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Muqtada al-Sadr from Opposition to Power: Democracy of the Cleric in Iraq After 2003

Introduction

In April 2003, Saddam's regime was defeated by the US army. The turmoil that accompanied the Iraqi state's collapse caused many of the radical Islam movements banned by Saddam's secular regime. A Shiite cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, appeared to oppose the US invasion of Iraq. Al-Sadr declared war against the occupier and its non-legal government – Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), by establishing the Mahdi Army.

In 2004, al-Sadr renounced violence (temporarily) and entered into a political process, participating in the Iraqi government. It allowed him to build his movement by controlling the most critical government sectors at that time, namely: the transportation and health ministries. Most of his followers were from the unemployed, economically disadvantaged sector of Iraqi society. His party gave them jobs and a political position.

During the civil war (2006–2007), al-Sadr returned to violence and declared war on Sunni extremists. The question arises whether this was the main reason for his return to violence, or was there perhaps another reason? Since the Mahdi Army's establishment in 2003 to the present day, al-Sadr has frozen, dissolved, and changed the names of his military forces, but he has never renounced violence. Violence is a political means to threaten opponents, internally and externally, and al-Sadr was fully aware of this. He renounced violence temporarily and then entered the political arena and became a political player,

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who had a large following that threatened the new regime on the one hand, and shared interests with it on the other.

Al-Sadr is currently one of the most controversial figures in Iraqi politics, as he plays a dual role in the practice of dissent in the Iraqi Parliament on the one hand and collaborates with the opposition on the other. His dual role has dramatically affected the legitimacy and power of the Iraqi government since 2003. It has caused instability as well as corruption within the political system. It is necessary to study the factors that contributed to the development of al-Sadr's movement. It also requires that one looks at the resulting interaction with the new political system and the political players who influence it. The Sadrist movement played an essential and varied role in Iraqi politics: To threaten the new regime with violence by using the Mahdi Army. A second was including his movement in the Iraqi Parliament and government. This behavior helped al-Sadr become one of the most important political figures in Iraqi politics. This paper discusses the factors that motivated al-Sadr to interact with the political system and its role players on the one hand, and with the opposition's financial support, on the other, until he achieved the powerful position he now occupies. To understand al-Sadr's reasoning and behavior, one should first consider his religious background and its impact on his political life and then his social standing with a solid gathering of ardent followers.

How did Muqtada al-Sadr achieve the balance between the two Shiite religious schools?

Muqtada al-Sadr was born in 1974, in the city of Najaf. He came from a family with religious, political, and cultural influence in Iraq. He was one of the sons of the Shiite cleric, Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (al-Sadr II²). His grandfather, Muhammad Hassan al-Sadr, was the prime minister of Iraq in 1948, also known as the royal era. His uncle, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, was executed by Saddam Hussein (al-Sadr I³). Al-Sadr's religious education was overseen by his father (al-Sadr II) in 1988. He left the school after the assassination of his father and his two brothers in 1999. He survived the

² Al-Sadr II was born in Baghdad 1943. During the 1990s, he became more popular by promoting the Vocal Hawza, meant that he represented the active Hawza that openly challenged and criticized Saddam's regime by providing Friday's Prayer, which was banned since 1970. In 1999 al-Sadr II and his two sons were assassinated in Najaf.

³ Al-Sadr I was born in Baghdad 1935. He was the ideological founder of Da'wa Party in Iraq, that confronted the ideology of al-Baath party. In 1980 Saddam's regime executed him with his sister and his body has not been found yet. See M.M. Dziekan, *Irak: Religia i Polityka*, Warsaw 2005, pp. 67–77.

assassination and was placed under house arrest until the fall of the regime in 2003⁴.

On April 9, 2003, the American forces besieged Baghdad. The consequences of the occupation and its military operations led to the collapse of Iraqi institutions. They were burned down and looted due to the chaos that swept the country. There was also a vacuum in the security system of the country.

Immediately after the US occupation, the name of Muqtada al-Sadr emerged and was held high due to his speech, which was addressed to his supporters in Najaf. The content included an explicit call to resist and end the US occupation by peaceful means; while retaining the military presence. Al-Sadr inherited his father's popular following, whose headquarters were located on the outskirts of poor Shiite cities: Najaf, Nasiriyah, and Amara. The most important one of these was al-Sadr City (formerly known as Saddam City) in Baghdad. These cities' residents suffered during Saddam's regime (and continue to suffer) from poverty, ignorance, and neglect⁵.

The emergence of al-Sadr, with such a large following in these cities, surprised each and every side involved in Iraqi politics at the time. It shocked the Iraqi Shiite political and religious leaders alike. The new player on the Iraqi scene shuffled all the political cards.

The political attitude of Shiites toward the occupation was divided into two groups. One was represented by friendly politicians, who arrived on the US tanks. The second was represented by the Shiite followers of al-Sistani, who adopted a peaceful approach to end the military occupation, using political solutions. Both groups saw the occupation as an opportunity to build a new regime, where the Shiites would have the primary role of making Iraq's political decisions. This approach aimed to avoid the same mistakes they had made during the era of the monarchy, where they revolted against the British in Baghdad and were then removed from the political scene.

This peaceful vision to end the occupancy between the political and religious elite of the Shiites and coalition forces was short-lived. The appearance of al-Sadr posed a significant challenge to them. Al-Sadr accused them of collaborating with the US occupiers, and by sowing seeds of doubt related to the legitimacy of these groups, not only politically but also religiously, Al-Sadr achieved his goal and held himself up to be a competitor to other Shiite elites.

