By contrast, Sadr's more recent stances have forced a reassessment of earlier hopes that his movement could play a role in advancing much-needed political reform and in pushing back against Iranian influence in Iraq. U.S. policymakers now are grappling with how to respond to the Sadrists, whose combination of raw power and unpredictable political behavior presents a perplexing and dangerous dilemma.

In fact, since 2015, Iraq's protest movements and the PMF² have become the two most powerful, but mutually antagonistic,³ forces struggling not only for control of the Iraqi state, but also over competing concepts of statehood, national mythologies, narratives of martyrdom, and the

1 For context, see, Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "Social Brokers and Leftist-Sadrist Cooperation in Iraq's Reform Protest Movement: Beyond Instrumental Action," *The International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* vol. 51, no. 2 (May 2019), pp. 257-280; and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics," London School of Economics Middle East Centre, June 22, 2018, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement_Published_English.pdf.

2 Renad Mansour and Faleh Abdul Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 27, 2017, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>; and Nancy Ezzeddine, Matthias Sulz, and Erwin van Veen, "The Hashd is dead, long live the Hashd! Fragmentation and consolidation," Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, July 2019, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/the-hashd-is-dead-long-live-the-hashd.pdf>.

3 On confrontations between protesters and PMF, see, Renad Mansour and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "The Basra Blueprint and the Future of Protest in Iraq," Chatham House, October 8, 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/basra-blueprint-and-future-protest-iraq>; and Renad Mansour, "Iraq's New Republic of Fear: How Youthful Protests Provoked an Authoritarian Turn," *Foreign Affairs*, November 20, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2019-11-20/iraqs-new-republic-fear>.

fundamental categories of Iraqi political identity.⁴ They also diverge in their orientations towards the American and Iranian roles in Iraqi politics.⁵ The Soleimani-Muhandis assassination has further exacerbated this divide. While protesters voice their desire to extricate Iraq from U.S.-Iranian conflict, the PMF has prioritized what it calls “defense” of the resistance axis and vengeance for the killing of two of its revered military leaders. These groups, along with much of the Shi’i Islamist elite, are now prioritizing the removal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Yet this priority has only furthered their alienation from the younger generation of protesters, who regard such moves as a distraction from their priorities: employment; better services; and individual and collective dignity.⁶

The Sadrists have been uniquely located as a movement that straddles these increasingly important domains—protest politics and Shi’i paramilitarism. This alignment has given Sadr access to a greater diversity of political resources than many other Iraqi leaders. It has been Sadr’s deft deployment of these resources that explains his intermittent success in carving out an important role in Iraqi politics. However, this aspect of the movement has contributed to its fragmentation, making a coherent Sadrist politic more difficult to fashion. In this sense, the Sadrists’ main strength (diversity of resources) and weakness (lack of internal cohesion) are inexorably bound together.

This fragmentation has long historical roots, stretching back to the organizational structure of the movement’s pre-2003 social base. Fragmentary dynamics also played a central role in the movement’s decline from the height of its strength during the civil war (circa. 2006)

to the splintering of its paramilitaries and Sadr’s political isolation and retreat to Qom by 2009.⁷ However, from 2015, fragmentation in the Sadrist movement has reemerged and grown as conflict between the protest movement and the PMF has intensified. Nor are these dynamics contained to the Sadrists’ fissiparous paramilitary wing—normally the focus of analyses—but are also visible in broader sections of the movement.

This chapter aims to make sense of the Sadrist movement since its reemergence as a major force in Iraqi politics from 2015. It argues that instability in Sadrist politics results from the movement’s organizational fragmentation and, relatedly, Sadr’s own reluctance and inability to be tied down to a concrete political vision or programme. This fragmentation not only impedes command and control over the movement, but also gives rise to various Sadrist factions with competing interests and distinct visions for the movement’s place within Iraqi politics and society. The ties that bind the movement’s core leadership to a younger generation of poor Iraqi Shi’a—who constitute its social base—are also under strain. As the Sadrist movement fragments, its political behavior becomes more unstable. Sadr’s inconstancy and the violent Sadrist attacks on protesters mean that he has burned his bridges with former allies in Iraq’s protest movement. However, he will struggle to maintain consistent relations with former rivals in the PMF. His accommodation with Iran entails a loss of autonomy. Yet, Iran will not regard Sadr as a reliable partner, but as merely a short-term fix to the post-Muhandis vacuum. Consequently, while today Sadr again looms large over Iraqi politics, it could be that his latest maneuvers will entail his long-term decline as an independent force.

4 Renad Mansour, “Iraq After the Fall of ISIS: The Struggle for the State,” Chatham House, April 4, 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/iraq-after-fall-isis-struggle-state>; and Fanar Haddad, “Understanding Iraq’s Hashd al-Sha’bi,” The Century Foundation, March 5, 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/?agreed=1>.

5 These different orientations do not break down into pro-U.S. versus pro-Iranian camps. The protest movement seeks to position itself as rejecting both U.S. and Iranian interference. However, it is also far more critical of Iranian influence in Iraqi politics than those factions aligned with the PMF.

6 The Soleimani/Muhandis assassination has not galvanized Iraqi Shi’a behind an anti-U.S. politics nor re-sectarianized Iraqi politics. Rather, it produced a consolidation of the Shi’i Islamist bloc at the level of elite politics, while driving a further wedge between this elite and many ordinary Iraqi Shi’a.

7 Marisa Cochrane, “The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement,” Institute for the Study of War, 2009, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Iraq%20Report%2012%20Sadrist%20Movement%20Fragmentation.pdf>

Who are the Sadrists?

The remainder of this introduction provides an overview of the Sadrist movement, delineating its basic features and the historical roots of Sadrism's fragmentation. It then surveys the Sadrists' shifting positions in Iraqi politics and how these have been variously interpreted by analysts and policymakers. Since many existing analyses have explored the rise and fall of the movement between 2003-2010,⁸ the focus here is on the more recent period, 2015-2020, when the Sadrists reemerged. The introduction closes by drawing together these strands into a conceptual account of organizational fragmentation and how this destabilizes Sadrist politics.

The remainder of the chapter then applies this interpretive framework to the Sadrists by addressing three key facets of the movement. The first deals with Sadr and his leadership role, covering his political orientations and particularly his relationship with Iran. The second and third sections look beyond Sadr to broader components of the movement and unpack their involvement in popular protest politics and Shi'i paramilitarism. The chapter concludes with recommendations that show how this understanding of the Sadrists as a fragmenting movement can help policymakers to grapple with the dilemmas posed by its unpredictable behavior.

Prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the importance of the Sadrists was initially overlooked by both Iraqi exile groups and those planning the Anglo-American war. However, during the 1990s, the movement, led by Sadr's father, Ayatollah Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr (Sadr II), grew rapidly on the social terrain of Iraq's rural and urban Shi'a poor. These were communities deeply affected by years of war and sanctions. While Iraq's other Islamist movements had shifted their activities abroad, the Sadr II movement remained in Iraq. It became a powerful religious phenomenon, a millenarian movement promising spiritual salvation while also addressing the more this-worldly concerns of Iraqi Shi'a: dignity for those doubly marginalized on the basis of class and sectarian identity; and easement of material hardships through charitable works and social services.

The Sadr II movement transformed Iraq's Shi'i religious field into a site of rival leadership and loyalty to Saddam's Ba'athist state. It became the only significant internal opposition after the 1991 Intifada.⁹ In taking on this role, Sadr II—never considered a credible religious authority by leading clerics in Najaf or Qom¹⁰—came to acquire a more unorthodox, but no less potent, status. He was a revered, even messianic, leader whose authority was characterized less by traditional markers of religious scholarship, and more by his proximity to ordinary Iraqis and his sharing in their suffering and ways of life. To his followers, Sadr II was the "White Lion," a reference to his white

8 "Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabilizer?" International Crisis Group, July 11, 2006; Marisa Cochrane, "The Fragmentation of the Sadrism Movement," Institute for the Study of War, 2009; and Nicholas Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015).

9 Much debate surrounds the extent to which a formal or informal agreement between Sadr II and the Ba'ath regime explains the former's rise to a dominant religious position in Iraq. If such an agreement did exist, then it had certainly broken down by the time of the Sadr II assassination. For those claim some form of agreement existed, see, Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2012), p. 249; Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival and the Struggle for Iraq* (London: Scribner, 2008), p. 79; "Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?" International Crisis Group, July 11, 2006, p. 3; Amatzia Baram, "Sadr the Father, Sadr the Son, the 'Revolution in Shi'ism,' and the Struggle for Power in the Hawzah of Najaf" in *Iraq Between Occupations*, eds. R. Zeidel, A. Baram, and Achim Rohde eds. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 144; and for a counter view, see, Abbas Kadhim, "The Hawza Under Siege: A Study in the Ba'ath Party Archives," *IISBU Occasional Paper 1* (June 2013).

10 In fact, in 1998, when Sadeq al-Sadr sent representatives to Qom with a view to building networks and establishing offices there, they were widely rejected by the Iranian clerical elite. This included Ayatollah Kazem Hussein al-Ha'iri, who expelled Sadr's representative, Abu Saif al-Waili, from his house and accused him of working for Ba'athist intelligence agencies, (ironic given that al-Ha'iri would later become—for a time—a *marja'* of the Sadr movement). See, Rashid al-Khayoun, *al-Islam al-Siyyasi fi-l-Iraq* (United Arab Emirates: al-Mesbar, 2012), p. 383.



Supporters of Sadr's alliance in Liberation Square, Baghdad, celebrating after a successful election campaign in 2018 (Zoheir Seidanloo/Wikimedia Commons)

beard and courage in refusing to bow to Saddam Hussein. His assassination by the regime in 1999 elevated Sadeq al-Sadr to a level of exalted martyrdom that the even the Shi'i *ulema* in Najaf and Qom were forced to acknowledge and pay lip service to.

However, following his assassination, leadership of the Sadrist movement quickly fragmented and its already minor role in Iraq's exile opposition politics further diminished.¹¹ This compounded the Sadrists' insulation from broader transformations in Islamist politics during the 1990s, when ideological "moderation" and engagement in cross-ideological cooperation was noted in groups like Da'wa and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (SCIRI).¹² Da'wa, in particular, had also developed into a more professional political group, acquiring systematic political ideas and a clearer division of labor between clerical and lay-political authority.¹³ By contrast, the Sadr II phenomenon remained a clerical movement par

excellence. To the degree that it sought political power, it was by subsuming politics under religious-clerical leadership. This was articulated by Sadr as an Iraqi version *wilayat al-faqih*, but without a fully developed notion of an Islamic state.

In fact, the Sadrists had little interest or use for formal politics (there was no space for contesting formal politics in Ba'thist Iraq) since the movement was focused primarily not on seizing the Iraqi state, but on wresting control of Iraq's Shi'i religious establishment from its more traditional leadership, represented at the time by the *marja'iyya* of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. This struggle was intra-clerical—over Iraq's Shi'i religious institutions and resources and the foundations of religious authority. A politics of anti-imperialism (targeting America and Israel in particular) and social justice and equality were also prominent features of the Sadrists' ideological makeup. However, these appeared

11 For more, see, Ali Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, (London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 61. The perspective of American war planners was largely shaped by these exile opposition groups.

12 These ideological changes were partly driven by the requirements of cooperation with non-Islamist groups in exile politics, and involvement with Western governments. During this period, according to Ali Allawi, Da'wa, which was designated a terrorist group by the State Department in 1985, gradually shifted from a revolutionary to a "more acceptable social democratic party, with Islamic roots," while SCIRI, too, "began to accept the pragmatist imperative in its dealings with the west." Allawi, *The Occupation*, p. 74.

13 Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst & Co., 2008), p. 265.

more as themes and motifs than as programmatic or systematic political ideas.

Post-2003, Sadr continued his father's anti-imperialist and social justice rhetoric and set his sights—particularly between 2003–2004—on seizing control of the Najafi *hawza*.¹⁴ However, Sadr's movement has diverged from its predecessor in several important ways. It participated in electoral politics from 2005 and competed with other political groups for control of the post-2003 Iraqi state. Today, Sadr oversees the largest bloc of Iraqi parliamentarians and controls many senior administrative positions within various ministries. The Sadrist have also mobilized one of Iraq's largest paramilitary groups (Jaysh al-Mahdi, rebranded Saraya al-Salam in 2014).

Yet, despite these diverse activities, the core of the movement, its most senior leaders and advisors, is populated by religious-clerical networks, many of whom constituted the nucleus of the Sadr II movement prior to the invasion.¹⁵ Thus, while there are important continuities between the pre- and post-2003 Sadrist movements, they are not one and the same. Rather, post-2003, the Sadr II clerical networks and organizational base were repurposed by Sadr and his allies for militant insurgency and later, professional politics. Consequently, the movement's point of origin in the 1990s contains the roots of its post-2003 fragmentations.

