



Iraq Report 12:

## The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement

Marisa Cochran

INSTITUTE FOR THE  
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Front cover: KUFA, IRAQ - MAY 20: Firebrand Iraqi Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr delivers a speech to his supporters during Friday prayers at the Kufa Mosque May 21, 2004 in Kufa, Iraq. The sounds of sporadic rpg fire and machine gun bursts outside the mosque frequently punctuated the cleric's speech as nearby militiamen loyal to him clashed with U.S. troops less than a kilometer away. (Photo by Scott Nelson/Getty Images)

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Marisa Cochrane

January 2009

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### *Overview*

THE SADRIST MOVEMENT has steadily fragmented as a result of the Surge, competition among internal factions, and Prime Minister Maliki's consolidation of power.

Deliberate Coalition and Iraqi military operations, and Iraqi political maneuvers, have severed the political, military, and social strands of the Sadr Movement, which no longer co-exist in the same entity and likely will not recombine in 2009.

While the political and military power of the movement has declined, its traditional constituency — the urban Shi'a poor and rural Shi'a tribes — remains a large and politically-valuable electorate.

Two main factions within the movement now compete for control of the traditional Sadr constituency: the clerics and politicians (including al-Sadr) who emphasize a return to social, religious and educational programs; and an armed movement, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, which seeks to continue resistance against Coalition Forces. Both groups seek to operate in the political process.

Existing frictions between Muqtada al-Sadr and the leaders of the military wing make it unlikely that the groups will combine assets in the near future.

In light of these ongoing tensions, rival political groups such as Prime Minister Maliki's Dawa Party and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, have sought to co-opt the Sadr Movement's key constituency of urban Shi'a poor and rural Shi'a tribes.

If Maliki succeeds in building a Parliamentary coalition with leaders from either Sadrist faction, he will most likely cement his hold on power in the 2009 elections and dramatically reshape the political environment in Iraq.

### *Part One*

Following the failed Shi'a uprising in Iraq, Saddam Hussein sought to reestablish strict control over the Shi'a population by co-opting specific Shi'a tribes and clerics.

The Sadrist Movement (or Sadrism Trend), under the leadership of Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, rose to prominence in the 1990s as part of the state-sponsored initiative. The movement was at once populist, nationalist, and religious.

As Sadeq al-Sadr's influence grew, he adopted a more aggressive tone with respect to the regime and other political issues. In response, regime-affiliated gunmen assassinated Sadeq al-Sadr and two of his sons in 1999.

Following the assassination, many members of the Sadrist Movement fled or went underground. Muqtada al-Sadr, Sadeq's other son, was placed under house arrest. The movement was held together underground by a group of young clerics who had been close deputies and students of Sadeq al-Sadr: Riyadh al-Nouri, Mohammed Tabatabai, Mustafa al-Yacoubi, Qais Khazali, and Jaber al-Khafaji.

Following the 2003 invasion, the Sadrist movement reemerged with the support of Iranian-based Iraqi cleric Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri. Haeri appointed Muqtada al-Sadr as his representative in Iraq.

The Sadrists quickly reopened mosques, established Friday prayers, created a militia to provide security, assumed control of local political institutions, and provided social services for their communities. Sadr sought to build the movement into a Hezbollah like organization with a political arm, a social services and religious arm, and a military arm.

The Sadrist Movement sought to capitalize on the anger and resentment of the Shi'a poor by opposing the Coalition.

Two failed uprisings against the Coalition in 2004, both launched from position in close proximity to holy shrines, diminished Sadr's stature among the Shi'a. Following the failed conflicts, Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri broke with Muqtada and thereby deprived the Sadr Movement of its principle source of funding.

Disputes arising from the two failed uprisings, exacerbated by the financial shortfall, resulted in increased fragmentation among the leaders of the Movement. One faction, led by Qais Khazali split from Sadr.

In 2005, the Movement joined the political process and secured 30 parliamentary seats in the January 2006 election. Engagement in the political system provided the clerical and political leadership of the Sadrist Trend with a new source of income and expanded their patronage network.

In 2006, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps – Qods Force (IRGC-QF) reorganized their support of militia groups within Iraq. Qais Khazali was chosen to lead a network known as Special Groups to other members the Jaysh al Mahdi militia (JAM) and Coalition Forces. But Khazali's

network adopted its own name, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous).

The Sadrists' political and military decline began in December 2006.

Prior to that time, the Sadr Trend served as an essential faction in the Prime Minister Maliki's coalition government. This support won them a degree of autonomy from Coalition Forces, as evidenced by the prohibition of Coalition Forces operating in Sadr City.

However, as the Sadr Movement grew in strength and power, it became more unwieldy and began to seriously challenge the efforts of the government. In late 2006, Prime Minister Maliki decided to marginalize the Sadrists and to tackle the problems of Shi'a militias

## *Part Two*

The Sadrist Movement's remarkable reversal of fortunes from early 2007 to late 2008 stemmed from the deep divide between the political, religious and military factions that were exacerbated by external pressures.

Several important developments during the Surge split Muqtada al-Sadr, other leaders of his movement, and militia groups. The most important changes in the Sadrist Movement occurred as a result of Sadr's stand-down and departure for Iran in January 2007; the arrest of Qais Khazali in March 2007; the Karbala incident of August 2007; and the Iraqi campaigns in Basra, Sadr City, and Amarah in the spring of 2008.

From January 2007 to mid-2008, Coalition and Iraqi offensive operations not only targeted JAM's military strength in Baghdad and southern Iraq, but they also

empowered political rivals to isolate the Sadrist movement.

There were at least five major divisions within the militia: the 'Golden JAM' that sought to purge criminal elements and Iranian influence; the 'Noble JAM' that exposed the criminal gangs and favored Coalition assistance; the Kadhimiyah wing which advanced the interests of cleric Hazem al-Araji and his brother Bahaa al-Araji, a Sadrist parliamentarian; Asaib Ahl al-Haq/Special Groups led by Qais Khazali and later, Akram al-Kabi; and the criminal gangs that depended upon the money generated from extortion.

After a series of additional political and military setbacks, it had become evident that Sadr had lost his ability to use the militia to strengthen his political position. Accordingly, Sadr sought to strengthen his control over the movement by enhancing his religious credentials. In late 2007, Sadr announced that he would be pursuing religious studies in Iran with the hope of becoming an ayatollah.

Prompted by security concerns and political calculations, Prime Minister Maliki launched an offensive in Basra against Shi'a militias.

The Sadrists' rivals in the Iraqi government sought to capitalize on the weakened Sadrist Movement by pushing for legislation that would ban any political party that maintained a militia. This move resulted in a fierce debate among Sadrist leadership between the political, religious and military camps.

The developments in the spring of 2008 demonstrated that Muqtada al-Sadr was unable to control the movement, which was politically isolated, and lacked a capable fighting force.

Sadrist clerical and parliamentary leadership sought to consolidate their fractured movement in the wake of their political and military losses, and embarked on a dramatic restructuring of the movement to improve its image and political prospects in the summer of 2008. Notably, Sadr emphasized a return to the social services model and sought to transition JAM into a non-violent organization.

## INTRODUCTION

THE SADR MOVEMENT is at a crossroads, operating in a dramatically reshaped political and security environment. While the political and military power of the movement has declined, its traditional constituency — the urban Shi'a poor and rural Shi'a tribes — remains a large and politically-valuable electorate. Iraq's provincial elections are scheduled to be held on January 31, 2009, and its national elections at the end of 2009. Established Shi'a political groups, including Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's Dawa Party and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, are competing with the remnants of the Sadrist political bloc for the support of this constituency.

If the Sadrist Trend is able to retain its electorate in the Provincial Elections or reconstitute itself as national elections approach, the party may again shape national political life. Iraqi Shi'a politicians will reorganize and cement Parliamentary coalitions in order to retain control of major offices. The Sadrist Trend, should it retain its constituency, may play a significant role in the formation of Parliamentary coalitions after the 2009 national elections, but without a strong link to a militia the movement is unlikely to dominate Iraqi politics.

This report documents the political and military decline of the Sadrist Trend in 2007 and 2008. It begins with a brief history of the Sadrist Movement, including its emergence in the 1990s under Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr; its quick rise to

power in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq under Muqtada al-Sadr; and its involvement in Iraqi politics through late 2006. This retrospective is necessary to identify the major Sadrist leaders prior to the U.S. invasion; their roles in rebuilding the movement from 2003 to 2006; and how their divergent views and competing claims to lead the movement lay the groundwork for its fragmentation. The original leaders of the Sadr Movement and close associates of Muqtada al-Sadr remain important in early 2009.

The second part of this report documents how critical events of 2007 and 2008 fragmented the movement. The report reviews Sadr's stand-down and departure for Iran in January 2007; the arrest of Special Groups' leaders in March 2007; the attack at the Karbala shrine in August 2007; the Iraqi campaigns in Basra, Sadr City, and Amarah in the spring of 2008; and the restructuring of the Sadrist Trend in the summer of 2008. The report concludes with a consideration of how the movement is evolving in Iraq's election year.

## PART ONE

### *A Brief History of the Sadrist Movement*

THE SADRIST MOVEMENT (or Sadrist Trend), as it is known today, emerged in the 1990s under the leadership of Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr.<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath of Saddam's disastrous invasion of Kuwait and the failed Shi'a uprising in southern Iraq, the Ba'athist regime sought to reestablish strict control over the Shi'a population by co-opting specific Shi'a tribes and clerics to harness growing religious sentiment.<sup>2</sup> The regime chose Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr to lead the efforts to reach the Shi'a.<sup>3</sup> The natural death of prominent Shi'a cleric Grand Ayatollah Abdul Qasim Al Khoei in 1992 furthered the opportunity for Sadeq al-Sadr to gain a following among the Iraqi Shi'a.

While he was relatively unknown at the time outside of the Najaf *hawza* (or seminary), Sadeq al-Sadr came from a prominent family. He was a relative and student of Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr, a distinguished Shi'a scholar who helped establish the Dawa party. (Saddam Hussein's regime killed Mohammed Baqir in 1980, and he became the first martyr from the Sadr family.<sup>4</sup>) Sadeq al-Sadr received recognition as a distinguished scholar from Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr and from Abdul Qasim al-Khoei, which in the modern Shi'a tradition helps to elevate a cleric such that others might follow him as a *marjah* (source of emulation).<sup>5</sup>

Under the cover of the state-sponsored initiative, Sadeq al-Sadr dispatched aides, mostly low-ranking clerics, throughout the south to establish his network among the urban poor and rural tribes.<sup>6</sup> Sadeq al-Sadr believed that tribal laws and customs could be reconciled with Sharia law. Thus, "he issued rulings on tribal law covering questions that the [traditional Shi'a clergy] had previously avoided."<sup>7</sup> Breaking from tradition, Sadeq al-Sadr allowed tribal leaders to issue religious rulings and administer Islamic law.<sup>8</sup> His followers also emphasized a return to traditional Islamic customs, as well as social and economic relief for the poor, who were suffering heavily in the 1990s under United Nations sanctions. The Sadrists established schools, mosques, and other offices from where they could meet the needs of local communities.<sup>9</sup> Through his message and outreach, Sadeq al-Sadr gained mass appeal among rural and urban Shi'a poor across the south, but particularly in the teeming slums of Baghdad and Basra.

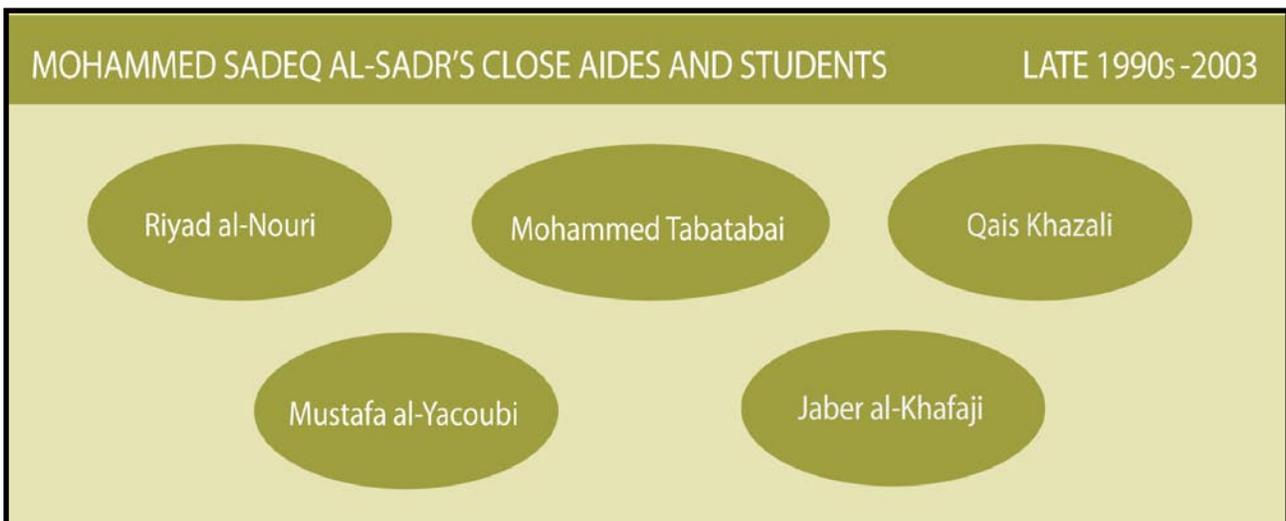
Sadeq al-Sadr challenged the quietist beliefs of the senior Shi'a clerics in Najaf, including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. As a quietist, Sistani believed that clerics should not be involved in politics, and should instead focus on religious affairs.<sup>10</sup> Sadeq al-Sadr, however, argued that religious leaders were required to take a more activist role in political and social affairs and agitate for justice and equality. In a further affront to the traditional Iraqi Shi'a clergy and the Ba'athist regime, as well as the Islamic Republic of Iran, Sadeq al-Sadr aimed to establish an Iraqi state under clerical leadership.<sup>11</sup>

The movement, therefore, struck a nationalist and anti-Iranian chord, which was heightened by the fact that Sadeq al-Sadr remained in Iraq during the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast, other Shi'a religious and political leaders such as the al-Hakim family and prominent Dawa party members lived in exile in Tehran, Damascus, and London. As a result, the Sadrist Movement was at once populist, nationalist, and religious.

To further mobilize the urban Shi'a population, Sadeq al-Sadr issued a *fatwa* (or a religiously-sanctioned edict) establishing Friday prayers in the densely populated Baghdad Shi'a neighborhood of Medinat al-Tharwa (later renamed Sadr City) in 1997.<sup>12</sup> Sadeq al-Sadr thus made an important change to Shi'a religious practice in Iraq, as Friday prayers had not been a dominant feature of Shi'a Islam. Moreover, the Ba'athist regime had previously forbidden them. His sermons emphasized messages of religious piety, nationalism, and populism. Sadeq al-Sadr would frequently lead chants of "Yes, yes to Islam; yes, yes to faith; no, no,

to America; no, no to the devil."<sup>13</sup> Years later, his son would lead similar calls before equally massive crowds. Sadeq al-Sadr's sermons during Friday prayers did not threaten the regime overtly, but the fact that he established a large following through his popular Friday prayers challenged Saddam.

Saddam's regime had selected Sadeq al-Sadr to lead the Shi'a revival because they believed he would be widely accepted but easy to contro. This notion soon proved false. Sadeq al-Sadr was certainly careful in the early 1990s not to provoke the regime as he established the infrastructure of his movement. But his message took on a more aggressive tone in 1998 when he actively began to speak out against the regime during Friday prayers in the southern city of Kufa, near Najaf.<sup>14</sup> On February 12, 1999, Sadeq al-Sadr called for the release of more than one hundred clergy and students who had been arrested in the wake of the 1991 uprising.<sup>15</sup> This demand electrified the tens of thousands who attended the mosque in Kufa. It also incensed the regime, which



responded immediately by banning Friday prayers.