Al-Sadr did not become a religious Shiite Authority in Iraq because he did not complete his religious education studies. Thus, to preserve his position as

⁴ The official website of Muqtada al-Sadr, <http://jawabna.com/index.php> [access: 27.07.2020].

⁵ R. Alaaldin, *Containing Shiite Militias: The Battle for Stability in Iraq*, 2017, p. 3.

a religious leader, he used Ayatollah Al-Haeri⁶ as a legal umbrella to justify his behavior and decisions⁷. Al-Haeri, who resides in Iran, found the opportunity to grant religious cover and provide some privileges for Al-Sadr as his agent or envoy in Iraq. In return, al-Sadr would call on his supporters to pay the *khums* (taxes) to Al-Haeri in Iran⁸.

Al-Sadr II (Muqtada's father) did not have his son's belief in the principle of *Velayat-e faqih* (The theory of power)⁹ in Iran. Instead, al-Sadr II called for a local Arab Shiite Authority. He said the role of religion is to consult and not to interfere directly in politics, as in the case with Iran. However, this did not mean turning away from politics, but opposing it and correcting its course, and then finally revolting against it, if necessary. The Sadrist movement did not aim to rule but to assess the current ruling to see if it was legal or not. Muqtada envisioned¹⁰ creating a Sadrist utopia which he could influence.

Since 2003, Al-Sadr has used this approach against all Iraqi governments, supporters, and religious figures in Najaf. On April 10, 2003, al-Sadr supporters killed Abdul Majeed al-Khoei inside Imam Ali's shrine in Najaf. Al-Khoei was one of the sons of the ayatollah Muhsin al-Khoei¹¹. After three days, his supporters surrounded the house of the Supreme Leader of the Shiites, Ali al-Sistani, and demanded that al-Sistani leave Iraq on the pretext that he was not an Arab. In response, the al-Sistani's supporters decided to protect him. Al-Sadr realized that al-Sistani, unlike al-Khoei, was not an easy target. Of course, al-Sadr denied all the charges against him and considered them a conspiracy by the occupation against him, so he called on his supporters to move away from Najaf's religious houses (High-ranking Shiite figures) and fight the occupation¹².

The conflict between the Sadrist line and other Shiite leaders was not the result of the movement. It went back to the mid-1990s when al-Sadr II publicly declared his opposition to Saddam's regime and accused the other Shiite clerics of submission and lack of courage. Indirectly, the al-Sadr II established what

⁶ Ayatollah Al-Haeri became a religious guider for the Sadrist line after the Sadr II was killed in 1999.

⁷ M.M. Dziekan, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

⁸ M.J. Godwin, *Political inclusion in unstable contexts: Muqtada al-Sadr and Iraq's Sadrist Movement*, "Contemporary Arab Affairs" 2012, Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 499.

⁹ M.M. Dziekan, *op.cit.*, p. 72.

¹⁰ R. Visser, *The Sadrists of Basra and the Far South of Iraq The Most Unpredictable Political Force in the Gulf's Oil-Belt Region?*, 2008, p. 3.

¹¹ P. Cockburn, *Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq*, Beirut 2014, p. 194.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 210.

was later called the *al-Hawza al-Natiqa*¹³ (Vocal Hawza). As a result, al-Sadr II split the Najaf religious institutions into two camps; the first was the active opposition line, represented by him and his supporters. The second one was inactive, called *al-Hawza al-Samita* (inactive or silent Hawza), represented by Ali al-Sistani¹⁴.

Although Muqtada denied his connection with the killing of al-Khoei and the besieging of al-Sistani's house, both events sounded the alarm at the doors of traditional religious leaders, like Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim (1939–2003) and Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayadh, who were closely allied to Iran. On his return from exile in Iran, Al-Hakim entered Iraq with a convoy of armed men so that he would not meet with the same fate as al-Kohei. The aftermath of these events posed a challenge to the Shiite religious and political leaders¹⁵.

Politically, al-Sadr called for opposition to the US occupation and the political leaders of the coalition forces. In his first reaction to the establishment of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) in July 2003 by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), al-Sadr called for a demonstration denouncing the legitimacy of the IGC and accused its members of being an agency of the occupiers. Among the supporter's slogans uttered during the demonstration was "*Asha al-Sadr, America wa-al-Majlis kuffar* (Long live al-Sadr, America and the Council are non-believers). It was the first challenge to both the Shiite elites and the CPA alike. The demonstrations aimed at withdrawing the legitimacy of the Shiite elites, embarrassing them in front of their followers, and including them in the category of occupation agents¹⁶.

For the CPA, the al-Sadr demonstration meant a religious rejection of their presence in Iraq from their closest Shiite allies in Iraq. The word "non-believers" suggests a theological rejection of the legitimacy of these forces and gives rise to the argument for confronting them militarily. The friendly Shiite elites, such as the Da'wa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), advised the Americans not to seriously consider the threats of al-Sadr. The fact that al-Sadr was not a religious leader for the Shiites, or even for his supporters, demonstrates that the slogan was essentially a political game, not a religious one. Its purpose was to expose al-Sadr himself as an active political player in the political equation. Besides, the prevailing belief of the Shiite

¹³ An active Shiite school represented by al-Sadr II. The supporters of al-Sadr II used the words by ordering another cervical Shiite school (al-Sistani) to remain silent in matters during Saddam's regime.