The Roots of Sadrist Fragmentation

The Sadrist movement was built out of Sadr II's pre-2003 organizational and symbolic

base constituted by clerical networks whose financial assets and authority were linked to their contestation of Iraq's Shi'i religious spaces. Control of these institutions and resources allowed the Sadr II movement to expand and penetrate deeper into local communities via the provision of legal and social services. This base was a powerful one for social mobilization, helping the Sadrists to become a formidable force shaping Iraq's post-2003 politics. However, it contained the roots of the movement's fragmentation.

The organizational base—a network of religious and administrative institutions adopted and created by Sadeq al-Sadr and which later became known as the Office of Martyr al-Sadr (OMS)—spanned urban and rural divides and integrated with existing patterns of local social organization (e.g., rural-tribal structures). This rootedness in local contexts meant the movement was only weakly integrated hierarchically. Moreover, Ba'thist repression of the Sadrist movement during the 1990s targeted the networks of *wukala'* (agents or representatives) who played a key role in the transference and distribution of movement resources (including religious taxes and duties). One consequence of this repression was a further decentralization and informalization of the OMS network and its resources (i.e., these were collected and distributed locally, often by trusted *hawza* students).

A further factor for fragmentation related to the movement's clerical form of authority. This was generated and transferred primarily via informal-interpersonal relationships (proximity to Sadeq al-Sadr), not via institutionalized or formal rule-bound processes.¹⁶ It was an inherently unstable process since status within the movement and access to movement resources were not anchored in a persistent institutional framework, but relied on fluid relationships that could be

14 The Battle of Najaf and militant insurgency launched by the Sadrists, ostensibly against the U.S. occupation, was a war for control of the physical institutional apparatus of the Shi'i religious field. Sistani was forced to draw in tribal forces to repel Sadrist attacks. Ultimately, it was U.S. military power to secure a demilitarization of the Shi'i religious field and thus implicitly underwrote Sistani's dominance of the field.

15 Examples include: Mustafa al-Ya'cubi; Ahmad Shaibani; Mohammed al-Ya'cubi; Muhammad Tabataba'i; Riyadh al-Nouri; Qais al-Khaza'li; Jabar al-Khafaji; Walid al-Kuraymawi; and Asa'd al-Nasiri, among others.

16 The importance of informal-interpersonal social ties in the transmission of clerical authority has been explored in other contexts. See, Elvire Corboz, *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Network* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 44–45.

downgraded or terminated suddenly. This also made the question of succession following Sadeq al-Sadr's death a matter of intense intra-clerical competition. No formal rules determined leadership, and multiple clerics with close ties to Sadr II, religious standing reflecting their levels of *hawza* training, and their own social bases of support could stake a leadership claim.

These features of the pre-2003 Sadrist movement made it extremely adaptable for rapid mobilization following the Anglo-American invasion in 2003. Perhaps most crucial, its local embeddedness and its symbolic legitimacy owing to the movement's unique status as the main domestic opposition to the Ba'thist regime were resources lacked by the Sadrists' competitors—the exiled political groups that returned to Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion.

However, the leadership vacuum that followed Sadr II's assassination only intensified when the Ba'thist regime collapsed. The campaign to seize control of the movement was immediately and fiercely contested within its clerical stratum by various actors with their own religious authority and, crucially, personal ties to Sadeq al-Sadr.¹⁷ Muqtada al-Sadr was never able to fully stamp his authority on the broader constellation of Sadrist trends. His movement continued the pattern of strong local organization, but weak hierarchic and institutional integration. Jaysh al-Mahdi—mobilized through the organizational framework of the OMS—thus came to reflect the same fragmentary pattern of powerful local control at street or neighborhood level, but weak central authority.

In the early post-invasion years, the Sadrists deployed their diverse resources (political, economic, coercive, and symbolic) to cement a powerful political role. The movement achieved this by acting as both spoiler (working outside

the system through militancy and street politics) and stabilizer (participating in formal politics and the intra-elite pacts that anchored the political system). Nevertheless, fragmentation of the movement, particularly within its paramilitary wing, led to a series of crises that culminated in Sadr's temporary withdrawal from politics and suspension of his movement's paramilitary activities between 2008-2009. At this stage, the movement's political power was reduced, and it began an internal restructuring.

The Evolution of the Sadrist Movement 2015-2020

The 2015-2020 period saw a revitalization of the Sadrist movement as a political force. This was based partly on Sadr's success developing new relations with previously hostile societal and political groups. These bridge-building efforts can be traced back to 2010, but they only began to bear fruit from 2015.¹⁸ At this stage, the Sadrists began openly cooperating with secularist groups involved in Iraq's 2015-2016 mass protest movement. This eventually developed into the 2018 electoral alliance, Sairoun lil-Islah (Marching Toward Reform), that went on to win the May 2018 national elections. However, the Sadrists did not abandon their engagement in other domains, whether formal politics, the administrative state, or the Shi'i paramilitary sphere. The contradictions inherent in these engagements led to various contrasting interpretations of what all this meant for Sadrist politics.

Sadrist involvement in the 2015-2016 protests, and in the Sairoun alliance, *appeared* to signify an important shift away from previously dominant forms of Islamist and identity-based politics.¹⁹ Not only did the Sadrists break away politically

17 This included more senior clerics, such as Iraq-based Ayatollah Muhammad al-Ya'cubi (who was nominally head of Sadeq al-Sadr's Private Office in Najaf post-2003, but soon split with Muqtada al-Sadr to form the Islamic Virtue Party, or al-Fadhila); Iran-based Ayatollah Kazem al-Hairi; and more junior clerics within the Sadrist trend, such as Sheikh Qais al-Kha'zali and Sheikh Muhammad Tabataba'i.

18 Robin-D'Cruz, "Social Brokers"; and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "The Cultural Antecedents of the Leftist-Sadrist Alliance," POMEPS Religion, Violence and the State in Iraq, October 2019, pp. 75-89.

19 Faleh 'Abd al-Jabar described the protests as representing a shift "from identity politics to issue politics." See, Faleh A. Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics," LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series, June 22, 2018, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement_Published_English.pdf.

from the sect-based Shi'i Islamist alliance,²⁰ but, within the context of the protest movement, the Sadrists also abandoned Shi'i Islamist and Sadrist symbols. Sadr, for instance, forbade his followers to raise images of either himself or Sadeq al-Sadr during protests.²¹ Instead, the Sadrists adopted the more 'moderate' and universalistic politics of their newfound secular allies.

This focused on calls for ending the *muḥāṣaṣa ṭā'fiyya*, the informal sectarian quota system by which Iraq's political factions divide control over the Iraqi state and which protesters blamed for cementing corruption and sectarianism in Iraq's political system.²² The movement also called for building "*al-dawla al-madaniyya*" (the civil state) and for a technocratic government committed to anti-corruption and improving Iraq's economy. Sadr even stated during a television interview: "I'll say this despite the '*amāma* [turban] on my head, we tried the Islamists and they failed miserably, it's time to try independent technocrats."²³

On the surface, this seemed a radical reorientation for an Islamist movement previously known for its sectarian violence (particularly during the peak of the civil war between 2006-2008), messianic Shi'i religiosity, and puritanical social conservatism.

The Century Foundation's Thanassis Cambanis wrote, "Sadr's political makeover amounts to a groundbreaking and encouraging transformation," which "sets an example for [those] interested in exiting the confining boxes of sectarianism and patronage and mobilizing broader, more fluid and inclusive idea- or policy-based movements."²⁴ Cambanis also stated that Sadr had abandoned Islamism and fully embraced secularism,²⁵ and had mobilised his followers behind calls for the creation of a "civil, secular state."²⁶ Mehiyar Kathem, in a piece for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, echoed this interpretation, stating that Sadr himself was "championing . . . secular-oriented politics."²⁷ These analyses were accompanied by a shift in media narratives and policy debates towards viewing Sadr and his movement as "aligned with Western attempts to reign in Iranian influence," and even as "anti-Iranian."²⁸

However, for other observers, the new Sadrist politics was merely further evidence of the movement's unpredictable and erratic nature, often attributed to Sadr's personal characteristics. He is sometimes portrayed as a skilled, power politics player, a "Machiavellian" operator who "fine tunes" his movement's political strategies

20 The National Iraqi Alliance (NIA)/The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) first formed as an umbrella for Iraq's Shi'i Islamist movement to jointly contest the 2005 elections.

21 Robin-D'Cruz, "Social Brokers."

22 For a discussion of the *muḥāṣaṣa ṭā'fiyya*, see, Toby Dodge, "Tracing the Rise of Sectarianism in Iraq after 2003," memo presented at The Comparative Politics of Sub-state Identity in the Middle East LSE MEC workshop, June 29, 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/13/tracing-the-rise-of-sectarianism-in-iraq-after-2003/>; and on its transition from a sectarian to a party-based logic, see, Fanar Haddad, "The Waning Relevance of the Sunni-Shia Divide," The Century Foundation, April 10, 2019, <https://tcf.org/content/report/waning-relevance-sunni-shia-divide/?agreed=1>.

23 Muqtada al-Sadr, November 21, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c7WAefoUw0&feature=youtu.be>.

24 Thanassis Cambanis, "Can Militant Cleric Muqtada al-Sadr Reform Iraq?" *The Century Foundation*, May 1, 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/can-militant-cleric-muqtada-al-sadr-reform-iraq/>.

25 Thanassis Cambanis, "Social Engineering in Samarra An Iraqi Shia Militia Experiments with Nationalism in a Sunni City," *The Century Foundation*, May 2, 2019, p. 1, https://production-tcf.imgix.net/app/uploads/2019/04/30131807/Cambanis_Samarra_FinalPDF.pdf.

26 Cambanis, "Can Militant Cleric Muqtada al-Sadr Reform Iraq?," p. 6.

27 Mehiyar Kathem, "Iraq's New Statesman," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 3, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/iraq-s-new-statesman-pub-76244>.

28 Michael D. Sullivan, "I Fought Against Muqtada al-Sadr. Now He's Iraq's Best Hope," *Foreign Policy*, June 18, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/18/i-fought-against-muqtada-al-sadr-now-hes-iraqs-best-hope/>.

to maximize his own power.²⁹ Alternatively, focus is frequently placed on Sadr's supposed mental instability and immaturity (or that of his followers), which is thought to render the movement's political behavior unpredictable. In this view, Sadr "lurches haphazardly to and fro, and his movements might as well be described as policy by divination."³⁰ These interpretations led some analysts to question Sadr's true intentions, and to cast doubt on his reliability as a partner in a reform-oriented project or as a vehicle for pushing back against Iranian influence.³¹

In reality, Sadrist politics are less stable and coherent than notions of "moderation" or a "groundbreaking transformation" would suggest. Nor does Sadr exert the sort of absolutist top-down control over the movement that the Machiavellian image of "fine tuning" denotes. However, the focus on psychology-oriented factors to explain the movement's incoherent and unstable politics has tended to obscure the important role of organizational fragmentation in shaping and constraining Sadr's behavior. The contradictions inherent in the Sadrists' post-2015 entanglements, i.e., broader contextual factors, have further exacerbated these fragmentary dynamics. Consequently, the Sadrists' victory in the 2018 parliamentary elections was not the first step toward a more coherent, programmatic, and reformist Sadrist politics, as some have argued.³² Rather, it proved merely a staging post for further

degeneration into a politic that is more chaotic and multi-directional.

A Conceptual Account of Fragmentation and Unstable Politics

An explanation of Sadrist politics should be rooted primarily in organizational and institutional factors, and not exclusively in analysis of Sadr and his intellectual and psychological characteristics. It is the effects of these organizational factors on the movement's ideological orientations, political interests and command and control mechanisms that best explain instability in Sadrist political behavior.³³ Three key features of the Sadrist movement are of central importance in this context:

1. The movement's social embeddedness in local communities means its resources and control processes are often bottom-up and resistant to vertical integration. This social embeddedness is rooted in the pre-2003 social base, which functioned as the organizational framework for the Sadrist movement following the 2003 invasion, including for the mobilization of Jaysh al-Mahdi. The result was multiple nodes of power

29 Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York: Scribner, 2008), p. 127; "Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?" International Crisis Group, July 11, 2006, p. 24; and Michael Weiss, "Moqtada al-Sadr, the Donald Trump of Iraq," *Daily Beast*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/moqtada-al-sadr-the-donald-trump-of-iraq>.