Gunmen affiliated with the regime assassinated Sadeq al-Sadr one week later, on February 19, 1999. They opened fire on his car as he was returning to his home in Najaf from the Kufa mosque.<sup>16</sup> Two of his sons and closest aides, Muammel and Mustafa, were also killed in the attack, along with the driver. His youngest son, Muqtada, then twenty-five years old, was not present in the vehicle during the attack. The regime immediately placed him under house arrest.<sup>17</sup>

A series of riots broke out in Sadrist strongholds across central and southern Iraq in the wake of Sadeq al-Sadr's assassination. The regime quickly and violently quelled these uprisings and closed the head office of the Sadrist movement in Najaf.<sup>18</sup>

A group of young clerics who had been close deputies and students of Sadeq al-Sadr led the movement after his death. They were: Riyadh al-Nouri, Mohammed Tabatabai, Mustafa al-Yacoubi, Qais Khazali, and Jaber al-Khafaji.<sup>19</sup> This circle ran the movement until the ascendance of Muqtada al-Sadr in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>20</sup> Nouri, Tabatabai, and Yacoubi were the most influential of the group.<sup>21</sup> From 1999 to 2003, the movement's leadership remained underground.

Sadeq al-Sadr's followers were divided about whom to adopt as their *marjah al-taqlid*, or source of emulation, in the wake of his death. Some followed Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf, while

others — including his closest students — turned to Karbala-born Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri, Sadeq al-Sadr's source of emulation, who resided in Qom, the seminary city of Iran.<sup>22</sup>

Muqtada al-Sadr, the unlikely heir to the Sadrist Movement, rose to prominence in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Muqtada had not been able to direct the movement after his father's death because he was under house arrest.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, many of his father's followers believed Muqtada's youth, "inexperience and unstable demeanor" made him an unsuitable leader.<sup>24</sup> According to some reports, Muqtada al-Sadr suffers from bipolar disorder.<sup>25</sup> Finally, scholarly credentials or *marjah* status do not pass from father to son, but rather from teacher to prominent student.<sup>26</sup> For all of these reasons, it is doubtful that Sadeq al-Sadr intended to pass the movement on to his son.

Within weeks of the March 2003 invasion, the Sadrist leadership cadre that had held the movement together underground reestablished its networks and offices. On April 8, as the Baghdad fell to Coalition Forces, Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri, the Iranian-based Iraqi cleric who had been Sadeq al-Sadr's *marjah*, issued a *fatwa* urging the Iraqi Shi'a to seize power. One day earlier, Haeri had appointed Muqtada al-Sadr as his deputy and representative in Iraq.<sup>27</sup> This was essential because Muqtada al-Sadr was a *Hojjet al-Islam*, a low-ranking cleric unable to issue religious rulings; therefore, he needed the authority of a senior cleric to do so.<sup>28</sup> In addition, as Ayatollah Haeri was the *marjah* of the other

deputies of Sadeq al-Sadr, they recognized his authority and thus granted Muqtada preeminence. As Haeri's representative in Iraq, Sadr was authorized to collect the *khoms* (an Islamic tax which Shi'a give to their *marjah*) on his behalf. This arrangement generated vast income for Sadr's movement in Iraq. According to Adnan Shahmani, a cleric in Sadr's Najaf office, the movement collected roughly \$65,000 a month from these donations—roughly half of which went to support the poor and religious students while the other half directly funded the Sadrist offices in Iraq.<sup>29</sup>

Other clerics were tasked with reopening Sadrist offices, called the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS), across Iraq and asserting Sadrist control in those communities. Sheikh Ahmed al-Fartousi was dispatched from Najaf and appointed as Haeri's representative at the Hikmah mosque in the newly-renamed Sadr City district of Baghdad, an area that was home to millions of poor Shi'a.<sup>30</sup> At the time, he reported to Riyad al-Nouri, who headed the Sadrist office — the movement's headquarters — in Najaf and worked closely with Muqtada al-Sadr as his deputy.<sup>31</sup> Nouri was also Muqtada al-Sadr's brother-in-law.<sup>32</sup>

The Sadrists quickly reopened their mosques, reestablished Friday prayers, created a militia to provide security, assumed control of local political institutions, and provided social services for their communities.<sup>33</sup> They also established religious courts to deal with disputes and crime.<sup>34</sup> These courts were controversial as they allegedly carried out summary

executions.<sup>35</sup> In the spring and summer of 2003, Sadrist clerics pushed for the application of strict Islamic law in the areas they controlled, often through intimidation or force.<sup>36</sup> Sadr issued a ban on alcohol and he ordered all women, even non-Muslims, to wear a veil.<sup>37</sup> "Punishment committees" sprung up in Sadrist neighborhoods like Sadr City to enforce these stern rules, violently if necessary.<sup>38</sup>

Some of Sadeq al-Sadr's followers questioned whether Muqtada was qualified to lead the movement, despite his designation by Haeri. Mohammed al-Yacoubi, a prominent Shi'a cleric and follower of Sadeq al-Sadr (not to be confused with Sadeq's student Mustafa al-Yacoubi), asserted that Sadeq al-Sadr had designated him as the rightful heir to the movement because he had greater religious authority.<sup>39</sup> On July 16, 2003, Mohammed al-Yacoubi created the Fadhila (Islamic Virtue) Party.<sup>40</sup> The Fadhila Party was an important splinter of the Sadr movement that ultimately won fifteen seats in the Iraqi parliament in the 2005 elections, but its political influence was concentrated in Basra.<sup>41</sup>

The Sadrist Movement, in contrast to its Shi'a political rivals, had a powerful and numerically superior constituency from which to draw support. Muqtada al-Sadr sought to capitalize on the anger and resentment of the Shi'a poor. He loudly denounced the presence of Coalition Forces as "occupiers," calling for resistance and demanding their immediate withdrawal. These calls became important unifying themes for his supporters and the main objective of the movement. In an effort to

stoke populist and nationalist sentiments, he also highlighted the contrasts between his movement and the returning Iraqi exile parties, namely the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and Dawa.<sup>42</sup> The Sadrists and their supporters were deeply suspicious of the returning exile Shi'a politicians and clerics. Having endured Saddam's brutality, particularly in the wake of the 1991 uprising, they perceived those returning from exile as pawns of the Iranians or the Americans. All of these factors, combined with his movement's provision of security and services, appealed to masses of the Shi'a poor.

The Sadr Movement violently challenged Najaf's clerical establishment as soon as the regime fell. On April 10, 2003, assailants attacked Sheik Abdel Majid al-Khoei as he "tried to establish his authority by reconciling with the caretaker of Imam Ali's tomb."<sup>43</sup> Khoei was the son of the Grand Ayatollah who had led the Shi'a revolt in 1991 and whose death in 1992 allowed Saddam to raise Sadeq al-Sadr to prominence. He had supported the Coalition and had recently returned to Najaf from exile in London with the help of U.S. forces.<sup>44</sup> The mob, which included Sadrist sympathizers, stabbed and shot the cleric, and reportedly left him to die outside the house of Muqtada al-Sadr.<sup>45</sup> Shortly after Khoei's murder, roughly fifty armed Sadrist supporters also besieged the home of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf and demanded that he leave Iraq within forty-eight hours.<sup>46</sup> Nearby tribal leaders intervened and compelled the men to stand down.<sup>47</sup>

The assassination of Abdel Majid al-Khoei removed an alternative source of leadership for the Shi'a population of Najaf, and set the precedent for violent retribution by Sadrist leaders against any who cooperated with the Coalition. The Central Criminal Court of Iraq issued sealed arrest warrants for Muqtada al-Sadr, Mustafa al-Yacoubi, and Riyadh al-Nouri (among others) for their alleged involvement in the attack.<sup>48</sup> The Khoei assassination therefore gave the Iraqi government the authority to detain Muqtada and others, an opportunity that the Coalition Provisional Authority ultimately revealed and declared it would enforce in April 2004.

Muqtada al-Sadr's implication in the attacks — and his radical position within Iraqi politics — caused the Coalition Provisional Authority to omit him from the Iraqi Governing Council, formed in July 2003.<sup>49</sup> He therefore established a shadow government in August 2003, and began to raise and train the Jaysh al-Mahdi militia (JAM). Sadr thereby directly challenged the authority of the Iraqi Governing Council and the Coalition Provisional Authority.<sup>50</sup> Muqtada al-Sadr sought to model his organization on Lebanese Hezbollah, combining a political party with an armed militia and an organization providing social services. The Hezbollah model gave the Sadrist Movement levers of control over political life through representation in Parliament, control of ministerial offices, the ability to organize popular protests, and the possibility of taking up arms when necessary. Likewise, the Sadr Movement could provide the guidelines for the social and religious life of its constituent

population. By early 2004, JAM had evolved into a powerful military force, albeit one poorly trained and organized.

The militia defended Sadrist political institutions and Muqtada's interests. When Coalition Forces shut down the main Sadrist newspaper, *al Hawza*, on March 28, 2004 and arrested prominent Sadrist aide, Mustafa al-Yacoubi, several days later, JAM fighters mobilized and launched major uprisings in Baghdad, Karbala, Najaf, and Kufa.<sup>51</sup> U.S. forces initiated major operations against the Mahdi Army fighters. While the militiamen were overall poorly trained, they took tactical positions in and around the holy shrines of Karbala, Kufa and Najaf, complicating the ability of Coalition Forces to use heavy firepower — and enhancing the militia's ability to control access to these shrines and the revenue they generated. The fighting lasted for nearly two months. Ultimately, JAM fighters were no match for U.S. airpower, artillery, and armor. The shrines suffered minimal damage, but the militiamen suffered heavy losses in the fighting.<sup>52</sup>

The first conflict between the Coalition and JAM ended in late May 2004. The ceasefire brokered between Coalition officials, Iraqi politicians, and Sadrist leaders was short-lived. A second uprising broke out in Najaf in August 2004,<sup>53</sup> after JAM fighters attacked a U.S. Marine patrol in Najaf which they believed was coming to arrest Muqtada al-Sadr.<sup>54</sup> The conflict escalated as JAM clashed with Coalition Forces across Najaf.<sup>55</sup> Militia fighters operated in and around the holy shrines and the main cemetery — some of the most sacred places in the Shi'a tradition — which

they used as sanctuary. U.S. tanks and helicopters continued their precision assault.<sup>56</sup>

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani was in London to receive medical treatment when the fighting erupted.<sup>57</sup> Sistani had departed the city for the first time in years on the same day the fighting broke out, in a move some say gave Coalition Forces tacit permission to enter the city.<sup>58</sup> Attempts to negotiate an end to the ongoing fighting stalled until he returned to Najaf on August 26, 2004.<sup>59</sup> Sistani brokered a truce with Muqtada al-Sadr that contained several demands: the removal of JAM fighters from the sacred Imam Ali shrine and the city of Najaf; the withdrawal of Coalition Forces from the city; the creation of a demilitarized zone in Najaf and Kufa; the appointment of the Iraqi Security Forces to guard the cities and the shrines; and compensation for citizens whose property had been damaged in the fighting.<sup>60</sup>

The truce enhanced the standing of Sistani and the traditional Iraqi Shi'a clergy, or *hawza*. They solidified their control over Najaf, which Sadrist leadership had contested as soon as the regime fell, with Khoei's assassination. The Sadrists had lost Najaf. In the immediate aftermath of their perceived defeat, Muqtada al-Sadr and much of the Sadrist movement went into hiding for several months.

### *The Sadr Movement Splits*

Rifts in the organization emerged after the two uprisings in 2004. Although Muqtada al-Sadr had clearly been the symbolic leader of the Sadrist Movement

throughout the revolts, he had had difficulty controlling his movement during the fighting. Important figures within the Sadrist movement, many of whom had had connections to Sadeq al-Sadr, directly challenged his authority after JAM's defeat in Najaf.

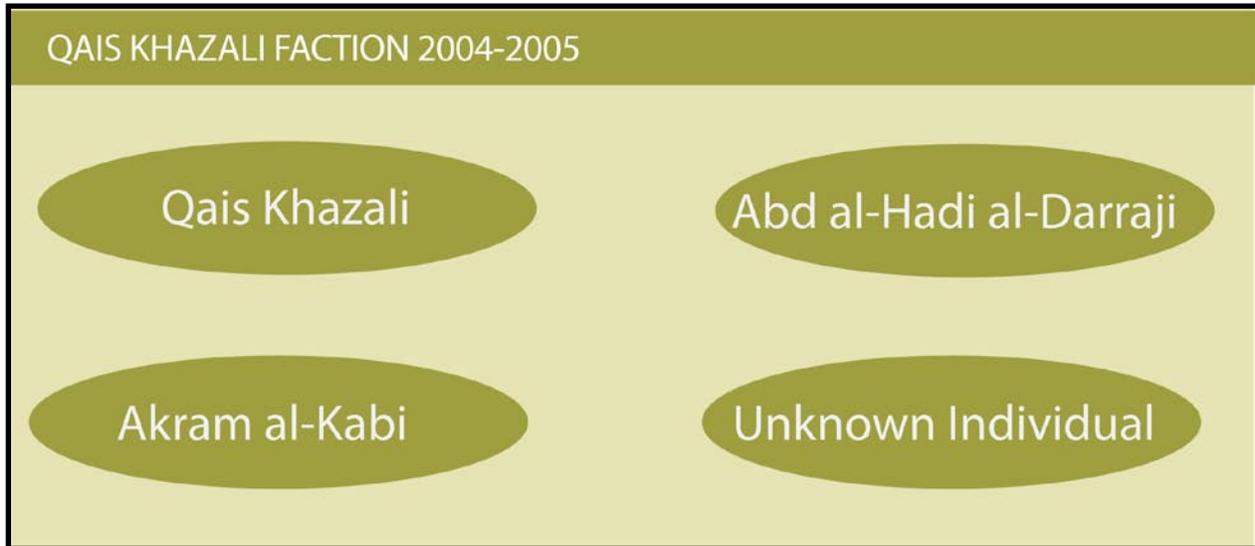
Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri broke with Muqtada after JAM's second uprising failed. Haeri was critical of Sadr's actions in both the first and second uprisings.<sup>61</sup> After the conflicts, he distanced himself from Muqtada al-Sadr's movement and declared that Sadr was no longer his representative in Iraq.<sup>62</sup> He also issued a *fatwa* instructing "followers in Iraq to stop paying al-Sadr the Shiite tax. Al-Haeri said the money should go instead to his own representatives."<sup>63</sup> The collection of the *khoms* on behalf of Haeri had hitherto been the Sadrists' primary source of funding, and they felt the financial loss almost immediately. In early September 2004, Sadrist cleric Ahmad al-Shaibani (who was arrested by Coalition Forces only weeks later) admitted their movement was "suffering from a financial crunch."<sup>64</sup> The heavy losses of JAM fighters forced the movement to spend a great deal of money to help the families of dead, increasing their financial expenditures at a time when their funding sources were declining.<sup>65</sup>

Haeri's break with Sadr was very likely done with Iranian approval and reflected a decision by the highest echelons of the Iranian government to adopt a new policy toward the Sadrist movement.<sup>66</sup> During the second uprising, the Iranian regime became increasingly concerned about Sadr.<sup>67</sup> The Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard-Qods Force (IRGC-

QF), which is responsible for the regime's external operations in support of the Islamic Revolution, sought to tighten its control over a network of militants in Iraq to achieve their aims.<sup>68</sup> Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamanei ordered the IRGC-QF to keep their operatives in Iraq underground until after the January 2005 elections for political reasons.<sup>69</sup> After the elections, the IRGC-QF reorganized their networks in Iraq in a way that undermined Muqtada's control over his militia.

Qais Khazali — a top Sadrist deputy and spokesman who was integral in keeping the movement alive after the 1999 assassination of Mohammed Sadeq — also broke from Muqtada al-Sadr at this time. During the second battle in Najaf, Khazali reportedly clashed with Sadr over strategy and began to issue orders to militia fighters without Muqtada's approval.<sup>70</sup> He returned to Sadr City after the battle and continued to direct his group in attacks against Coalition Forces.<sup>71</sup> In October, Qais Khazali, along with Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji and two other senior Sadrist leaders were ignoring the ceasefire agreement and weapons buyback program that Muqtada al-Sadr had brokered with the Iraqi government.<sup>72</sup> They had no interest in complying with Sadr's demand. It is reasonable to deduce that Qais Khazali and Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji were not acting as individuals, but rather controlled a segment of those who formerly fought alongside Muqtada and JAM. They attracted other senior leaders of the movement to themselves, and away from Muqtada.