¹⁴ R. Visser, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁵ P. Cockburn, *op.cit.*, p. 212.

¹⁶ At that time, I was present and witnessed the al-Sadr's demonstration in Baghdad in summer 2003.

political elite at the time was that al-Sadr's supporters were only a handful of bandits and thieves. Included amongst these were some remnants of the Ba'ath party who used violence to collect wealth without any clear political or ideological goal¹⁷.

Al-Sadr's opponents accused him of recklessness and a lack of experience because he took advantage of his long-standing religious family name. He did this to lead uneducated extremist groups to split the unity of the Shiites and undermine their efforts to build a democratic system. These accusations indirectly persuaded al-Sadr followers that the silent Hawza represented by al-Sistani and his supporting parties still kept pace with the government, regardless of its legitimacy. While the Sadrist movement is considered a dynamic, non-traditional opposition movement, it aims to reinforce the values of solidarity amongst all Shiites, regardless of their different social class or political position in society¹⁸.

One of the reasons that led to the elevated position of al-Sadr was his transparency in rejecting the occupation and its project. This transparency, which had positive results for al-Sadr and his movement, was aimed at attracting many supporters in Baghdad's southern and eastern regions. These areas formed the first nucleus of his supporters, not for religious but social reasons. These regions had been plagued by poverty, ignorance, and neglect since the 1990s. For instance, in 2003, unemployment in Sadr City constituted an estimate of 70%¹⁹. Weapons were sold openly in the streets. In May 2003, medium and heavy weapons were being sold in the market in Sadr City. The Iraqi army left these weapons after the US forces occupied Baghdad. However, the uncontrolled weapon distribution was not a result of the occupation alone. Still, its roots were in the uprising that the Shiites launched against Saddam's regime in 1991, followed by the 1999 riot after the assassination of al-Sadr II²⁰.

In May 2003, the CPA was formed under the leadership of Paul Bremer. This authority was based on Security Council Resolution No. 1483, which officially legalized the occupation of Iraq²¹. On July 12, 2003, the CPA formed the International Crisis Group (ICG) with limited powers. Al-Sadr refused to recognize this council and created a shadow government parallel to it. The shadow government's goal was first to challenge the legitimacy of the US oc-

¹⁷ International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, Report No. 55, 11.07.2006, p. 13.

¹⁸ Ibidem, pp. 4–5.

¹⁹ M.J. Godwin, *op.cit.*, p. 451.

²⁰ At that time, I saw the weapons over the city on May 2003.

²¹ E.L. Halchin, *The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA): Origin, Characteristics, and Institutional Authorities*, Washington D.C. 2004, p. 5.

cupation, and secondly, to pull the rug out from under the feet of the Shiite elites, who supported the occupation's decision²².

In July 2004, al-Sadr addressed his supporters about the IGC in Najaf, saying: "This council consists of none believers". In response to the establishment of the IGC, he established an ideological army that he called the *Jaish al-Mahdi* (Mahdi Army²³). It was an official announcement by al-Sadr to develop his military organization, in which the members of the organization began their activities at the end of 2003 in Sadr City in Baghdad²⁴.

All these factors helped al-Sadr limit Najaf's religious leadership to the point of isolation. It paved the way for him to become a key influencer and one of Baghdad's political scene's primary decision-makers.

How to Convert from a Cleric to a Politician?

The baffling twist in the plot that led al-Sadr to become a political figure, with a growing set of followers, was based on four facts: (1) The CPA's type of decision-making related to the treatment of al-Sadr, as a military target. (2) The lack of understanding about the social standing of al-Sadr's supporters and their influence on the country. (3) The decision made by Bremer to close the *Hawza Newspaper* in Najaf. (4) Arresting one of al-Sadr's aides in Baghdad²⁵.

In response to the mentioned reasons, al-Sadr's supporters staged demonstrations rejecting some Iraqi cities' occupation. (Nassiryia, Kut, Amara). The protests met with violence and resulted in more than 200 members killed by the US and Spanish forces in Najaf. Al-Sadr realized that the demonstrations were futile and declared war on these forces. Military clashes erupted between the two sides in Baghdad and most of the southern region. In Baghdad, despite the killing of 35 members of the Mahdi Army and 500 Iraqi civilians, the American forces could not enter al-Sadr city but managed to besiege it.

On June 28, 2004, the IGC was dismantled, and CPA gave the Iraqi *Handover of Sovereignty*²⁶. The first Iraqi government led by Iyad Allawi was established. Al-Sadr stated his readiness to assist the Allawi government by providing the Mahdi Army to protect state institutions. The Interior Minister in

²² International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr...*, op.cit., p. 10.

²³ Muqtada al-Sadr called his militia the Mahdi army; word Mahdi refers to a religious figure sacred to the Shiites – Imam al-Mahdi, is the last of the Shiite imams, who will appear at the end of the world as the savior and reformer of the whole world.

²⁴ P. Cockburn, op.cit., p. 217.

²⁵ M.J. Godwin, op.cit., p. 450.

²⁶ K. Katzman, *Iraq: U.S. Regime Change Efforts and Post-Saddam Governance*, 2004, p. 22.

the Allawi government, Falah al-Naqeeb, rejected the al-Sadr initiative and decided to clash with Mahdi Army. The Iraqi government was unwilling to resolve this crisis peacefully due to Ambassador Bremer's pressure. Bremer and other Shiites, opposing al-Sadr, rejected any initiative he brought to the table because it would eventually bring him closer to the Iraqi government²⁷.