30 Nibras Kazimi, "Iraq: What was that all about?" *Talisman Gate*, May 10, 2016, <https://talisman-gate.com/2016/05/10/iraq-what-was-that-all-about/>; Elijah J. Magnier, "Moqtada al-Sadr and Iran: A Long Love-Hate Relationship," *Middle East Politics*, September 15, 2019. This view of Muqtada's mental instability is widely held by his detractors. For example, during his interrogation by the Central Intelligence Agency, Qais al-Khaz'ali stated that "the core problem" with the Sadr movement was that "Muqtada himself is not stable, he is constantly changing his mind and this reflects on his followers. . . . This mind changing creates too much waste, obstacles, and hardships because you do not understand his right, clear thinking in order to dialogue or converse with him." "Qayis al-Khazali Papers: Tactical Interrogation Reports (TIR)," Report no: 200243-007, *Homeland Security Digital Library*, p. 17.

31 For examples of this skepticism from different sides of the political divide, see, Phillip Smyth, "Beware of Muqtada al-Sadr," The Washington Institute, October 19, 2016; <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beware-of-muqtada-al-sadr>; and, from the opposing political perspective, see, Elijah J. Magnier, "Moqtada al-Sadr and Iran: A Long Love-Hate Relationship," The Centre for Research on Globalization, September 15, 2019, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/moqtada-al-sadr-iran-love-hate-relationship/5689495>.

32 Thanassis Cambanis, "Can Militant Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr Reform Iraq?" *The Century Foundation*, May 1, 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/can-militant-cleric-moqtada-al-sadr-reform-iraq/>.

33 This explanatory framework draws on social institutional theory developed by literature dealing with the effectiveness of insurgent groups. See, Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (London: Cornell University Press, 2014).



Jaish al-Mahdi army military parade, Najaf, Iraq, 2014. (Demotix/Ahmad Mousa)

anchored in local contexts, such as a Jaysh al-Mahdi commander who exerted control over a city street or neighborhood. Consequently, Sadr has consistently faced challenges from below and struggles to impose control and uniformity on local leaders emerging from these distinct bases.

2. Weak horizontal integration further limits central control and fragments ideological coherence across the movement. This lack of integration applies both *between* and *within* different movement factions. Consequently, different factions acquire distinct interests and political perspectives that are not necessarily shared with other parts of the movement (e.g., paramilitary versus professional politics or clerical factions). Moreover, even *within* these distinct factions, the absence of horizontal integration can allow for diverse local interests to flourish at the expense of faction-wide coherence (e.g., Sadrist paramilitary commanders whose interests and perspectives may be highly parochial and resistant to integration into a more unified paramilitary organization with a coherent ideology).

3. Central control and ideological coherence are further limited by the Sadrist movement's **lack of hierarchic integration via institutional structures**. This issue relates to the movement's informal and highly personalized mode of authority, which primarily governs access to

movement resources. Sadr's authority has also been repeatedly contested from within the movement's clerical elite by actors with their own personal ties to Sadeq al-Sadr. In all such cases, the underlying operation of authority remains personalized. Formal institutions—which would otherwise generate central control, organizational stability, continuity and homogenizing integration—are secondary and often ad hoc. They fill-in for specific collective action problems that the movement cannot solve through its primary informal practices.

Taken together, these features produce a movement whose resources and forms of control are locally situated, whereas central discipline is weak. Sadr's leadership often consists in broker-type practices within, and between, heterogeneous factions pursuing different, and sometimes contradictory strategies and politics. To reveal how these features of the movement play out, the remainder of this chapter explores the diverse strategies of different Sadrist actors and groups who have contested the movement's politics. It will discuss the politics of Sadr himself as “the man in the middle” who mediates between these competing factions. It will then look beyond Sadr to other groups within the Sadrist movement and unpack two important spheres of action that have shaped their politics: first, Iraq's protest politics; and second, the PMF and Sadrist paramilitaries.

THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE: THE POLITICS OF MUQTADA AL-SADR

Current analyses of Muqtada al-Sadr's ideology and politics are not sufficient to explain the political behavior of the Sadrist movement partly because Sadr does not possess or seek to articulate a coherent and systematic political ideology. However, and perhaps more importantly, because organizational fragmentation prevents the emergence or imposition of a coherent politics by its leader. Nevertheless, Sadr is indisputably the most powerful single actor in the movement, and clarifying the contours of his political thinking, ideological influences, and the nature and limitations of his leadership role are the essential starting point for analysis of the broader movement.

Muqtada al-Sadr's Political Ideology

Sadr's ideology has typically been understood as a form of Shi'i Islamism structured around three poles. First, the religious-political authority of the *marja'iyya* of Ayatollah Sadeq al-Sadr (some have claimed Sadr, like his father, therefore supports the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* and ultimately seeks the status of *wali amr al-muslimin* in Iraq).³⁴ Second, anti-American/anti-imperialist politics infused with social justice tropes (this has Shi'i religious-Qur'anic roots as well as those linked to a more modern leftist-Islamist syncretism). And

third, an Iraqi or Arab ethno-nationalism and a Shi'i-centric sectarian politics.

These characteristics are best understood not as coherent, stable core features, but as highly situational and often rhetorical. For instance, Sadr's anti-Iranianism, and his Arab ethno-nationalism, relate to intra-clerical struggle with the non-Iraqi or non-Arab *ulema* of the Najafi *hawza*. Consequently, its centrality in Sadrist politics has waxed and waned, in part, according to the fluctuating status of relations between Sadr and Sistani.³⁵ Similarly, anti-Iranian or Iraqi nationalist rhetoric has not stopped the Sadr from developing extensive ties with Iran, particularly via the latter's IRGC networks.³⁶

Sadr's support for the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* is also ambiguous. It is reasonable to think that Sadr continues to embrace his father's stance on this crucial question. However, Sadr II's interpretation of *wilayat al-faqih* did not contain a fleshed-out theory of an Islamic State. This reflected the conditions in which Sadr II and his movement operated in 1990s Iraq, i.e. one in which contestation of the Iraqi state was not a viable avenue for political mobilization. Consequently, in contrast to Khomeini, the state itself was not present in a substantive way in the Iraqi ayatollah's thinking on religious leadership.³⁷ In 2013, Sadr himself stated that he was a follower of *wilaya ammah*.³⁸ This has been interpreted as expressing support for a maximalist interpretation of clerical leadership in politics. However, this too

34 Amatzia Baram 'Sadr the Father, Sadr the Son, the "Revolution in Shi'ism," and the Struggle for Power in the Hawzah of Najaf" in *Iraq Between Occupations*, eds. R. Zeidel, A. Baram, and Achim Rohde (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 149.

35 Consequently, the nationalism of the Sadrist movement, particularly in the early post-2003 phase—during which its contestation of the Shi'i religious field was most intense—took a particular form of Arab ethno-nationalism (distinct from the form of nationalist politics the movement practiced from 2015).

36 Contrary to what has been claimed by Cockburn and others, that the Sadrist-IRGC relationship only began after the Battle of Najaf in 2004, it seems that it actually started almost immediately after the fall of the regime in 2003 and expanded after the Battle of Najaf.

37 See Sadr II's most important work, *Ma Wara al-Fiqh*.

38 Muqtada al-Sadr, interview on al-Hurra TV, 13 December, 2013.

may be misleading, since *wilaya ammah* covers a wide variety of interpretations as to the range of prerogatives that the Shi'i *ulema* can take over from the Imam (whose line of succession had ended).³⁹ The more maximalist position – represented by the Islamic Republic of Iran – is typically referred to as *wialya ammah mutlaqa* (i.e. absolute guardianship), which Sadr did not explicitly endorse. It is plausible that Sadr's statement regarding *wilaya ammah* was intended to be interpreted by Iraqis in the maximalist sense. However, this it is not definitive proof. Nor does it indicate Sadr's adherence to the model of *wilayet al-faqih* practiced in Iran since, like his father, Sadr does not possess such a coherent and systematic notion of an Islamic state.

From 2015, analysts, such as Thanassis Cambanis, Mehiyar Kathem, and Michael D. Sullivan argued that Sadr had undergone an ideological transformation, embracing political secularism and abandoning austere Islamism and identity politics for more issue-based politics. The evidence for this was his engagement in pro-reform protests and coalition politics with secular-leftist groups. However, arguments that Sadr has fully embraced political secularism,⁴⁰ the creation of a secular state,⁴¹ or is championing a secular-oriented politics⁴² are misleading. These narratives mischaracterize Sadr's politics on these specific issues and do not account for how Sadr's political behavior is not tied to any systematic ideological framework.⁴³ In reality, Sadr's own statements and actions reveal a more ambiguous picture regarding his political views, particularly on secularism and the civil state.

The view that Sadr has embraced political secularism and is seeking the creation of a secular state in Iraq, appears to be rooted in a conflation of two terms in Arabic with overlapping but not coterminous meanings: *'ilmaniyya* (secularism) and *madani/al-dawla al-madaniyya* (civil/the civil state). These differences are significant since "civil state" has a broader and more ambiguous range of meanings than secularism, and has been adopted by a range of Islamist actors.⁴⁴ For some of these individuals and groups, the conceptual language of a "civil state" has cashed out in concrete terms as little more than a distinction between a civilian and military form of government.⁴⁵ In short, while "secularism" denotes a more-or-less coherent political doctrine, "civil state" frequently functions as a strategic discourse whose utility for a diverse range of ideological actors lies primarily in its ambiguity. It would be misleading, therefore, to regard Sadr's apparent endorsement of a civil state as expressing his support for political secularism.

Moreover, Sadr was initially resistant to the "civil state" language that was the ideological centerpiece of the 2015-2016 protests and subsequent Sairoun electoral coalition. In mid-2017, the two sides privately discussed substituting "civil state" with a "citizenship state" (*dawlat al-muwāṭana*), which Sadr felt had weaker secularist connotations. One senior political operative involved in these discussions told the authors at the time: "Sadr told us that talk of a civil trend, or a civil state, provokes the Islamists and creates opposition and distortion, so we say 'a citizenship state.' Sadr tells us 'we and you are

39 See entry 'Wakālah al-ʿĀmmah,' in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0839?_hi=12&_pos=1.

40 Cambanis, "Social Engineering in Samarra," p. 1.

41 Cambanis, "Can Militant Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr Reform Iraq?" p. 8.

42 Kathem, "Iraq's New Statesman."

43 Patrick Cockburn, for example, has argued, "The Sadrist had always been antisectarian and Iraqi nationalists . . . [and the] Sadrist movement was historical anti-Iranian." Cockburn, *Muqtada*, p. 167.

44 This includes the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the *marja'iyya* in Iraq. See, Annette Ranko & Justyna Nedza, "Crossing the Ideological Divide? Egypt's Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2016): p. 521; and Mark Farha, "Arab Secularism's Assisted Suicide: A Brief History of Arab Political Discourse on Religion and the State," *The Century Foundation*, April 25, 2019, <https://tcf.org/content/report/arab-secularisms-assisted-suicide/>.

45 Farha, "Arab Secularism."

national forces, a national and Islamic current, not civil [*madanī*] but national [*waṭanī*].”⁴⁶

Nor was this ambivalence in Sadr’s political thinking vis-à-vis secular and *madanī* politics merely a tactical matter. In part, such a portrayal would miss Sadr’s reluctance to articulate, or be held accountable to, a concrete political vision of any sort. Clues pointing to this reluctance, but also to a persistent ideological divergence between Sadr and Iraq’s secularists, can be gleaned from the guidance that Sadr provided to his followers. These are Sadr’s responses to questions from ordinary Sadrist during the period of the secular-Sadrist convergence.⁴⁷

Here, Sadr consistently refused to be drawn into giving definitive statements of his political ideology. Rather, he claims that politics is for the Iraqi people to decide and, by extension, not for clerics to impose. For instance, one question asks: “Are you a supporter of a pluralistic Islamic state which secures the rights of all Iraqis?” Sadr responds:

*I am not an advocate of an Islamic state or any other type of state. I call for the political path to be in the hands of the people, and what the people decide should be the path that Iraq follows.*⁴⁸

Similarly, another follower asks: “Should the Iraqi constitution be based on the noble Qur’an, or on positive [secular] law, and what is the position of the Sadrist line [*al-khaṭ al-ṣadrī*]⁴⁹ on these two possibilities?” Sadr responds:

*In truth, I absolve myself of this matter. I do not intervene in this question, whether it should be Islamic or non-Islamic. Personally, I prefer the Islamic, but it remains for the Iraqi people to decide the constitution.*⁵⁰

This reluctance to “intervene” in questions of political ideology may seem strange given Sadr’s active role in Iraqi politics. However, this political engagement should not obscure the fact that Sadr is both a religious and political actor. In other words, Sadr does not seek to predicate his own authority and legitimacy primarily on political terms, but to carefully calibrate an appearance of distance from politics. This approximates to a “supervisory” role, or, as Sadr himself frequently describes it, a “paternalistic” (*abawīyya*) relationship between clerical leadership and politics.⁵¹

On the question of the civil state, Sadr has given more a more detailed response. Thus, a follower asks: “There is wide circulation in Najaf for adopting the concept of a civil state. What do you understand by this concept, and the role of religion within a civil state?” Sadr’s response reveals his reluctance to adopt the terminology of a civil state, preferring a “citizenship state,” but also his broader opposition to secularism:

*The civil state [*al-dawla al-madaniyya*] or, more properly, the citizenship state [*dawlat al-muwāṭana*] is one that gives everybody a single identity regardless of religion, sect or ethnicity. However, the point of dispute arises from the*

46 Interview conducted by authors in Iraq, August 6, 2017. The issue of secularism, and its relation to the country’s leftist politics, is particularly charged in Iraqi political discourse owing partly to the infamous anti-communist fatwas issued in 1960 by Najaf-based Ayatollah Muḥsin al-Hakim, which forbade membership of the Iraqi Communist Party and charged the latter with atheism.