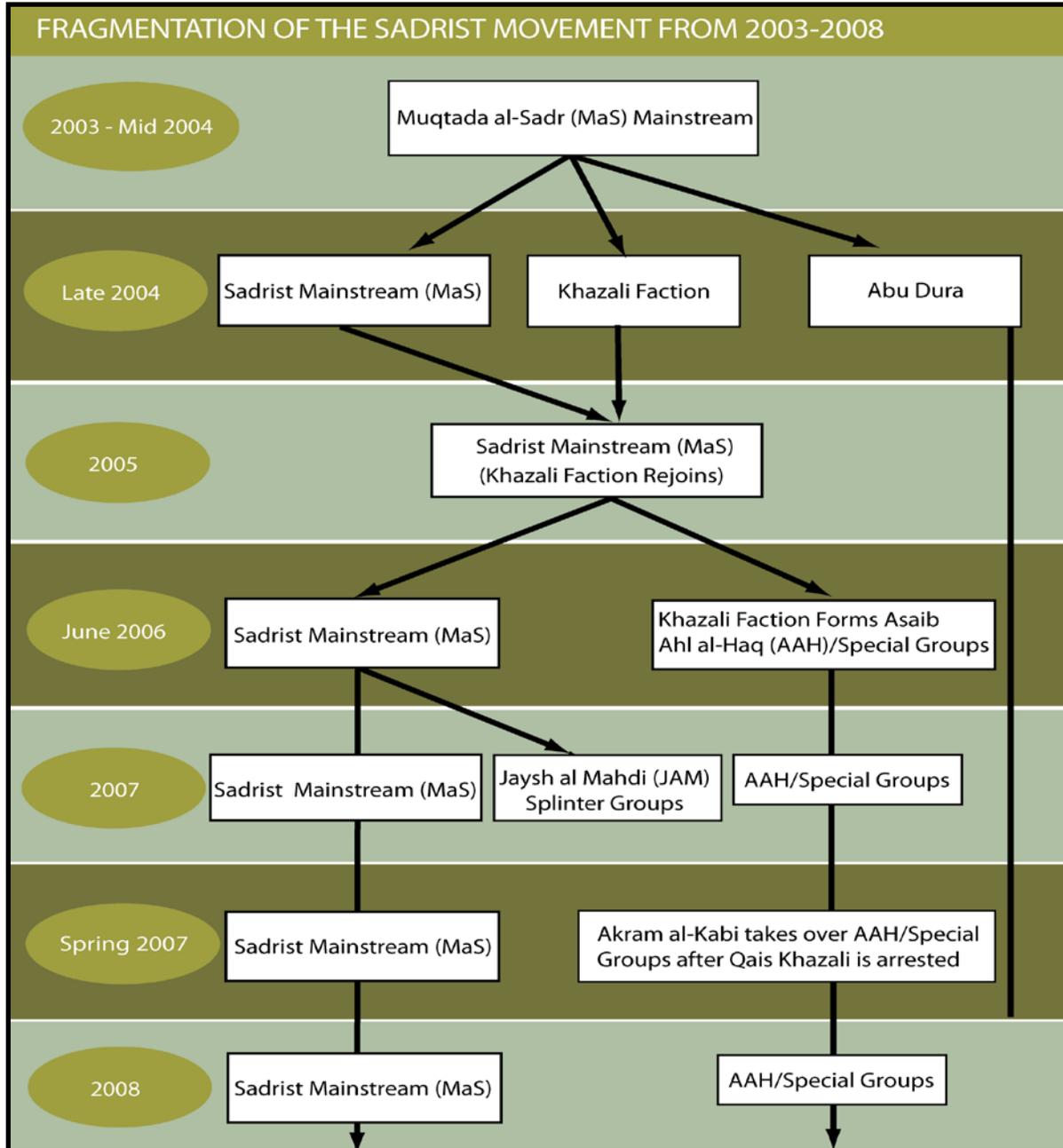
Other senior militia leaders established themselves as commanders



independently of Muqtada and Qais. One such commander was Isma'il Hafiz Al-Lami, known by his nom-de-guerre Abu Dura.<sup>73</sup> Abu Dura (which means Father of Armor) adopted the name in August 2004 as he fought against Coalition Forces in Najaf.<sup>74</sup> He rose to prominence during the fight as a projectiles expert.<sup>75</sup> After the second uprising, Abu Dura broke from JAM and began operating his own militia.<sup>76</sup> His group, which was based in Sadr City, operated notorious death squads in Baghdad that were responsible for the kidnapping, torture, and murder of thousands of Sunni civilians from 2004 to 2006.<sup>77</sup> Dura's group was also responsible for the July 2006 kidnapping of Taysir Najid Awad al-Mashadani, a Sunni Minister of Parliament, and the kidnapping of employees of the Ministry of Higher Education in November

2006.<sup>78</sup> Seeking to distance the movement from such atrocities, top Sadrist cleric Riyadh al-Nouri publically disavowed Abu Dura in August 2006.<sup>79</sup> After evading several raids by Coalition Forces in late 2006, Abu Dura fled to Iran to avoid capture. However, he continued to direct his death squads via proxy in 2007.<sup>80</sup>

Sadr emerged from his seclusion in early 2005, Iraq's first election year. He adopted a more conciliatory tone towards the Iraqi government and turned his attention to politics. He apparently intended to improve the reputation of his movement after the failed 2004 uprisings.<sup>81</sup> Sadr also aimed to impose greater discipline over his rank-and-file. He "insisted his followers adhere to an 'official line.'"<sup>82</sup> He also created an internal discipline unit that would ensure obedience and punish those who did not adhere to his orders.<sup>83</sup>



Muqtada also reconciled with Qais Khazali and his cadre, who had split from him after the second Najaf uprising, and gave them a position of political honor within the movement. According to *Ansar al-Mahdi*, a Sadrist newspaper and purported mouthpiece of JAM, in early March 2005, Muqtada al-Sadr appointed Qais Khazali,

Akram al-Kabi (another prominent JAM commander), and two others to supervise OMS offices.<sup>84</sup>

We can reasonably deduce from this information an association between Qais Khazali and Akram al-Kabi. We know that Qais Khazali and Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji

were working alongside one another in Sadr City in October 2005. We can thus deduce that there was a faction of former Sadrists working against Muqtada after the uprisings until March 2005. This faction's leadership included Qais Khazali, Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji, Akram al-Kabi, and one other individual unnamed in the public sources. We shall call this group, and the followers who retain their arms and weapons to follow them, the "Khazali faction." In March 2005, the leaders merged back into the wider Sadr movement, presumably with their followers.

Riyad al-Nouri and Hazem al-Araji were the primary clerical leaders of the movement, the former based in Najaf and the latter in Baghdad. Araji had been arrested in September 2004 and was released from Coalition custody in late August 2005. He re-entered public life in the Sadrist movement by leading the social affairs committee.<sup>85</sup> In this role, Araji provided social services to poor Shi'a in Baghdad and the south.<sup>86</sup> To achieve their aims, he and Nouri emphasized this priority of social outreach over armed resistance.<sup>87</sup>

Sadr and his movement joined the United Iraqi Alliance (a coalition of Shi'a parties led by SCIRI and including Dawa) in November 2005. They garnered thirty seats in parliamentary elections held in January 2006, plus the votes of two members of the independent but sympathetic Risaliyoon party.<sup>88</sup> As the government formed, the Sadrist political bloc gained control of the Ministries of Health, Transportation, and Agriculture, enabling them to provide jobs, services, and revenue for militiamen and loyalists.<sup>89</sup> Engagement in the political

system provided the clerical and political leadership of the Sadrist Trend with a new source of income and expanded their patronage network.

### *The Iranian Qods Force Trains JAM Special Groups*

Many members of JAM resisted Sadr and his clerics' turn towards the political process in 2005. This dissatisfaction coincided with increasing Iranian influence and support for armed groups via the IRGC-QF. The Qods Force, with the help of Arabic-speaking Lebanese Hezbollah commanders, trained a growing number of Iraqi militants in Iranian camps; many of the Iraqi fighters had been members of JAM.<sup>90</sup>

The Iranians had already been training and funding Iraqi militias throughout 2004 and even 2003, but the Qods Force expanded the program in 2005. That year, Hezbollah leadership sent Ali Mussa Daqduq to Iran to work with IRGC-QF to train Iraqi militants, particularly members of JAM.<sup>91</sup> Daqduq joined Lebanese Hezbollah in 1983.<sup>92</sup> He served in various leadership positions during his long tenure. "He commanded a Hezbollah special operations unit. He coordinated protection of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. And he led Hezbollah operations in large areas of Lebanon."<sup>93</sup> In his new position, Daqduq was a member of Hezbollah Department 2800, which was created to "support the training, arming, funding, and in some cases, direction of militia extremists by the Iranian Republican Guards Corps' Qods Force."<sup>94</sup> These fighters, some of whom were members of

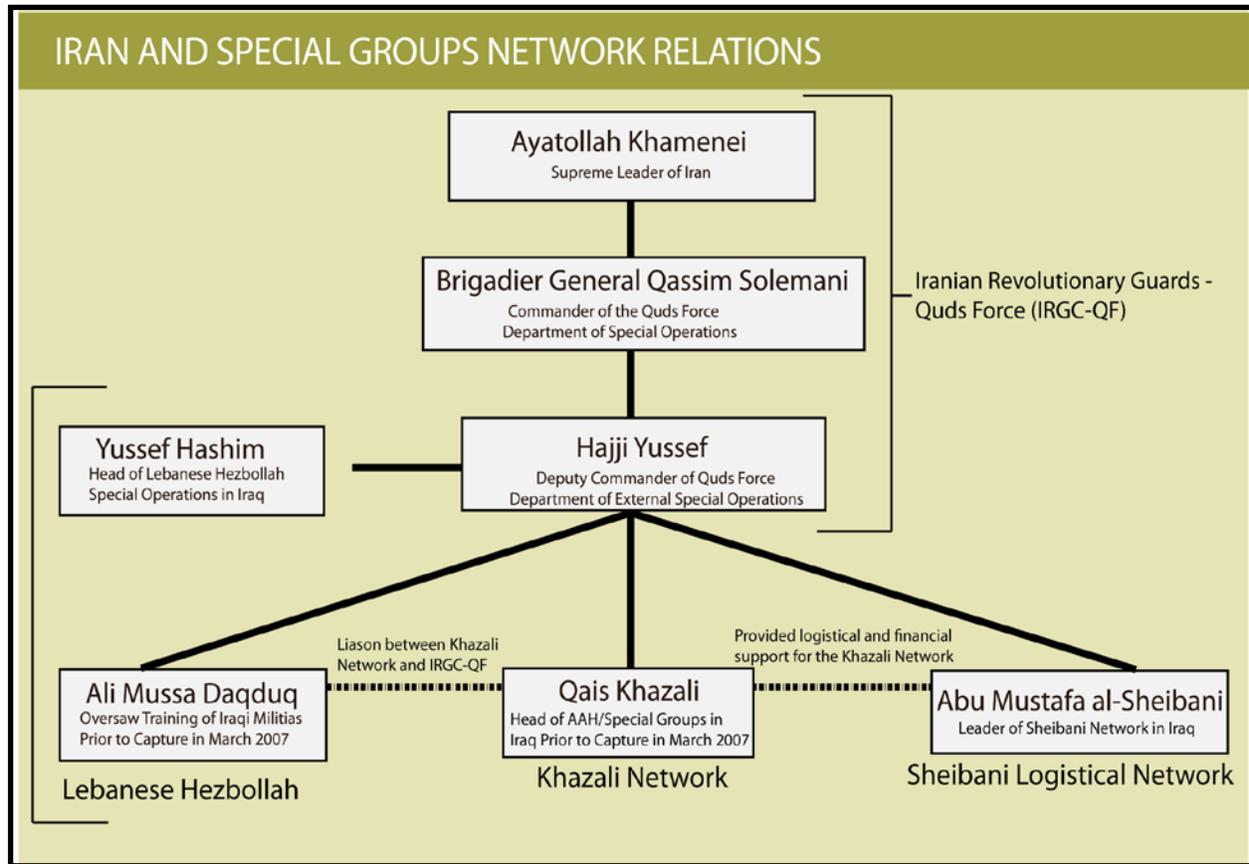
JAM or other extremist groups, came to Iran in groups of twenty to sixty.<sup>95</sup> In the camps, they received four to six weeks of training in the use of mortars, rockets, sniper tactics, intelligence gathering, kidnapping operations, and explosively-formed penetrators (EFPs).<sup>96</sup> EFPs are especially lethal, as they are made with advanced explosives and curved copper plates that can easily pierce heavily-armored vehicles.

In May 2006, as the Maliki government was forming, the IRGC-QF sought to reorganize their efforts in Iraq in order to restructure these trained militia cells into a network resembling Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>97</sup> Daqduq travelled to Tehran with his superior, Yussef Hashim, the head of Lebanese Hezbollah Special Operations in Iraq, for a meeting with the top Iranian leadership. IRGC-QF commander, Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani, attended the meeting.<sup>98</sup> Soleimani reports directly to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamanei and has advised him on Iranian operations in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2002.<sup>99</sup> Hajji Youssef (also known as Abdul Reza Shalai) was at the meeting as well. Youssef is a deputy IRGC-QF commander and head of the Department of External Special Operations.<sup>100</sup>

The following month, Qais Khazali was designated the head of a network.<sup>101</sup> The Khazali network was known as Special Groups by other members of JAM (who saw them as a better trained, funded, and armed faction of their movement) and Coalition Forces. But Khazali's network adopted its own name, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous).<sup>102</sup> Daqduq remained the chief advisor and served as a liaison between

Khazali and the IRGC-QF.<sup>103</sup> “[Daqduq] monitored and reported on the training and arming of special groups in mortars and rockets, manufacturing and employment of improvised explosive devices, and kidnapping operations. Most significantly, he was tasked to organize the special groups in ways that mirrored how Hezbollah was organized in Lebanon.”<sup>104</sup> Armed, funded, and trained by the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah, the Khazali network/ Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)/ Special Groups conducted attacks on Coalition and Iraqi forces throughout 2006.

The relationship between Qais Khazali and Muqtada al-Sadr at this time is unclear. Khazali had his own sources of funding, training, and supplies and thus operated independently of Muqtada. But he does not seem formally to have broken with Muqtada al-Sadr in 2006 as he had in 2004. Akram al-Kabi, furthermore, was the overall commander of Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi organization until May 2007. It is very likely that Akram al-Kabi was using his command of JAM to facilitate the activities of the Khazali network — that is to say, the Khazali network/AAH/Special Groups operated partially within the JAM structure and pretended to be part of JAM. This deduction relies on the assumption that Akram al-Kabi was associated at this time with Qais Khazali/AAH/Special Groups, as he was known to have been both before and after this time. Given the absence of further evidence, this cannot be definitively proved or disproved.



The Khazali network received logistical and financial support from Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani and his smuggling network. In the 1990s, Sheibani was a member of the Badr Corps. By 1999, the Badr Corps had organized its operations along four geographic axes to coordinate activities against the Baathist regime.<sup>105</sup> Sheibani headed Badr's Third Axis, which focused on Baghdad and the surrounding areas.<sup>106</sup> He "was tasked with recruiting dissidents, disseminating propaganda, conducting sabotage, and procuring weapons."<sup>107</sup> Sheibani was therefore extremely familiar with the smuggling routes and infrastructure used by the Badr Corps. The Badr Corps received support from the IRGC-QF, which worked with each geographic axis.