Bremer's policy toward al-Sadr might have resulted from his conviction that al-Sadr was only a gangster and should be defeated. Besides, al-Sadr's Shiite opponents hated him for social and ideological reasons. Socially, because he led the poor, uneducated class and ideologically, because he represented a revolutionary religious trend, which was inherited from his father.

In his book (*My Year in Iraq*), Paul Bremer quoted an aide to Ibrahim al-Jaafari at a meeting in Baghdad, saying that: "If the coalition authority improves the Iraqi economy, Muqtada will lose the support of his followers". Bremer commented: "[Please do not give me sermons about the importance of the economy. I have a thousand volunteers working..., to reform the economy, not to confront Muqtada]". It seemed that Bremer did not realize the importance and seriousness of Muqtada and his political movement. On the contrary, he considered it a military demonstration against the presence of the Americans in Iraq. Later on, this view proved that the United States was short-sighted in dealing with al-Sadr. They were in denial about his role and the nature of his social movement²⁸.

Six months after the Hawza Newspaper was shut down, Prime Minister Al-lawi allowed the newspaper to resume its work. Al-Sadr, in his first statement to the press through the Hawza Newspaper, criticized the CPA and the Iraqi government. This announcement was in response to Allawi's government rejecting the initiative launched by al-Sadr. In response to al-Sadr's statements, some Iraqi government officials described al-Sadr's followers as criminal. These statements were conclusive evidence of the government's intention to launch a military campaign against al-Sadr's followers in the cities they controlled. Nevertheless, the expected confrontation was not between al-Sadr and the occupying forces, as had happened previously. Instead, it took a severe grant represented by a rebel camp led by al-Sadr, on the one hand, and American-backed Iraqi troops on the other²⁹.

In August 2004, Iyad Allawi mobilized the Iraqi army (called the National Guard). With the support of the US Marines corps, and besieged Najaf. Al-Sadr

²⁷ W. Al-Zubaidi, *The Najaf War: An American War with Iraqi Hands*, "Al-Jazeera", 3.10.2004, <https://www.aljazeera.net/knowledgegate/specialcoverage/2004/10/3/تقارير عدي اب-ةيكر يم-أبرح-فج ن ل-أبرح/ح> [access: 7.08.2020].

²⁸ L.P. Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq*, Beirut 2006, p. 159.

²⁹ International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr...*, op.cit., p. 11.

followers flocked from several Iraqi provinces with their heavy and medium weapons to fight what they called (the pagan guard), i.e. the National Guard. Although the Marines excelled in the military operations, they failed to arrest al-Sadr and eliminate his supporters. Iraqi forces were weak at the time and unable to win the battle. At the same time, the Marines faced a problem on the battlefield because Najaf is a holy city for Shiites in Iraq and the world. In the media, al-Sadr supporters exploited these weaknesses and positioned themselves close to the Imam Ali shrine and the Najaf cemetery. Militarily, as a result of the blockade of Najaf, foreign forces faced fierce fighting not only in the city of Najaf but also in several Shiite-majority areas that owed allegiance to al-Sadr, such as Nasiriyyah, Kut, and the eastern areas of Baghdad³⁰.

On August 26, 2004, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani returned from a medical trip to London. After lengthy consultations with al-Sadr and other religious leaders in Najaf, al-Sadr agreed to stop fighting and hand over the Mahdi Army's weapons to the Iraqi government. The intervention of Al-Sistani pushed the military operations away from Najaf, but in return, he allowed al-Sadr to rearrange his cards. The ending of the armed conflict in Najaf served both sides. Al-Sadr accomplished his goal by forcing the CPA and the Iraqi government to abandon the idea of his arrest. The CPA got rid of the resistance in the Shiite regions, primarily because these forces were engaged in combat against the Sunni insurgency in the city of Fallujah³¹.

In 2005, al-Sadr ran in the first general elections for the National Assembly. Indirectly through his support for the Elites and Independent National Blocs, he won two government seats. The al-Sadr bloc obtained service ministries, such as transportation and health. These ministries were essential to al-Sadr, as most of the government jobs fell into these portfolios. That helped him bring many poor Shiites to critical positions in the Iraqi state, which had long been confined to the wealthy areas of Baghdad, such as Karrada and Adhamiyya, in eastern Baghdad, and al-Mansour and Al-Harithiyya in western Baghdad³².

In 2006, the Sunni al-Qa'ida claimed responsibility for bombing the Shiite Al-Imam al-Askari Mosque in Samarra city. Al-Sadr's supporters responded to the incident by attacking Baghdad's predominantly Sunni areas, such as Adhamiya in eastern Baghdad, Ghazaliyya, and the Jihad neighborhood in

³⁰ A.H. Cordesman, S.B. Moller, *Iraq's Evolving Insurgency*, Washington D.C. 2005, pp. 50–52.

³¹ D. Filkins, A. Berenson, *The Reach of War: Return to Iraq; Ayatollah Calls for Rally to End Fighting in Najaf*, "The New York Times", 26.08.2004.

³² M.J. Godwin, op.cit., p. 542.

the west. The Shiite Death Squads³³ were formed in Baghdad to escalate the sectarian violence. These groups announced killing Saddam's regime supporters, accusing them of supporting and funding the Sunni terrorism against the Shiites. Civil war flared up Iraq, and the Mahdi Army was brought back to the scene on the pretext of eliminating the incubators supporters al-Qa'ida in Baghdad.