47 This is a religious practice—Istiftā’—and therefore carries more weight than political rhetoric. It does not, however, seek to lay out a systematic political ideology. Sadr’s responses to questions on the civil trend-Sadrist convergence have been collected in a single volume, see, al-Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr, *Hiwar al-Tayyar al-Dini (al-Islami) ma’ al-Tayyar al-Madani* (Najaf: The Institute for the Heritage of the Martyr al-Sadr, 2015).

48 al-Sadr, *Hiwar al-Tayyar*, p. 10.

49 Sadrists sometimes describe their movement using the phrase *al-khaṭ al-ṣadrī* (the Sadrist line) as opposed to *al-tayyār al-ṣadrī* (the Sadrist trend). The former emphasizes its religious-genealogical character.

50 al-Sadr, *Hiwar al-Tayyar*, p. 11.

51 Here Muqtada models himself on the Najafī *marja’iyya*.

*claim that this is not achieved unless secularism [ilmaniyya] is followed by taking religion out of politics. [By contrast,] I say that this cannot be applied except through the Islamization of society and its culture on a fundamental level, and the organization of true Islam and the spirit of justice and equality through tolerance and genuine brotherhood.*⁵²

Secularism, therefore, is rejected in favor of a unity arrived at via the Islamization of society from below. This is a standard clerical position that seeks, again, to distance religion from politics by focusing on non-political aspects of Islamist activism. In this view, secularism is kept off the table, since in a fully Islamized society, the question of political secularism will not arise.

The Sairoun alliance eventually deployed the language of both a “civil state” and a “citizenship state,” suggesting a shift in Sadr’s orientation toward the former between 2015 and 2018 (when Sairoun was first launched).⁵³ However, this shift should not be over-interpreted. In Sairoun’s manifesto, the “civil state” was couched primarily in terms that allude to questions of sovereignty, national independence, strong state institutions and security. More contentious issues around the role of religion in state and society were assiduously avoided.⁵⁴

This points to the potential strategic utility of the “civil state” language for Sadr in the particular context of his movement’s competition with Iranian-backed elements of the PMF.⁵⁵ In this view, the language of a civil state functions as a useful means of differentiation by which Sadr seeks to delegitimize these rivals and position himself as

the defender of the sovereignty and integrity of the Iraqi state, particularly its security apparatus. Consequently, its wider ideological implications vis-à-vis Sadr’s perspective on secularism may be limited.

Muqtada al-Sadr and Iran

Sadr has frequently been described as “anti-Iranian.”⁵⁶ However, while Sadr has often challenged Iranian interests in Iraq, this relationship is not a zero-sum conflict, nor does it reflect Sadr’s consistent application of an Iraqi nationalist ideology. Rather, Sadr is engaged in multiple competitive arenas (e.g., religious, paramilitary, political), each of which structures the dynamics of his cooperation and conflict with Iran in distinct ways. Consequently, Sadr’s orientation toward Iran is ambiguous and frequently confounds analyses that want to place him in a pro- or anti-Iran box. Boxing Sadr in this way is largely unhelpful to understanding how the relationship between the Sadrist movement and Iranian religious, political, and military actors varies according to context.

In the religious sphere, the basis of Sadr’s own authority and his ideological center of gravity remains the *marja’iyya* of Sadeq al-Sadr. At times, this has implicated Sadr in similar dynamics of intra-religious struggle as those practiced by his father. This applies to both Najaf and the Iranian clerical establishment based in Qom. Today, however, Sadrist competition with the Najaf-based *marja’iyya* has largely dissipated, as Sadr has, for now, accepted a subordinate status in the religious sphere. One of his political advisors told

⁵² al-Sadr, *Hiwar al-Tayyar*, pp. 40-41.

⁵³ Sairoun launched under a banner reading: “For building a civil state [*al-dawla al-madaniyya*] . . . a state of citizenship [*dawlat al-muwāṭana*] and social justice.” Sairoun launch event, January 15, 2018.

⁵⁴ A full translation of Sairoun’s manifesto can be found in appendixes of Benedict Robin-D’Cruz, “The Leftist-Sadrist Alliance; Social Movements and Strategic Politics in Iraq” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2019), pp. 300-304.

⁵⁵ Renad Mansour, “Iraq Votes 2018: Electoral Mobilization Strategies,” Institute for Regional and International Studies, May 18, 2018, http://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/IraqVotes2018_MobilizationStrategies1.pdf.

⁵⁶ Michael D. Sullivan, “I Fought Against Muqtada al-Sadr. Now He’s Iraq’s Best Hope,” *Foreign Policy*, June 18, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/18/i-fought-against-muqtada-al-sadr-now-hes-iraqs-best-hope/>; and Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York: Scribner, 2008), pp. 166-167.



Following the assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis in January 2020, Sadr saw an opportunity to revive his political fortunes by seizing a more central role within the resistance axis. The removal of Muhandis, in particular, threw the Shi'i Islamist paramilitary sphere open to greater contestation. Sadr saw an opportunity to step into this space as his best hope of securing a new political role for himself that aligns more closely and consistently with Iranian interests.

the authors that Sadr tends to discuss his political moves (typically through indirect channels, but sometimes directly) with Sistani and seeks to ensure alignment and harmony between them.⁵⁷

The irremovable commitment to the *marja'iyya* of Sadeq al-Sadr remains a limiting factor on Iranian ideological penetration of the Sadrist movement as a whole. One implication is that Iran is not likely to regard the Sadrists as dependable partners since their integration with the IRGC cannot progress as far along the ideological axis as other Iraqi Shi'i paramilitary groups. This explains Iran's preference with splintering Sadrist paramilitaries and subordinating them to a broader military structure that falls under Iranian ideological as well as operational control (i.e., the PMF under Muhandis).

Nevertheless, it is the paramilitary dimension of the Sadrist movement that has proven the most conducive to Iranian influence. Here, the imperatives of paramilitary mobilization and collective military action have allowed for deeper penetration of Sadrist networks by the IRGC and its Iraqi allies.⁵⁸ It is not surprising, therefore, that current fragmentary dynamics in the Sadrist movement are emerging around some of its clerical leadership, who are more committed to the protest movement, and its paramilitary leadership, who are more closely linked to Iran and embedded in the IRGC's paramilitary networks in Iraq.⁵⁹ Iranian leverage over Sadr thus correlates with the varying centrality of violence

and coercion within Sadr's strategies.

Politically, Sadr has consistently probed the limits of his autonomy from Iran and, until quite recently, has been the most powerful Iraqi political actor challenging Iranian interests in Iraq.⁶⁰ However, particularly since the Sadrists' electoral victory in May 2018, Iran has sought to rein in Sadr's disruptive politics. The explosion of a mosque in Sadr City in June 2018—where Saraya al-Salam was said to have stored munitions—killing 20 and wounding over 90, came during a critical period of negotiations between Sairoun and Fatah over government formation. Although reported as an accident, Sadr likely interpreted the incident as a punishment or a threat from the IRGC.

Iran has used Sadr's presence in Lebanon and Iran to exert greater pressure and influence over him and to isolate Sadr from “negative influences” (secular activists and politicians who had close relations with Sadr from 2015). Sadr's aides insist that he is resident in Iran for religious training in Qom and to spend time with family (Sadr's surviving brother, Murtada al-Sadr, resides permanently in Iran).⁶¹ However, Sadr had become increasingly concerned for his own survival in the face of threats emanating from Sadrist splinters and other paramilitaries within the IRGC's Iraq-based networks whose power has grown considerably in recent years.⁶²

A drone strike on Sadr's home in Najaf in early December 2019 was only one particularly visible manifestation of these threats.⁶³ One important

57 Interview conducted by the authors with senior Sadr political advisor, November 15, 2019.

58 For a full discussion of these actors and networks, see, Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, “The Leftist-Sadrist Alliance: Social Movements & Strategic Politics in Iraq,” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2019), chp. 3.

59 For example, see, discussion below on dispute between Sadrist cleric Sheikh Asa'd al-Nasiri and Saraya al-Salam Commander in Chief Kazem al-Issawi (AKA Abu Do'a al-Issawi).

60 Although Sadr cooperated with Hadi al-'Ameri's Iran-backed Fatah Alliance in the 2018 government formation process, he resisted Iranian plans vis-à-vis particular ministerial appointments (e.g., Minister of Interior), and conflicted with Prime Minister 'Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis over the formation of a Hashd air force in September 2019. Iraq analyst Kirk H. Sowell has argued: “For all of the negatives that can rightly be said about them, Sadr's bloc has been the most steadfast force against Iran-backed militias' creeping effort build a permanent militia sub-state.” Nevertheless, this resistance to Iranian interests and allies in Iraq occurs within fluid but powerful limits explored in this chapter.

61 Based on multiple conversations with senior Sadrists in late 2019 and early 2020.

62 The recent growth in strength of these different formations has been detailed most closely by Michael Knights. See, Michael Knights, “Iraq's Expanding Militia Army,” *CTC Sentinel*, August 2019.

63 “Drone attack targets Iraqi cleric's home following deadly attack on protesters,” *France 24*, December 7, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20191207-drone-attack-targets-iraqi-cleric-s-home-following-deadly-attack-on-protesters>.

narrative that circulated in Iraq was that Sadr had bowed to Iranian pressure to step aside and not obstruct the violent crackdown on protesters by the Iraqi government and IRGC-linked paramilitaries. When questioned about these theories, one senior Sadrist refused to directly link specific threats to Sadr's residence in Iran, but did confirm that Sadr has consistently been subject to dangers of this sort.⁶⁴ Thus, despite victory in May's elections, Sadr found himself in a defensive posture, his political role diminished as he appeared to retreat to the periphery once more.

However, following the assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis in January 2020, Sadr saw an opportunity to revive his political fortunes by seizing a more central role within the resistance axis. The removal of Muhandis, in particular, threw the Shi'i Islamist paramilitary sphere open to greater contestation. Sadr saw an opportunity to step into this space as his best hope of securing a new political role for himself that aligns more closely and consistently with Iranian interests. The Soleimani-Muhandis assassination may have convinced Sadr that he is also on a U.S. hitlist, pushing him further into Iranian arms.⁶⁵ Sadrist social media frequently cites the threat of a U.S. drone strike on Sadr as justification for his residence in Iran. Sadr's leverage with Iran depends largely on the demonstrative effect of his ability to mobilize and de-mobilize protesters. In other words, for Sadr, the protest movement became a bargaining chip, which he seeks to trade with Iran to shore up his future position in what he expects to be Iran-dominated Iraqi politics.

The reality of Sadr's attempt to reach a new accommodation with Iran became visible as his rhetoric towards the protest movement became more critical. Sadr warned of the protesters' "intransigence," criticized their messaging vis-à-

vis the religious authorities, and rebuked their "deviation" from the "correct path."⁶⁶ Equally significant, on January 13, 2020, Sadr was pictured at a meeting in Iran with important PMF commanders: Abu Wala al-Walai (Kata'ib Sayyid Al-Shuhada); Laith al-Khaza'li (Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq); Akram al-Ka'bi (Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba); and Abu Dua Al Issawi (Saraya al-Salam). This meeting generated controversy given that most protesters blame these PMF factions for much of the violence directed at the protest movement.⁶⁷ Following this meeting, a pattern of tit-for-tat violence between Saraya al-Salam and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq—ongoing since the start of protests in October—came to a halt.

In late January 2020, Sadr attempted to withdraw his followers from the protest movement. By early February, he was using Sadrist paramilitaries—the so-called "Blue Helmets"—to violently seize control of protest spaces (including the famous Turkish Restaurant in Baghdad's Tahrir Square). Following public outrage over this anti-protest violence, and particularly an incident in Najaf that left seven killed and scores wounded, Sadr announced a demobilization of the Blue Helmets. However, this has been a demobilization in name only, with Sadrist paramilitaries removing their distinctive hats, but remaining in the streets. Saraya al-Salam now controls access to the deserted Turkish Restaurant, the symbol of Iraq's October Revolution.⁶⁸ Sadr was never a revolutionary, but from the perspective of broad sections of Iraq's protest movement—many of whom had always doubted Sadr's authenticity as a reformer—he had now definitively become a counter-revolutionary actor.