After the 2003 invasion, Sheibani operated a major Iranian-backed logistics, arms, and financing network.<sup>108</sup> By 2005, his network consisted of 280 members, which were divided among seventeen teams.<sup>109</sup> When the IRGC-QF resumed their activities after the January 2005 Iraqi elections, Sheibani began to smuggle EFPs into Iraq.<sup>110</sup> Iranian-backed groups may have been using EFPs even before this time, but they were used with greater frequency after 2005.<sup>111</sup> His network also supplied money, rockets, mortars, explosives, and other weapons to a variety of Shi'a militia groups, including JAM, Badr, and Khazali's Special Groups.<sup>112</sup> Sheibani also facilitated the transfer of fighters into Iran for training.<sup>113</sup> His network was also implicated in a number of high-profile attacks against Iraqi

government officials and Coalition Forces.<sup>114</sup> Although the Sheibani network coordinated closely with the Khazali network, it was an independent entity with direct ties back to Iran. This allowed the IRGC-QF and the Sheibani network to “regulate the flow of advanced weaponry into Iraq...[to] shape the overall pace and level of violence.”<sup>115</sup>

The IRGC-QF assisted JAM splinter groups in Iraq while it created other Iranian-backed militant networks. In 2005, Iranian-supported groups were especially active in the southern provinces of Basra and Maysan. Ahmed al-Fartousi (not to be confused with Mohammed al-Fartousi, the Sadrist leader in Baghdad) was the top JAM commander in the city of Basra, the capital of the southernmost Iraqi province. Fartousi directed numerous attacks on British forces in the city for much of 2004 and 2005. Over time, his group began to operate independently of Muqtada al-Sadr’s orders and to receive weapons and funding from Iran.<sup>116</sup> Because of this, he was reportedly relieved from his command by Sadrist leadership; however, he continued to operate in Basra with Iranian support.<sup>117</sup> In September 2005, Fartousi was arrested by the British in a raid on his house.<sup>118</sup>

Despite these various splinters, in late 2006, at the height of sectarian violence, the Sadrists were a formidable military force. Muqtada al-Sadr remobilized and rebuilt the Jaysh al Mahdi after the February 2006 bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, one of the holiest Shi’a shrines. JAM positioned itself as a security guarantor for the Shi’a against al Qaeda in Iraq, but the organization also spawned death squads responsible for sectarian

cleansing.<sup>119</sup> By mid-2006 these militias were engaged in a violent campaign of expansion into Sunni and mixed Sunni-Shi’a neighborhoods. JAM soon controlled large areas of Baghdad.

The Sadrists also held thirty seats (plus two allied votes) in the 275-member Iraqi parliament, giving them a powerful political voice. During this time, Maliki relied heavily on the Sadrists for political support, as his Dawa party lacked a broad constituency and militia. In fact, Sadrist backing was essential in Maliki’s selection as Prime Minister in May 2006.<sup>120</sup> Given their political numbers and clout, the Sadrists presented an important bloc for passing legislation. They were also important for generating a quorum at a time when many legislators spent their time outside of the country.

As sectarian violence raged in Baghdad, an increasing number of local JAM commanders began to splinter from the movement. JAM had always functioned as a loosely organized movement. Many JAM commanders largely financed themselves after the Haeri funding stream ceased in late 2004.<sup>121</sup> JAM groups operated criminal rackets in Shi’a neighborhoods across Baghdad to generate funding, intimidate the local population, and maintain power.<sup>122</sup> The rapid growth in the movement from 2004 to 2006 and the subsequent emergence of a mafia-like system undermined Muqtada al-Sadr’s control over his commanders. As local commanders grew more powerful and financially independent, they became less likely to follow orders from Muqtada al-Sadr and the clerical leadership in Najaf.<sup>123</sup> Likewise, growing Iranian support for

different elements of Muqtada's movement further undermined centralized control. As JAM leaders became less responsive to his demands, Sadr reportedly tried to discipline the movement by reprimanding or firing insubordinates, albeit to little effect.<sup>124</sup> By late 2006, the Sadrist political and religious leadership had little control over the disparate groups operating under the JAM banner.

### *The Turning Point*

The Sadrists' political and military decline began in December 2006.<sup>125</sup> As JAM had expanded its territorial control throughout Baghdad, often via forced displacements and extra-judicial killings, Maliki had shielded Sadrist leaders and militia commanders from being targeted by Coalition Forces.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, the Iraqi government prohibited Coalition Forces from operating in Sadr City in 2006.<sup>127</sup> Hence, Sadr City became a large sanctuary for JAM and the Khazali network/AAH/Special Groups.

Iraqi political leaders recognized the threat that the Sadrists and their militia presented, perhaps none more than Prime Minister Maliki. Coalition Forces also recognized that in order to stabilize the rapidly-declining security situation they would have to stop JAM death squads. Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) decided not to attack Sadr City directly, but placed an enormous amount of pressure on the Prime Minister to allow them to target influential Sadrist leaders by removing immunity from those who had hitherto been protected by their government connections. Maliki resisted this notion until November

30, 2006, when the Sadrist bloc suspended their participation in his Cabinet after he refused to set troop withdrawal timelines at his meeting with President Bush in Amman, Jordan.<sup>128</sup> The Sadrists' political withdrawal prompted Maliki to reassess his political alliances. Several weeks later, Dawa and SCIRI officials met to discuss the problem of Shi'a militias.<sup>129</sup> Following the meeting, Dawa and SCIRI made a formal agreement to marginalize the Sadrists, politically and militarily.<sup>130</sup>

Maliki's decision to target the Sadrists occurred partially as the result of President Bush's announcement of the New Way Forward in Iraq — a plan that involved the deployment of five additional U.S. brigades and a change in strategy from transition to counterinsurgency. The move, along with a planned security operation in Baghdad termed *Fardh al-Qanoon* (Enforcing the Law) aimed to decrease the level of violence in the capital and tackle the problem of Shi'a militias. For the first time in years, U.S. forces were permitted regularly to conduct raids into Sadr City as part of the operation because Maliki dropped his protection of the Sadrists.<sup>131</sup>

## PART TWO

### *The Sadrists during the Surge*

THE PRESSURE BROUGHT to bear on the Sadrist Movement during the Surge accelerated rifts within the already fractured movement. From January 2007 to mid-2008, Coalition and Iraqi offensive operations not only targeted JAM's military strength in Baghdad and southern Iraq, but they also empowered political rivals to isolate the Sadrist movement. The political alliance between Dawa and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, formerly SCIRI) actively sought to marginalize the Sadrist political bloc in advance of provincial elections originally slated to occur in October 2008. Moreover, the withdrawal of the Sadrists from the United Iraqi Alliance in September 2007 permitted ISCI and Dawa to act more aggressively.<sup>132</sup> Backed by the Kurdish parties,<sup>133</sup> ISCI and Dawa's maneuvering in late 2007 and early 2008 diminished the Sadrists' political sway and eliminated their ability to obstruct key pieces of legislation. The Sadrists also lost control over the Ministries of Health and Transportation when Maliki appointed replacements for the Sadrist ministers who had withdrawn from his Cabinet.<sup>134</sup>

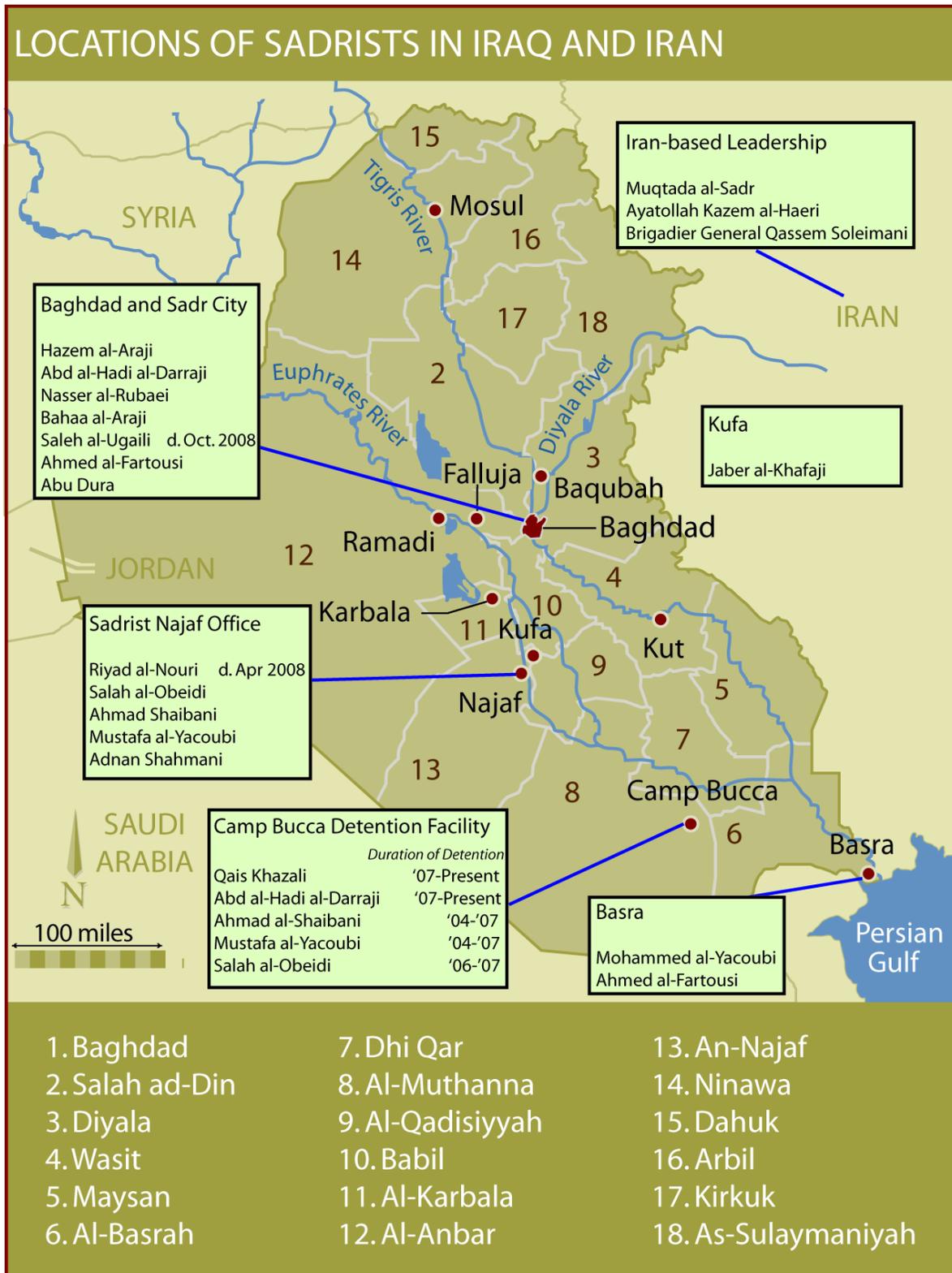
At the same time, the pressure on the Sadrist Movement exacerbated its internal struggles. Sadr's prolonged absence undermined his already-diminished control over the movement. By the time the last Surge brigade redeployed in June 2008, the Sadrists were operating in a transformed political and security landscape. Additionally, the movement itself was

deeply divided between the political, religious, and military factions. The military wing was split between various objectives and loyalties to different leaders. Facing newly-strengthened political rivals, Muqtada al-Sadr was forced to announce a serious restructuring of his weakened movement.

The Sadrist Movement's remarkable reversal of fortunes from early 2007 to late 2008 stemmed from internal divides that were exacerbated by external pressures. Several important developments during the Surge split Muqtada al-Sadr, other leaders of his movement, and militia groups. The most important changes in the Sadrist Movement occurred as a result of Sadr's stand-down and departure for Iran in January 2007; the arrest of Qais Khazali in March 2007; the Karbala incident of August 2007; and the Iraqi campaigns in Basra, Sadr City, and Amarah in the spring of 2008.

### *Sadr Orders a Stand-Down and Departs for Iran*

In early 2007, Coalition and Iraqi forces prepared for the Baghdad security offensive, Operation Fardh al-Qanoon (Enforcing the Law), which was launched on February 14, 2008. They moved into neighborhoods across the city to conduct systematic clearing operations. The strategy emphasized population security and the holding of previously-cleared terrain. The targets of Fardh al-Qanoon included both Shi'a and Sunni extremists in all areas of Baghdad. Prime Minister Maliki also ensured that there would be no political interference in the operation, meaning that



the Sadrists were no longer under his protection.<sup>135</sup> Hence, Coalition Forces were permitted to conduct operations in Sadrist-controlled neighborhoods and target JAM during the security crackdown.<sup>136</sup>

Sadr and the Sadrists in Najaf were becoming increasingly concerned about what the operations would mean for their movement and their militia. They were also contending with the growing problem of JAM splinter elements that were operating unchecked in the capital. Muqtada al-Sadr ordered his followers to stand down and not resist the security crackdown in mid-January, presumably an effort to avoid a showdown with Coalition Forces while he worked to reinstate his control over the movement.<sup>137</sup> He began a purge of the organization, discussed below. Direct confrontation with Coalition Forces would not only complicate his efforts to purge his organization but it would also severely weaken his movement. Shortly after issuing the order, in late January or early February 2007, Muqtada al-Sadr fled to Iran.<sup>138</sup>

Sadr had important reasons to leave Iraq. First, he likely fled to avoid being targeted in the security crackdown. Coalition Forces arrested several of his top aides prior to his departure.<sup>139</sup> Most notably, on January 19, 2007 Coalition and Iraqi Special Forces arrested prominent Sadrist cleric and spokesman Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji during a raid on his complex in the Beladiyat neighborhood near Sadr City.<sup>140</sup> Darraji, who was a member of the Khazali faction and once a close associate of Muqtada al-Sadr,<sup>141</sup> was accused of involvement in kidnappings, murder of

civilians, and assassinations of Iraqi military and government officials.<sup>142</sup> Darraji was likely operating as a part of the Khazali Network (now AAH/Special Groups), as he did in 2004 in the wake of the second uprising; however, his association with Muqtada al-Sadr had until then shielded him from being targeted by Coalition Forces. Either way, his arrest certainly concerned Sadr, who feared a similar fate for his other close associates and himself.

There were also indications that Muqtada al-Sadr fled Iraq over threats to his safety from within his movement.<sup>143</sup> This was a long-held fear of Sadr, particularly given the internal splits in the movement. However, the decision to flee to Iran solely on account of these fears, while not implausible, seems less likely.

Sadr's order to stand down and his subsequent departure revealed at least five major divisions within the militia. The first group included mainstream JAM led by the Najaf-based clerical leadership and the Baghdad-based political leadership. This group believed the movement had been heavily infiltrated by criminal elements and Iranian influence. They disapproved of these influences, and followed Sadr. Mainstream JAM generally obeyed Sadr's orders to stand down.<sup>144</sup> The Sadrist leadership in Najaf established an elite group of fighters to purge rogue members of JAM — often violently. This group was sometimes called the 'Golden Brigade,' or 'Golden JAM,' and it has been described as "an intelligence service that maintains internal discipline."<sup>145</sup> The group operated in northwest Baghdad as early as February 2007.<sup>146</sup> In April 2007, as Sadr's orders went unheeded by factions

of JAM, Sadrist leadership in Najaf dispatched Golden JAM to Baghdad to hunt down, punish, and even assassinate rogue members of the militia “before [Coalition Forces] can capture and interrogate them.”<sup>147</sup>

This faction seemed reconcilable to some in the Iraqi government and the Coalition. In late March 2007, Coalition Forces released Sadrist cleric Ahmad al-Shaibani at the request of Prime Minister Maliki.<sup>148</sup> Coalition Forces publically stated the move was designed to empower Sadrist leaders who were more willing to reconcile with the Iraqi government and to moderate extremism within the movement.<sup>149</sup> Shaibani was tasked to lead a newly-formed committee within the Sadrist Movement to foster reconciliation with Sunnis following his release.<sup>150</sup> Weeks earlier, Coalition Forces also released Sadrist cleric Salah al-Obeidi because they believed he could “help neutralize the radicals in Sadr’s fold.”<sup>151</sup> Maliki may also have requested release of these clerics as a quid pro quo, given in return for Sadr’s efforts to rein in his militia during the security crackdown. Shaibani and Obeidi were subsequently closely affiliated with the Office of the Martyr Sadr and the Najaf-based clerical leadership, but they were not able substantially to reconcile the extreme factions of the organization.