To resolve the issue, the US military divided Baghdad into Sunni and Shiite areas by surrounding them with concrete walls, and Baghdad became very similar to the apartheid *division* in Southern Africa. However, the war between Sunnis and Shiites was not ethnic, not even religious, but political. The real reason behind the violence was that the political elitists (Sunnis and Shiites) had not reached a consensus on power-sharing. In other words, it was a conflict and a political race aimed at obtaining the most significant number of high positions in the Iraqi ministries and government institutions³⁴.

One of the effects of sectarian violence was the increase of al-Sadr's influence on the state institutions and the rise of his popularity amongst his followers. In the southern, oil-rich city, Basra, al-Sadr supporters controlled the oil fields and shared oil smuggling with other parties, such as the Da'wa Party, the SCIRI, and Fadhila Party. Contrary to the nature of the political conflict and the civil war in Baghdad was the struggle in Basra between the Shiite elites. It is worth mentioning that Basra city's finances supported 80% of Iraq's budget³⁵.

Al-Sadr's engagement in the civil war not only made him a religious leader and an adversary to the occupation but also (albeit temporarily) a hero accepted by the majority of the Shiites in Iraq. It was because he was the only one to directly fight al-Qa'ida and the remnants of the Baath party, who were accused of committing atrocities against the Shiites.

In comparison, the strategy of the Shiite armed militias closely allied to Iran was focused on consolidating the rule of the Shiite majority in the parliament and state institutions. These military forces formed secret brigades, which participated in the civil war. Their involvement aimed to eliminate the Sunni elitists and weaken their position to keep them far from the political scene in Baghdad. The type of military operations carried out by these brigades was aimed mainly at the mid-level Sunni scholars and the most educated people to

³³ Death squads: Secret, random Shiite organizations emerged after 2003, whose mission is to balance the violence in Baghdad. The goal of these organizations was to eliminate members of the Baath Party in Iraq. In 2006, these groups carried out sectarian violence against Sunnis in Baghdad.

³⁴ B. Rahimi, *The Return of Moqtada al - Sadr and the Revival of the Mahdi Army*, "Combating Terrorism Center" 2010, Vol. 3, No. 6, pp. 8–10.

³⁵ R. Visser, *op.cit.*, pp. 16–18.

cause a power vacuum within the Sunni community structure³⁶.

On May 20, 2006, Nouri al-Maliki became Prime Minister. Al-Maliki announced the Baghdad Security Plan to end the Civil War in Baghdad and restore Basra by taking it from the oil mafia. In Baghdad, al-Maliki was able to reduce the daily sectarian bombings and killings. In Basra, the prime minister announced the *Sawlat al-Fursan* (Charge of the Knights Campaign) to eliminate the city's oil smuggling mafia and lawlessness. It was mainly aimed at removing members of the Mahdi Army. Al-Sadr's reaction to this campaign was split into rejecting the campaign, as it targeted the Sadrist movement alone, and approving it, as a tactical move to exclude some of the movement's leaders, who were deviating from his path³⁷.

On January 10, 2007, President George W. Bush announced that the US would send 20,000 additional troops to increase the number of American forces in Iraq. The goal was to end the violence in Baghdad and other provinces. The surge strengthened the Iraqi government's position by tackling Death Squads in Baghdad. Al-Sadr, in turn, became urgently needed to calm the situation since he controlled a lot of Shiite armed groups. Additionally, it appeared that the Sadrist movement played a significant role in the balance of violence in Baghdad. Violence in the city mainly focused on Shiites, with almost daily bombings in their areas. It is noteworthy that many Shiites accused the Sunnis of supporting terrorism in their areas. The planning and logistical support for al-Qaida operations came from the predominantly Sunni areas of the *Baghdad Belt*³⁸. These areas were subordinated to extremist religious organizations allied with Ba'athist remnants to thwart the American project in Iraq³⁹.

In the summer of 2007, the rivalry between al-Sadr and the SCIRI had escalated for influence in the Shiite areas in southern Iraq. In order for his opponents to miss the opportunity, al-Sadr once again froze the Mahdi Army for six months; then, he retired from politics and left for Iran to continue his religious education.

Al-Sadr did not retire from politics as he claimed but froze his movement for two reasons: Firstly, to show his opponents that he did not care about politics as

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 19.

³⁷ Ibidem, pp. 19–20.

³⁸ Baghdad Belt are an agricultural and industrial areas that surround Baghdad from all sides. These areas are inhabited by a majority of Sunnis who are reluctant to the new regime after 2003. The Iraqi government accuses the residents of these areas of being a launching pad for attacks against the Iraqi government and Shiite cities.

³⁹ A. Belasco, *Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001-FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues*, 2009, p. 38.

much as he did about religion. Secondly, to convey a message to his supporters, that he wanted to preserve the reputation of the Sadrist movement and exclude militias that did not follow his instructions. As a result of these decisions, the Sadrist political movement was formed. What distinguishes al-Sadr from other Islamic factions is his flexibility and tactical decision-making. Freezing or dissolving the military wing of the Sadrist movement more than once did not mean that al-Sadr had abandoned violence, but instead, he employed it politically in his favor. Weapons used for conflict in Iraq could be collected easily because of their abundance in all Iraqi homes. From an organizational perspective, al-Sadr supporters can be distinguished from other Islamic movements because of their complete submission to their leader's decisions (al-Sadr). This feature gave al-Sadr a tactical advantage in making decisions or reversing them.