The Sadrist defense of Sadr's behavior towards the protest movement hones in on five main issues. First, they argue that removing the U.S. presence in Iraq is a necessary first step to curtailing Iranian influence in Iraqi politics since it

⁶⁴ Interview conducted by the authors with senior Sadr political advisor, November 15, 2019.

⁶⁵ This message is likely being fed to Sadr during his residence in Qom.

⁶⁶ This appeared to be based on hoax materials created to discredit the protest movement. See, Salih Muhammad al-Iraqi, Twitter, January 9, 2020.

⁶⁷ Renad Mansour and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "The Basra Blueprint and the Future of Protest in Iraq," Chatham House, October 8, 2019.

⁶⁸ This is based on conversations between the authors and several protesters who regularly attend Tahrir Square.



January 2020 protests in Baghdad. (Kariot/Wikimedia Commons)

is the U.S. presence that provides the pretext for Iran's own involvement. Second, provocative U.S. actions and rhetoric (especially the assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis) have pushed the Sadrist into closer alignment with Iran. Third, they argue the protest movement itself is too fragmented and has failed to come up with plausible candidates for prime minister. As one senior Sadrist told the authors, "Many will regret the wasted time and blood of the protests." Fourth, they argue elements of the protest movement have been infiltrated, or are being manipulated, by political entities, including those beholden to the United States and the Gulf countries. And finally, they claim Sadr is still supporting the core demands of the protesters, including their calls for electoral reform and early elections.⁶⁹

This moment is a transformative one for Sadr, who is now defying the popular sentiments driving protests across central and southern Iraq. The sense of betrayal among former allies and friends of the Sadrists is palpable. One senior activist involved in cooperation with the Sadrists wrote

that, no matter what moves Sadr makes next, the cleric has "terminated all partnership with the protesters," and "shattered the framework for cooperation."⁷⁰ A line has thus been crossed that Sadr cannot reverse; he will not be able to recover what he has now lost. At the same time, Iran and its Iraq-based paramilitaries, also, do not see Sadr as a dependable ally, and will look to isolate and side-line the cleric when the opportunity arises. There are also important sections of the Sadrist movement that are disappointed and dismayed by Sadr's reorientation. In seeking to exploit a crisis for short-term gain, Sadr risks a return to political isolation and may well have sealed his fate—in the long term—as a declining force in Iraqi politics.

⁶⁹ This is based on multiple conversations and interviews with various middle-ranking and senior Sadrists between January 27, 2020 and February 3, 2020.

⁷⁰ Renad Mansour and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz. "After Latest Turn, is Muqtada al-Sadr Losing Influence in Iraq?" Chatham House, February 12, 2020.

PROTEST POLITICS AND THE SADRIST MOVEMENT

Sadr's positions vis-à-vis protest politics in Iraq since 2015 have been shaped and constrained, at least in part, by the distinct perspectives and orientations of sections of the Sadrist movement who have become more deeply involved in this form of politics, but also elements who have resisted engagement with secularist groups. Consequently, this section looks beyond Sadr to these broader parts of the movement, addressing its base (meaning ordinary rank-and-file members), the clerical elite, and Sadrist intellectuals and cultural activists. It will also draw into the analysis the role of secular activists and political figures who engaged with the Sadr movement from 2015.

A key difference between the 2015-2016 protests and those starting in October 2019 has been the comparative absence of these secular intellectual and political elites from prominent leadership roles. From 2015, these "civil elites" exerted considerable effort in influencing Sadr personally and in building an organizational and programmatic framework for cooperation with the Sadrist movement.⁷¹ Their underlying strategic aim was to drive a wedge between the Shi'i Islamist elite and prevent that elite deploying its coercive apparatus to crush political resistance. They also sought to direct and shape the cultural and political perspectives of ordinary Sadrists in a way that would make the movement less dangerous and more capable of playing a constructive role in Iraqi politics. This was a high-stakes political gamble, and while the first part of the wager has ended in failure, the effects of the second less tangible strand to the strategy have yet to fully play out.

The Followers of Muqtada al-Sadr

Both scholarly and media analyses frequently claim that Sadr controls his movement's base and can call it into the streets, or out of the streets, at will.⁷² However, in 2015, the dynamic was different, with many ordinary Sadrists joining the protests before any direct instruction from the movement's leader. This should not be surprising given the socio-economic profile of Sadr's followers (mainly from economically marginalized urban and rural poor in Baghdad and southern Iraq). However, this spontaneous mobilization created a dilemma for Sadr. One source close to Sadr, and prominent in the organization of the 2015-2016 protests, told the authors:

When the protests started, the demands were for electricity and services and this affected the Sadrists too, perhaps more than others, so they came to the first protests. Sadr thought that he had lost his base, or part of his base, and saw that the civil trend was providing an alternative leadership, so he had to take a step.⁷³

In this way, the movement's social base, mobilizing spontaneously around bread-and-butter issues, has been able to exert a seldom-acknowledged capacity for upward pressure on its leadership.

This dynamic was seen again in Iraq's October 2019 protests when ordinary Sadrists in Basra, Maysan, Dhi Qar, Baghdad, and other locations

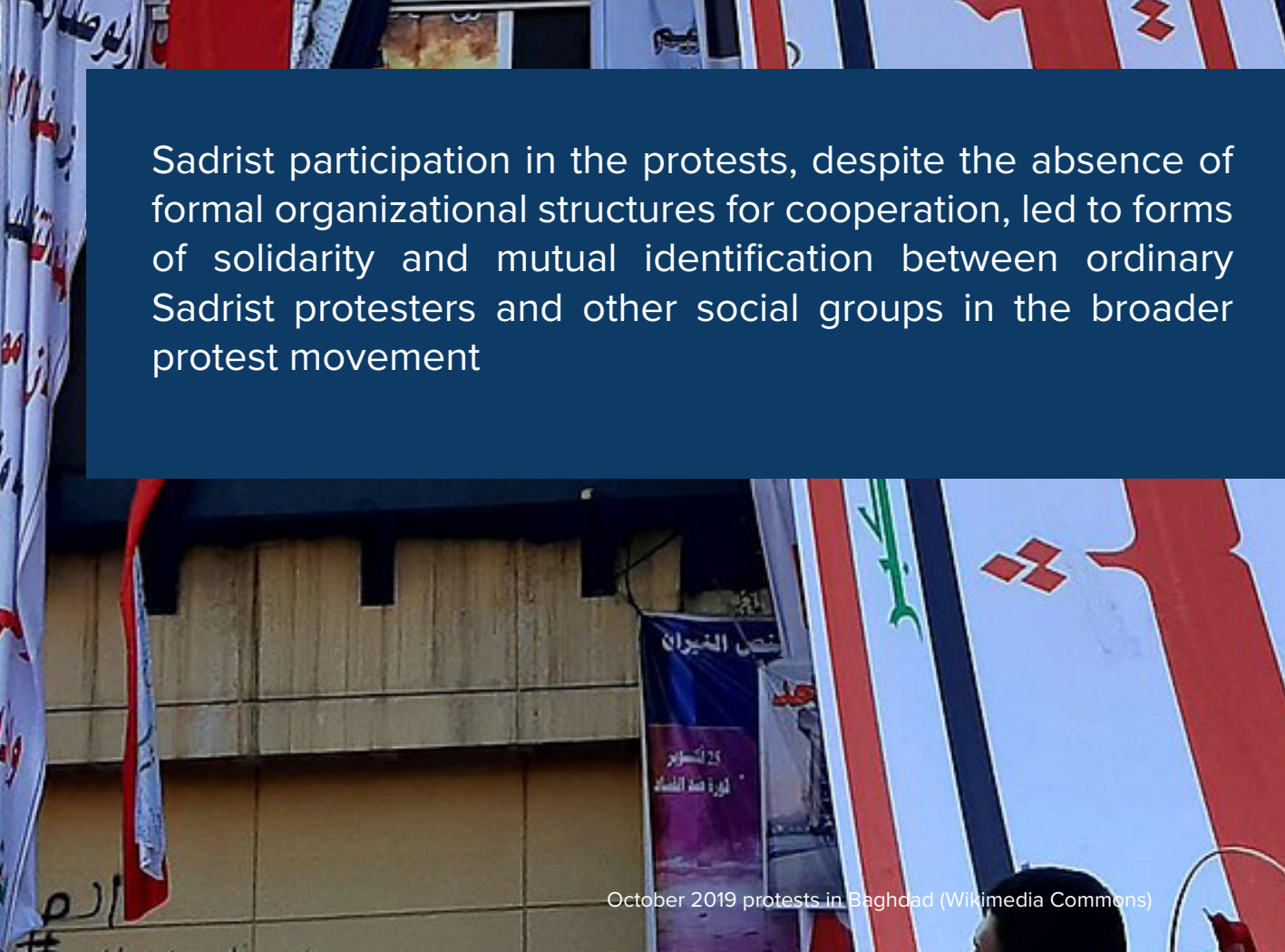
71 Robin-D'Cruz, "Social Brokers and Leftist-Sadrist Cooperation"; and Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement."

72 A typical example of this in media analyses appeared in *France 24*'s coverage of Iraq's October 2019 protests: "The onetime militiaman has earned himself a cult-like following in Iraq which he can mobilise with a single tweet to crown -- or bring down -- a government." See, "Iraq's Muqtada Sadr: cleric and kingmaker," *France 24*, October 30, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20191030-iraq-s-muqtada-sadr-cleric-and-kingmaker>. Jabar writes, "Mass participation by the Sadrist movement in the protests in Baghdad followed Muqtada al-Sadr's instruction." Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement," p. 22.

73 Interview conducted by the authors with senior political figure, Erbil, Iraq, on August 6, 2017.



Sadrist participation in the protests, despite the absence of formal organizational structures for cooperation, led to forms of solidarity and mutual identification between ordinary Sadrist protesters and other social groups in the broader protest movement



mobilized spontaneously without orders from above.⁷⁴ Although rarely mentioned in media accounts, as many as half the tents and a significant number of the protesters occupying Tahrir Square since October have been Sadrists.⁷⁵ Sadrists to whom the authors spoke highlighted the commitment of the movement's ordinary members (and paramilitaries) to the protest movement. One, for example, stated:

The Sadrists have been active participants in the protests, and we have given many martyrs and injured [protesters]. Sadrists have given the most support to the protesters in terms of food, drink, medicines, and have played a fundamental role in protection of the protests as happened at Sinak Bridge and Khilani Square⁷⁶ when they defended protesters from the armed groups who intervened to kill and break up the demonstrations.⁷⁷

Thus, Sadrist participation in the protests, despite the absence of formal organizational structures for cooperation, led to forms of solidarity and mutual identification between ordinary Sadrist protesters and other social groups in the broader protest movement.⁷⁸ These features can be traced back to deeper Sadrist involvement in protest politics alongside other social groups from 2015.

Gareth Browne, a journalist who spoke to demonstrators in Tahrir Square following Sadr's

apparent withdrawal of support for the protests, encountered a shift in the attitudes amongst some of the Sadrists present. He told the authors:

Several Sadrists said they would stay in the squares rather than withdraw as Muqtada had told them. Among them, there was a sense of betrayal; even usually loyal Sadrists seemed to be concerned that Muqtada was leaving some of the most vulnerable at great risk by withdrawal from the protests. In some cases, I saw individuals begging their fellow Sadrists to return or stay in Tahrir Square. They made a very conscious and passionate decision to go against Muqtada, in many instances for the first time.⁷⁹

In other words, the Sadrist base has become more firmly anchored in popular protest politics, leaving Sadr himself torn between his need to retain credibility and influence with his base, and the demands of other elite actors and Iran that he assists in reasserting and stabilizing the political system and Iran's dominant role therein.

Consequently, Sadr's ability to reorient the movement's base has proven to be limited. In mid-January, he attempted to shift its protest politics into coherent alignment with the PMF and resistance axis. This manifested in the so-called "million-man march" focused on forcing a U.S. troop withdrawal.⁸⁰ However, turnout at the march, while significant, was not as high as

74 There is little evidence that this group was mobilised around support for the civil trend or its particular symbolic politics, as opposed to more bread-and-butter issues. Rather, the civil trend controlled the protest space and thus able to impose on it a particular ideological footprint.

75 Based on conversations between the authors and Iraqis who have visited Tahrir Square or participated in protests there since October 2019.

76 These are references to instances where the Sadrists' so-called "Blue Helmets" (discussed below), apparently intervened to protect protesters from armed groups seeking to kill and injure protesters and break up their demonstrations.