The second group included JAM members who also believed the movement was being corrupted, but, unlike Golden JAM, believed that it could be best purged with Coalition assistance. The group, known as ‘Noble JAM,’ opposed the criminal gangs and death squads that extorted the local population and terrorized

innocent civilians.<sup>152</sup> Noble JAM operated in northwest Baghdad. In the Shi’a-dominated neighborhoods of Shula and Hurriyah, Noble JAM squads secretly cooperated with Coalition and Iraqi forces.<sup>153</sup> They provided tips and sworn statements that led to the arrest of a handful of top militiamen since January 2007.<sup>154</sup>

A third group competed for control in northwest Baghdad, which is home to the Kadhimiyyah shrine, one of the holiest sites in Shi’a Islam. It generates a significant amount of revenue from pilgrims. Sadrist cleric Hazem al-Araji and his brother Bahaa al-Araji, a Sadrist parliamentarian, controlled the shrine. Although the Araji brothers were sympathizers and members of the Sadrist Movement, they also sought to advance their personal and political interests.<sup>155</sup> As a result, Sadr was not able to control Hazem and Bahaa al-Araji, who were using their affiliation with the movement and its infrastructure to their advantage.<sup>156</sup> In the spring of 2007, Bahaa al-Araji created a 300-member plainclothes militia in Kadhimiyyah ostensibly to protect the shrine — but more likely to defend the Araji’s brothers’ control.<sup>157</sup> This Kadhimiyyah wing undercut the Najaf-based leadership of the movement, who sought to reassert their authority through Golden JAM.<sup>158</sup> These factions competed with others — including criminal gangs and Iranian-backed Special Groups — for dominance in northwest Baghdad.

The fourth group was the Khazali network/AAH/Special Groups. The network did not abide by Muqtada al-Sadr’s freeze and sought to escalate their attacks on Coalition Forces. Some of those in the

Khazali network functioned as secret cells within the Jaysh al Mahdi — that is, they might be perceived as JAM members although they followed Khazali's orders. They continued to employ EFPs against U.S. troops, and they also targeted Coalition and Iraqi bases, including the Green Zone, with rocket and mortar fire.<sup>159</sup>

The fifth major group of JAM — criminal gangs—also ignored Sadr's call to stand down. These fighters operated local criminal rackets that generated large sums of money. They stood to lose personal power and wealth in the stand-down. Their extortion of the population also meant that they were prime targets of Coalition Forces and Noble JAM.

### *The Arrest of Qais Khazali*

The Iranian-backed Khazali network conducted a brazen attack against U.S. forces around the time Sadr ordered his freeze. On January 20, 2007, gunmen with “American-looking uniforms, vehicles and identification cards” successfully penetrated the Karbala Provincial Joint Coordination Center (PJCC) to attack a meeting of U.S. and Iraqi officials, who were planning the security measures for the upcoming Ashura pilgrimage.<sup>160</sup> The attackers had received extensive assistance from the IRGC-QF.<sup>161</sup> The Khazali-network fighters killed five U.S. Soldiers and wounded three more in the well-planned and executed attack.<sup>162</sup> The PJCC attack alerted Coalition Forces to the growing threat of AAH/Special Groups and the extent of Iranian assistance for their networks.

Intelligence gathered from the attack ultimately led to the capture of Qais Khazali, his brother Laith Khazali, and Lebanese Hezbollah member Ali Mussa Daquduq on March 20, 2007.<sup>163</sup> Coalition Forces found computer documents and Daquduq's personal journal, all of which detailed his tactics to target Iraqi and Coalition Forces as well as information on his travels and meetings.<sup>164</sup> In the raid on Qais Khazali, U.S. troops recovered documents “that recorded attacks against Coalition Forces” that he had directly ordered.<sup>165</sup> The captures also revealed that Iranian Quds Force operatives were training Iraqi Special Groups fighters in Iranian camps.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, they were arming and funding these cells with \$750,000 to three million dollars a month.<sup>167</sup> Given these high sums, it is no surprise that Special Groups fighters heeded directives from the Khazali instead of those from the Najaf-based Sadrist clerics.

Sadr's absence presented serious challenges to his ability to control the organization. In late May 2007, Sadr briefly returned from Iran to meet with key leaders of his movement in Kufa. According to General Ray Odierno, at the time the Corps commander of Coalition Forces, Sadr was in Iraq “to shore up his organization.”<sup>168</sup> He had evidently decided that more direct steps would be needed to quiet his militia, purge rogue elements, and reassert control — a move encouraged by the older and more moderate clerics in his movement.<sup>169</sup> Indeed, the dispatch of Golden JAM in early 2007 likely stemmed from this existing concern. During this time, Sadr also urged Sunni leaders to create a united front to oppose

## SADRIST TIMELINE

February 19, 1999 – Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr assassinated.	February 17, 2007 – Operation Fardh al-Qanoon begins in Baghdad. Facing a fractured movement and Prime Minister Maliki's denial of protection, Sadr orders JAM to stand down and not resist the US operation.
March 20, 2003 – Operation Iraqi Freedom, the U.S. invasion of Iraq, begins.	February - March 2007 – Ahmed Shaibani and Salah al-Obeidi are released from US custody in an effort to garner Sadr's support for the Baghdad Security Plan.
April 7-8, 2003 – Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri sends letter to Najaf appointing Muqtada al-Sadr as his deputy in Iraq and issues Fatwa calling on Shiite mullahs in Iraq to "fill the power vacuum of the administration in Iraqi cities."	March 23, 2007 – Qais Khazali and his brother Laith are detained by US Forces in Basra.
April 10, 2003 – Shia cleric Sheik Abdel Majid al-Khoei killed in Najaf by a mob which included Sadrists supporters.	Late May-August 2007 – Muqtada al-Sadr returns briefly to Iraq to reassert control over the movement.
July 2003 – Iraqi Governing Council is formed. Sadr is excluded from participation.	August 28, 2007 – Fighting erupts in Karbala between JAM and Maliki's security forces. 50 people are killed. Muqtada al-Sadr declares a six-month cease-fire.
July 16, 2003 - Mohammed al-Yacoubi creates the Fadhila (Islamic Virtue) Party, a splinter of the Sadr movement.	February 22, 2008 – Sadr announces a six-month cease-fire renewal.
August 2003 – Excluded from the government, Sadr establishes a shadow government and begins creating Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM).	March 25, 2008 – Maliki launches an operation in Basra to rid the city of Sadrists militias. Fighting erupts shortly afterwards in Sadr City, Baghdad.
March 28, 2004 – US closes the Shiite "al-Hawza" newspaper, sparking demonstrations.	March 29, 2008 – Muqtada al-Sadr gives an interview on Al-Jazeera indicating his desire to reorganize JAM. He also appeals for the release of Qais Khazali and Abd al-Hadi al-Darraj.
April 4, 2004 – US Forces arrest Mustafa al-Yacoubi, head of Sadr's Najaf office.	April 2, 2008 – An Iranian-brokered cease-fire quells most of the violence in Basra.
April 2004 – Sadrists mobilize in Karbala, Baghdad, Kufa, and Najaf. US Forces quell the uprising in late May.	April 9, 2008 – In response to a push by parliament to ban political parties with armed factions, Saleh al-Obeidi now says Sadr will not disband the militia, but will keep his forces "at bay."
August 2004 – The second Sadrist uprising breaks out in Najaf.	April 11, 2008 – Riyadh al-Nouri is assassinated in Najaf outside his home.
August 26, 2004 – Ayatollah Sistani returns from medical treatment in London to Najaf, where he brokers a cease-fire between Sadr and Coalition Forces in Najaf.	May - June 2008 – JAM and Iranian-backed militia fighters flee to Iran in the wake of the Basra, Sadr City, and Amarah operations to evade capture, reconstitute, and retrain.
September 2004 - Haeri withdraws his support of Muqtada al-Sadr. Qais Khazali breaks from Sadr and continues to coordinate attacks on Coalition Forces.	June 13, 2008 – Sadr, in a speech read at Friday prayers in Kufa, announced that most JAM members will be disarmed and become part of a service organization known as the Mumahidoon.
Early 2005 – The Khazali faction is reintegrated into Muqtada al-Sadr's organization.	June 14, 2008 – Sadrists say they will not participate directly in Provincial Elections but instead support independent candidates.
January 2005 - Iraq holds Provincial elections.	August 28, 2008 – Sadr permanently renews his ceasefire.
January 2006 - The Sadrists participate in National elections, winning 30 seats.	September 11, 2008 – Akram al-Kabi, a leader of Asaib ahl al-Haq (AAH), issues a message urging fighters to continue their armed resistance. Sadr approaches AAH about integrating with the Sadrists but AAH refuses.
November 30, 2006 – Sadrists withdraw from Maliki's Cabinet.	October 9, 2008 – Sadr MP Saleh al-Auqaeili assassinated in Baghdad.
December 21, 2006 – PM Maliki (Dawa) and MP Haidar al-Abadi (ISCI) agree to crack down on Sadrists, marking the start of the ISCI-Dawa alliance.	November 2008 - Sadr asks AAH to join his organization. They refuse.
January 10, 2007 – President Bush announces "The New Way Forward," a surge of 20,000 troops to Iraq.	
January 19, 2007 – Abd al-Hadi al-Darraj is captured by security forces in Sadr City.	
January 20, 2007 – AAH/Special Groups gunmen conduct an attack on U.S. and Iraqi officials at the Karbala Provincial Joint Coordination Center (PJCC). Five US Soldiers are killed and three wounded.	
February 14, 2007 – US reports reveal that Sadr has fled to Iran.	

the U.S. presence in Iraq — a move designed to broaden the appeal of his tarnished movement and enhance his status as the only nationalist leader in Iraq.<sup>170</sup>

Sadr had replaced eleven leaders in his movement, two of whom were from Baghdad, by the time he returned to Iran in early July.<sup>171</sup> The replacement of Akram al-Kabi was the most significant. Kabi had been the top JAM commander in all of Iraq until Sadr replaced him with Kazim al-Isawi in late May 2007.<sup>172</sup> Kabi, who was associated with Khazali, seized the opportunity (whether by his own initiative or by Iranian encouragement) to lead the AAH/Special Groups network after Qais Khazali's arrest.<sup>173</sup> One can hypothesize that Kabi had replaced Khazali before or after Muqtada al-Sadr relieved Kabi of his formal command of JAM, but the evidence does not support making a firm conclusion about the sequence of events.<sup>174</sup>

### *The Attack on the Karbala Shrine and Sadr's Ceasefire*

While in Iraq, Sadr was also considering the idea of ordering a freeze on all JAM activities, a move tantamount to suspending his militia.<sup>175</sup> Such a move would be a serious departure for Sadr, given the role of JAM in his rise to power. Yet, the reputation of his organization was being seriously damaged by rogue factions operating under his name, which prompted consideration of such a move.

In the summer of 2007, JAM and Badr were violently contesting several cities across the south, particularly Diwaniyah, the capital of Qadisiyah province.<sup>176</sup> Badr

was a rival Shi'a organization which had once been the militia of the Supreme Council (SCIRI, then ISCI) but had largely been incorporated into the Iraqi Security Forces. Several high-profile assassinations of ISCI and Sadrist figures in July and August increased the tensions between the two groups throughout the shrine cities in the mid-Euphrates.<sup>177</sup> On the evening of August 27, 2007, fighting erupted near the Imam Ali shrine in Karbala between JAM militiamen and the shrine guards, who were members of the Iraqi Security Forces affiliated with Badr.<sup>178</sup> The area was filled with pilgrims, who were celebrating the Shi'a festival of Shabaniyah near the shrine. As the fighting escalated and continued into the next day, these worshipers were caught up in the machine gun, mortar, and grenade fire.<sup>179</sup> More than fifty civilians were killed and 200 wounded in the firefight.<sup>180</sup> It seems plausible that JAM attempted to wrest control of the shrine as both a reprisal attack on Badr and an attempt to claim the control over the religious revenues, but the cause for the outbreak was disputed. Regardless, many witnesses quickly blamed JAM fighters for sparking the conflict and attempting to seize control of the shrine.<sup>181</sup>

This incident in Karbala further tarnished the image of the Sadrist Movement. It echoed the 2004 uprisings, during which JAM fighters were seen as endangering the holy shrines by attracting a violent reprisal from Coalition Forces. Sadrist leadership acted quickly to limit the fallout. The next day, Sadr issued a statement, which was read by aides Hazem al-Araji in Baghdad and Ahmad al-Shaibani in Najaf, declaring a six-month suspension

of all militia activities, during which time his movement would purge all rogue factions and reorganize.<sup>182</sup> The statement also included a ban on attacking Coalition Forces.<sup>183</sup>

On September 5, 2007, a week after the ceasefire was announced, Prime Minister Maliki met with Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani.<sup>184</sup> During the meeting, Sistani called for a demilitarization of Iraq's holy cities of Karbala and Najaf to protect the shrines from further violence.<sup>185</sup> The top Shi'a cleric also confirmed his support of the Iraqi government's security measures — implicitly supporting Maliki and diminishing Sadr's clerical and political leadership position.<sup>186</sup>

Several weeks later, Sadrist leadership signed a pact with the rival ISCI party aimed at reducing the tensions between the two groups and their militias during the upcoming month of Ramadan.<sup>187</sup> While Iraqi and Coalition officials welcomed these moves, they remained skeptical of his ability to rein in his militia.<sup>188</sup>

The factions of JAM reacted differently to Sadr's ceasefire. Some leaders and members respected his demands and ceased their militia activities. Yet, the controversial decision to suspend the militia drew opposition even from members within Sadr's inner circle. Shortly after the agreement was announced, some Sadrist clerics and JAM commanders hedged on its conditions.<sup>189</sup> For example, Ahmad al-Shaibani objected to the ban on resisting Coalition Forces and disputed it in a statement the following day, despite having

been one of the clerics who announced the ceasefire.<sup>190</sup>

Sadr had lost his ability to use the militia to strengthen his political position, but he sought to strengthen his control over the movement by enhancing his religious credentials.<sup>191</sup> In late 2007, a close aide in Najaf, Salah al-Obeidi, announced that Sadr was pursuing religious studies in Iran with the hope of becoming an ayatollah (and a *marjah*) like his father.<sup>192</sup> Achieving this rank would enhance Sadr's authority by allowing him to directly issue fatwas and other religious rulings and collecting religious taxes for himself, rather than relying on a higher-ranking cleric. While religious scholars traditionally take decades to achieve this status, Sadr's aides expected him to complete his studies by 2010 — a remarkably fast pace.<sup>193</sup>

Although Obeidi indicated that Sadr would be studying in Najaf, he has actually been studying in the Iranian city of Qom under Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri.<sup>194</sup> Given Haeri's break with Sadr in late 2004, this move suggests a rekindling of their relationship. Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, the head of the Iranian judiciary, is also overseeing his studies.<sup>195</sup> The decision to study in Iran was controversial, given his father's nationalist stance. It has also generated questions about how much control the Iranian government has over Sadr's actions, given his mentors' ties with the Iranian regime and his continued presence in the tightly-controlled state. Some believe that Sadr is under house arrest in Qom.<sup>196</sup> In a further challenge to the quietest Najaf clergy, his studies in Iran focus on the *velayat-e-faqih* doctrine, which

calls for clerical involvement in all matters of state and society.<sup>197</sup>

As the threat of al-Qaeda in Iraq diminished in the second half of 2007, Coalition Forces accelerated their operations against these Shi'a enemy groups. Since the beginning of the Surge, Coalition Forces decapitated much of the JAM leadership—including those still responsive to Sadr and Sadrism leadership in Najaf as well as those operating outside independently.<sup>198</sup> As militia leaders were captured or killed, Sadr's remaining command and control eroded. Additionally, as U.S. troops moved into the neighborhoods of Baghdad, they denied JAM criminal networks the ability to extort and intimidate the local populations, depriving them of a major source of wealth and power. As a result, many JAM militiamen turned to Iran for support. By late 2007, it was clear that Iranian-backed groups were the primary driver of violence in the capital.<sup>199</sup>

Some militant JAM and Special Groups leaders did not abide by the ceasefire.<sup>200</sup> They were even supported in doing so by Iranian-backed militias, who actively encouraged their continued resistance.<sup>201</sup> AAH/Special Groups, now reorganized under Akram al-Kabi, received weapons, training, funding, and even direction from the IRGC-QF and continued to operate in Baghdad throughout the fall of 2007.<sup>202</sup>