During the first government of al-Maliki (2006–2014), al-Sadr provided a list of the defectors from his movement and accused them of using his name for political and material purposes. With this step, al-Sadr achieved two goals. Firstly, he isolated the people who were not listening to his instructions. They were taking orders from Iran instead. Secondly, it prevented him from taking responsibility for these groups' violence and theft and thus exonerated him from blame apportioned to him by his accusers.

The most prominent dissident from the al-Sadr movement is the *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq* (League of the Righteous) organization led by Qais al-Khazali. Al-Khazali was one of Sadr's closest associates, but he defected from the movement and did not surrender his arsenal. Thus, al-Sadr successfully persuaded his supporters that he did not follow Iran, unlike the Shiite elitists, such as the SCIRI or the Da'wa Party.

After 2007, al-Sadr shifted from revolutionary legitimacy, as a man of resistance, to political legitimacy and entered the democratic scene. With the support of al-Sadr, a political bloc called the Independent Free Movement was established. This bloc represented the Sadrist movement but had no right to address al-Sadr directly. Al-Sadr backed the bloc but was not responsible for it. In the 2009 provincial council elections, the bloc won nearly 10% of the votes. In the 2010 parliamentary elections, the bloc was allied with the National Iraqi Alliance (NIA) in one bloc and won 39 seats out of 325⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ M.J. Godwin, op.cit., p. 453.

From the Opposition to Power After 2011

After intense negotiations between Iraq and the US Administration, on December 18, 2011, Barak Obama announced the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq on the pretext that the Iraqis were able to run their own country. The Iraqi government acted independently in making political and military decisions. The return of al-Sadr from Iran accompanied the withdrawal. Despite his alliance with al-Maliki in one parliamentary bloc and the participation of the Al-Ahrar bloc in the government, which involved several vital ministries, al-Sadr's new role in the government, did not exclude his old role as the opposition⁴¹.

Al-Sadr's policy with the al-Maliki government was characterized as tactical and maneuvering. The Sadrist movement participated in the government and parliament and had several local governments and ambassadors, but at the same time, this movement represented the opposition bloc in the parliament. Despite the hostility between the two leaders, external pressure resulted in their co-operation with the government. The Iranian side saw the inclusion of al-Sadr in the government and the increased influence of the Shiites on the political stage. The Americans wanted to reduce violence by representing the Sadrist movement in the political process. We should not forget that Obama's administration policy was to withdraw US troops from Iraq and eliminate the occupation's effects. The American administration gave Iran influence in Iraq after the nuclear agreement that was signed in 2011⁴².

At the end of 2011 and early 2012, as an extension of the so-called Arab Spring, protests took place in Baghdad and some Iraqi cities. Al-Sadr supporters participated in the anti-corruption protests during the second term of the al-Maliki government (2010–2014). The protests were suppressed in Baghdad but continued in the predominantly Sunni areas until the end of 2013. On April 23, 2013, the Iraqi government forces dispersed the sit-in in the Sunni city of Hawija in Kirkuk. It killed 50 protesters and injured 110. Sunni elitists accused the al-Maliki government of sectarian handling of the Sunni demands. Al-Sadr, in turn, supported the Sunni claims and considered al-Maliki to be a sectarian dictator. This position strengthened al-Sadr's influence, not only in Shiite areas in central and southern Iraq but also within Sunni cities⁴³.

⁴¹ H. Feickert, *Walking a Tightrope in Baghdad the 'New' Iraq between Sovereignty and Iranian Influence*, "Academic Peace Orchestra Middle East – Policy Brief" 2013, No. 25, p. 3.

⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 6–11.

⁴³ International Crisis Group, *Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State Crisis*, Report No. 144, 14.08.2013, p. 31.

On June 10, 2014, the city of Mosul fell into the hands of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). The Iraqi army collapsed very quickly. To curb ISIS, al-Sistani issued a fatwa⁴⁴ to fight the terrorist organizations on June 13, 2014. As a result of al-Sistani's fatwa, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) were established to support the collapsing Iraqi army and prevent other cities from falling⁴⁵.

Al-Sadr found in the fatwa an opportunity to get rid of the accusations that affected his political bloc and his ministers. He established an organization within the crowd formations he called *Saraya al-Salam* (Peace Brigades). Its mission was limited to protecting religious shrines. Unlike other organizations affiliated with Iran, the Saraya al-Salam was operating independently. Al-Sadr's position toward Iran increased his political and military influence alike. Politically, al-Sadr had marketed himself as a patriotic Shiite leader, not affiliated with Iran. Militarily, al-Sadr had acquired an army militia that protected his movement, continuing the purpose of the dissolved Mahdi Army⁴⁶.

In Muqtada Al-Sadr's book: *The Shia Awakening and the Struggle over Iraq 2014*, there was an interview with a supporter of Al-Sadr. Patrick Cockburn asked the supporter who funded the Shiite parties. He answered: "...the Iranians were paying money to the Shiites friends and enemies alike". The author commented: "The aim is to bet on all the Shiite contenders, regardless of who wins the elections and forms a government. This will result in them being with us, (the Iranians)". To some extent, this is true, albeit, from a different perspective, al-Sadr was aware of the Iranians' policy with him. They wanted to implement their influence in Iraq through him. He did not see a problem with that. Still, the dispute between him and the Iranians was neither religious nor political but rather lay in the representation of al-Sadr himself⁴⁷.