77 Interview with Sadrist contact on condition of anonymity anonymous, February 10, 2020.

78 Gareth Browne, Twitter, January 25, 2020, <https://twitter.com/BrowneGareth/status/1221146154848661510?s=20>.

79 Based on discussion between the authors and Gareth Browne, January 30, 2020.

80 Although well-attended, the million-man march was a one-off, staged event that benefitted from quasi-official state support and logistical resources (buses transported protesters from southern cities to Baghdad). It is, therefore, difficult to compare this mobilization with the October 2019 protest movement, which has been sustained for many months in the face of extreme violence from the Iraqi state and its paramilitaries.

expected and was not sustained for more than a few hours. This was despite massive quasi-official logistical support. This reorientation has also involved a Sadr's revival of a more conservative Islamist politics, including criticism of protesters for their alleged consumption of alcohol and Sadr's demand of gender segregation at demonstrations (widely mocked by protesters).

A significant portion of ordinary Sadrists (anecdotal estimates put the figure around twenty percent) have remained engaged in the October protest movement, with the Sadrist withdrawals occurring primarily in Baghdad. Thus, one Sadrist told the authors at the end of January:

Some Sadrists withdrew, especially those providing logistical support, food and drink in Tahrir Square [more linked to Sadrist paramilitary organization]. This was after many demonstrators abused Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr. However, most of the withdrawals occurred in Baghdad, but in the other provinces, the withdrawals were very few.⁸¹

At the time, conversations between the authors and those involved in protest organization suggested at least some sections of the protest movement were seeking for ways to reintegrate the departed Sadrists. They indicated that negotiations were taking place to find a face-saving means by which Sadr could reverse his withdrawal.⁸² For this purpose, a delegation of senior figures from Iraq's civil elites attempted to make contact with Sadr in Qom, but without success (pointing to a breakdown in their communication channels).⁸³ In any case, Sadr's more aggressive anti-protest actions in early February made such efforts largely redundant.

Sadr's attempt to reorient his base away from solidarity with the broader protest movement and bread-and-butter issues towards a more

conservative Islamist politics with axis of resistance themes risks weakening the ties that bind him to ordinary Sadrists. In particular, the young generation of Iraqi Shi'a in Sadrist strongholds like Sadr City relate less to Sadr's claims to divine authority. For them, his appeal has been rooted more in their perception that Sadr has stood in solidarity with a more this-worldly struggle for dignity and an improvement in their quality of life.

A glimpse of this generational cultural shift can perhaps be seen in the recent popular trend among adolescent males in Sadr City for expressive forms of flamboyant dress, hairstyles, makeup, and dancing, earning them the nickname *al-atwani* (after the wedding photographer Zuhair al-Atwani who has documented their exploits).⁸⁴ While not necessarily an indication of receding religiosity and secularization, the *atwani* certainly provide a contrasting image to the usual Sadrist stereotype. They appear to resonate less with an austere Islamic conservatism. Sadr's recent actions show his intuitive feel for the cultural and political currents moving his base—and particularly its youngest elements—may be deserting him.

The Sadrist Clerical Elite

The second Sadrist group that supported the Sadrist movement's engagement in protest politics and cooperation with secular-leftist forces from 2015 has been a small but influential number of senior Sadrist clerics. Some of these clerics were Sadr's advisors and confidants at the time, e.g., Sheikhs Saleh al-Obeidi, Muhammad al-Aboudi, Karim al-Manfi, and Sadeq al-Hasnawi. One senior political operative who played a key role in negotiating between the Sadrist movement and Iraq's civil elites told the authors about the crucial role this group of clerics played:

⁸¹ Interview conducted by the authors with a member of Sadrist movement on condition of anonymity, January 29, 2020.

⁸² Interview conducted by the authors with senior civil trend organizer on condition of anonymity, January 25, 2020.

⁸³ Interview conducted by authors with senior Sadrist on condition of anonymity, February 3, 2020.

⁸⁴ Examples can be viewed on Zuhair's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/zahiraleutwani/>.

There is a section amongst the clerical leadership who believe that reform is a religious and national duty, a humane duty, and they are very convinced by Muqtada al-Sadr and claimed that 'Muqtada al-Sadr precedes us in analysis by around a year or two years.' I only came to recognise this due to friendships that emerged between us, not just with Muqtada al-Sadr, but with several leaders amongst those to close him. These people could obtain benefits from the system, be members of parliament or ministers, but they distance themselves from such worldly things. They have a sort of satisfaction with a Sufi religious asceticism, they are genuine revolutionaries and they want genuine reform. To be frank, I was shocked by the positions and actions of some of these people, such as [Sheikh] Salah al-Obeidi, for he was truly convinced by the words of Muqtada al-Sadr and the reform project.⁸⁵

This small network of senior Sadrist clerics is distinguished by their personal proximity to Sadr. This grants them greater autonomy vis-à-vis the incentives and constraints, which these other domains (e.g., political or paramilitary) impose on different strata of the Sadrist movement.⁸⁶ However, their status within the movement is highly dependent on their personal relationship to Sadr, thus challenging his decisions publicly carries great risks.

Nevertheless, the October 2019 protests precipitated intra-clerical divisions. Thus, the authority of Sadr's attempt to withdraw the movement's base from the protest movement in late January came into dispute. Some Sadrist clerics have made recourse to a religious ruling from Sadeq al-Sadr in which the ayatollah gave

his followers permission to disavow any order he might give to abandon their oppositionist activities vis-à-vis the Ba'thist regime. The intention of this ruling was to circumvent a situation in which the Ba'th might coerce Sadeq al-Sadr into issuing an order for disengagement. The argument being made by some Sadrist clerics is that Sadr has been coerced by Iranian pressure into calling for a disengagement from the protests, and thus Sadeq al-Sadr's ruling can justify their refusal of this call. The mainstream of the Sadrist movement strenuously rejects this interpretation.⁸⁷

One such case appears to be that of Sheikh Asa'd al-Nasiri, a prominent Sadrist cleric and formerly *khatib al-jumu'a* at al-Kufa Mosque. Nasiri caused controversy when he expressed solidarity with protesters in Dhi Qar province and his rejection of Iran's involvement in repressing the popular protests, stating: "The threats of Iranian soldiers do not scare me, no one will be able to silence me except death!"⁸⁸ He also stated that he "does not belong to any religious or political faction," indicating a split with Sadr because of the latter's failure to fully support the protest movement. Nasiri camped out in Nasiriyah's main protest site in al-Habobi Square, where violent confrontations between protesters and PMF factions have been particularly intense.

Nasiri's case is instructive, capturing all the dimensions of organizational fragmentation outlined in the introduction. First, Nasiri has his own local social base in Nasiriyah, and is prioritizing solidarity with this base over his status within the broader movement. Second, he can challenge Sadr, in part, by drawing on his own independent sources of authority. These are premised on his personal ties to Sadeq al-Sadr (he was a prominent pupil of Sadeq al-Sadr pre-2003). This has deeper roots than the present context. Sadrist contacts told the authors that Nasiri's conflicts with Sadr date back to his role post-2003 in the intra-clerical struggle for

⁸⁵ Interview conducted by the author with senior ICP operative on condition of anonymity.

⁸⁶ The limitations of this autonomy were clarified in 2008 when Sadr's brother-in-law and senior clerical advisor, Shaykh Riyadh al-Nouri, was assassinated after he called for disbanding Jaysh al-Mahdi.

⁸⁷ Based on interview with senior Sadrist source on condition of anonymity, January 3, 2008.

⁸⁸ Asa'd al-Nasiri, Twitter, January 19, 2020, <https://twitter.com/asaadalnaseri/status/1218808558084677632>.

control of the OMS network between Sadr and Sheikh Muhammad al-Ya'cubqi (who split from Sadr to form al-Fadhila). Nasiri later reconciled with Sadr, but these intra-clerical conflicts have been reignited by Sadr's recent positions on the protest movement. While Nasiri has his sources of authority, openly challenging Sadr required his stepping outside of Sadr's movement. His prior position within the movement hinged almost entirely on the management of personal relations with Sadr, which could be instantly transformed.

Third, there has also been a rift between Nasiri and Sadr's chief "jihadi advisor" (head of Saraya al-Salam) Kazem al-Issawi (AKA Abu Do'a). This rift dates to the latter's surprise expulsion from the Sadrist movement in May 2019. At that time, Nasiri spoke critically of Issawi and his involvement in corruption.⁸⁹ However, Issawi has since been rehabilitated by Sadr.⁹⁰ The Nasiri-Issawi dispute could be a sign of intra-Sadrist struggle between its more pro-Iran elements (located in the movement's paramilitary wing) and those more anchored in Iraq's anti-establishment protest politics (including sections of the clerical leadership). The Nasiri-Issawi dispute is reminiscent of Sadr's brother-in-law Sheikh Riyadh al-Nouri, who was assassinated in 2008 after he called for Jaysh al-Mahdi to be disbanded. The crucial point here being the persistent horizontal fractures between clerical and paramilitary wings of the Sadrist movement.

How representative Nasiri is of the broader Sadrist clerical strata is difficult to judge. Certainly, many remain loyal to Sadr, and there is another strand within this group that consistently opposed Sadr's earlier attempts to build cooperation with non-Islamist forces (indicating the absence of intra-factional ideological coherence). For this latter group, the Sadrists' tilt towards what they regarded as form of secular-liberal politics was perceived as a threat to clerical and religious

hegemony over the movement. The opposition of this group spilled out into the open in 2017, when a prominent Sadrist cleric, Sheikh Usama al-Musawi, publicly denounced other parts of the movement.⁹¹ In a long statement to his Sadrist followers on social media, Musawi identified "an internal conflict within the Sadrist movement," which involves Sadrist "political leaders" and "journalists, writers, and philosophers who constitute a 'secular-liberal trend'" that is "a purely political group which thinks that all the human, economic, military and even religious capacities should serve only a single goal: the domination of authority and governing without any sacred or divine aspect."

Sadrist Intellectuals and Cultural Activists

One of the Sadrist groups that Musawi was targeting with this criticism was Sadrist intellectuals and cultural activists (i.e., lay activists without religious training in the *hawza*). This group has been particularly supportive of Sadrist engagement in protest politics and cooperation with secular-leftist forces. In part, this reflects their distinct social backgrounds and networks, i.e., their greater degree of social integration with Iraq's secular intelligentsia.⁹² These elements of the movement are the closest in ideological terms to secular-liberal trends, which manifests in greater willingness to criticize former Sadrist behaviors and their stated desire to "open up" the movement, moderate its image, and engage in forms of cross-ideological politics. This group also tends to regard Sadrist engagement in formal politics as a mistake that entangled the movement in corruption. They regard protests and popular politics as closer to the movement's pre-2003 roots and preferable to formal politics. One prominent Sadrist intellectual discussed

⁸⁹ Interview with Sadrist contact on condition of anonymity, January 29 2020.

⁹⁰ His prominence in Sadr's inner circle was seen in his role in delivering Sadr's address to the "million-man march" at the end of January 2020. He was also pictured with Sadr at a meeting with other prominent PMF leaders in Iran on January 13, 2020.

⁹¹ May 27, 2017, Usama al-Musawi on Facebook.

⁹² Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The politics of religious dissent in contemporary Saudi Arabia* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 31, 136.

his views on the movement and the role of its intellectual strata with the authors, stating:

*The Sadrist trend today is not what it was several years ago as it has developed in constructing its consciousness and as a national project. It has left behind the chaotic emotionalism by which it was previously characterized, and today seeks an active participation in the construction of Iraq and its salvation. The Sadrists now have an open disposition towards all Iraq and are the Islamist trend that is closest to the secular civil groups.*⁹³

He further elaborated on what he saw as a process of ideological transformation in the movement and how this affected its relationship with other Islamist factions and Iran:

The Sadrist trend today is trying to be a national trend, fundamentally, far from religious-sectarian affiliations. Consequently, the movement is at odds with most of the Shi'i religious parties and movements, because of this moderation it has adopted and calls for. Even our relationship with Iran has become somewhat disturbed and thrown into doubt.

It is not argued here that what is described above applies to the Sadrists as a whole. Rather, it reflects an uneven process of ideological change localized in particular sections of the movement. These Sadrist intellectuals and cultural activists also played an important role in mediating relations between the Sadrist movement and Iraq's secular intellectual and political forces as the two camps began exploring possibilities for cooperation from 2015.⁹⁴ The absence of an organizational framework for cooperation between the Sadrists and other social groups involved in the October 2019 protest movement has meant that the role of this stratum in shaping its politics has diminished. Moreover, Sadr's pivot towards a counter-revolutionary stance, and the

centrality of Sadrist paramilitaries in pursuing this strategy, has pushed the movement's intellectuals and cultural activists further to the margins.