### *The Government of Iraq Takes on the Shi'a Militias*

AAH/Special Groups increased their violent activity in the first three months of 2008.<sup>203</sup> Iranian-backed militants escalated their indirect fire campaign, launching rockets and mortars on Coalition bases across central and southern Iraq. They also frequently targeted U.S. and Iraqi troops with EFPs, small arms fire, and other types of attacks. These attacks were led by Akram al-Kabi, who was providing the weapons, funding, and command and control for his network in Baghdad.<sup>204</sup> In February 2008, "al-Kabi sanctioned attacks targeting Coalition Forces to include indirect fire attacks against the International Zone."<sup>205</sup> Indirect fire attacks on Coalition bases in Baghdad noticeably increased during this time.<sup>206</sup>

The growing violence stoked concerns over whether Muqtada al-Sadr would renew his six-month ceasefire, which was set to expire in late February 2008. In mid-February, Nasser al-Rubaie, the head of the Sadrism parliamentary bloc, announced the cancellation of the agreement made with ISCI to reduce the tensions between the two groups; this fueled speculation that the six-month ceasefire would meet a similar end.<sup>207</sup> Moreover, Sadr was under increasing pressure from members of his movement — including senior aides like Hazem al-Araji and Ahmad al-Shaibani—to end the freeze.<sup>208</sup> They believed that the ceasefire was weakening the movement by allowing Coalition Forces and Shi'a rivals like ISCI to target Sadrists without reprisal.<sup>209</sup> Others feared a growing displeasure with the freeze

was motivating fighters to join AAH/Special Groups and expanding Iranian influence.<sup>210</sup>

Sadr announced a six-month ceasefire renewal on February 22, 2008 despite these concerns.<sup>211</sup> Not all were pleased with the renewal.<sup>212</sup> The day after the announcement, AAH/Special Groups launched a large mortar and rocket attack on the International Zone in Baghdad, sending a clear message that Sadr did not speak for their faction nor could he control them.<sup>213</sup>

The problem of militia control in Basra was becoming especially clear. In the wake of the premature British withdrawal from the city center and transition to an overwatch capacity in late 2007, Basra became a haven for militia and criminal activity. Rival militia factions and criminal gangs were vying for control of the city's lucrative infrastructure and resources, namely shipping and oil. AAH/Special Groups, mafia-style gangs, and other militias — many of which were operating under the JAM banner — dominated the city. Iraqi and British forces were unable to maintain security and became frequent targets of attacks. In an effort to stem the attacks, British troops made an agreement with JAM that stated no British soldier could operate in Basra without the permission of the British Defense Secretary.<sup>214</sup> While the pact was intended to encourage the militia to enter the political process, it effectively allowed JAM and other groups to operate in Basra unchecked.<sup>215</sup> And while U.S. troops recognized the deterioration of security in Basra, the main effort of their operations in early 2008 was targeting al-Qaeda in Iraq

and other Sunni insurgents in northern Iraq, particularly the city of Mosul.

Prime Minister Maliki launched an offensive in Basra to retake control of the city, prompted by these security concerns, combined with personal political calculations. Iraq Reports 9 and 11 document the Basra offensive and subsequent operations against JAM and Special Groups in Sadr City and Amarah.<sup>216</sup>

Many JAM fighters who had up to then abided by the ceasefire believed that the movement was being unfairly targeted in the operation.<sup>217</sup> AAH/Special Groups took advantage of this sentiment and fought alongside a variety of JAM factions in Basra to enhance their capabilities and lethality.<sup>218</sup> Maliki and the Iraqi Security Forces therefore encountered a heavily-armed and capable enemy fighting force. The operation stalled by the end of the first week, as the abrupt decision to fight led to insufficient planning and exacerbated the problems created by inexperienced army units and an infiltrated police force.

An Iraqi delegation including representatives from Dawa and ISCI went to Iran to negotiate a ceasefire with Sadr and IRGC-QF commander, Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani. The Iranians attempt to broker a ceasefire is particularly revealing. As head of the IRGC-QF, Soleimani is responsible for providing training, weapons, funding, and direction to militia groups in Iraq — and thus the leader of one belligerent group. His involvement in the negotiations was integral because he enabled the AAH/Special Groups that were fighting against Iraqi forces. Hence, he was

not a neutral arbiter in the dispute. The symbolism of holding Basra ceasefire talks in Iran, brokered by the head of the Qods Force, underscored Sadr's limited control over the militia. It also highlighted the extent to which Qassem Soleimani and the IRGC-QF controlled levels of violence in Iraq.

Muqtada al-Sadr made his first public appearance in almost a year in the midst of the fighting. He gave a televised interview with Al-Jazeera on March 29, 2008. During the interview, Sadr gave the first public indication of his desire to reorganize JAM, stressing the importance of cultural and educational resistance. He stated that "the Al-Mahdi Army, the army of the Imam al-Mahdi, peace be upon him, should turn to scientific and cultural integration for a certain period of time so as to straighten and reorganize itself. This is called cultural resistance."<sup>219</sup> This was an important statement, given that it was made during the Basra fighting. It indicated that Sadr was deeply concerned with the direction of his movement and foreshadowed later restructuring. While Sadr tacitly confirmed the divisions within his movement, he stated his belief that those splinters would rejoin the movement, and that some had already.<sup>220</sup> Sadr also voiced his disapproval of Iranian support for militias in Iraq and other "negative actions carried out by the republic [of Iran] in Iraq."<sup>221</sup>

Sadr explicitly asked for the release of Qais Khazali and Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji from Coalition custody during the interview.<sup>222</sup> This statement suggests that Sadr wished to reconcile with Khazali and

Darraji, who had split from him to operate the AAH/Special Groups network. He presumably needed the support of the Khazali faction in order to strengthen his fragile movement. Sadr would again appeal to reunite with AAH/Special Groups again in the fall of 2008.

Sadr ordered his fighters off the streets after the negotiations concluded on March 30, 2008.<sup>223</sup> The fiercest fighting in Basra subsided in the wake of the Iranian-brokered ceasefire, but the violence continued in Sadr City throughout the month of April. Coalition Forces had begun to push their way into the district to stem the mortar and rocket attacks that were being launched from the area against the Green Zone. As they did so, they faced heavy resistance from AAH/Special Groups and their JAM affiliates.<sup>224</sup> The intensity of the violence caused extensive collateral damage in Sadr City, particularly along al-Quds street, where Coalition efforts to build a barrier became a magnet for militia attacks.

Iraqi politicians, Sadrist leadership, and even JAM and AAH/Special Groups commanders came under intense pressure to halt the violence as the fighting dragged on.<sup>225</sup> On April 30, 2008, a second delegation of Iraqi officials traveled to Tehran to meet with Soleimani and other Iranian officials about the ongoing fighting in Sadr City and Iranian support for the militants.<sup>226</sup> The Iraqi delegation was led by the deputy speaker of parliament, Khalid Attiya, an independent Shi'a politician and member of the United Iraqi Alliance.<sup>227</sup> It also included Tariq Abdullah, the Prime Minister's office manager; Ali al-Adeeb, a senior Dawa

member; and Hadi al-Ameri, the head of the Badr Organization and a member of ISCI.<sup>228</sup> The Iranians denied accusations of their involvement in training and arming militants in Iraq, but they did help to “end the standoff [in Sadr City] by throwing their weight behind the government.”<sup>229</sup> This was a departure from their previous practice of overtly challenging Maliki.

Sadrist cleric Salah al-Obeidi announced that a truce had been reached on May 10, 2008, after several days of negotiations between Sadrist political leaders and the ISCI-led United Iraqi Alliance.<sup>230</sup> It nevertheless took several days for the fighting in Sadr City to subside, indicating that Sadrist clerics and politicians were having trouble imposing the ceasefire on the militia.<sup>231</sup> Many AAH/Special Groups and JAM fighters were apparently angry about the truce and reluctant to stop fighting Coalition Forces.<sup>232</sup> Faced with the prospect of Iraqi forces entering the rest of Sadr City, AAH/Special Groups and mainstream JAM leaders fled to Iran to avoid capture and reconsolidate their forces.

The Iraqi Security Forces launched a third security offensive in late June that aimed at clearing the Sadrist stronghold of Amarah, the provincial capital of Maysan province. “Sadrist politicians and clerics, wishing to avoid the destruction that accompanied the push into Sadr City, instructed their followers not to resist the government’s operations. Moreover, any AAH/Special Groups and JAM leaders that remained in Maysan in the wake of the Baghdad and Basra offensives fled to Iran before the operations commenced in

Amarah.”<sup>233</sup> The Iraqi Security Forces faced little resistance and took control of the province. The immense political and military pressure directed at the Sadrists in the spring and early summer of 2008 had serious ramifications for the movement.

The Sadrists’ rivals in the Iraqi government sought to capitalize on the militia’s defeat by pushing for legislation that would further hamper the Sadrists in advance of provincial elections. The Iraqi National Security Council, a body that comprises the Iraqi President, Prime Minister, and representatives from the top political blocs, formulated a draft measure that that banned any political party with a militia from running in the upcoming provincial elections.<sup>234</sup> The controversial move took aim at the Sadrist Movement by pressuring its political leadership to dissolve its militia or forfeit participation in the election.<sup>235</sup> The Iraqi Cabinet approved the legislation in mid-April and forwarded it to the parliament for a vote.<sup>236</sup>

The Sadrist leadership intensely debated whether to disband JAM in the face of the new legislation, further dividing militant JAM and Special Groups commanders from moderate Sadrist politicians and clerics. The political leaders, wishing to maintain their influence and positions, generally argued in favor of disbanding JAM and emphasizing the cultural, social, and educational aspects of the Sadrist movement. JAM commanders generally opposed the disbandment of the militia.

The clerical establishment sat on the fence. Sadr would only disband JAM if

senior Shi'a Ayatollahs Sistani and Haeri demanded it, cleric Salah al-Obeidi declared on April 7, 2008.<sup>237</sup> Another Sadrist aide and spokesman, Hassan al-Zarqani, reiterated the statement.<sup>238</sup> The next day, Obeidi read a signed statement from Sadr stating that Sistani and Haeri instructed him not to disband his militia.<sup>239</sup> It is unlikely that Sistani actually offered this advice. He reportedly denied meeting with any Sadrist representative and was reported to have backed the government crackdown.<sup>240</sup> Moreover, throughout this time, Salah al-Obeidi was not in direct communication with Sadr. It is not clear that he spoke for Sadr, thus making it difficult to determine Sadr's true sentiments.<sup>241</sup> The entire exchange, however, illustrates the tensions within the movement, and their search for a way of influencing the outcome.

Sadrist parliamentarians found themselves isolated not only from the armed wing of their movement but also from their colleagues in the government. Sadr's decision to pull his six representatives from Maliki's Cabinet one year earlier had left them with virtually no voice in government decision-making.<sup>242</sup> One frustrated Member of Parliament (MP), Hassan al-Rubaie, "complained that 'those close' to al-Sadr 'are radicals and that poses problems.'"<sup>243</sup> Another Sadrist lawmaker said that Sadr "now only communicates with the Mahdi Army commanders."<sup>244</sup> Whether or not this was true, the Sadrist political bloc was increasingly marginalized within Iraqi politics and distanced from Sadr himself and the Najaf-based clerics. They therefore struck a more conciliatory tone during the Iraqi offensive in order to maintain leverage

with the Government of Iraq. Bahaa al-Araji, a Sadrist MP and brother of the Baghdad-based Sadrist cleric Hazem al-Araji, acknowledged that the request to disband JAM was legitimate but stated that the law should be applied to all political parties with militias, a reference to the Badr Organization (which had technically already disbanded as a militia when it had joined the Iraqi Security Forces).<sup>245</sup> He also condemned the rocket and mortar attacks on the Green Zone that were being launched from Sadr City by AAH/Special Groups and JAM fighters.<sup>246</sup>

Sadrist lawmakers sought to compromise with Maliki over demands to disband the militia in order to retain military power and the political party. They "sent compromise-seeking proposals to al-Sadr in Qom. The ideas [sought] to appease Maliki enough to forestall his threat...But the proposals [went] unanswered."<sup>247</sup> One such proposal suggested the creation of a new political party unaffiliated with JAM, while another suggested running individual candidates as independents, rather than as a part of the Sadrist bloc.<sup>248</sup> The lawmakers believed that either option preserved the militia and gave an opportunity to participate in the elections.

Riyad al-Nouri, one of the most senior Sadrist clerics and head of the movement's Najaf office, was a proponent of the proposal to disband JAM.<sup>249</sup> He wrote a letter asking Sadr to disband JAM and rid the movement of extremists.<sup>250</sup> Shortly afterwards, Nouri was assassinated by gunmen near his home in Najaf as he returned from Friday prayers on April 11, 2008.<sup>251</sup> Nouri's request to disband the

militia directly challenged AAH/Special Groups and hard-line JAM elements, giving them a clear motivation to kill him. His assassination might also have been tied to his participation in the assassination of Sheik Majid al-Khoei in April 2003. The Khoei family, seizing upon the government's marginalization of the Sadrists and the defeat of the militia, sought to reopen the murder case of Sheik Majid al-Khoei.<sup>252</sup> Such a move would effectively have renewed the warrants against Sadr, Nouri, and Yacoubi and presented a serious threat to the movement should legal proceedings demonstrate guilt.

The assassination of Riyad al-Nouri cemented the break in the movement between the Sadrists who were willing to reconcile with and participate in the Iraqi government and those who were unwilling to reconcile and who sought to continue their armed resistance. JAM commanders were adamantly opposed to disbanding the militia, as were others in the movement, including the head of Sadr's cultural office, Rassim al-Marwani.<sup>253</sup> Sadr's statements after Nouri's death at first echoed these more militant sentiments.

Sadr initially seemed to oppose dissolving his militia. He escalated his rhetoric in a statement released by his Najaf office on April 19, 2008, threatening "open war until liberation" if Coalition and Iraqi forces continued their operations in Sadr City.<sup>254</sup> On April 25, 2008, a second statement was read aloud in Sadr City and posted on the Sadr website that backed away from the earlier threats. The announcement clarified that the target of a potential "open war" was Coalition Forces

and not the government.<sup>255</sup> It read, "We mean a war against the occupier, nothing else, as there is no war between us and our brothers the Iraqis, regardless of their affiliation, race or sect."<sup>256</sup> That same day, Sadrist MP Salah al-Ugaili reiterated that the freeze on militia violence from last August was still in place.<sup>257</sup> Elements in the movement were wary of provoking a heavier response from the Iraqi government.

Sadr's various reversals obscured his position on disbanding his militia. Since late 2007, Sadr only communicated through three or four aides, who were switched every few months.<sup>258</sup> Given that he made no public statements in April 2007, and that the Najaf office was in turmoil after the death of Nouri, it is difficult to know which statements of his aides he actually endorsed. Sadr's presence in Iran might have given individuals within the Iranian government influence over his actions, lending credibility to the concerns of Sadrist MPs that he was being pressured by more radical elements. Hence the two camps — those for and opposed to disbanding JAM — could both claim to represent Sadr through written statements.

The developments in the spring of 2008 demonstrated that Muqtada al-Sadr was unable to enforce his control over the movement, was politically isolated, and lacked a capable fighting force. It became clear that a military showdown with the Iraqi government would not succeed. As a result, Sadr entertained alternate courses of action that might allow him to continue to function within Iraqi politics, including those referenced in his Al-Jazeera interview and in the proposals of Sadrist politicians.

## *The Sadrist Movement Restructures*

Sadrist clerical and parliamentary leadership sought to consolidate their fractured movement in the wake of their political and military losses. They embarked on a dramatic restructuring of the movement to improve its image and political prospects for the upcoming provincial elections, which were scheduled for the fall.

Sadr “moved away from both JAM and the Iraqi government and tried to return to the social services model that launched his movement.”<sup>259</sup> He thereby sought to rectify the tarnished image of his militia. He wanted instead to “focus on the ideological and intellectual aspects” of the movement.<sup>260</sup> Sadr issued a statement that was read after Friday prayers in Kufa on June 13, 2008, announcing that he was transitioning the majority of JAM fighters into a non-violent organization.<sup>261</sup> The group would focus on social support and cultural and religious education programs, rather than armed resistance.<sup>262</sup> More details about the organization emerged in August. Named the *Mumahidoon*, roughly translated as “those who pave the way,”<sup>263</sup> the group would focus on educational and social projects, including neighborhood reconstruction projects.<sup>264</sup> Members of the *Mumahidoon* would be unarmed and strictly disciplined; any violation of this policy would be dealt with harshly.<sup>265</sup> Sadrist cleric Hazem al-Araji was the primary leader of this reformed movement, along with nine other Sadrist clerics.<sup>266</sup>

Sadr’s move surprised many, given his militant rhetoric at the height of the fighting only weeks before. One report suggested Sadr’s decision resulted from an agreement made between Maliki and Haeri during the former’s visit to Tehran on June 7, 2008. Maliki reportedly warned that the Sadrists would be barred from participating in provincial elections unless Muqtada al-Sadr issued a clear order to disband JAM and end their violence against the Iraqi government.<sup>267</sup> Although the report was not substantiated, it does underscore that Sadr’s moves were likely not made without some kind of Iranian endorsement.