The Iranians did not support al-Sadr in becoming a primary player in the political arena. The Iranian policy was one of push-and-pull when dealing with him. Al-Sadr tried to persuade the Iranians to give him the same role as that of Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon, especially since the situation of the two personalities was very similar. Hassan Nasrallah was resisting the Israeli occupation in Lebanon, while al-Sadr was resisting the American occupation in Iraq. Nevertheless, Iran refused to consider al-Sadr as they did to Nasrallah because that would mean abandoning their traditional Shiite allies in Iraq, like the SCIRI or Da'wa Party.

⁴⁴ Nonbinding legal opinion given by high-ranking Muslim authorities.

⁴⁵ I. Rudolf, *Holy Mobilisation: The Religious Legitimation behind Iraq's Counter-ISIS Campaign*, London 2018, pp. 6-7.

⁴⁶ European Asylum Support Office, *Iraq Targeting of Individuals*, 2019, pp. 192-193.

⁴⁷ P. Cockburn, op.cit., p. 214.

In the 2018 general elections, the Iraqi government was formed by victors in the war against ISIS. The victors were the militias that were formed after al-Sistani's fatwa. The election results led to the victory of the two blocs: Fatah Alliance (FA) and Alliance Toward Reforms (ATR), FA led by the pro-Iranian Hadi al-Amiri, while ATR was led by al-Sadr. After negotiations between them to form a new government, the blocs did not settle. The Iranian role in forming the Iraqi government was not a secret. General Qasim Soleimani⁴⁸ pressured the Shiite leaders to leave the conflict and form a new government. The Cabinet was settled and headed by Adel Abd al-Mahdi⁴⁹.

The Abd al-Mahdi cabinet was weak and was unable to make meaningful decisions. The al-Amiri AF bloc supported the government and adopted its decisions. In contrast, the al-Sadr AFT bloc did not adopt the government's decisions despite its acquisition of most ministries and high-ranking positions. This strategy by al-Sadr succeeded in convincing his followers that he was just supporting the government but would not be responsible for its decisions.

Al-Sadr dealt ambivalently with all Iraqi governments. In 2016, his supporters led a demonstration against Haidar al-Abadi's government (2015–2018). At that time, al-Sadr called on his supporters to storm the Iraqi parliament, and then himself staged a sit-in in front of the Green Zone (the government and parliament buildings) in Baghdad, calling for the eradication of government corruption⁵⁰.

On October 1, 2019, massive demonstrations were held in Baghdad where demands were made to the Abd al-Mahdi government to eliminate corruption and provide job opportunities for the unemployed. In these protests, live bullets were fired, killing and wounding several protesters. In response to the government's excessive use of violence, demonstrators announced a date for public protests throughout Iraq on 25 October 2019. Demands were made not only to eliminate corruption but also for the dismissal of the Abd al-Mahdi cabinet. On the afternoon of October 25, an unknown force (not acknowledged by the government) sniped and killed many protesters, including al-Sadr's supporters who participated in these protests of their own free will⁵¹.

⁴⁸ General Qasim Soleimani was a major general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran. He played an essential role in the Iraqi policy and was represented the Iranian influence in Iraq. In 2020 US drone has killed him near Baghdad's airport.

⁴⁹ A. Aboulenein, *Iraq's Sadr and Amiri announce political alliance*, "Reuters", 12.06.2018.

⁵⁰ M. Chulov, *Moqtada al-Sadr supporters break into Baghdad green zone*, "The Guardian", 20.05.2016.

⁵¹ Euro-med Human Rights Monitor, *Iraqi Protests: An Audacity to Kill and Absent Justice*, 2019, pp. 5–7.

On December 1, 2019, Abd al-Mahdi's government resigned due to the massive protests that swept the country. After the resignation, the protesters' demands involved changing the country's political system and disbanding Iran-backed militias. Al-Sadr invited his supporters to participate in the protests publicly. However, the protesters refused to allow his supporters to join the protest under the Sadrist umbrella. Instead, the protesters recognized them as Iraqis, whom the Iraqi government had oppressed⁵².

The reaction of al-Sadr's supporters to the protesters in Baghdad was violent and resulted in casualties on both sides. The violence against the protesters by Al-Sadr's supporters changed the image of al-Sadr among the Iraqis. Some of them considered him to be part of the corrupt regime and be its savior at the same time. Some activists believed that the followers of al-Sadr were more dangerous than the pro-Iranian groups because the pro-Iranian groups were clear and explicit in their goals and behavior. They were either involved in the government or opposed it. In comparison, al-Sadr played the joker card in his dealings with the government; he was both a participant and an opponent at the same time.

Conclusion

The emergence of armed religious movements in Iraq was not instantaneous. Instead, it coincided with a political obstruction after the Baath Party came into power in 1968. The closure of the political process and its reduction to one party led to the appearance of armed fronts fighting Saddam's regime. The opposition intensified during the Iran-Iraq war, especially after al-Sadr I's execution (Muqtada's uncle). After Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, American forces destroyed the capabilities of the Iraqi army. The defeated Iraqi army faced an armed uprising in northern Iraq, which gave the Kurds autonomy. In southern Iraq, the rebellion was suppressed, and the regime controlled it. An economic embargo was imposed on Iraq (1991–2003). These sanctions destroyed the social structure of the Iraqis and weakened the middle class.