The Strategic Gamble of the Secular-Sadrist Alliance

Each of these different factions, along with leaders from Iraq's secular and leftist political and intellectual elites, competed for influence over Sadr, who mediated between their distinct interests and political strategies. This process was an inherently unstable one, reflecting the relative balance of power between these factions and not merely Sadr's own political beliefs or calculations. Like the IRGC, those secularist groups who sought alliance with the Sadr movement from 2015 were seeking to exploit tactical openings presented by Sadrist fragmentation.

In other words, behind the surface rhetoric of a broad ideological alignment around more moderate, civil (*madani*) politics, lay a more strategic political gamble. One senior leftist political operative explained their thinking to the authors in 2016, stating:

*How can we change the balance of forces if we do not penetrate the system? We must, therefore, penetrate the system in order to break the system. This system is built on Sunni, Shi'a and Kurd, but the Shi'i alliance is the strongest, and is constituted by the Sadrists, Da'wa and the Supreme Council. Da'wa cannot join us, and nor can the Supreme Council. So, we search for a framework, for possibilities of joining with the Sadrists. If we can join the Sadrists to us, and thereby weaken the Shi'i alliance and render it unstable, then if the Shi'i alliance is weak, the system as a whole will be shaken.*⁹⁵

⁹³ Interview conducted by authors in Iraq, August 6, 2017.

⁹⁴ Robin-D'Cruz, "Social brokers."

⁹⁵ Interview conducted by the authors with senior leftist political operative on condition of anonymity.



October 2019 protests in Baghdad (Wikimedia Commons)

The secular-leftist/Sadrist alliance, then, was not anchored in a stable ideological framework reflecting the Sadrist movement's wholesale transformation toward a secular politics. Rather, it was a highly strategic political gamble that sought to exploit small pockets of social and ideological integration and alignment between the two movements to leverage the Sadrists as a whole out of the Shi'i Islamist bloc, and out of Iran's orbit, and to thereby destabilize Iraq's political system. As a political and programmatic project, the gamble did not pay off. However, it is too soon to judge its less tangible effects in reshaping the cultural and political perspectives of parts of the Sadrist movement and the anchoring of its base more firmly in broad-based protest politics prioritizing political reform.

SADRIST PARAMILITARIES

Sadrist paramilitary groups have been a source of organizational fragmentation and the main conduit for Iranian penetration within the movement since 2003. The militia developed a fragmented structure consisting of multiple bases of power characterized by effective local control, but weak hierarchic institutional integration and horizontal cohesion. A further factor reducing cohesion was Jaysh al-Mahdi's lack of important ingredients for effective war fighting. This included fighters with experience in jihadi and clandestine operations and social networks for trafficking weapons and materiel. Consequently, although Jaysh al-Mahdi could mobilize many fighters in a short space of time, the nature of its organizational structure, and the characteristics of its fighters, rendered the group more vulnerable to internal fragmentation.

This fragmentation took two main forms, which interacted in a mutually reinforcing dynamic: first, external penetration by the IRGC (fragmentation from above); and second, internal dissent and competing local power bases (fragmentation from below). The underlying driver in either case was competition for economic, coercive, and ideational power. The latter factor of ideational power—whether the use of sect-based versus nationalist discourses, or the positioning as a protector or opponent to protests—represents major fault-lines within the Sadrist paramilitary space that is seldom addressed. This section focuses on how these dynamics have shifted since 2003 and the role of Sadrist armed groups within the movement in the present day.

The Roots of Fragmentation within Sadrist Paramilitaries

After the Anglo-American invasion toppled the Saddam Hussein regime, the Sadrist movement became known primarily for its militant opposition to the U.S.-sponsored political order. Jaysh al-Mahdi amassed a significant following drawing from the lower classes of Iraqi Shia society in Baghdad and southern Iraq. The roots of this force stemmed back to a loose network of armed fighters who would protect Shi'i pilgrims during religious festivals that were banned by the Ba'th regime but persisted clandestinely in some limited forms. However, post-2003, Jaysh al-Mahdi became the largest Shia militia fighting the American occupying forces, growing to a force with tens of thousands of fighters.⁹⁶ The rapid expansion of the militia occurred via the Office of the Martyr al-Sadr network of local administrative offices and religious institutions, inherited from Sadeq al-Sadr's pre-2003 movement. Consequently, Jaysh al-Mahdi came to reflect the same structure of local social embeddedness and weak central control that typified other parts of the movement.

Initially, Sadr positioned Jaysh al-Mahdi as the resistance to the United States and other foreign occupation forces. When an insurgency broke out in Fallujah in spring 2004, rejecting the U.S. occupation and the U.S.-sponsored political process in Baghdad, Jaysh al-Mahdi was sent to help Sunni militants with aid and blood donations.⁹⁷ In the same year, the Sadrist militias fought against the Americans in Najaf and other parts of the south.

⁹⁶ Including thousands from Saddam's Fedayeen who had lost their jobs from CPA order 2.

⁹⁷ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, p. 149.

However, the exigencies of war fighting exacerbated the fragmentation of Sadrist paramilitaries. After heavy losses to U.S. troops during the Battle of Najaf, there was a meeting between Sadr and the heads of several of Jaysh al-Mahdi's most powerful fighting units. At this meeting, it was decided to reconstitute these groups in a more effective military structure, breaking them out of Jaysh al-Mahdi to form better equipped and more disciplined units with a greater degree of operational autonomy from the core of Jaysh al-Mahdi.⁹⁸ It is not clear whether Sadr welcomed this arrangement as a means of distancing himself publicly from militant activities, or if this new arrangement was forced on him by commanders that sensed his weakened position (these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive). This point marks the emergence of the so-called Special Groups (SGs), a force that grew to 5,000 elite militant fighters and over which Qais al-Khaza'li was meant to have operational control.⁹⁹

However, from this period, certain SGs commanders began working more closely with Qasem Soleimani, who had designed his own military structure that interfaced effectively with smaller units without a centralized command structure.¹⁰⁰ The splintering of Jaysh al-Mahdi into several paramilitary units thus allowed for smoother integration into IRGC networks. According to Khaza'li, by this stage, Sadrist paramilitaries were receiving around \$2 million per month from Iranian sources (and this does not include extensive training and other materiel).¹⁰¹ Thus, although the fragmentation of Sadrist paramilitaries partly reflected characteristics of

the militias social base, and the organizational framework through which it was mobilized, it was also greatly exacerbated "from above" by the model of paramilitary organization adopted by the IRGC.

The fragmentation of Sadrist paramilitaries and greater Iranian penetration of their networks further eroded Sadr's overall control over the Special Groups. At times, units would not comply with Sadr's orders. Different factions would pursue their own strategic interests and visions—e.g., pursuing mafia-style economic practices, or Iraqi nationalist versus Shia-centric state-building—and make their down choices vis-à-vis tactics, e.g., rules of engagement and methods of violence.

For example, during operations Fardh al-Qanun (Impose the Law) and Saulat al-Fursan (Charge of the Knights),¹⁰² Sadr issued orders for Jaysh al-Mahdi to stand down and not resist these counter-insurgent operations. However, his lack of control over the increasingly fragmented Sadrist paramilitaries meant that many factions continued to fight. These conflicts were eventually brought to a halt through the mediation of Soleimani, clarifying where real power over Sadrist militias lay.¹⁰³

This concentration of Iranian penetration within Sadrist paramilitary networks was spelled out during the 2007 Central Intelligence Agency interrogation of Qais al-Khaza'li (who eventually split with Sadr to form 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Iranian-linked militia active in Iraq).¹⁰⁴ Khaza'li was asked what would happen to the Sadrist

98 "Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 23, 2007," pp. 64-65.

99 "Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 24, 2007," p. 70. The 5,000 figure was given by Khaza'li for the size of SG around the time of his capture, see, "Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 28, 2007," p. 121. Joel Rayburn, *Iraq after America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2014), p. 181.

100 Interview with Qasem Soleimani advisor in Sulaimania, April 2018.

101 "Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR," Report no: 200243-008, 21-23; 200243-016, pp. 43-44; and "Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TI, March 25, 2007," pp. 85-86.

102 An attempt in early 2008 by Iraqi and coalition forces to retake parts of the capital and Basra as part of the wider "surge" of U.S. military and Iraqi Security Forces to pacify Iraq and quell the insurgency

103 Marisa Cochrane, "The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement."

104 Sheikh Qais al-Khaza'li was a pupil of Sadeq al-Sadr and emerged as one of Sadr's closest allies post-2003 until the relationship between the two began to deteriorate following the Battle of Najaf in 2004.



The fragmentation of Sadrist paramilitaries and greater Iranian penetration of their networks further eroded Sadr's overall control over the Special Groups. At times, units would not comply with Sadr's orders. Different factions would pursue their own strategic interests and visions—e.g., pursuing mafia-style economic practices, or Iraqi nationalist versus Shia-centric state-building—and make their down choices vis-à-vis tactics, e.g., rules of engagement and methods of violence.

movement if Iranian funding was withdrawn altogether, to which he responded: “It would not have any effect on the Office of the Martyr al-Sadr side of the movement, but it would have a great and negative effect on Jaysh al-Mahdi.”¹⁰⁵ Moreover, as the IRGC model succeeded in transferring operational control over parts of Jaysh al-Mahdi from the loose, informal Sadrist networks to its own more coherent structure, it also incrementally lost one mechanism of leverage over Sadr, i.e., it became less embedded in the movement.

Reorienting Sadrist Paramilitaries and the Emergence of Saraya Al-Salam

Following a series of military defeats in early 2008, Sadr announced a pause on the policy of violent resistance.¹⁰⁶ In its place, he established three new organizations: a latent guerrilla force, Liwa’ al-Yawm al-Ma’ud (Brigade of the Promised Day); a social and cultural wing, al-Mumahidun (Path-Layers); and a religious and charitable wing, al-Munasirun (the Supporters).¹⁰⁷ However, the rise of the Islamic State in 2014 would lead Sadr to re-mobilize his militia, which was called Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades). While part of the PMF, as Brigades 313 and 314, Saraya al-Salam’s relationship with the other militias, and particularly former Sadrists now represented by groups like ‘Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, remained fraught.¹⁰⁸ At times, Sadr spoke alongside Khaza’li and others in the fight against the Islamic State, and, at other times, he singled out competing paramilitary groups for criticism, calling them the “imprudent” militias.

According to conversations with leading Sadrists, Saraya al-Salam has a virtual capacity to build a 100,000-strong army, and the number of those registered on the Sadrists’ volunteer list may exceed that number. Their actual capacity is constrained not by the number of volunteers, but by a lack of resources, specifically money, military hardware, and training because, unlike the groups more integrated into IRGC networks and the pro-Khamenei factions, the Sadrists were largely cut off from Iranian funding and, more critically, training. This dynamic fueled competition between Saraya al-Salam and other splinter groups from the Sadrist movement, such as Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat al-Nujaba, as well as other groups that Sadr views to be too close to Iran.

As with Jaysh al-Mahdi, Saraya al-Salam is socially embedded via webs of economic and social ties in the locales where it is deployed (e.g., Samarra, north of Baghdad). As a result, the paramilitaries inevitably develop fairly autonomous strategic and economic interests that are bound up with local politics. At the same time, there is little horizontal social embeddedness between the Sadrist paramilitaries and other parts of the movement. Jawad al-Musawi, who would become a Sadrist MP for the Sairoun alliance following the 2018 national elections, stressed that Saraya al-Salam had no links to the political sphere.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, a leading Sadrist advisor told the authors on a number of occasions that he had no involvement or awareness of the military side of the movement, which according to him, was purposely kept in its own realm.¹¹⁰ This separation meant that Sadr’s political followers had no influence or awareness of the movement’s military operations and would often deflect questions by acknowledging their ignorance.

¹⁰⁵ “Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR, April 3, 2007,” p. 168.

¹⁰⁶ “Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR, April 3, 2007,” p. 168.

¹⁰⁷ Michael David Clark, PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2017.

¹⁰⁸ Renad Mansour and Faleh Abdul Jabar, “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future,” Carnegie Middle East Center, April 27, 2017, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>.

¹⁰⁹ Shelly Kittleson, “Sadr urges technocrats as armed factions look beyond border,” *Al-Monitor*, January 20, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/01/iraq-baghdad-sadr-city-muqtada-sadr-saraya-salam.html#ixzz640zdZbmV>.

¹¹⁰ Interview with senior Sadrist politician.

The local embeddedness of Sadrist paramilitaries and the absence of effective hierarchic integration produced forms of horizontal and vertical fragmentation within the militia. Weak central control has meant Sadr was not always able to direct his commanders and fighters who frequently develop relatively autonomous fiefdoms within local contexts where they deploy coercive power to control the flow of resources in and out of neighborhoods and districts. In an effort to preserve his authority, Sadr has frequently purged paramilitary commanders whose local power bases have become a threat to him. A further effect of this practice has been the erosion of organizational and strategic coherence within the movement's militias.