Sadr did not abandon his commitment to armed resistance altogether. In keeping with nationalist strain of the movement, Sadr announced that he would keep a small cadre of well-trained and tightly-controlled fighters to carry on attacks against Coalition Forces.<sup>268</sup> He emphasized that this new unit, later named the Promised Day Brigade, would have a clear chain of command and strict discipline in order to avoid the decentralized structure of JAM that led to a fractured and uncontrollable militia.<sup>269</sup> The group would only target Coalition Forces, and not the Iraqi Security Forces. The decision to keep a small group of fighters likely resulted from the intense pressure on Sadr to respond forcefully to the targeting of his movement.<sup>270</sup>

Sadr lacked a cadre of elite commander or fighters within the Jaysh al Mahdi. Most of the AAH/Special Groups leaders and fighters, along with the JAM commanders who had fought against the

## WHO'S WHO INDEX OF THE SADRIST MOVEMENT

## FAMILY

**Muqtada al Sadr** – Son of Sadeq al-Sadr. Has led the Sadr Movement since the 2003 invasion. Has been in Iran since early 2007.

**Muhammed Sadeq al-Sadr** – The founder and leader of the Sadr Movement from the early 1990s until his assassination in February 1999. Father of Muqtada al-Sadr.

**Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr** - A distinguished Shi'a scholar who helped establish the Dawa party in the 1960s. Sadeq al-Sadr's cousin and Muqtada al-Sadr's father-in-law.

## CLERICAL

**Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani** – Shia Cleric based in Najaf.

**Hazem al-Araji** – A prominent Sadr cleric who controlled the Khadamiya Shrine in northwest Baghdad, and leads the Mumahidoon with nine other Shia clerics. Brother of Sadr MP Bahaa al-Araji

**Ayatollah Kazem Haeri** - An Iraqi-born cleric who is based in Qom, Iran. Was the source of religious emulation for Sadr II and many of his followers. Broke from Muqtada al-Sadr following the second uprising in Najaf in late 2004, but has since reconciled and is overseeing his studies in Qom, Iran.

**Jaber al-Khafaji** – A close aide and student of Sadeq al-Sadr. Helped keep Sadr movement alive underground following the assassination of Sadeq al-Sadr.

**Sheikh Abd al-Majid al-Khoei** - Son of the Grand Ayatollah who led the Shi'a revolt in 1991. Killed April 10, 2003 by Sadr supporters. Muqtada al-Sadr, Riyad al-Nouri, and Mustafa al-Yacoubi were implicated in his death.

**Salah al-Obeidi** – Sadr cleric based in Najaf. Arrested in late 2006 and released in early 2007.

**Adnan Shahmani** – A Sadr cleric based in Najaf.

**Ahmad Shaibani** - A Sadr cleric based in Najaf. Arrested in 2004 and released in early 2007.

**Mohammed Tabatabai** – A close aide and student of Sadeq al-Sadr. Helped keep Sadr movement alive underground following the assassination of Sadeq al-Sadr.

**Mustafa al-Yacoubi** – A close aide and student of Sadeq al-Sadr. Helped keep Sadr movement alive underground following the assassination of Sadeq al-Sadr. Arrested by US forces April 5, 2004 in Najaf and released in early 2007.

## POLITICAL

**Nasser al-Rubaie** – Head of Sadrist parliamentary bloc, based in Baghdad.

**Rassim al-Marwani** – Head of Sadr's cultural office in Baghdad.

**Riyad al-Nouri** – A close aide and student of Sadeq al-Sadr. Helped keep Sadr movement alive underground following the assassination of Sadeq al-Sadr. Head of Sadr office in Najaf, and Muqtada al-Sadr's brother in law. Assassinated by gunmen in Najaf April 11, 2008.

**Saleh al-Ugaili** – A Sadrist parliamentarian who upheld the JAM cease-fire of April 2008. Assassinated October 9, 2008.

**Mohammed al-Yacoubi** – A close aide and student of Sadeq al-Sadr. Helped keep Sadr movement alive underground following the assassination of Sadeq al-Sadr. Broke from Muqtada al-Sadr and founded the Fadhila (Islamic Virtue) party in July 2003.

**Bahaa al-Araji** - A Sadrist member of Parliament. Operated plainclothes militia to guard the Kadhimiya shrine in northwest Baghdad. Brother of Hazem al-Araji.

## MILITIA

**Qais Khazali** – A close aide and student of Sadeq al-Sadr. Helped keep Sadr movement alive underground following the assassination of Sadeq al-Sadr. Leader of AAH/Special Groups until his arrest in March 20, 2007.

**Akram al-Kabi** – A member of the Qais Khazali faction. Commander of JAM until May 2007. Assumes control over AAH/Special Groups in May 2007 after Qais Khazali's arrest in March 2007.

**Ali Mussa Daqduq** – A top Hizbullah operative who oversaw training of Iraqi militia groups, particularly the Khazali AAH/Special Groups network, in Iran.

**Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji** – A member of the Qais Khazali faction. Arrested in Sadr City on January 19, 2007. Muqtada al-Sadr requests his release in May 2008.

**Ahmed al-Fartousi** – Top JAM commander in Basra who broke off from Sadr. Arrested September 18, 2005.

**Muhammed al-Fartousi** – Sent from Najaf to be Haeri's representative at the Hikma mosque in Baghdad.

**Aws Khafaji** – JAM commander in Nasiriyah.

**Isma'il Hafiz Al-Lami (Abu Dura)** – A JAM commander who fought in the Najaf uprisings in 2004. Later split from the movement to operate his own death squad.

**Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani** – Operated a logistics, arms, and financing network in Iraq that supplied AAH/Special Groups. Headed the Third Axis of Badr militant group which focused on Baghdad and its environs.

## IRANIAN

**Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamanei** – The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

**Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani** – Head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF).

**Hajji Youssef (Abdul Reza Shalai)** - Deputy IRGC-QF commander, head of the Department of External Special Operations, which oversees Quds Force operations outside Iran.

**Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi** – Head of the Iranian Judiciary, overseeing Muqtada al-Sadr's studies in Iran.

Iraqi government, had fled to Iran. And the AAH/Special Groups leaders did not follow Muqtada al-Sadr's orders in June 2008 any more than they had six months before. Accordingly, the new, elite units of the Promised Day Brigade did not materialize right away. Indeed, Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin, the Corps commander in Iraq, and Colonel Charles Flynn, commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne which was responsible for much of southern Iraq, indicated in late June that they saw no evidence of the movement's activities.<sup>271</sup> In early July, Aws Khafaji, a JAM commander in Nasiriyah, said the framework of the new cells was still being determined.<sup>272</sup> Throughout July, as the nature of the group was being discussed, Sadr placed a number of limits on the resistance fighters.<sup>273</sup> This included a ban on armed resistance in cities and in a way that could harm innocent civilians or members of the Iraqi Security Forces.<sup>274</sup> The limitations were enacted presumably to avoid the collateral damage witnessed the Sadr City and Basra battles, which eroded popular support for the Sadrists. There is no published evidence to suggest that Muqtada al-Sadr had elite fighting units operating in Iraq at the end of 2008.

Muqtada's decision about the political future of his movement was similarly ambiguous. Salah al-Obeidi announced that the Sadrist political bloc would not compete directly in provincial elections in a statement on June 14, 2008, only a day after declaring the restructuring of the militia.<sup>275</sup> Instead, the movement

would support tribal figures, "technocrats and independent politicians" who sympathized with Sadrist aims.<sup>276</sup> Obeidi explained that the movement did not want to be a part of the sectarian divisions.<sup>277</sup> This announcement echoed comments made days earlier by Sadrist MP Bahaa al-Araji, who stressed the importance of a technocratic rather than sectarian government.<sup>278</sup> Rhetoric aside, the decision allowed the Sadrists to skirt the draft election law that barred political parties with militias from competing in the elections.<sup>279</sup> Given eroding political support for the movement, the decision may have also been a way to avoid potential and embarrassing electoral losses.<sup>280</sup>

### *Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Iranian-Backed Groups Continue Armed Resistance*

AAH/Special Groups consolidated their networks and retraining in Iran while the Sadr Movement charted a new course. Thousands of fighters had fled Iraq to evade capture during the Basra, Sadr City, and Amarah security offensives.<sup>281</sup> With their network disrupted in Iraq, senior AAH/Special Groups and IRGC-QF leadership embarked on a retraining and restructuring process.<sup>282</sup> The training involved new tactics and weapons, including the use of "sticky bombs" for targeted assassinations of significant political figures.<sup>283</sup> This restructuring was likely done with an eye towards the upcoming elections.<sup>284</sup> Iranian armed support has historically taken into account Iraqi political developments. In the wake of

Iraqi national elections in January 2005, IRGC-QF expanded their efforts in Iraq with help from Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>285</sup> Likewise, as the Maliki government was formed in May 2006, Iranian-backed militias were restructured under the leadership of Qais Khazali.<sup>286</sup> And Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad is said to have promised Prime Minister Maliki that the IRGC-QF would cease its activities in Iraq for the three weeks prior to Iraq's provincial elections.<sup>287</sup>

U.S. intelligence reports assessed that there were at least two primary Iranian-backed groups operating in Iraq in the fall of 2008: Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah.<sup>288</sup> AAH continued to operate independently of Sadr and turned as usual to Iranian-linked groups to continue their resistance.<sup>289</sup> According to General Odierno, these Iranian-backed groups have changed their tactics to adapt to the improved security situation, which has made it harder for their networks to operate.<sup>290</sup> Iranian-backed fighters have turned to the use of silenced weapons and "sticky bombs," explosives which are attached to vehicles (often magnetically) and detonated remotely.<sup>291</sup>

Asaib Ahl al-Haq continued to attack Coalition Forces in the summer and fall of 2008 with EFPs; they also engaged in kidnapping, intimidation, and sectarian violence.<sup>292</sup> Akram al-Kabi evidently continued to lead AAH after the spring uprising; he published a message for the members of Asaib Ahl al-Haq in September 2008 urging them to continue their armed resistance against Coalition Forces.<sup>293</sup> Kabi

also appealed to the legacy of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr as the father of their movement.<sup>294</sup> Kabi was thus implicitly claiming Asaib Ahl al-Haq as the true heir to Sadeq al-Sadr's movement, instead of the organizations under the control of Muqtada al-Sadr.

Muqtada al-Sadr attempted to reconcile with Akram Kabi and AAH in late 2008. Muqtada appealed to members of Asaib Ahl al-Haq to "abandon their leaders and join his brigade" when he announced the creation of the Promised Day Brigade on November 14, 2008.<sup>295</sup> According to his statement, Sadr had approached Kabi and the other leadership of Asaib Ahl al-Haq about reintegrating into his movement but they rebuffed his request.<sup>296</sup> He thus criticized their leadership for abandoning the interests of the Sadrist Trend and Iraq and becoming concerned with political affairs.<sup>297</sup> This statement confirms the splits between Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the reformed militia, and indicates that AAH was not willing to act as the Promised Day Brigade. Muqtada al-Sadr, furthermore, viewed the split between his organization and AAH as harmful and desired to unite the disparate factions under his control. Sadr's criticism of the political focus of Asaib Ahl al-Haq leaders implies that they were planning on entering the political sphere to challenge his organization. To counter this challenge, he sought to reconcile with the group.

Asaib Ahl al-Haq issued a statement several days later rejecting Sadr's offer. AAH accused him of abandoning them and their cause of resistance.<sup>298</sup> They responded to

Sadr's criticism of their leadership by saying that their leaders were close aides of Sadeq al-Sadr who were integral in carrying on his legacy after his death.<sup>299</sup> Akram al-Kabi thus suggests that he was joined by others who were close to Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr and were leaders of the movement prior to Muqtada al-Sadr's rise in 2003. These might possibly be other elements of what was once the Khazali faction, before the Coalition detained Qais Khazali. AAH urged Muqtada al-Sadr to retract his statements and unite with them in a return to armed resistance.<sup>300</sup>

Asaib Ahl al-Haq retains a limited capacity for armed resistance. The group re-trained in Iran during the summer of 2008. The absence of its high-level leaders has reduced its capacity to operate in Iraq. Its leadership continues to insist on armed resistance to the Coalition, while nevertheless attempting to enter the political arena. They present a challenge to Muqtada al-Sadr's leadership of the political movement before national elections, if not provincial elections.

## PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

JAM IS UNLIKELY to derail provincial elections through intimidation campaigns. Support for JAM has waned in the Shi'a neighborhoods of Baghdad, where residents have grown tired of the violence, intimidation, extortion, and criminality wrought by the militia.<sup>301</sup> With the threat of al-Qaeda diminished and the Iraqi Security Forces increasingly capable of maintaining security, Shi'a civilians no longer depend on JAM for protection. As a result, they have come forward in increasing numbers with information on militia fighters.<sup>302</sup> JAM's inability to control the local economy is especially evident — "The price of cooking gas is less than a fifth of what it was when the militia controlled local gas stations, and kerosene for heating has also become much less expensive."<sup>303</sup> In some areas, relatives of those killed by the militia have demanded compensation from the families of militiamen.<sup>304</sup>

The Sadrists are also politically weak. The Maliki government marginalized Sadrist politicians during the negotiations of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The Parliamentary bloc fiercely resisted the SOFA (a stance consistent with the Movement's anti-Coalition agenda) and voted against it, but they could not prevent the Iraqi Parliament from passing the agreement in late November 2008.<sup>305</sup> They were unable to offer a realistic set of demands or alternatives to it.<sup>306</sup> Moreover, because the SOFA contains withdrawal dates for Coalition Forces, Prime Minister Maliki has seized the Sadrists' central issue and made it his own.<sup>307</sup> The Sadrists'

platform is therefore weakened as they approach provincial elections. Moreover, their decision to run as independents has left them without the infrastructure necessary to compete against ISCI and Dawa.<sup>308</sup> The Sadrist Movement has also not been able to build a coalition in advance of elections, which further diminishes their chances for electoral success. The Sadrists' are unlikely to gain seats on the provincial councils.

Yet, the traditional Sadrist constituency — the Shi'a urban poor and rural tribes — has taken on new significance as the political and military clout of the Sadrist Movement declined. Established Shi'a parties are competing for this constituency as provincial and national elections approach.

Prime Minister Maliki has aggressively sought to court the Sadrist Trend's traditional power base. He formed tribal support councils throughout the Shi'a south in the late summer and fall of 2008. Maliki claims that the tribal support councils were designed to empower tribal leaders, who traditionally had been politically marginalized.<sup>309</sup> Maliki has underlined the role of the tribes in maintaining local security, promoting reconciliation, and strengthening the government.<sup>310</sup> Maliki echoed Sadeq al-Sadr's stress on the important role of the tribes in politics and society. He even sought to cast himself and his Dawa party as the rightful heir of Sadeq al-Sadr's movement, with its emphasis on nationalism and populism.<sup>311</sup> Dawa was founded in the 1960s by Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr, Sadeq al-Sadr's

cousin and Muqtada al-Sadr's father-in-law.<sup>312</sup> Rhetoric and symbolism aside, Maliki has used the tribal councils to build a patronage network in advance of elections. The tribal support councils are directed and funded by the Prime Minister's office, bypassing the provincial and local governments that are controlled by Maliki's rivals.<sup>313</sup> The tribal support councils provide a way for Maliki to get money directly to the tribes, and thereby gain political leverage.