Al-Sadr II (Muqtada's father) emerged in Najaf and established a network of clerics whose mission was to solidify and assist the poor Shiites affected by the siege. On the other hand, he criticized Saddam's regime openly. In 1999 al-Sadr II was killed, but his followers continued his religious and social teachings until 2003.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 7.

After the invasion of Iraq and the dissolution of its security institutions, armed religious organizations surfaced to resist the occupation. In the Sunni areas, they were represented by al-Qa'ida and some leaders of the security forces left over from Saddam's defeated military dissemination. In the Shi'ite region, it was represented by the al-Sadr movement (Mahdi Army). The emergence of al-Sadr as a resistance to the occupation posed a significant military challenge to the invading forces on the one hand and a political challenge to the Shi'ite elites on the other. Shi'ite and Kurdish elites were allied with the Americans to topple the Sunni dictator's regime. The emergence of al-Sadr, with a substantial following, confused Iraq's political equation on both its American and Iraqi sides. The 30-year-old Muqtada imposed himself on the political scene as a staunch opponent who could not be ignored. In addition to the factors contributing to the maintenance of the al-Sadr movement above, four elements helped al-Sadr's emergence as a political leader:

1. Religion: He used the al-Sadr family name, especially his father's name, to call for the Vocal Hawza and then embarrassed the Shi'ite clerics, accusing them of being allies of the occupiers.
2. Violence: By establishing the Mahdi Army, Al-Sadr threatened high-ranking Shi'ite clerics in Najaf by killing Abd al-Majeed al-Khoei, besieging al-Sistani's house, and spreading terror among the other religious houses.
3. Socially: The majority of al-Sadr's supporters hailed from disadvantaged areas, affected by the previous regime's policies. They could not find opportunities in the new system. The al-Sadr movement then later provided them with essential jobs and positions in modern Iraq's public institutions.
4. Politically: By directly rejecting the occupation and then militarily resisting it, it made al-Sadr a national leader, not only for his Shi'ite supporters but also among the Sunnis who were disgruntled by the invasion.

These factors helped the Sadrist movement to continue and interact with the new political system, then contributed to the transformation of al-Sadr from a resistant cleric to a man of power. Al-Sadr's position with all Iraqi governments after 2003 was patriotic, or at least it was claimed to be so, by his supporters.

Factors indirectly contributing to his eminence were: the success of the G.W. Bush's administration in winning the battle, removing Saddam, and then leaving the country to run itself. Iraq, after 2003, became a failed state. The absence of security made the state unable to complete its other tasks. Dissolving the Iraqi army and its related security services due to Bremer's decision contributed significantly to a few Iraqis seeking to join other military forma-

tions for various reasons. Al-Sadr exploited the security gap and achieved an alternative type of security for his followers in the absence of a state militia.

Despite the many causes and objectives, the main reason for the Iraqis joining military formations outside the framework of the state was the absence of legal military readiness in the state. As long as the state remained unable to safeguard itself from outside attacks, using its ranks, the Iraqis would be forced to bear arms under the wings of informal military organizations. Such was the case with the al-Sadr movement after 2003 and with the radical Shiite movements formed after the fall of Mosul by ISIS in 2014. It would be better to study the military movements and organizations that emerged after 2014 in Iraq since they originated under different circumstances from those of the Sadrist movement.

In the same vein, however, the formation of dissident armies can be attributed to the state's lack of military readiness and its absence of legal force – one of the very reasons that caused the al-Sadr movement.

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Muqtada al-Sadr from Opposition to Power: Democracy of the Cleric in Iraq After 2003

Summary

According to learned scholars, radical political movements change their behavior when participating in formal politics. Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shiite cleric, used violence in order to protect his movement. At its inception, the Sadrist movement became an armed militia called the Mahdi Army. This paper will examine al-Sadr's transition from opposition to power in the new political system in Iraq. In 2004 al-Sadr turned to politics by recognizing the political system in Iraq. Learned scholars suggest that al-Sadr should have transferred his movement into a political party to interact with the state political system and should then have been responsible for its outline. Al-Sadr returned to violence in 2006, threatening the new democracy in Iraq. If he recognized the political game, why did he resort to violence? This work suggests that to be in politics in post-2003, he should have formed a military wing to achieve political and material goals to maintain his movement.

Keywords: Muqtada al-Sadr, Shiite, Iraqi democracy, Radical Islam, Mahdi army

Муктада аль-Садр от оппозиции к власти: демократия духовенства в Ираке после 2003 года

Резюме

Согласно предположениям ученых, радикальные политические движения изменяют свое поведение, участвуя в формальной политике. Муктада аль-Садр – это духовный лидер шиитов, который применял насилие для защиты своего политического движения. Движение садристов вначале было вооруженным восстанием, так называемая «Армия Махди». В статье анализируется переход аль-Садра от оппозиции к власти в новой политической системе Ирака. В 2004 году аль-Садр обратился к политике, признав политическую систему Ирака. Научная литература предполагает, что аль-Садр должен был преобразовать свое движение в политическую партию, чтобы взаимодействовать с государственной политической системой и отвечать за ее основные принципы. В 2006 году Муктада аль-Садр вернулся к насилию, угрожая новой демократии в Ираке. Почему же он продолжает применять насилие, если распознал политическую игру? В статье аргументируется, что для того, чтобы быть в политике после 2003 года, необходимо иметь военное крыло для достижения политических и материальных целей и для поддержки своего движения.

Ключевые слова: Муктада аль-Садр; шииты; иракская демократия; радикальный ислам; армия Махди