This practice has applied even to the most senior commanders, such as Abu Muhammad Shibl (commander of Jaysh al-Mahdi during the Battle of Najaf in 2004), who was expelled from the movement in 2005; Akram al-Ka'bi (one-time second-in-command of Jaysh al-Mahdi), who was expelled in 2007; and Kazem al-Issawi AKA Abu Do'aa (the top commander in Saraya al-Salam), who was expelled unexpectedly in May 2019 before being reinstated months later. However, senior Sadrists point out other reasons for purging commanders in the movement's paramilitary ranks, e.g., removing those thought too close to IRGC, or for reasons of discipline. For instance, one Saraya al-Salam official explained to the authors, "After the end of Jaysh al-Mahdi we had to clean the movement and remove the parts of the movement that were responsible for the crimes that had occurred in the early years."¹¹¹

Similarly, in 2018, the movement decided to sack a number of senior Saraya al-Salam commanders, including Naji al-Mariani, who was the top commander in Samarra (the movement's

primary deployment), along with Hassan al-Gharawi, Wasifi, and Ahmed Lifta.¹¹² According to a letter issued by Saraya al-Salam, members of militia are not allowed to work in any commercial or economic project under the military name and these individuals had violated the internal rules.¹¹³ Again, under the banner of anti-corruption and internal by-laws, the Sadrist movement effectively removed its most senior commanders from its most significant military operations.

Saraya al-Salam, and the Sadrist movement's engagement in paramilitary activity, clarifies the distinct and sometimes contradictory constraints and incentives imposed on the movement by its implication in distinct spheres of action. Sadrist militias have worked alongside and opposed other groups in the PMF. Many leading Sadrist politicians and advisors remain fundamentally against the proliferation of militias, which are viewed as an impediment to state-building. Meanwhile, Sadr himself has spoken out against the militias, but has not completely disbanded his forces. He has often made statements ordering the shutdown of his brigades.

In summer 2019, for instance, Saraya al-Salam announced that it was no longer connected directly to the Sadrist movement. Spokesman Safa al-Tamimi announced that it would no longer have a distinct name associated with the Sadrist movement, but would be part of Samara Operations of the PMF.¹¹⁴ Moreover, in the south, Saraya al-Salam started using the name "blue hats."¹¹⁵ However, despite the name change, the network of Sadrist fighters remains connected to Sadr's base.

Saraya al-Salam fulfills several important strategic functions for Sadr and the Sadrists, which make decoupling the movement from its paramilitary

¹¹¹ Authors' interview with Saraya al-Salam commander, Baghdad, February 2018.

¹¹² The letter can be found at: "Sadr Expels a number of Peace Brigades Leaders," *Al-Kawthar TV*, November 3, 2018, alkawthartv.com/news/170752.

¹¹³ "Sadr Expels a number of Peace Brigades Leaders," *Al-Kawthar TV*, November 3, 2018, alkawthartv.com/news/170752.

¹¹⁴ "Saraya al-Salam reveals its new name and new leader: We have become a separate force from Muqtada al-Sadr," *Shafaq News*, July 3, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/v76aubf>.

¹¹⁵ "Spread in the protests of Nasiriyah [...] Who are the heads of the Blue Hats?" *Nas News*, October 27, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/ttzs64>.

wing practically difficult. First, the paramilitaries are a significant part of Sadrist patronage network, providing employment, which becomes another revenue-generating mechanism for the movement.¹¹⁶ Second, the Sadrist paramilitaries allow for forms of economic extraction and local forms of political power. For example, a tribal leader from Samarra stated, “they [Saraya al-Salam] didn’t allow displaced Sunnis to return to the city and they extracted bribes from merchants at their checkpoints.”¹¹⁷ Third, according to one Saraya al-Salam commander, Sadr requires the presence of an armed force as an insurance policy as long as his enemies, such as Qais al-Khaza’li and other PMF groups, maintain their own forces and continue to constitute a potential threat.¹¹⁸ Finally, Saraya al-Salam’s role in Samara protects a sacred Shi’i shrine. In this context, Saraya al-Salam is a source of symbolic power allowing Sadr to play the role of protector of Iraq’s Shi’i community.

Following the assassinations of Soleimani and Muhandis, Sadr’s rhetoric shifted abruptly to refocus on anti-Americanism and pursuing a full withdrawal of U.S. forces. This rhetoric included a statement declaring that he would re-establish Jaysh al-Mahdi (although he later backtracked on this commitment and focused on political mechanisms to achieve a U.S. withdrawal). The U.S. strike and the vacuum from Muhandis’ killing provided Sadr with an opportunity to take more control over the PMF and, in particular, to regain power over groups that broke away from his leadership.

Previously, this space was becoming problematic for the Sadrists. During the October 2019 protests, Sadr’s armed wing had initially sympathized with demonstrators. They stood against the violent response that the Iraqi state and allied PMF pursued in their counter-protest campaign. At one point toward the end of October, Sadrist armed actors came close to fighting against Khazali’s militiamen engaged in attacks on protesters (in Maysan). However, in the weeks after the U.S.

strike, Sadr appeared to be realigning his armed wing to come together with the pro-Iranian PMF groups.

However, just as in the past, this maneuverer is unlikely to re-solidify Sadrist paramilitaries, and may even open further cleavages within the movement, potentially setting elements in the Sadrist base and its paramilitaries on opposing sides of the struggle around Iraq’s protest politics. Some Sadrist paramilitaries could resist the new orientation, particularly if it involves their engagement in a broader campaign of repression against protesters. These groups could look for new leadership from clerics within the broader Sadrist constellation willing to step into the space left by Sadr’s pivot towards the PMF and Iran.

¹¹⁶ The movement employs tens of thousands of Saraya al-Salam members, and some of these members tax at checkpoints and engage in other business schemes.

¹¹⁷ Cambanis, “Social Engineering in Samarra.”

¹¹⁸ Interview with Saraya al-Salam commander, February 2018.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter has tried to make sense of Iraq's powerful Sadrist movement by linking the group's unstable politics to Sadr's lack of concrete political vision and to forms of organizational fragmentation within the movement. This fragmentation results in a factional and heterogeneous leadership with different Sadrist groups pursuing distinct, and sometimes contradictory, agendas. These competing leadership strata compete for influence over the movement's social base, a young generation of poor Iraqi Shi'a whose tight alignment with Sadr and other movement leaders can no longer be taken for granted. Sadr himself is not an absolutist ruler who "fine tunes" his movement's strategies, but often acts more as a broker who mediates relations between, and within, these different factions and the movement's rank-and-file members.

External actors seeking to predict, and adapt to, Sadrist politics must grapple with this instability. At the same time, these intra-movement cleavages present strategic opportunities. They function as points of entry where external actors can seek to build influence within the Sadrist movement and attempt to shape its politics. This strategy has been pursued by Iran and, more recently, by some of Iraq's secular intellectual and political elites.

The recent assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis have tilted parts of the Sadrist movement, and particularly Sadr himself and his paramilitary forces, back toward the Iranian orbit. However, this chapter's core argument—that the movement as a whole is heterogeneous and fragmented, not characterized by a homogenous set of political ideas or interests—should caution policymakers against making assumptions about a future Sadrist role in Iraq based on an "Iran and its proxies" framework. Instead, policymakers should be looking toward decentering Sadr himself within their overall strategic approach to the movement, recognizing that Sadr is both

unable to sustain a consistent political orientation and that his power as an autonomous force in Iraqi politics may be waning.

This final section sets out policy recommendations designed to help international actors better cope with the unstable politics of the Sadrist movement and to utilize the opportunities this instability presents:

Addressing knowledge gaps.

- The emphasis on trying to decipher Sadr's behavior means that other strata of the movement, particularly beyond the paramilitary sphere, have seldom been the subject of research. Little is known about the cultural and political perspectives of the movement's social base, its broader clerical leadership, Sadrist intellectuals and journalists, and other cultural activists. Nevertheless, all these groups play a role in shaping and contesting Sadrist politics. More sociological and ethnographic analyses of the Sadrist movement should be prioritized. Partnering with local Iraqi research capacity could be one viable route.

Pressing for accountability for anti-protest violence.

- Many Iraqi protesters and activists are deeply dissatisfied with what they regard as a feeble international response to the sustained violence used against them by Iraqi state and parastatal forces. The tendency to view the PMU as non-state actors obscures the reality of contiguity and integration between the PMU and the Iraqi state. Iraqi

protesters do not make these differentiations, understanding that the violence they face is coming from a coherent network of coercive forces that constitute the Iraqi state. U.S. interests align with the cultural and political currents moving Iraq's protest movement. However, the U.S. is also wary that overt support for the protesters could expose them to greater dangers and ultimately prove counterproductive. One measure the U.S. could take would be to tie its sanctioning of Iraqi parastatal actors more explicitly to their role in violence against protesters. This should include Sadrist paramilitaries who have been prominent in anti-protest violence in recent weeks. However, the imposition of accountability mechanisms should not be limited to the PMU and Saraya al-Salam. This would absolve other important parts of the Iraqi state and political class of their responsibility for violence. It would also facilitate their strategic use of ambiguities between formal and informal components of the state to deploy coercive repression.

Reappraising Saraya al-Salam's position within the PMF.

- Much of the messaging from Saraya al-Salam leaders since 2014 overlapped with U.S. messaging, including the need to hold to account pro-Iranian factions of the PMF. As such, policymakers have refrained from grouping Saraya al-Salam as part of a monolithic Iran-aligned PMF, seeking to highlight and reward differences in practices between the Sadrist movement and the more pro-Iranian factions. If Sadr pursues a more dominant role within the PMF or seeks to align Saraya al-Salam with its Iranian-supported groups, this approach of differentiating Sadrist paramilitaries needs to be rethought. Instead, policy should focus on subjecting Saraya al-Salam to similar scrutiny and accountability mechanisms designed to constrain the worst abuses of other PMF groups.

Improving channels of communication.

- Policymakers' understanding of the Sadrist movement and its ways of thinking and acting politically are hampered by extremely weak lines of communication. Interactions between Sadrist leaders and U.S./UK government agencies are rare and typically pass through intermediaries (sometimes with distorting effects). The authors broached the question of opening direct U.S.-Sadrist channels with one of Sadr's representatives. His response was that Sadr was not opposed to this in principle, but had certain conditions, namely, a guarantee that the U.S. would not interfere in Iraqi politics and would apologize and pay compensation for its "crimes" in Iraq.
- Since this is not plausible, developing other channels of communication should be a priority. Many members of the Sadrist movement work in diplomatic missions. The UK., in particular, has recently seen a number of high-profile Sadrist-linked appointments to Iraq's embassy in London. These could potentially play a useful role in improving communication channels with the Sadrists. Workshops and more general meetings, such as Track II events and think tank conferences that include Sadrists and U.S. officials, could be a starting point to indirect engagement.

Identifying the limits of shared interest.

- Policy objectives, such as political stability, meaningful reform, and curtailing Iranian influence in Iraq, are typically seen as bound together. The Sadrist movement has a role—whether positive or negative—in each of these objectives. It has been the most powerful Iraqi political actor to consistently challenge Iranian power. At the same time, its recent behavior has indicated a receding autonomy from Iran and a weakening of the movement's desire and capability to carve

out its own space in Iraqi politics. Moreover, the Sadrist movement is not anti-Iranian and will not explicitly partner with the American government. The priority, therefore, should be identifying issues where tacit forms of cooperation could strengthen Iraqi political institutions and reformist currents, including those within the Sadrist movement.

Adapting to Sadrist fragmentation.

- The Sadrist movement is more structurally differentiated and ideologically heterogeneous than is commonly thought. Post-2003, Iran exploited the Sadrists' lack of hierarchic integration, resources and expertise in the paramilitary sphere to penetrate the movement and shape its politics. From 2015, parts of Iraq's secular-leftist civil trend utilized a similar strategy, but this time targeting the Sadrists' clerical and intellectual strata. Both strategies adapted to different forms of Sadrist fragmentation by building ties into the movement's leadership in order to gain influence and leverage over Sadr. These strategies could function as a blueprint for external actors seeking to influence the Sadrist movement and shape its politics. However, strategies that depend on influencing Sadr personally are likely to end in failure. Sadr is not able to inhabit, or carry forward, a consistent political orientation. Consequently, strategies targeting the Sadrist movement should consider "decentering" Sadr himself and focusing instead on broader elements of the movements. This may also involve curtailing the ambitions that such strategies hope to achieve. Nevertheless, even if Sadr himself pivots into a more Iranian-aligned position, other parts of the movement should not be written off or assumed to have followed him down this path. 

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