Maliki's tribal efforts have attracted fierce resistance from ISCI indicating that they pose a serious threat to that party's hold on power in southern Iraq. He has used the tribal support councils to show his popularity in the south and to counterbalance the popular demonstrations organized by the Sadrists against the SOFA. Thousands of members of the tribal support councils demonstrated in support of the Prime Minister in Dhi Qar province and Hillah on November 15, 2008.<sup>314</sup> A thousand people marched in a demonstration in Basra in support of the SOFA and Prime Minister Maliki days later.<sup>315</sup> The Sadrists' protest against the SOFA that same week drew a crowd larger than Maliki's but noticeably smaller than those who rallied with the Sadrists' in years past.<sup>316</sup>

Iranian-backed groups seek to destabilize and delegitimize the vote through assassination and intimidation.<sup>317</sup> Fifty percent of their leadership is still outside Iraq, in places like Iran, Syria, or Lebanon, but lower level operatives remain within Iraq.<sup>318</sup> They have conducted targeted assassinations of moderate

politicians and government employees, as well as attacks against Coalition and Iraqi Forces. The highest profile of these attacks was the assassination of Saleh al-Ugaili, a Sadrist parliamentarian who upheld the JAM ceasefire during fighting in Sadr City in April 2008. Ugaili was killed in a bomb attack as his convoy traveled through Sadr City in October 2008, allegedly perpetrated by hard-line militia elements backed by Iran.<sup>319</sup>

The IRGC-Qods Force is also providing financial support to several Shi'a political parties and they maintain close ties with a number of Iraqi political leaders.<sup>320</sup> The Iranians have a longstanding strategy of supporting multiple political factions while sponsoring various armed groups outside of the government.<sup>321</sup> Iran thereby maintains influence within the Iraqi government while hedging "against a potentially hostile Iraqi government."<sup>322</sup> It also allows the Iranians to check U.S. action in Iraq in the political and security spheres.<sup>323</sup> The temporary cessation of IRGC-Qods Force sponsored activities in the weeks before the provincial election, promised to Maliki by Ahmadinejad, is only helpful exactly as long as it lasts, and hardly undermines Iranian policy.<sup>324</sup>

## CONCLUSION

THE SADRIST MOVEMENT has steadily fragmented as a result of the Surge, competition among internal factions, and Maliki's consolidation of power. Deliberate Coalition and Iraqi military operations, and Iraqi political maneuvers, have severed the political, military, and social strands of the Sadr Movement, which no longer co-exist in the same entity and will not likely recombine in 2009. The pressure on the Sadrists during the Surge accelerated this fracturing. Coalition and Iraqi offensive operations in 2007 and 2008 targeted JAM's military strength in Baghdad and southern Iraq, minimizing threat that the militia posed to security. Simultaneously, Sadrist political rivals, namely ISCI and Dawa, marginalized the movement by diminishing the Sadrists political sway and eliminating their ability to obstruct key pieces of legislation.

The external pressure on the Sadrist Movement exacerbated its internal struggles. Muqtada al-Sadr's prolonged absence in 2007 and 2008 further undermined his control of the decentralized movement. By June 2008, when the last of the U.S. Surge brigades redeployed, the Sadrists were operating in a transformed political and security environment. The movement's political, religious, and military factions were deeply divided in their priorities and loyalties.

Two main factions within the movement are competing for control of the constituency and the legacy of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr. The first faction, clerics and politicians of the Sadrist Trend led by

Hazem al-Araji, are seeking to solidify support for independent candidates that represent their movement. They have done so with an emphasis on a return to the social, religious, and educational programs and services that was enshrined in the movement of Sadeq al-Sadr during the 1990s. Hazem al-Araji and Muqtada al-Sadr have demobilized most JAM members and included them in the *Mumahidoon* movement, the non-violent successor to JAM.

The second faction of the Sadrist Movement is Asaib Ahl al-Haq, the armed resistance movement, which coheres around the aims, loyalties, and leadership of Qais Khazali and Akram al-Kabi. Muqtada al-Sadr has appealed for members of this splinter faction to abandon their leaders, such as Akram al-Kabi, and rejoin his movement. Asaib Ahl al-Haq has refused. It seeks to continue armed resistance against Coalition Forces while nevertheless entering Iraqi politics as the rightful heir of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr.

In 2003, the leadership of the Sadrist Movement modeled the organization on Lebanese Hezbollah, seeking to establish political, social, and armed wings of the movement. The Sadrist Movement once exerted levers of control over the government through representation in Parliament, control of ministerial offices, the ability to organize popular protests, and the possibility of taking arms when necessary. The military operations of 2007 and 2008 have made it impossible for either faction to exercise all of these levers or reconstitute into a Hezbollah-like organization in the near future. Muqtada al-Sadr, Hazem al-Araji, and the political and clerical leaders of

the Sadr Trend must acquire a capable armed wing and restore their own political capacity if they wish to pursue the Hezbollah model. Asaib Ahl al-Haq, in contrast, must enter politics and acquire the social-services capacity it currently lacks. The frictions between Muqtada al Sadr and the leaders of Asaib Ahl al-Haq make it unlikely that the groups will combine their assets in the near future — a move that would restore the Sadr Movement to a Hezbollah-like path in Iraq.

The Hezbollah model may no longer seem attractive to the leaders of either Sadrist faction. The increasing strength of the Iraqi central government makes that model less likely to succeed. The Sadrist factions, Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Qods Force would have to create conditions in which a Hezbollah-like model could flourish inside Iraq. It is possible that either or both factions of the Sadrist Movement have adapted to this reality and will not seek to follow the Hezbollah model. The rival Sadrist leaders may therefore sensibly decide to consolidate their own strengths rather than attempting to recombine all the movement's disparate components. The abandonment of the Hezbollah model will perpetuate the factional rivalry, but give each faction the opportunity to gain a different foothold within Iraqi politics.

In this scenario, Muqtada presents the greatest challenge to the Government of Iraq and the traditional Iraqi Shi'a clergy if he completes his studies with Ayatollah Haeri, secures recognition of his ability to understand and interpret Islamic jurisprudence, and returns to Najaf —

whether in a few years, as his spokespeople claim, or at some later point. The challenge would come not only from his enhanced clerical authority, but more importantly from his commitment to Iranian revolutionary theology and the principles of clerical rule Haeri espouses.

Asaib Ahl al-Haq presents a challenge to the Government of Iraq because of its potential capacity to use its armed militia against the nascent political order — in assassination or terror campaigns, for example. Yet the leaders of AAH had little capacity to use their militia inside of Iraq at the end of 2008, and they have done so primarily to target Coalition forces rather than Iraqis.

Coalition Forces have had Asaib Ahl-Haq's original leader, Qais Khazali, imprisoned for nearly two years. The Status of Forces Agreement requires the Coalition to release all prisoners from custody who cannot be held under Iraqi law. Qais Khazali is likely to be freed from custody in 2009. If Qais Khazali and Akram al-Kabi are able to work together, they can strengthen AAH's position as the rightful heir to the Sadr Trend. If Muqtada is able to reconcile with Qais Khazali, however, he might fold the networks fully into his own organization.

Other Shi'a political groups are also seeking to attract Sadrist factions, but none more so than Prime Minister Maliki. Maliki and his Dawa Party are presenting themselves as the rightful heir to Sadeq al-Sadr's movement with a focus on nationalism and the importance of the

tribes. The creation of Tribal Support Councils enabled the Prime Minister to garner the support of a constituency in southern Iraq formerly sympathetic to the Sadrist Trend. These Councils appear to have attracted a large body of would-be Sadrist voters.

The formation of Parliamentary coalitions is more important in consolidating power in the Iraqi system than gaining a large share of the popular vote. Therefore, the coalitions that form before and after the national elections will be critical in determining the next Prime

Minister of Iraq and the trajectory of Iraqi politics. Although Maliki has successfully attracted a portion of the Sadrist constituency through his tribal outreach, it is not clear whether he can and will seek to ally with other fragments of the movement — whether the Sadrist politicians loyal to Muqtada, or the leaders of Asaib Ahl al-Haq who are now seeking political opportunities. If Maliki succeeds in building a Parliamentary coalition with leaders from either Sadrist faction, he will most likely cement his hold on power in the 2009 elections and dramatically reshape the political environment in Iraq.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Sadr Movement refers broadly to the adherents of a Shi'a Islamist and Iraqi nationalist movement that emerged in the 1990s in impoverished areas of southern Iraq and Baghdad under the leadership of Ayatollah Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr.
- <sup>2</sup> Faleh Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, SAQI, London, 2003, p. 272; Mahan Abdein, "The Sadr Movement," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 7, July 2003.
- <sup>3</sup> Mahan Abdein, "The Sadr Movement," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 7, July 2003; Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, Scribner, New York, 2008, p. 79-80.
- <sup>4</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, Scribner, New York, 2008, p. 79.
- <sup>5</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism* (Policy Focus #59: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2006), for the sophisticated description of theological and jurisprudential status; Juan Cole, "The United States and Shi'ite religious factions in post-Ba'thist Iraq," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57 No. 4, Autumn 2003, 551 for the recognition of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr.
- <sup>6</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, Scribner, New York, 2008, p. 90.
- <sup>7</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, Scribner, New York, 2008, p. 91.
- <sup>8</sup> Mahan Abdein, "The Sadr Movement," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 7, July 2003.
- <sup>9</sup> Faleh Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, SAQI, London, 2003, p. 272-273.
- <sup>10</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism* (Policy Focus #59: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2006), 13-18.
- <sup>11</sup> The Islamic Republic of Iran provided one model of a Shi'a theocratic state familiar to Sadeq al-Sadr. The Islamic Republic was established by Ayatollah Khomeini on the basis of a political and religious principle known as *veliyat-e-faqih*, or guardianship of the Islamic jurist. The theological arguments surrounding this principle and Khomeini's interpretation of it fall far beyond the scope of this paper. What is important here is that according to Khomeini's theories, the Supreme leader in Iran oversees all matters of governance for all Shi'a—not only those in Iran. Sadeq al-Sadr, by aiming to create and lead an Iraqi theocratic state, thereby challenged "Supreme Leader [of Iran] Ayatollah Ali Khamanei's claim to pan-Shiite leadership." He was challenging the Iranian concept of the state by offering an alternative view of clerical rule to Iraqi Shi'a. "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?" *Middle East Report No. 55*, International Crisis Group, July 11, 2006, p. 4.
- <sup>12</sup> The establishment of Friday prayers was staggered across central and southern Iraq. In 1996, Sadr initiated Friday prayers in the city of al-Kut. A year later, in Sadr City. In 1998, Sadr began leading Friday prayers at the great mosque in Kufa, near Najaf. Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, Scribner, New York, 2008, p. 100.
- <sup>13</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, Scribner, New York, 2008, p. 79.
- <sup>14</sup> Dan Murphy, "Sadr the Agitator: Like Father, Like Son," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 27, 2004; Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, Scribner, New York, 2008, p. 100.
- <sup>15</sup> Mahan Abdein, "The Sadr Movement," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 7, July 2003; Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, Scribner, New York, 2008, p. 104.
- <sup>16</sup> Douglas Juel, "Assassination of Shiite Cleric Threatens Further Iraqi Unrest," *The New York Times*, February 22, 1999.
- <sup>17</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, Scribner, New York, 2008, p. 112-113.
- <sup>18</sup> Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2005, p. 172
- <sup>19</sup> Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2005, p. 172
- <sup>20</sup> Anthony Shadid, "Sadr's Disciples Rise Again to Play Pivotal Role in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2005.
- <sup>21</sup> Anthony Shadid, "Sadr's Disciples Rise Again To Play Pivotal Role in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2005.
- <sup>22</sup> Juan Cole, "The United States and Shi'ite religious factions in post-Ba'thist Iraq," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57 No. 4, Autumn 2003; for greater nuance on the nature and traditions of the marjayat, see Mehdi Khalaji, *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism* (Policy Focus #59: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2006). For Kazim Haeri, <http://www.alhaeri.org/index1.html>.
- <sup>23</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, Scribner, New York, 2008, p. 113.
- <sup>24</sup> Greg Bruno, "Muqtada al-Sadr," Background, Council on Foreign Relations, May 16, 2008.

- <sup>25</sup> “Iraq’s Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?” *Middle East Report No. 55*, International Crisis Group, July 11, 2006, p.6; Vali Nasr, Transcript from “Iran and the Shia Revival in the Middle East,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 23, 2006.
- <sup>26</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, “The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism,” *Policy Focus* #59, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2006.
- <sup>27</sup> Craig S. Smith, “Aftereffects: Iran’s Influence; Cleric in Iran Says Shiites Must Act,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 2008.
- <sup>28</sup> Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2005, p. 172
- <sup>29</sup> Anthony Shadid, “A Struggle for Iraqi Clergy’s Soul; Some Shiites Reject Tradition, Embrace Politics,” *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2003.
- <sup>30</sup> Craig S. Smith, “Aftereffects: Iran’s Influence; Cleric in Iran Says Shiites Must Act,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 2008; Anthony Shadid, “Shiite Clerics Move to Assume Control,” *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2003.
- <sup>31</sup> Anthony Shadid, “A Struggle for Iraqi Clergy’s Soul; Some Shiites Reject Tradition, Embrace Politics,” *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2003; Anthony Shadid, “Cleric Risks a Backlash With Anti-U.S. Rhetoric,” *The Washington Post*, July 28, 2003, p. A12.
- <sup>32</sup> Amit R. Paley, “Aide to Shiite Militia Leader Killed in Iraq; Ambush Could Intensify Clashes between Sadr’s Mahdi Army, Government Troops,” *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2008, pg. A10.
- <sup>33</sup> Maj. Timothy Haugh, “The Sadr II Movement: An Organizational Fight for Legitimacy within the Iraqi Shi’a Community,” *Strategic Insights*, Volume IV, Issue 5, May 2005; Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, Scribner, New York, 2008, p. 127-128.
- <sup>34</sup> Juan Cole, “The United States and Shi’ite religious factions in post-Ba’thist Iraq,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57 No. 4, Autumn 2003.
- <sup>35</sup> “Grand Ayatollah who was al-Sadr’s mentor distances himself from the anti-U.S. cleric,” *Associated Press*, September 5, 2004.
- <sup>36</sup> Mahan Abdein, “The Sadr Movement,” *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 7, July 2003; E.A. Torriero, “To militants, new Iraq doesn’t mix with alcohol,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 20, 2003.
- <sup>37</sup> “Prominent Shiites call for Iraqi Christians to follow Islamic law”, *Agence France Presse*, May 2, 2003; E.A. Torriero, “To militants, new Iraq doesn’t mix with alcohol,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 20, 2003.
- <sup>38</sup> “Coalition, Iraqi Forces Net Numerous Suspects, Weapons Caches,” *American Forces Press Service*, October 3, 2005; Juan Cole, “The United States and Shi’ite religious factions in post-Ba’thist Iraq,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57 No. 4, Autumn 2003.
- <sup>39</sup> George Packer, “Testing Ground,” *The New Yorker*, February 21, 2005.
- <sup>40</sup> Juan Cole, “The United States and Shi’ite religious factions in post-Ba’thist Iraq,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57 No. 4, Autumn 2003.
- <sup>41</sup> Ernesto Londoño, “Shiite Bloc in Parliament Diminished by Defection,” *The Washington Post*, March 8, 2007, p. A18.
- <sup>42</sup> There are serious differences in the perception of the Sadrists and the exile parties. Many Sadrists supporters believe ISCI and Dawa to represent the elite and educated classes, rather than the broader population. The Sadrists were also highly wary of the time ISCI and Dawa leaders spent in Iran. Members of ISCI and Dawa often view the Sadrists as uneducated, poor, and unruly. See, Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, Scribner, New York, 2008, 132-133; “Iraq’s Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?” *Middle East Report No. 55*, International Crisis Group, July 11, 2006, p.15.
- <sup>43</sup> Craig S. Smith, “Iraqi Shiites, Jockeying for Power, Preach an Anti-American Sermon,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 2003.
- <sup>44</sup> Craig S. Smith, “Aftereffects: Iran’s Influence; Cleric in Iran Says Shiites Must Act,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 2003.
- <sup>45</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada*, Scribner, New York, 2008, 123-126; Juan Cole, “The United States and Shi’ite religious factions in post-Ba’thist Iraq,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57 No. 4, Autumn 2003..
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